VETERANS' ADJUSTMENT TO COLLEGE: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF LARGE-SCALE SURVEY DATA

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Student veterans are not monolithic, but many have shared experiences. As higher education considers ways to serve this growing population, it is important to recognize the rich data that comes from location-specific, branch-specific, and program-specific qualitative studies, in addition to patterns that emerge across geographical and institutional boundaries. The current study explores the transition from military life to student life using two open-ended questions in a survey of 391 student veterans to examine the complexity and ubiquity of student veteran perceptions of their adjustment to college. Data from this study were derived from these items: "what, if anything, has been the most helpful in transitioning to college?" and "what, if anything, has made it challenging to transition to college?" The analysis was framed using Vacchi and Berger's Combined Ecological Model of veteran adjustment to college. Veterans cited financial support, campus veteran support staff, family, and support from other veterans as helpful. Challenges included a multi-faceted understanding of difference and balance.

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Contextualizing Literature

Student veterans, as a population, present a unique challenge for campus student affairs professionals. Like other non-traditional students, student veterans often have family and work responsibilities, live away from campus, and are financially independent (Radford, 2009). Additionally, student veterans may identify as a "veteran" with all the meanings and weight that moniker carries in our culture (Osborne, 2014). As veterans, they can bring to campus a sense of the pride in their service, the work they have done, and the sacrifices they have made. This service may also carry an enduring burden of physical and psychological wounds. Some student veterans choose to exist as a hidden demographic, not wanting to identify as a veteran. Identifying as a veteran means they are sometimes asked to speak on behalf of all veterans or have to respond to insensitive questions about war and their combat experience (Ahern et al., 2015).

Military culture instills an ethos of teamwork, mission-driven commitment, and resilience which prepares many student veterans for the rigors of academic life (Osborne, 2014). Often student veterans maintain the worldview and life habits imbued with military culture (Soeters, Winslow, & Weibull, 2006). The contrast between military and civilian culture can lead to a sense of alienation in student veterans (Ahern et al., 2015). The gap between the student veteran and civilian students is often widened by the age difference between the two groups, and further widened by the life experiences that military service has afforded the student veteran. This paper will help frame how veterans themselves view their experiences moving between military culture and campus culture. By listening to the voices of 391 veterans from different areas of the country, we can see common perspectives they share on what has been helpful and challenging in their transition to college.

Combined Ecological Model as Guiding Theory and Research Frame

In order to effectively address the varied needs of student veterans, it is important to understand what, from the veteran's perspective, has been helpful or challenging in their transition from military life to college. Much of the qualitative research in the literature has been based on a small sample of veterans from a single campus sites (Barry, Whiteman, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2014). In contrast to the existing literature, this study has employed a broader sample to address the heterogeneity of the student veteran experience. Using Vacchi and Berger's Combined Ecological Model (CE Model) as a lens, we examined what aspects of student veteran campus experience are helpful and challenging in their transition to college. This model, inspired by the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979), describes several layers of social, institutional, and cultural in-

teractions experienced by student veterans. By situating the Model for Student Veteran Support in the center and representing the microsystem in the ecological layers, the CE Model demonstrates the complexity of factors which impact the student veteran experience. The proximal experiences in the microsystem center on four axes: support, academic interactions, transition support, and services provided to veterans (Vacchi & Berger 2014). In the model, the four axes project out from "Student Veteran" which represents the intrapersonal characteristics of the individual or "Person."

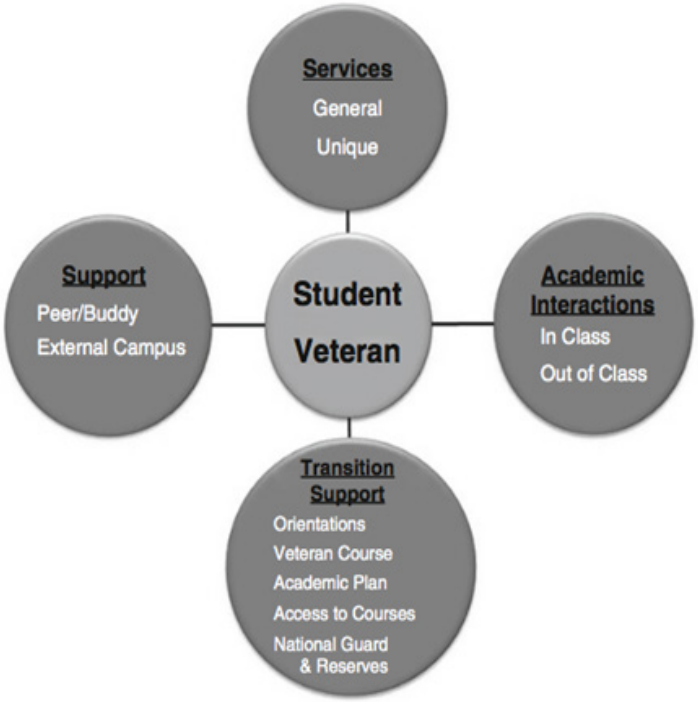

Figure 1. Vacchi's Model for Student Veteran Support

Microsystem

Person. The nucleus of the ecological model is represented by strengths and abilities endemic to the person. In the CE Model, the student veteran in the center brings a unique set of characteristics molded by their military experiences. Serving in the military creates changes in the individual's worldview, skill set, temperament, and values. The military can instill self-discipline and a new perspective founded on valuable experiences (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). These experiences imbue student veterans with maturity, focus, and confidence (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). These traits set student veterans apart from civilian and traditional-age students.

Support. The importance of social support is well documented throughout both the veteran literature and student affairs literature (Barry et al., 2014). Social support is defined as the perception of love or care, concern, and connectedness to a network of mutual aid (Wills, 1991). In the military, the culture of collectiveness and interdependence is deeply embedded into daily life and is essential for survival in combat (Tucker, Sinclair, & Thomas, 2005). On campus, many veterans seek out these types of bonds with other veterans which will continue the sense of unit support they experienced in military life (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Academic interactions. One challenge for many student veterans comes from their experiences interacting with civilian, traditional-age students in the classroom. Student veterans are not only typically older than their civilian counterparts, they also bring with them experiences and a worldview that frequently stand in contrast to their classmates (Livingston et al., 2011). The gap between student veterans and other students is mutually created as civilian students have preconceptions about veterans that often make it difficult for them to connect to veterans (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Often student veterans are made uncomfortable by civilian students asking student veterans questions or stating assumptions that are offensive or insensitive (Ahern et al., 2015). This gap between student veterans and civilian students plays out in the learning process. According to Cole and Kim (2013), student veterans are less likely to engage with classmates outside of class on course assignments, when compared to non-veteran students. Student veterans also report having less friendly and supportive relationships on campus than ci-

vilian students (Cole & Kim, 2013).

Where student veterans feel a lack of support from their classroom peers, they experience more connection with faculty than the non-veteran students experience with faculty (Cole & Kim, 2013). Attitudes towards veterans help to determine the relationship faculty have with veterans in their classrooms. Gonzalez and Elliot (2016) found faculty with military family members were more likely to be familiar with student veterans and in turn more likely to provide assistance. Faculty who work closely with student veterans can be a protective factor in student retention (Olsen et al., 2014). However, not all student veterans have had positive experiences with faculty. Conflicts with faculty can derive from a lack of understanding of veteran issues on the part of faculty members (Barry et al., 2014).

Services. Campuses across the country have responded to the influx of Post 9/11 veterans by providing specialized staff and programming to support their transition from military life to college. In general, most campuses (81.8%) provide a designated staff person to work with veterans and have provided credit for some military training (Hitt et al., 2015). Student veterans have reported the importance of veteran-specific services and personnel as well as policies that support veterans (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). University administrators, eager to retain and support student veterans, have provided services to veterans which have been met with mixed results. Across the country, veteran officials lament the low participation rate in some of their support programs. Olsen and colleagues (2014) identified three themes related to low participation to student veteran programming: not wanted to be recognized as a veteran, lack of time, and living off campus. Student veterans in the Olsen et al. (2014) study expressed preference for programs which offer social support as well as programs that connect students to GI Bill and other financial resources. These preferences reflect the importance veteran centers can have in providing both social support and help with accessing GI Bill and other financial programs. When a campus is unable to host a veteran center, Livingston and colleagues (2011) recommend the formation of a locus of support or a network of faculty and staff members who collaborate with the campus certifying official to provide more seamless services to the veterans. Social support on campus has been found to have a direct effect on functioning and academic adjustment for student veterans (Campbell & Riggs, 2015).

Transition support. The initial transition to college from military life can be a particularly difficult time. Veterans require a moderate amount of support from college staff during this time, as well as continuing support thereafter (Osborne, 2014). Negotiating bureaucracies within and external to the university is a significant challenge for incoming student veterans. Even when working with VA certifying officials on campus, there can be difficulty negotiating the VA for benefits and payments (Wurster, Rinaldi, Woods, & Liu, 2013). Further, the bureaucracy of universities can be unwieldy for student veterans to negotiate as it is so dissimilar to military bureaucracy (O'Herrin, 2011). Military bureaucracy involves straightforward and decisive decision making (Ahern et al. 2015). This military structure provides a care-taking role where each service member has a chain of command who will provide direction and services. Upon entering college, student veterans may have difficulty transitioning between these bureaucracies without a designated veteran's official on campus as a guide. Universities have separate bureaucratic arms for billing, registration, financial aid, academic problems, student life, and other campus functions. When attending classes at a college or university, a student veteran may have to go to several offices on campus to register for a class using the GI Bill. To complicate matters further, the student veteran has to negotiate between two complicated bureaucracies, the Veterans Administration and the

university, to make sure the benefits get approved and processed (Cunningham, 2012). In the military, the enlisted service member will have a single point of contact, a sergeant or commanding officer, who attends to his or her requests and provides guidance when needed; in civilian life and particularly higher education life, there is no such person. Daly and Garrity (2013) recommend a stand-alone veteran services office at the university, which becomes that single point of contact, to be the optimal approach to facilitate student veteran transition and service provision.

Meso-, Exo-, and Macrosystems

Mesosystems, exosystems and macrosystems in the CE Model are more distal forms of social influence on the lives of student veterans (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). These ecological systems may include connections outside the campus gates like connections to military, VA policies, and military cultural traditions. One example of a distal form of influence would be financial support from the VA. It has been instrumental in allowing over one million student veterans to attend college (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). In addition to tuition payments, monthly housing allowance and the book stipends have also enabled student veterans to stay in school (Roulo, 2014). In this model, family interactions lie in the mesosystem layer. Family support has been linked to ameliorating depressive and anxiety symptoms in student veterans (Romero, Riggs, & Ruggero, 2015). As non-traditional students, about half (47.3%) of veterans are married and 47% have children (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). However, there is a dearth of literature which speaks to the supportive nature of spouses and family life of student veterans. Most of the mention of families in the literature has framed them as an additional responsibility of student veterans (Lang, Harriett, & Cadet, 2013).

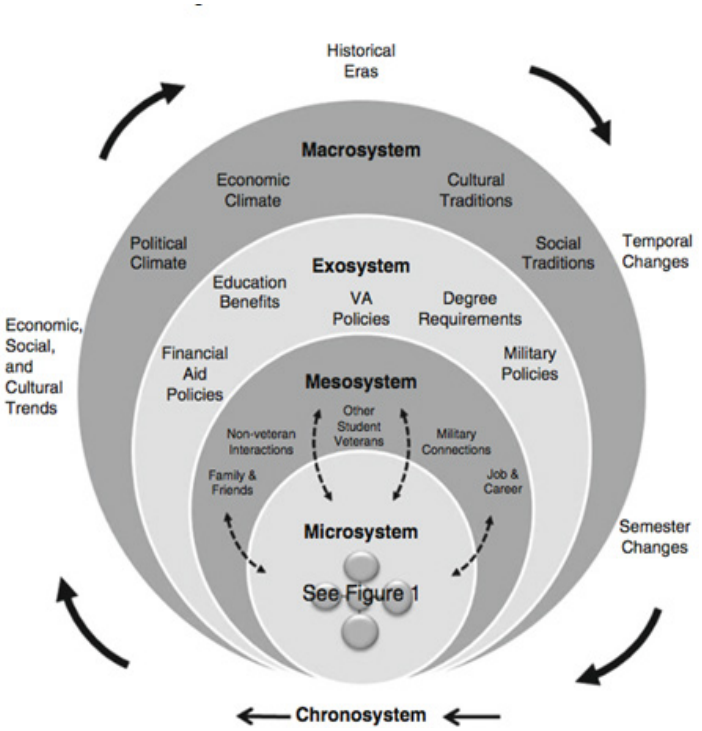

Figure 2. Combined ecological model for student veterans

Methodology

Data for this project were collected from three public universities located in Connecticut, Illinois, and Texas using an internet survey. The survey was designed to test the validity of the Veterans Adjustment to College Scale and also included validated scales for PTSD, depression, and student stress (Author, 2017). The data from this study were drawn from two open-ended questions which are included in the Veterans Adjustment to College Scale, "What, if anything, has been the most helpful in transitioning to college?" and "What, if anything, has made it challenging to transition to college?"

A link to the survey was emailed to veterans' services coordinators at the three universities following approval from the Institutional Review Boards of all the institutions. The emails were sent by veterans' coordinators to their respective GI Bill recipient email lists. As established by Dillman et al., (2009), a modified Tailored Design method was employed by sending three follow-up emails after the initial email request. Flyers asking for veteran participation in the

study were also sent to the universities to be posted in near veteran gathering points on campus.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics

Variable	N/Mean	%
Age (mean)	31.3	
Gender (male)	291	74.4
Race/ Ethnicity		
Caucasian	289	73.9
Black	23	5.9
Latino	64	16.3
Multi-racial	21	5.3
Asian	10	2.5
Native American	6	1.5
Military Service		
National Guard/Reserves	72	18.4
Active Duty	8	2.0
Combat Veteran	127	32.4
Veteran	238	60.9
Household		
Single	176	45.0
Married or DP	162	41.4
Divorced	42	10.7
Separated	7	1.8
Year in School		
Freshman	23	5.9
Sophomore	50	12.8
Junior	99	25.3
Senior	157	40.2
Graduate School	59	15.1

Participants

Of the 391 respondents, 74% were male and the average age was 31. The majority of the participants were white (74%), 16% were Latino, 6% were Black, 5% were multi-racial, and the remaining 5% reported being Asian or Native American. Twenty percent of participants were still serving in the military and roughly 30% reported being combat veterans with a mean number of months deployed 16.4. Most of the participants were undergraduate upperclassmen (65%) with about half of them either married (41%) or divorced (11%). The demographics in this study are similar to a 2015 nationwide survey of student veterans where 70.9% of the participants were White, 26.9% female, 45.1% married, and 12.1% divorced (Cate & Davis, 2016). See Table 1 for additional demographics.

Data and Data Analysis

This project focused on a descriptive analysis of the open-ended responses. Using a cloud-based data management system, both researchers used in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2012) to initially code all responses. In order to establish credibility, researchers co-coded and debriefed throughout the coding process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A secondary, axial coding looked at the relationships between the initial codes and considered how they fit into larger themes. Vacchi and Berger's (2014) EC Model was used as a comparative framework to make meaning of the themes.

Findings

Each respondent commented on what was helpful and what was challenging following their transition to higher education. Within these two larger themes, student veterans suggested ways in which people, the university, and student veterans themselves contributed positively and negatively to their transitions. Many veterans only gave one answer though some answers received two or more separate codes. The themes suggested below were the codes that ap-

peared most frequently in participant responses. For each major theme, we will explore some of the responses that showcase the breadth of the theme.

Helpful

The four major things that veterans found helpful were financial support, campus veteran support staff, family, and support from other veterans. Less frequent responses included faculty support, programs for veterans on campus, strength from service, and support from the VA or other entities.

Educational benefits. Student veterans who acknowledged the financial freedom that came with government support often referred to the support package by name. Many simply answered, "G.I. Bill" or "Post 9/11 G.I. Bill." Those surveyed in the state of Texas referred to the Hazelwood Act (passed in 1943), a fee and tuition exemption for Texas residents at public Texas colleges and universities. In 2009, Hazelwood exemptions became available to dependents of veterans, making it an even more popular and costly state initiative (Jauer, Blagg, & Benton, 2016). Participants from Connecticut also cited that tuition waivers were helpful, allowing them to "focus on school and not on student debts." Participants citing specific educational benefit programs often did so in the context of language that was both appreciate and recognize the generosity of the current G.I. Bill legislation. One participant wrote that the "opportunity to attend college by utilization of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill" was helpful. Another wrote that the most helpful thing was the "luxury" afforded by government support. Finally, veterans saw their financial support of what it saved them from: "worry…how to pay for college," debt, and "having to pay for college out of pocket." Veterans also noted that the government support was earned and not additional help or special treatment. One participant shared, "I don't feel entitled to any sort of extra privilege besides those listed in the contract." While thankful for the opportunity to use G.I. Bill funds, student veterans are quick to remember why they are afforded the "luxury" in the first place. One participant explained, "I don't feel entitled to any sort of privilege besides those listed in the contract I entered with the U.S. Army."

Campus veteran support staff. Respondents seemed to focus on support staff connected with veteran's centers on campus. Most students explained that veteran's center support with financial aid, academic counseling, and the enrollment process were most helpful. Many participants named a specific person at the center that was helpful. These names included both civilians and veterans. At least one person mentioned was a Veterans Affairs representative working at the institution. The tendency to mention a name over a center or office emphasizes the importance of staff/student veteran relationships. As both a sign of respect and a point of allegiance or loyalty, student veteran use of specific names or programs emphasizes their unique connection to the personnel or office supporting them. Student veterans, perhaps more than any other student demographic are conditioned to be collaborative in military training. There is always a "buddy" or fellow serviceman to depend on and "have their six," a military term for having someone's back. Also, in military life, every service member has a commanding officer to provide guidance and support. This propensity to depend on a person instead of a system (especially a system that is in many ways foreign or operating at odds to military logic) leads to a championing and connection with student affairs professionals and their staff.

Family. Family provided a necessary support structure to many of the veterans surveyed. Many participants actually used terms like "spousal support" and "family support" instead of just writing "family." Others were specific about members of their family that supported them in their transition. Common references included wives, husbands, spouses, and sisters. Additionally, respondents discussed the support

structure surrounding family. "My existing family support structure," "strong family support structure," and "family support system" were some of the ways family help was described. These responses operationalize families, potentially holding greater responsibility and meaning than ways civilian students might view family. Direct access to families was also noted, with one participant explaining that having "family nearby" was helpful. For many veterans surveyed, "family" extended to friends, colleagues, and even religious structures. One veteran explained that support came from those who had "support[ed] their decision to through the military before [they] came to college." In this instance, family became those who "knew" pre-service, service, and post-service identities.

Support from other Veterans. Other veterans frequently were noted as helping veterans with the transition. Whether in a shared classroom, still in the service, or on staff or in faculty positions, respondents explained how veterans helped with their transition. One respondent drew strength from "other veterans who have already done a year or so of college [there] to help get [him] used to the area and have someone there to talk to or go out [with]." While some veterans specified that meetings, organizations, or "finding other service members to work with in classes" helped, others acknowledged that just the presence of other veterans on campus was helpful. Many veterans suggested that "talking to," "networking with," and "resourcing with" other veterans "helped [them] find friends that [could] relate to [their] experience from both military and college life." A shared word for veterans discussing other veterans on campus was the word "find." Veteran responses seemed to imply that there was always a hunt for veteran friends, veteran classmates, and veteran faculty members. Some participants also recognized their responsibility to help other veterans. One student veteran shared, "First year students have the hardest time, [other veterans] need to show [new student veterans] who they can talk to and [that] it's OK to talk to them." As a recipient or ally, support from other veterans was cited by many veterans as being helpful.

Challenging

The largest theme represented in experiences that veterans found challenging was the idea of difference. Specifically, veterans suggested that differences between them and civilians, difference from military life, and not belonging were challenging. An additional challenge came from attempting to balance responsibilities. Minor themes of note included bureaucracy, a lack of understanding from others, and conflicts with faculty.

Difference. As a meta-theme, difference permeated student responses. Difference included comparative differences between students veterans and other groups (civilian students, civilian faculty), perceived differences in the lives of student veterans (things that emphasized the "change" between a military and civilian identity), and general feelings of loneliness that were attributed to difference.

Difference between veterans and civilians. The most frequent challenge cited in participant responses was a disconnect and a frustration with civilians on campus, specifically students. While many respondents referenced age and maturity as defining way that they differed from their classmates, others were more specific. One participant explained that "having high expectations of my peers…made it difficult" but that he has "had to learn to let go and focus on only [his] performance." Other veterans referenced the actions of the civilian students and the professors. One wrote that a challenge was "the sense of entitlement that my classmates have. They constantly talk during class which is very distracting in my larger classes and the profs [sic] ignore it." Another explained, "one of my classes is taught at a low roar. The lack of focus on the professor with so many know-it-alls

constantly talking causes problems." Others were frustrated by the "self-centeredness of the general population" and "the fact that no one on campus cares about what's going on in the world that isn't a pop culture issue." There was a general frustration with civilians who did not understand the military, were highly opinionated about the military, and lacked characteristics associated with the military, like discipline. One veteran found it challenging to "deal with other students and teachers who have no idea what military life is like of what veteran have experienced." Another disliked that "people treat [him] like [he has] a handicap because [he is] a veteran." there are "so many opinions" he continued "with little real knowledge." Other terms used to describe civilian peers included "spoon-fed," "immature," "naïve," "lazy," "children," and "hippies."

Difference from military life. The differences faced during the transition included adjusting to new schedule , "because [in the military] I was always being told what to do;" learning a new language "losing the military talk, per se;" and changing focus "having more hands-on experience from the military and transitioning to a more mentally challenging environment." One participant explained that their challenge was "being good at the job that you had in the military and then coming to college and being terrible at everything else." Even in describing their challenges, many veterans used a military-oriented language and thought process. On participant wrote "Shorter timelines to complete tasks and lack of rank to share the tasking orders with other personnel." Frustration exists in the lack of structure, the lack of hierarchy, and different expectations, but the additional component is a lack of someone with whom to "share the tasking orders." "In the military" one respondent wrote, "when someone new comes, everyone makes a point to meet and be friendly. At school, it doesn't work that way." Veterans commented about organization and structure. For many students, transitioning from a life where every decision was made to one where veterans must make every decision was particularly challenging: "going from not having to worry about the little things, such as when I will eat, to having to worry about every single little thing." Perhaps the most incomplete response resonated as most complete: "In the military directions are clearly given. The expectations are clearly stated. The responsibilities are defined. In college initially you have… [ellipses added by respondent]."

Not belonging. While some veterans described purposefully isolating themselves from civilian students because of maturity and age differences, most veterans wrote that alienation and displacement were some of the more challenging parts of their transition: "feeling like an outcast…not having anyone [they] can relate to." Veterans found it "hard to meet people" and felt they were unable to be "part of their social groups." One veteran explained, "I know absolutely nobody and my depression/anxiety makes it extremely difficult to get to know people." Another wrote "It can be difficult to meet people. A lack of general camaraderie. You are expected to help yourself, and if you can't, you suck." many veterans gave reasons for their perceived isolation, writing that stereotypes of veterans and PTSD, age, and life experience made it difficult to find friends. Even those who knew what kind of support they needed and where they could get it could not always find it. On participant wrote that it was challenging "having direction and knowing how much benefits and how [he] should use them. Also getting into veterans programs. Wish I was part of them."

Balancing responsibilities. Both the act of balancing responsibilities and the responsibilities themselves were cited as challenges while transitioning into college. Many respondents listed some of the many responsibilities they shoulder: "having a full-time job and two kids," "working 30 hours a week," and "debt responsibilities." Other participants focused on act of juggling multiple responsibilities, using words like "bal-

ancing," "managing," and "maintaining." Combinations of work and family, work and school, and school and family dominated the responses. Others simply expressed that "time management" or "adjusting my time schedule" was a challenge. And yet another just felt "overwhelmed by college life."

Discussion

The themes which emerged in this study appear to fit with the CE Model as proposed by Vacchi and Berger (2014). The following themes fit within the microsystem, the most proximal system to the veteran: campus veteran support staff, support from other veterans, difference between veterans and civilians, and not belonging. Campus veteran support staff, who provide both service and transition support to veterans, were identified by many student veterans as important to their adjustment. The model recognizes the role of the veteran support staff within the services and transition support axis, but fails to identify the importance of having a "go to" person who understands and attends to veteran-specific needs. Support from other veterans on campus fits well under the support axis which identifies support as coming from peers/buddies. The themes, difference between veterans and civilians and not belonging both are housed within the academic interactions. Strayhorn (2008) notes that a sense of belonging can affect both how a student "fits" or perceives to fit within an environment and the results of that perception of fit—behavior, actions, and attitudes. Feeling different than their non-veteran peers or not connecting with other veterans on campus is a day to day experience which can affect the veteran's sense of support. Central to the microsystem in this model is the concept of support. Support, from peers and professionals, has been demonstrated to be protective to student veterans for both academic and mental health indicators (Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013)

The next layer outward from the student veteran in the EC Model is the mesosystem. This layer includes external sources of support as well as strain and may include: the larger community of student veterans, employment, family, and military connections. This study uncovered two themes which fall in the mesosystem layer, family support and balancing responsibilities. Veterans in the study reported that family was a source of support for them, with many naming a specific family member. Family as a source of support for student veterans is under reported in the literature. However, using a path analysis, Romero and colleagues (2014), found that family social support buffered relationship between avoidant coping and depression and had direct effects on both depression and anxiety symptoms. Also in the mesosystem of the EC Model is balancing adult responsibilities, a theme which includes work and household responsibilities, was a theme reported as a challenge to adjusting to college. Like other adult learners, student veterans have children, jobs, and adult financial responsibilities. This balance is particularly challenging for veterans newly transitioning from military life.

The final two layers in the model are the exosystem and finally the macrosystem. The exosystem includes educational benefits, VA policies, and degree requirements and the macrosystem, the outermost layer, includes cultural, political, and social traditions. The educational benefits theme fits cleanly within the exosystem. When asked what was helpful in their transition to college, many participants simply responded "GI Bill". The educational benefits offered by the VA and state-level veterans programs create a wraparound support for student veterans, and in many cases, making their education possible.

The final theme, difference from military life can be conceptualized as a macrosystem influence. Military life is centered on military culture and social traditions. The military ethos, culture, and social structure frame the perception of the civilian world for veterans. The civilian world of a university can sometimes seem lacking to a veteran.

Campuses lack a clear chain of command, work time is largely unscheduled, and there is a lack of shared mission. Veterans may enter a campus with the expectation or hope that college would be complementary to their military socialization, when often it is not. Student veterans in this study frequently remarked on their disappointment in how different college was to their military experiences.

The CE Model demonstrates the multidimensionality of student veteran experiences. The themes derived from this study lend support to this idea. There are many layers to the student veteran experiences, many of which are shared amongst veterans across the county. With these shared experiences, student veterans are unique as a population, but should not be considered homogeneous (Vaccaro, 2015). Each veteran on campus represents an intersectionality of military branch, rank, combat experience, and military specialty. These military identities further intersect with race, gender, parental status, marital status, sexuality, class, faith, and even studied discipline.

Application

The findings from this study can be applied by both student affairs professionals and veteran services staff. The benefit of this broadly-sampled qualitative data is that is presents a set of factors unfettered by narrowly-scoped close-ended questions. What we have uncovered from the research is that student veterans appreciate the economic and social support from networks within the university and beyond. When looking at economic support, student veterans overwhelmingly credited the GI Bill and other Veterans Administration benefits as helpful in their transition. This research points to the importance of veteran service staff facilitating the process that connects the students to timely and seamless access to benefits. Support from designated veteran service professionals was also pivotal for veterans on campus. This was evidenced by the number of respondents mentioned that staff person by name when asked "what was helpful" in their transition to college. Support also comes from a student veteran organization or from other groups of veterans on campus. Providing opportunities for veterans to gather on campus is essential in aiding transition. For many universities, this is further validation of their veterans' service staff, veteran-designated centers, and student veteran organizations on campus. For some, this research provides a clear guide to what works in providing transitional support for veterans on their campuses.

Family support, sparsely found in student veteran literature, was a minor theme in the data. Nearly half of student veterans are married, have kids, or both (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). Leaving the family out of the equation of veteran success may be unwise. Does your campus provide babysitting for evening veteran's events? Are there opportunities for veterans to bring their spouses to campus events? These are all questions student affairs professionals should address when considering their veterans' services plan. Veterans in this study reported that balancing work and home life responsibilities to be a challenge for them. It may be helpful to look at how we can engage the family members as an ally in the transition and retention of veterans on campus.

In looking at the challenges veterans reported in transitioning to college, the major theme was experiencing difference. Veterans feel different than their classmates, campus life is different than the military and these differences lead to feelings of alienation on campus. These challenges can begin to be addressed by circling back to the social supports veterans reported in this study: support from veteran service staff and other veterans on campus. Support from other veterans will validate feelings of difference and provide mentorship during the transition. Programs, like veterans first year experience classes, can also help normalize the difficulty in transitioning from military life to campus life. On campuses

where veterans' activity participation rates are low, connecting to students who don't access services can be challenging. Re-certification is an excellent time to assess and connect with your veterans. Assessing how they are doing through a quick survey or just asking questions like "what has been most challenging in your transition from military to college?" can be a start. Letting student veterans know that it is normal to struggle to understand the college bureaucracy or to be frustrated at the younger students in class is also helpful.

Conclusions

While the Vacchi and Berger (2014) model is useful to organize supports and challenges within student veteran transition, it is not easily operationalized. More work that connects the nodes of the microsystem with one another and explores how the different layered systems of the ecological model interact could provide better suggestions for practice.

The amount of participant responses used in this study is rare. A limitation of this research is that participants represent only three states. The social and political context of these three states are significantly different. While this offers breadth to the study, there is more work to do. Additional research needs to aggregate multiple campuses to get a broader view of veteran experiences in higher education. Data must be gathered from community colleges, private institutions, and for-profit institutions. This study only looked at four-year public institutions. Collaboration between institutions and faculty willing to take on these sizable projects must be supported by institutions and the field of veteran studies.

Finally, researchers working with student veterans need to recognize the importance of producing qualitative and quantitative work that tells the multidimensional stories of student veterans. While there is strength in narrative, there is also strength in numbers. A synergistic approach to veteran studies that includes multiple paradigms can explore the unique experiences of student veterans and gather multi-institutional data that can be applied and eventually tested in practice. This research tells a multi-vocal story that has practical implications, but is limited by its inability to elaborate on the experiences of the responding student veterans. Themes that illuminated through this work deserve careful and focused qualitative attention through focus groups or individual interviews.

In addition to expanding student veteran research by reporting on a multi-institutional, large data set, this analysis further emphasizes the role of family in student veteran transition. While suggested in the literature, the degree of impact family has on student veteran success warrants further inquiry. Lastly, while broad themes appear, this work reaffirms the need to consider the multidimensionality of student veteran experiences. Models like Vacchi and Berger's (2014) are an important step towards recognizing how multiple levels of active systems affect student veteran transition and success; however, there is still work to do.

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