From the Foxhole to the Ivory Tower: A Critical Analysis of Veteran Transitions from the Military to College

Christopher T. Davidson

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

PRESENTED AT THE 43RD ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN TAMPA FL – NOVEMBER 2018

Abstract

More than 5,000,000 post-9/11 service members are expected to transition out of the military by 2020 due to a reduction in the size of the U.S. military and presence in Iraq and Afghanistan (American Council on Education, 2014). As these service members separate from the military many will choose to enter college. The purpose of this study was to explore the transition experiences of Post-9/11 student veterans from a military setting to college using Veteran Critical Theory to examine data collected from semi-structured interviews. The findings were presented as a composite narrative and add to and confirm a decade's worth of literature about the transition experiences of Post-9/11 student veterans. The findings also confirmed many of the tenets of Veteran Critical Theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) especially related to the conflict between military, civilian, and academic cultures that disrupted student veterans' ability to adapt to their new role as civilian and student.

Keywords: veteran critical theory, higher education, student veterans, transition

From the Foxhole to the Ivory Tower: A Critical Analysis of Veteran Transitions from the Military to College

The United States military quickly approaches twenty years of military conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other Middle Eastern countries. During this time, the country added more than 3 million post-9/11 Veterans to the growing veteran population (National Center for Veteran Analysis and Statistics, 2017). As these servicemembers transition out of the military, many will look to some form of postsecondary education to prepare them for their next career as a civilian using the Post-9/11 GI Bill (American Council on Education, 2014). These student veterans bring a diverse background and life experiences to campus. Many have served multiple deployments during operations in Iraq and Afghanistan (Committee on the Assessment of the Readjustment Needs of Military Personnel, Veterans, Populations, & Medicine, 2013), and some bring physical challenges, disabilities, and mental health issues like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or traumatic brain injuries resulting from their active combat duty service (Arminio, Grabosky, & Lang, 2015; Francis & Kraus, 2012; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, & Strong, 2009; Madaus, Miller, & Vance, 2009; Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011; Wheeler, 2012). Student veterans are typically older than traditional 18- to 22-year-old student (American Council on Education, 2014; Arminio et al., 2015; Brown & Gross, 2011; Madaus et al., 2009; Molina & Morse, 2015), are more likely to work in either full-time or part-time jobs (American Council on Education, 2014; Molina & Morse, 2015; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013), and are more likely to be married with families (American Council on Education, 2014; Molina & Morse, 2015; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). All of these characteristics can complicate an already challenging transition process from the military to college.

The transition process for student veterans tends to be challenging because the military-to-civilian adjustment can be difficult (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; Morin, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014) because of potential traumatic experiences in combat zones, being seriously injured, serving with someone who was killed or injured, and if the veteran was married while in the service (Morin, 2011). For those who may or may not have a traumatic experience before their transition, student veterans experience the loss of the camaraderie experienced in military life that led to strong friendships, and served as a surrogate family (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Olsen et al., 2014). When student veterans enter college, however, they are no longer surrounded by people with the same experiences; instead, they are surrounded by traditionally aged college students with very different life experiences (DiRamio et al., 2008; Durdella & Kim, 2012; Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011) which may lead to a sense of frustration (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Durdella & Kim, 2012; Livingston et al., 2011; Olsen et al., 2014). Family and finances served as an additional stressor for student veterans because the Post-9/11 GI Bill does not provide for all living expenses, leading many student veterans to seek employment while balancing school and work responsibilities while also providing for their family (Brown & Gross, 2011; DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Durdella & Kim, 2012; Elliott et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Wilson, Smith, Lee, & Stevenson, 2013; Zoli, Maury, & Fay, 2015).

The campus climate also plays a role in the transition experience for student veterans. Campus climates can be classified in one of three ways. The Supportive Climate typically has strong historic ties to the military and provides a variety of services to assist student veterans with their transition, including a military and veteran student office (MVSO), a student veteran

association (SVA), and other institutional policies to support veteran needs (DiRamio et al., 2008; Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014). Ambivalent Climates are those campuses that tend to have large populations of nontraditional students, and being a veteran is seen as just another nontraditional experience (DiRamio et al., 2008; Summerlot et al., 2009). Finally, the Challenging Climate is one in which a veteran may hide their military service to avoid the anti-military sentiments closely associate with these campuses (DiRamio et al., 2008; Summerlot et al., 2009)

With the increase in student veterans on campus, the diverse backgrounds and experiences they bring, and the need to create a more welcoming and veteran-inclusive campus, faculty and administrators should commit to understanding that the best practices aimed at the more traditionally aged 18- to 22-year-old college student may not be the best suited for the Post-9/11 student veteran. By understanding the military context and experiences that shape these veterans before becoming students, college administrators may be better equipped to provide better services and support as these students enter college. To examine the veteran's transition from the military to college, this article uses a composite case of six student veterans to illustrate the military context and experiences that influenced their transition from the military to college. Phillips and Lincoln's (2017) Veteran Critical Theory (VCT) provided the framework that guided the cross-case analysis and construction of a composite character for this study. The experiences of Jonathan—a composite character created from the experiences of six student veterans in Virginia—is presented, followed by a discussion and implications for those in higher education working with these student veterans.

Conceptual Frameworks

Phillips and Lincoln (2017) developed VCT to challenge the status quo when it comes to serving student veterans and to understand the multifaceted issues facing this population. By examining other critical theories, tenets, and literature surrounding the theories using a case survey approach, Phillips and Lincoln (2017) proposed 11 tenets for VCT:

1. Institutions of higher education are predominately staffed by civilians in leadership and faculty positions and focus on educating the traditionally aged 18- to 22-year-old civilian students, leading to "structures, policies, and processes [that] privilege civilians over veterans" (p. 660).
2. Veterans "experience various forms of oppression and marginalization including macroaggressions" (p. 660) because of a lack of privacy about experiences, assumptions about disabilities and need for assistance, and the "the emotional or social gain" (p. 661) by civilians for showing respect due to a perceived or actual disability;
3. "Veterans are victims of deficit thinking in higher education" (p. 661) because the more traditional means of supporting and measuring student success may not be appropriate for student veterans given their experience in education.
4. Veterans experience "multiple conflicting and interacting power structures, languages, and systems" (p. 661) due to their roles as both military and civilians.
5. There is value in the stories that veterans tell to explain their own reality.
6. Veterans experience the intersection of multiple identities other than just being a veteran.
7. Stories of veterans' experiences are written typically from the perspective of a civilian that may not have the authority to express the meaning of a veteran's experience.

8. "Veterans are more appropriately positioned to inform policy and practice regarding veterans" (p. 662) by providing the voice of those the policy may affect.
9. Services for veterans may be serving the interests of civilians and ultimately harming veterans because of the lack of a holistic view of the veteran experience.
10. Veterans are diverse and their experiences and services cannot be generalized to everyone nor can they be "essentialized" (p.663).
11. "Veteran culture is built on a culture of respect, honor, and trust" and at times institutions of higher education may not be congruent with the socially learned military culture (p.663).

Methods

The data from this study stemmed from a larger collective-case study of six student veterans at two- and four-year public and private institutions located in Virginia to understand the experiences of student veterans and their experiences transitioning from the military to college (Stake, 1995). A collective-case study methodology was used to focus on a single issue illustrated through several cases to show different perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). The cases were bound by location (institutions within Virginia), type of institution (public institutions), time (data collected within one academic year), and experiences (the military and college experiences) (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

Sampling

I chose a purposeful sample of six participants to craft individual cases studies for cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014) for the larger study. Eligible participants met the following criteria: (a) were a veteran discharged from the U.S. Air Force, Marines, Army, Navy or served in the National Guard or Reserves on active duty after September 11,

2001; (b) completed at least 9 credit hours each semester for the last two consecutive semesters (i.e. 9 credits in Fall, 9 credits in Spring) during the 2015-2016 academic year; and (c) attended a public or private four-year or two-year institution of higher education in Virginia. I sought also to select a diverse sample in relation to age, marital status, race, ethnicity, and gender.

Data Collection

For the larger project, case studies were constructed from data collected via two semi-structured interviews lasting 40 to 60 minutes using the product of a systematic literature review called the Student Veteran College Transition Model [blinded for review] and a modified version of Seidman's (2013) model of phenomenological interviewing. The interview protocols consisted of a series of questions designed to explore the meaning that people place on their experience within the context of their lives. The first interview asked questions to elicit responses related to the student's transition experiences from the military to college, their current experiences in college, and how they interpreted those experiences. The second interview focused on the student's life before joining the military, their military experience, and follow-up questions about their transition experience to college.

Data Analysis

To examine the data using VCT, data analysis took place in three phases: (a) within-case analysis, (b) cross-case analysis, and (c) assertions (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). To complete the within-case and cross-case analysis phases, I used a word table, created in Microsoft Excel. I included the tenants of VCT (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) along the vertical side and the case, or participant, name running horizontally across the top of the table (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). For the within-case analysis, I systematically examined the transcripts, notes from interviews, and the instrumental case for each participant and began copying direct quotes

and statements into the appropriate cell of the table. The second phase of data analysis was cross-case analysis. To complete this phase, I systematically examined the data by moving horizontally across cases within a single theme looking for similarities, differences, and patterns in the data (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The last phase of analysis was assertions. During this phase, I developed naturalistic generalizations from the data. I sought to apply what I learned from the data to the student veteran population (Stake, 1995).

To present the findings more concisely and to ensure confidentiality, I collapsed the six instrumental cases and additional data from the semi-structured interviews not in the instrumental cases into a composite narrative representing a self-identifying male and female student veteran. Composite narratives draw from multiple sources to create a "composite" character to discuss various forms of oppression and experiences. The use of composite narratives has typically been employed to examine the oppression of people of color (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Examples of composite stories in education include examining the experiences of faculty of color (Tuitt, Hanna, Martinez, Salazar, & Griffin, 2009), the 1968 East Los Angeles school walkouts and the 1993 UCLA student strike for Chicana and Chicano studies (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001), African American and Latino graduate students, (Daniel, 2007), and the college admission process for undocumented students (Gildersleeve, 2010). Similar to other underrepresented populations on college campuses, student veterans experience forms of oppression related to their veteran status along with the intersections with other identities they possess. By creating a composite profile, I am able to illustrate these experiences in two narrative cases.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness of the data, I used six strategies common to qualitative research: (a) expert review of the protocols and methods, (b) member checking for each case, to ensure I captured their story and experiences accurately before collapsing the stories into a composite narrative, (c) peer reviews of the three phases of the data analysis, (d) positionality, (e) bracketing, and (f) the use of memos and an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, I piloted the interview protocol with a small sample of student veterans who were not eligible to participate in the study.

Positionality

I must also acknowledge my positionality with the topic of this study. My experiences with veterans include both familial connections and connections through work. I have worked with student veterans in a variety of capacities at two large flagship institutions in states with a large military presence. I have also served as a project team member conducting a state-wide needs and gap analysis examining transition, education, employment, and entrepreneurship services for veterans to craft recommendations to state policymakers. Both my professional and research experience with veterans could influence how I collected and analyzed the data produced in this study.

Jonathan

Jonathan, a 26-year-old man and former Marine (serving from 2009 to 2012) attends the University of the Mid-Atlantic (UMA), a large public flagship institution, in pursuit of his undergraduate degree in public policy and leadership. Before attending UMA, he attended Upstate Community College (UCC), his local community college, upon separating from the

military and before transferring to UMA. Jonathan continued to serve in the National Guard while attending classes.

Joining the Military and Military Life

When Jonathan graduated high school, he initially enrolled at his local community college. After not doing well academically during his first semester, however, his parents refused to help with the finances and he withdrew and decided to enlist in the U.S. Marine Corps. He decided that if he wanted to go to school later on in life, he could use the GI Bill to pay for his education. In 2009, Jonathan left college and joined the Marines during the surge of troops in Afghanistan as an infantryman and later became a mortarman. Jonathan was excited about leaving for basic training because he knew it would be a different experience and had pride in that he would be serving his country; however, when he entered training, it shocked him because of the abrupt change in lifestyle with an extremely regimented life. When Jonathan completed boot camp on Parris Island, he deployed to Afghanistan.

Deployment

In 2010, Jonathan deployed to Afghanistan where his platoon focused on foot patrols, engaging with the local Afghanis, and removing improvised explosive devices (IEDs). During his time in Afghanistan, his role changed from strictly being a mortarman to becoming a Fire Direction Center (FDC) member, meaning he obtained a high position within his platoon. In this new role, he received "information from forward observers and intelligence, and comput[ed] that information to the gun line, and often to higher authorities, as to where they could shoot and land artillery rounds and mortar rounds." Once his deployment in Afghanistan ended, he returned home and then deployed again aboard a ship traveling to the Mediterranean Sea to "train local nationals" in Jordan and Kuwait and to "conduct amphibious landing operations."

Military Culture and Relationships

The regimented lifestyle that Jonathan experienced as a Marine permeated every aspect of his life and relationships. During the early stages of being a Marine, Jonathan experienced the concept that being a Marine required a willingness to sacrifice everything in order to be a Marine. Jonathan described being a Marine as a "way of life is what it is. I mean it's a language. It's how to write. It's how to speak. It's its own little world."

As a "Boot," or "a derogatory term in the Marines for those Marines that have not deployed and haven't seen combat," Jonathan was forced to grow close to his fellow service members. These close relationships led Jonathan to consider his fellow Marines as some of the "best friends" that he had "ever made in his life." This group of friends "saw the best and worst of each other" and were "unable to hide anything personal" from one another because of the amount of time they spent together.

Unlike the relationship with other Boots, the relationship with superiors was a "psychological game." Jonathan found that officers had the ability to either protect him or make his day-to-day life "a living hell." Jonathan quickly learned which superiors were true leaders and who would train and protect him as a Marine. In one instance, he found an officer that took him under his wing and guided him through the job and workings of the Marines. Along with the personal friendships with his fellow Boots, Jonathan found a network of professional relationships with Boots and officers, by continually meeting the high standards set before him to earn respect from fellow servicemembers. In turn, he earned his "value" in the platoon despite being a Boot.

Once Jonathan deployed, he found there was no pretext of rank. He learned that you had to be "effective and be good at your job;" ultimately, that was what mattered in battle.

Jonathan's relationships focused on learning "who's the person you could trust in the fight" and whom you could depend on. While there was no pretext of rank, he still had to please his superiors because he wanted to be the Marine "that people wanted to work with" and not the Marine that people did not trust.

Leaving the Military and Going to College

In 2012, Jonathan received an honorable discharge from the Marines. He decided that instead of taking a gap year to readjust to civilian life as some of his fellow Marines did, he would move home and attend UCC for two years and obtain his associate's degree and begin using his Post-9/11 GI Bill and transfer to UMA to complete a bachelor's degree in public policy and leadership. For Jonathan, attending a community college was the best option for him because he felt academically unprepared for college due to poor high school performance, his previous college experience, and the lack of critical thinking during his time in the military. "I had to put in way more hours than everyone else, simply because it's been so long since I've even addressed a lot of the subjects that they were talking about." Going to community college served as a good way for Jonathan to adjust to the civilian life as a student because he knew that he would be leaving "a hyper-masculine, very aggressive environment to something that is the polar opposite."

> [I]t prepared me to be a student. I didn't know how to be a student. I didn't know how to schedule my time. The concept of you can wake up at 11 and show up to a class, that was alien to me. So it was a good way of introducing me to the college life.

Collegiate Culture and Relationships with Students

While at UCC, Jonathan learned to adjust to a less regimented life but found it difficult to deal with ambiguity and make personal decisions and this followed him to his experience at UMA.

> One of the biggest issues I had, when I got out of college, was that no one was talking at— when I got out of the Marine Corps, nobody was telling me what to do. I'd get these broad objectives like, "Get into [UMA]," and then I'd be like "All right, accomplished that, now what's my next step?" And I would get very little guidance—I'd get a lot of big-picture guidance like pick a major. But beyond that, I didn't get much guidance. And I feel like a lot of grunts are very used to a world that - when I say grunts, I mean infantrymen - are very used to a world in which we have a direction. It's a culture that does breed an element of—I don't know the best way to put it. But it breeds a kind of element in which we're not great thinkers on our own outside in the civilian world because we always had a structure and institution to work with, and that was very clear.

What he did not anticipate was the difficult transition because he had lost the family he had built with fellow servicemembers. UCC, however, did provide him with the chance to interact with civilians again from a variety of backgrounds and ages since many were older, nontraditional students. UCC gave Jonathan the opportunity to meet many other veterans, including those through the veterans' student organization, "a second family" to him, because of shared experiences and backgrounds.

UCC also provide Jonathan with a military and student veteran office (MVSO) to serve him and other military-connected students. As a place for student veterans to assemble, the MVSO had a lounge space, computer workstations, and provided an atmosphere where students could share a common dialogue with one another. At UCC the MVSO had an administrative function since it employed a full-time staff member and several student veterans through the federal work-study program to certify GI Bill paperwork, answer military and non-military

related questions about campus, and to serve as a common point of contact or clearinghouse and referral agent on campus. After two years at UCC, he transferred to UMA.

Jonathan described UMA as not having a strong military student presence like UCC and he was lonely at first because he was older than the average student at UMA. Transferring to UMA prevented him from having the large social networks that many of his civilian peers had and the same foundational knowledge about the workings of UMA as those who started there as first-year students and engaged in the typical Greek life activities that most students did. Jonathan found himself being asked questions on whether "he had killed someone" at UMA. While he was open about his experiences, he found this the dumbest of questions a person could ask a service member and it occurred "because people simply are uneducated about the military."

Jonathan did find some solace in that Liz, a former classmate and Marine, had transferred from UCC at the same time he did and into the same major. Together, he and Liz learned to navigate the complex organization of UMA together. Even with this connection to Liz, however, he did not feel like a part of the community at UMA. He stated, "I want to feel like I'm part of the community here, I don't feel like I'm a part of the team."

Jonathan saw a large difference in the experience and culture of his classmates as compared to his own. "I've never met so many 20-year-olds packed in one room that know everything about the world and are so sure of it, too. I'm 26 and I'm still trying to figure out which way is up." For him, he learned what he called "intellectual humility" early in the Marines from "somebody like a squad leader or a sergeant or a staff sergeant say, 'No, you're not as smart as you fucking think you are, and you need to shut up and listen right now.'" These superiors made it clear that his place was to follow orders, not to think. This "intellectual

humility" and military experience informed his perspective on college challenges that arose. He said,

> I've had some, some really rough, hard days before. Some really, really, long, bad days. Some things are more in perspective for me. I mean, there are things that don't bother me as much as I see them bothering other students.

Jonathan overcame the lack of intellectual humility and maturity differences with his peers through the skills and work ethic instilled through the Marine Corps. He talked about how his self-discipline helps him see that college was like another job for him. He understood that he had to be on time for class, take responsibility for assignments, works to meet the professor's expectations of the professor just like he did for his commanding officers. By treating classwork like a job in the military he built a rapport with some of his faculty members.

Experiences with Institutional Faculty and Staff

Jonathan's perception of how he interacted with his professors at UCC and UMA was different from his perception of nonmilitary students. He saw himself as more mature and professional similar to his faculty members. Jonathan treated the standards from the faculty the same way he did with superiors. He stated, "I don't ask for excuses. I don't ask for my excuses to be accepted, that's for sure. I don't give excuses. I think a lot of professors appreciate that." He said:

> I show them a degree of respect that I don't think they're used to. I sir or ma'am the whole time. Whenever I speak, I stand up if I want to speak to them. I see a lot of teachers personally interacting with students that remain seated. To me, that's just incomprehensible how you can remain seated to somebody who's so much infinitely more accomplished than you.

Jonathan did have one staff member, the veteran's benefits coordinator at UMA, with whom he found difficult to communicate and work with during his experience. He never met with the coordinator because the benefit's certification process was solely electronic through a generic office email address. He felt that he only received canned responses despite the subject of the email. Jonathan described the frustration of trying to use UMA's early registration policy for student veterans.

> I'm having issues with the VA official here on the [UMA] campus. For example-- and this is the second time in a row, so it's a trend. So I submitted all my paperwork to enroll and I had already enrolled in my classes online. And I got to let her know what classes I enroll[ed] in. That's standard; it was at UCC as well. So I submitted all my paperwork to her November 22nd. At UCC, the VA rep would certify my enrollment within like 48 hours. For some reason, she didn't certify my enrollment until January 6th. So what happens is, she certified my enrollment, then it goes to the VA. And the VA says, "We will process your request in the order it is received." Well, guess how many other requests they were processing, okay? And this is why it's an issue; because of that book stipend. Because I get that book stipend to buy my books. So I just got my book stipend yesterday, and classes started on Wednesday.

This example was the second time Jonathan experienced a certifying issue and was unable to use UMA's early registration policy. The first time he was told, "You're not a third or fourth year," when he was actually a third-year junior when he transferred. These experiences left him feeling he had no voice and was unsupported at UMA. Even though he had issues with the veterans' coordinator and did not feel supported on campus, he eventually found an ally in the Dean of the School of Leadership and Public Policy. Jonathan's dean was a former Army Green Beret and

reached out to student veterans. The dean felt that student veterans were an excellent fit for his school because they "know something about leadership" and are an asset to the school.

Resolution for the Military vs Civilian Cultures

Jonathan was cognizant of the significant cultural differences between the Marine Corps and college. He explained, that civilians did not understand the "gross culture, the politically incorrect culture" of the military. He stated that some Marines "instead of accepting the fact that [we're] aliens, they think that society is alien. It's the reverse. The Marine Corps culture is the alien culture, and society is the normal one." He suggested that without learning to leave the military culture behind, a Marine would struggle outside of the military.

While UMA did not have a strong military presence and lacked services for student veterans, he seemed to like the idea of a program that linked student veterans together for academic, social, and professional experiences that he later helped create while attending UMA. Jonathan said:

> I do believe that pairing them with veterans—I've heard of a program a long time ago that some schools were buying into, in which all the veterans they had for the first two years of their four-year institution, they would be linked together. They would track each other's improvement, and they would all be together and take the same general ed classes. I really like that idea.

By doing this, he thought that student veterans could help one another to navigate the ambiguity created by the institutional culture of institutions such as UMA instead of feeling as if they had no direction.

Jonathan discussed that he believed that student veteran organizations could serve as an organization to advocate for student veterans on campus. He described:

> I thought that, for me, [the social aspect] was the really important thing is to have a place where veterans could come and socialize and interact with other student veterans. Because, for me, I knew that having that sense of community helped keep me in school, so I wanted to make sure that that was available to other people.

Ultimately, Jonathan overcame these challenges by relying on his military experience and mentality. He knew that he could not just walk away from school, just as he could not leave the military, so he learned to put things into perspective. Jonathan had moments where he would tell himself, "Yeah, this is a lot of work, a lot of stuff I got to do…I'm not in Afghanistan. Nobody's trying to kill me today, so it's not that bad." He took school seriously; however, he understood that in the scheme of his experiences, the worst thing that could have happened in Afghanistan is much worse than what could happen in class. For him, this made the transition less stressful.

Critical Insights from Jonathan's Story

The overarching theme of Jonathan's experiences is the intersection between the multiple and conflicting identities and cultures of the military, civilians, and academia. This overarching theme fits with the several tenets of VCT and helps to illustrate Jonathan's experiences and interactions through that framework.

Veterans are Diverse Individuals

Philips and Lincoln (2017) describe that veterans are diverse and that their experiences cannot be generalized. Even with the composite case of Jonathan, his story is not generalizable to every student veteran. Jonathan described himself as older, more experienced, and more mature. The age difference also led Jonathan not to interact or socialize with his fellow students, which is consistent with other scholarly literature about age (American Council on Education, 2014; Durdella & Kim, 2012; Elliott et al., 2011) and maturity (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio

et al., 2008; Durdella & Kim, 2012; Livingston et al., 2011; Olsen et al., 2014) differences negatively affecting relationships between student veterans and their nonmilitary classmates.

Veterans Experience Multiple Identities and Cultures

VCT suggest that veterans experience the intersection of multiple identities and cultures because of their role as both a veteran and civilian (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). The differences in military, civilian, and academic culture emerged as the second challenge for student veterans. In this study, student veterans described a perceived lack of awareness and knowledge about the military culture by faculty, staff members, and civilian students. Student veterans perceived that civilians on campus make broad assumptions that all student veterans have the same experiences. For example, a common question that Jonathan was asked, "have you ever killed someone," was usually a result of the civilian being unaware that not all veterans have seen combat or killed someone. The difference in cultures also included how student veterans use the military perspective to reframe challenges they experience as college students, in their social lives and their worldview. Stressful situations that involved coursework and other college experiences did not seem as important when the student veterans stopped and thought about them in the context of their combat experiences. Academia for them is not a life-or-death situation like serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, or other combat-related missions. This difference was the cause of some division and frustrations between student veterans and their civilian classmates. The lack of military cultural awareness created challenges for student veterans on campus (Arminio et al., 2015; Durdella & Kim, 2012; Elliott et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Summerlot et al., 2009).

The last cultural difference that provided challenges for a student veterans' transition was the conflict between the regimented life of the military and the unregimented lives as a civilian

and student. Student veterans in this study described leaving an environment where the military dictated all aspects of their lives. Superiors told these student veterans exactly what to do, how to do it, and where to be with the expectation that they would complete orders without deviating. Military regulations dictated how student veterans could participate in social and political activities. This environment created a group of people that did not have to engage regularly in the critical thinking skills and choice making that is a hallmark of a college education. When student veterans in this study entered college, they experienced challenges because of higher education values and expects independence and personal accountability with little to no direction from faculty or staff members. These findings confirm prior research about the conflict between the regimented and unregimented lives of student veterans (Arminio et al., 2015; DiRamio et al., 2008; Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011; Livingston et al., 2011; Olsen et al., 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Veterans are Positioned to Inform Policy and Practice

Jonathan described that the military and veteran student office (MVSO) and the veteran student organization (VSO) as something that would be beneficial to student veterans. The MVSO on campus served two purposes for student veterans. Consistent with prior literature, it first served as a place for student veterans to congregate with one another (Brown & Gross, 2011; Elliott et al., 2011; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; O'Herrin, 2011; Summerlot et al., 2009; Wheeler, 2012). The MVSO, like many other cultural centers on college campuses, provided student veterans with a safe space where they may congregate with people that have similar experiences, backgrounds, and can have candid conversations with fellow student veterans in their shared military language.

Secondly, MVSOs played an important administrative role for student veterans in this study. These offices typically employed veterans as full-time staff members and student veterans in work-study positions. MVSO staff members in these offices answered questions for student veterans, certified GI Bill benefits, and referred student veterans to appropriate resources both on and off campus. The MVSO appeared to be beneficial because student veterans perceived staff members as trustworthy and understanding because of their shared military backgrounds (Ackerman et al., 2009; Arminio et al., 2015; Brown & Gross, 2011; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Olsen et al., 2014).

In addition to MVSOs, campus VSOs served an important role in the transition process for student veterans. VSOs provided the mechanism to facilitate student veteran-to-student veteran peer relationships through the student organization. This is consistent with the literature about the importance of VSOs on campus for student veterans (Arminio et al., 2015; DiRamio et al., 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011; Olsen et al., 2014; Summerlot et al., 2009; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014; Wheeler, 2012).

Implications

The findings of this study have implications for practice, policy, and future research. In terms of practice, college and university administrators have followed the best practices outlined by practitioners and researchers during the past decade typically focused on traditional practices used for civilian students. Consistent with VCT (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017), student veterans are willing to share their experiences and recommendations on how better to serve them if given the opportunity. They are also appropriately positioned to inform both policy and practice concerning student veterans.

Next, administrators should assess and evaluate their programs and services geared towards student veterans. By doing so, administrators can learn about the effectiveness of their programs and if they are meeting intended outcomes. To do this, they should engage student veterans in the process because they appear to be willing to share their experiences and concerns about services for them. By assessing and evaluating these practices regularly and including student veterans in the process, they may provide a more inclusive campus and ensure that the services are designed to meet the needs of student veterans and not to convenience civilian administrators (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017).

The third implication for practice is related to cultural awareness for faculty, staff members, and students. These groups may benefit from continued education on military students' experiences. This education should go beyond just military experiences and health issues related to those that served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead, it should include other issues that affect student veterans, such as the culture of the military, external resources for student veterans, and the importance of the encouragement from family members in reaching their educational goals. This education is important because colleges and universities are primarily led by civilians with no understanding of the military experience (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017).

Lastly, my study illustrates the need for additional research. This study confirms many of the findings from the scholarly and best practice literature from the last decade and uses VCT (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) to explore the experiences of student veterans. Additional studies using Philips' and Lincoln's Veterans Critical Theory (2017) could help broaden the perspective of the experiences of student veterans and how to better serve this population. By using this framework (as well as other factors like race, gender, university rurality, and urbanicity), researchers may find other factors that affect a student veterans' transition from the military to

college. These theories and factors should consider that the military and veteran culture permeates all aspects of the student's experience that many frameworks do not incorporate.

Conclusion

The findings of this study add to and confirm a decade's worth of literature about the transition experiences of Post-9/11 student veterans. The study also confirms the tenets of Veteran Critical Theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). As the number of Post-9/11 student veterans continues to increase, whether they have seen active-duty combat or not, college and university administrators need to continue reexamining how they serve this population. This population of students, while an underrepresented population on campus, deserve to have a positive experience and feel like they belong on the college campus. Without changes in the way administrators and faculty serve these students, this population will continue to have negative experiences with higher education administrators, faculty, and nonmilitary classmates. To make this change, college administrators should engage with various stakeholders within the university, including student veterans themselves, to create more inclusive environments through both policy and practice to support student veterans as they integrate and navigate their changing identities and cultures.

References

Ackerman, R., DiRamio, D., & Garza Mitchell, R. L. (2009). *Transitions combat veterans as college students*. doi: 10.1002/ss.311

American Council on Education. (2014). Higher ed spotlight: Undergraduate student veterans. Retrieved from http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Higher-Ed-Spotlight-Undergraduate-Student-Veterans.aspx

Arminio, J., Grabosky, T. K., & Lang, J. (2015). *Student veterans and service members in higher education*. New York: NY: Routledge.

Brown, P. A., & Gross, C. (2011). Serving those who have served—managing veteran and military student best practices. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, *59*(1), 45–49. doi: 10.1080/07377363.2011.544982

Committee on the Assessment of the Readjustment Needs of Military Personnel, Veterans, and their F., Populations, B. on the H. of S., & Medicine, I. of. (2013). *Returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan: Preliminary assessment of readjustment needs of veterans, service members, and their families*. Washington DC: National Academies Press (US). Retrieved from http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK206861/

DiRamio, D., Ackerman, R., & Mitchell, R. L. (2008). From combat to campus: Voices of student-veterans. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *45*(1). doi: 10.2202/1949-6605.1908

DiRamio, D., & Spires, M. (2009). Partnering to assist disabled veterans in transition. In R. Ackerman & D. DiRamio (Eds.), *Creating a veteran-friendly campus: Strategies for transition and success: New directions for student services* (Vol. 2009, pp. 81–88). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. doi: 10.1002/ss.319

Durdella, N., & Kim, Y. K. (2012). Understanding patterns of college outcomes among student veterans. *Journal of Studies in Education*, *2*(2), 109–129. doi: 10.5296/jse.v2i2.1469

Elliott, M., Gonzalez, C., & Larsen, B. (2011). U.S. military veterans transition to college: Combat, PTSD, and alienation on campus. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *48*(3), 279–296. doi: 10.2202/1949-6605.6293

Francis, L. C., & Kraus, A. (2012). Developing a student veterans center: The confluence of academic and military cultures. *About Campus*, *17*(4), 11–14. doi: 10.1002/abc.21087

Griffin, K. A., & Gilbert, C. K. (2015). Better transitions for troops: An application of Schlossberg's Transition Framework to analyses of barriers and institutional support structures for student veterans. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *86*(1), 71–97. doi: 10.1353/jhe.2015.0004

Hinojosa, R., & Hinojosa, M. S. (2011). Using military friendships to optimize postdeployment reintegration for male Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom veterans. *The Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, *48*(10), 1145–1157. doi: 10.1682/JRRD.2010.08.0151JSP

Livingston, W. G., Havice, P. A., Cawthon, T. W., & Fleming, D. S. (2011). Coming home: Student veterans' articulation of college re-enrollment. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *48*(3). doi: 10.2202/1949-6605.6292

Lokken, J. M., Pfeffer, D. S., McAuley, J., & Strong, C. (2009). A statewide approach to creating veteran-friendly campuses. In R. Ackerman & D. DiRamio (Eds.), *Creating a veteran-friendly campus: Strategies for transition and success: New directions for student services* (pp. 45–54). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass doi: 10.1002/ss.315

Madaus, J. W., Miller, W. K., & Vance, M. L. (2009). Veterans with disabilities in

postsecondary education. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, *22*(1), 10–17.

Molina, D., & Morse, A. (2015). *Military-connected undergraduates: Exploring differences between national guard, reserve, active duty, and veterans in higher education*. Washington DC: American Council on Education and NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.

Moon, T. L., & Schma, G. A. (2011). A proactive approach to serving military and veteran students. In J. B. Hodson & B. W. Speck (Eds.), *Entrepreneurship in student services: New directions for higher education* (pp. 53–60). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. doi: 10.1002/he.426

Morin, B. R. (2011). *The difficult transition from military to civilian life*. Retrieved from http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2011/12/The-Difficult-Transition-from-Military-to-Civilian-Life.pdf

National Center for Educational Statistics. (2013). 2011–2012 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/

National Center for Veteran Analysis and Statistics. (2017). *Veteran Population Projections 2017-2037*. Washington, D.C.

O'Herrin, E. (2011). Enhancing veteran success in higher education. *Peer Review*, *13*(1), 15–18.

Olsen, T., Badger, K., & McCuddy, M. D. (2014). Understanding student veterans' college experience an exploratory study. *U.S. Army Medical Department Journal*, *Oct-Dec201*, 101–108.

Ostovary, F., & Dapprich, J. (2011). Challenges and opportunities of Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans with disabilities transitioning into learning and workplace environments. In T. S. Rocco (Ed.), *Challenging ableism, understanding*

disability, including adults with disabilities in workplaces and learning spaces: New directions for adult and continuing education (pp. 63–73). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. doi: 10.1002/ace.432

Phillips, G. A., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2017). Introducing veteran critical theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *8398*(April), 1–13. doi: 10.1080/09518398.2017.1309586

Rumann, C. B., & Hamrick, F. A. (2009). Supporting student veterans in transition. In R. Ackerman & D. DiRamio (Eds.), *Creating a veteran-friendly campus: Strategies for transition and success: New directions for student services* (pp. 25–34). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. doi: 10.1002/ss.313

Rumann, C. B., & Hamrick, F. A. (2010). Student veterans in transition: Re-enrolling after war zone deployments. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *81*(4), 431–458. doi: 10.1353/jhe.0.0103

Summerlot, J., Green, S. M., & Parker, D. (2009). Student veterans organizations. In R. Ackerman & D. DiRamio (Eds.), *Creating a veteran-friendly campus: Strategies for transition and success: New directions for student services* (pp. 71–79). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. doi: 10.1002/ss.318

Tomar, N., & Stoffel, V. (2014). Examining the lived experience and factors influencing education of two student veterans using photovoice methodology. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *68*(4), 430–438. doi: 10.5014/ajot.2014.011163

Wheeler, H. A. (2012). Veterans' transitions to community college: A case study. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *36*(10), 775–792. doi: 10.1080/10668926.2012.679457

Wilson, K. B., Smith, N. L., Lee, A. L., & Stevenson, M. A. (2013). When the army post is the campus: Understanding the social and academic integration of soldiers attending college. *Journal of College Student Development*, *54*(6), 628–642. doi: 10.1353/csd.2013.0087

Zoli, C., Maury, R., & Fay, D. (2015). *Missing perspectives: Servicemembers' transition from service to civilian life — data-driven research to enact the promise of the Post-9/11GI Bill*. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans & Military Families, Syracuse Univesity.