

Examining the lived cultural experiences of veterans at military friendly community colleges: A
narrative inquiry

by

Matthew E. Miller

B.A., Kent State University, 2002
M.A., Cleveland State University, 2007

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Community College Leadership Program
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2025

Abstract

Military veterans represent a unique community college demographic with a powerful cultural background that informs their approaches to learning, campus interactions, and challenge negotiation styles. Community colleges place a special emphasis on recognizing the cultural background of veterans and tailor support services and campus resources to embrace culturally specific inclusivity philosophies. These philosophies manifest as campus resource centers, targeted student support frameworks, and inclusive practices that recognize the important influence of culture on the military veteran student experience. The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study was to explore the lived cultural experiences of veterans at a military friendly community college.

This study was an exploration of a challenging student experience that is influenced heavily by powerful cultural background considerations and highlights the cultural implications associated with difficulties and successes. This study found that challenges with transition from military to community college student, interpersonal relationships, and campus acclimation have foundations in military culture. Successful use of skills gained from military culture was vital to veteran student success and influenced military student behaviors and attitudes positively. By identifying specific cultural experiences and their implication on the student experience, this study established direct evidence of a cultural confluence that complicates the military veteran community college journey.

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Approved by:

Co-Major Professor
Dr. JaNice Marshall

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Co-Major Professor
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Dedication

This research is dedicated to all current and former members of the United States Armed Forces.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Inclusivity is an important aspect of the community college mission, and institutions strive to recognize the unique cultural backgrounds of students, faculty, and staff. Culturally based student initiatives on campus focus primarily on marginalized students and provide access to resources, specialized programming, and culturally sensitive student support initiatives. This culturally sensitive approach to veteran students is referred to as “military friendly,” and community colleges across the United States are embracing the associated philosophies. Culturally focused programs, safe spaces, and student support structures are common at public community colleges, and these initiatives have been found to have a positive effect on the targeted student demographic. Military veterans are a marginalized student demographic that community colleges target with specific student support programs, dedicated physical campus spaces, and student support frameworks. These programs are typically administered through the campus veteran resource center (VRC). The VRC is a physical location on campus that places a special significance on culturally based support philosophies designed specifically for military veterans.

A military friendly culture has developed throughout the higher education world in general, but most particularly within the community college sector as institutions strive to create a veteran-inclusive campus environment. Being military friendly is a higher education approach to supporting the student experience and academic success of veterans; it includes designated campus support personnel, mental health counseling capabilities, and a VRC (Lederman, 2008). Selection of military-friendly schools is conducted annually by the veteran-owned and operated Viqtory Military Marketing Company. According to the cofounders of Viqtory (2023), the company “serves as the vital link between the military community and the companies that want

to hire them, the schools that want to enroll them, and the brands that want to reach them” (para. 1). The organization measures commitment, success, efforts, and sustainability through a vigorous process of continuous evaluation of institutional processes and procedures. An advisory council of college presidents, campus military program directors, and student veteran organizations use public databases and responses from a proprietary survey to select and designate institutions recognized as military friendly.

More than 1,800 colleges participated in the 2023 survey, and 530 received military-friendly designations (Military Friendly, 2024). The survey consists of more than 150 questions and covers key areas determined to be key factors in supporting military talent (Military Friendly, 2024). Criteria for selection include institution retention and graduation rates, job placement, repayment persistence, and loan default rates. Evaluations are developed by category and include sections devoted to the veteran friendliness of academic policies and compliance, admissions and orientation, culture and commitment, financial aid assistance, and student support and retention programs (Military Friendly, 2024). Eligible institutions embrace specific practices, provide veteran-inclusive academic programming, and assist with acclimation to civilian life.

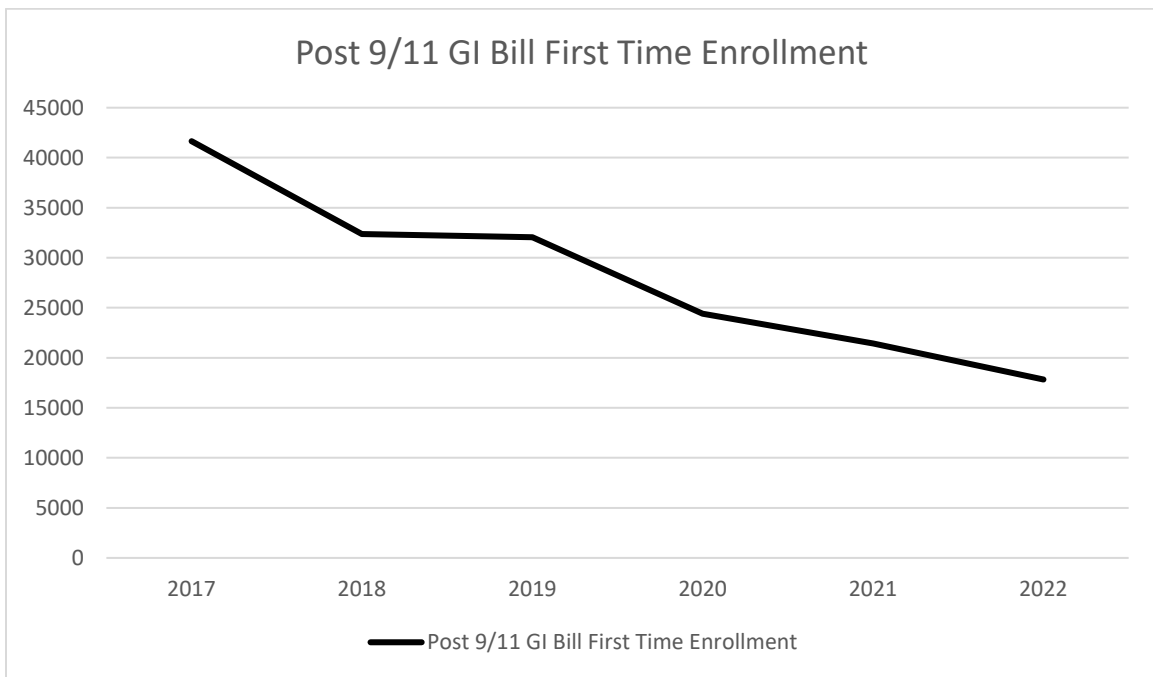
Military friendly community colleges receive generous private funding opportunities for scholarships, VRC development, and veteran-specific programming that impact the veteran student experience positively (Sander, 2012). Creating an inclusive environment is a primary goal of military-friendly campuses, and research has identified focus areas leaders can use to improve the military veteran student experience (DiRamio et al., 2008; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). By fostering a positive student experience that recognizes the importance of military culture, military-friendly institutions can effectively serve the academic needs of student veterans (Chen,

2022; Heineman, 2016; Moore, 2017). Institutional focus on military culture and student veterans' unique needs and life experiences contributes to a positive student experience, community perception, and academic outcomes (Heineman, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

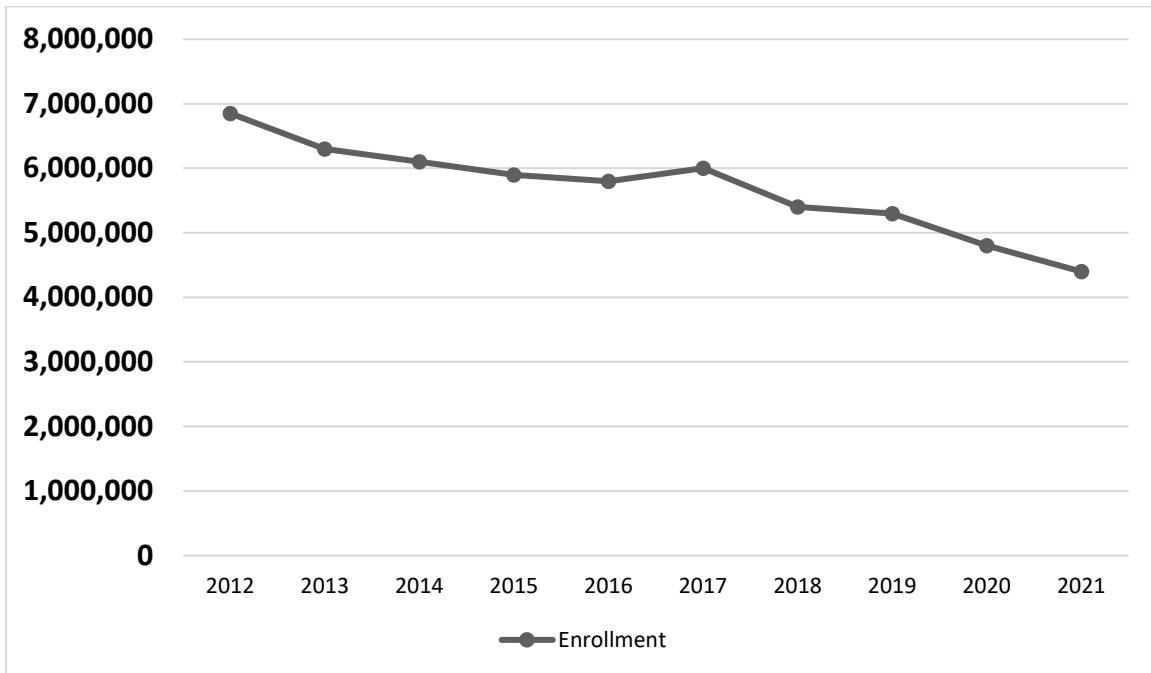
New student enrollment is at the forefront of conversations related to the modern challenges community colleges face, and enrollment rates of veterans at community colleges have significantly declined since the peak academic year of 2014–2015 (Donaldson, 2022; O’Leary & June, 2023). Low rates of community college enrollment, education benefits usage, and college credential completion among veterans are key concerns in the higher education sector (Bond-Hill et al., 2019) and from 2017–2022, there was a 57% reduction in military veterans’ first time enrollment using the post-9/11 GI Bill at 2-year institutions (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA], Veterans Benefits Administration, Office of Performance Analysis and Integrity, Performance and Analysis Service, n.d.; see Figures 1.1 and 1.2).

Figure 1.1. Post 9/11 G.I. Bill First Time Enrollment



Note. Reprinted from *Annual Benefits Report* by U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Benefits Administration, Office of Performance Analysis and Integrity, Performance and Analysis Service, n.d. (<https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/abr/>). In the public domain.

Figure 1.2. Nationwide Community College Enrollment



Note. Reprinted from *Current Term Enrollment Estimates*, by The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, n.d. (<https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates>). Copyright 2023 by the National Student Clearinghouse.

This sharp decline does not statistically correlate with any reduction of military forces or eligible users, and the size of the U.S. military continues to increase (MacroTrends, n.d.). In 2022, more than 200,000 Post 9/11 G.I. Bill-eligible individuals were discharged from the U.S. military (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024).

Despite the military friendly student support frameworks developed by community colleges specifically for veterans, a vast number of eligible users, and robust funding opportunities, enrollment remains an issue. According to research, community college enrollment reductions may not be caused by variables related to the number of eligible veterans, but rather by, issues with the transition from active duty to community college student, negative

campus interactions, a healthy job market, and cultural conflicts (DiRamio et al., 2008; Edelman, 2023; Vacchi, 2011).

Background of the Problem

Military veterans represented approximately 5% of community college students as of 2021, and 35% of new post-9/11 GI Bill education benefit users will select a 2-year institution for their initial enrollment option (Kofoed, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Veterans represent a unique community college student demographic with specific cultural considerations, challenges, barriers, and skills relative to their military experience (Richman, 2017). Creating a veteran-inclusive environment is a primary goal of community colleges, and improving their cultural experiences on campus and in the classroom has a positive effect on their academic integration (Vacchi, 2021).

Community colleges strive to support military veterans with costly VRCs, student support personnel, and specialized academic programs that are designed to improve the veteran student experience, yet declines remain sharp (Spitalniak, 2022). Despite steady declines, improving the military veteran student experience remains a common goal of community colleges, and institutions are bound by law to facilitate a preferential student experience if they accept U.S. Department of Veterans Administration education benefits (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019). Community colleges that work to improve the veteran student experience will often embrace cultural aspects of military service in their approaches to support programs, veteran student services, and functions of the VRC (DiRamio, 2017; Vacchi, 2011).

Recognition of military culture is a major aspect of military-friendly approaches to veteran student support, institutional recruitment strategies, and VRC development. Research has found veterans shared military cultural experiences outweigh any racial, socioeconomic, or

ethnic considerations (Moore, 2017). Successful community college campus veteran inclusivity philosophies recognize military culture as integral to developing student experience models (Dillard & Yu, 2016). Enhancing the military veteran student experience is a primary goal of military-friendly community colleges, and best practices, support models, and initiatives are deployed commonly on campuses nationwide to embrace this effort (DiRamio et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2018; Somers, 2020). VRCs, dedicated student support personnel, and student clubs encourage engagement and foster college-going attitudes among military veterans on campus (Anft, 2019). Research finds that designing support programs that are accountable, responsive, and inclusive will situate institutions with the appropriate administrative requirements associated with supporting military veterans (McDonald, 2011). Despite significant efforts by community colleges to stem the military veteran enrollment decline with inclusive philosophies, enrollment remains a challenge.

Recent enrollment declines are attributed to job market demands, cost of tuition, COVID-19 global pandemic recovery, and competition from other institutions (Barrington, 2023b; Edelman, 2023; D. Jenkins, 2023; Marcus & Report, 2023). These challenges have forced community colleges to reevaluate their institutional designs, programs, and structures, with a particular focus on improving the student experience (Bailey et al., 2015; Blankstein et al., 2020; Morgan, 2013). Improving the student experience has been found to have a positive effect on retention, enrollment, extracurricular activity, and degree completion (Beauchamp et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2021; Wood, 2020). Community college recruitment strategies often focus on improving the student experience and will incorporate cultural considerations in new designs. Community colleges have dedicated significant resources to improving the student experience of military veterans, and cultural inclusivity philosophies have driven this approach.

Veteran inclusivity practices at community colleges recognize the importance of culture and are comparable to other support programs that target specific demographic groups. Similar community college initiatives aim to support students and leaders through community partnerships, academic support, and designated cultural spaces. A military-friendly community college will adopt a similar approach to culture, partnerships, and academic support for student veterans. Military culture is a unique social construction that produces specific characteristics, behaviors, and personality traits that influence the personal disposition of its participants far after their removal from service (Burek, 2018).

Community colleges dedicate substantial institutional resources to serving military veterans; outreach efforts, community events, and campus inclusion activities are common themes of military friendly philosophies (Heineman, 2016). Much like inclusion programs designed for other targeted demographics, veteran support programs are designed to create a positive student experience that is culturally sensitive to each individual student's background. Despite these efforts, generous education benefits, inclusive campus environments, and extensive student support services, enrollment of new veteran students at community colleges has declined rapidly (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Benefits Administration, Office of Performance Analysis and Integrity, Performance and Analysis Service, n.d.).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this narrative inquiry qualitative study was to explore the lived cultural experience of veterans at military-friendly community colleges.

Research Questions

This study was grounded by the following research questions:

1. What are the lived cultural experiences of student veterans at military-friendly community colleges?
2. What cultural challenges did student veterans experience at military-friendly community colleges?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership was the theoretical framework for this research. Schein (2010) framed organizational culture as three levels: artifacts, espoused values, and underlying beliefs. According to Schein (2010), artifacts are visible organizational structures and business processes; artifacts include "products" of an organization, the "physical environment," and "observable rituals and ceremonies" (p. 25) displayed. Next are espoused values, including strategies, goals, and vision. Institutional philosophies, beliefs, and values inform the direction of problem solving and "sense of what ought to be" (Schein, 2010, p. 28). Assumptions refer to the beliefs, perceptions, and thoughts of an intuition (Schein, 2010). Basic assumptions "tend to be nonconfrontable and nondebatable, and hence are extremely difficult to change" (Schein, 2010, p. 31). According to Schein (2010), institutional assumptions are what individuals take "for granted" and allow for little "variation within a social unit" (p. 31). This degree of consensus results from repeated success in implementing previous procedures and philosophies (Schein, 2010).

This researcher selected Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership as this study's theoretical framework because of the way organizational culture is categorized in the model. I connected Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership to the organizational aspect of military friendly through the values, artifacts, and underlying assumptions explained by Schein (2010). VRC's represent the artifacts when considered within Schein's (2010)

organizational culture and leadership, espoused values are represented by the dedication to serve military veterans, and underlying assumptions symbolize the organizational assumption that military veterans require targeted student support models. The perspective of this researcher when designing this study's theoretical framework was that for an organization to earn the military friendly recognition an institution would have to exhibit specific values, underlying assumptions, and visible artifacts related to military veterans. It is the defined cultural values of an institution that prioritizes veterans and strives for military friendly recognition.

Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support was the conceptual framework for this study and situated the research in a framework designed specifically for the targeted demographic. According to Vacchi (2011, 2013), four key areas of support influence the military veteran student experience: (a) academic interactions, (b) institutional services, (c) active-duty transition, and (d) student support frameworks. First, academic interaction "involves frequency and intimacy of contact (in and outside of the classroom) with classroom peers and faculty" (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 35). The second area of support focuses on institutional services provided for military veterans and includes accommodations and friendly entrance policies. The third aspect is dedicated to transition from active duty to higher education assistance and considers the importance of peer mentoring and orientation coursework. The fourth area of focus by Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model stresses the importance of internal and external veteran student support frameworks and includes internal counseling options, external partnerships, and peer support programs.

Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veterans support is the student experience boundaries of this study. Themes were identified within the parameters of the four identified areas of student veteran support as described by Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model. This researcher

evaluated findings from this research through the prism of transition experiences, academic and interpersonal relationships, student support frameworks, and institutional services. This researcher prepared this study's interview questions, research questions, and study aims to examine cultural experiences within Vacchi's (2011, 2013), defined areas deemed important to the student experience of military veterans.

The four identified areas of Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support are influenced by the recognition of an existing military culture and are rooted in many of the same aspects of Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership. Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership is a theoretical framework that works well with qualitative research and synthesized nicely with Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support. In both frameworks, the researchers agreed that a positive culture is essential to fostering organizational success. Although this research focused on the student cultural experience through the conceptual lens of Vacchi's model of student veteran support, the theoretical framework was selected because the theoretical framework represents institutions that create the cultural experience.

Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership created the theoretical boundaries of this research study with its categorized description of the components of culture. The framework effectively defines cultural components that align vertically with this study's conceptual framework. The theoretical approach to this research took the position that a military-friendly institution is informed by the cultural experience created by the organization and its leadership. The culture of the organization deploys the values, mechanisms, and structures that inform effective military-friendly philosophies and support programs. Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support was the conceptual framework for this study. According to

Vacchi (2011, 2013), institutions that understand military culture are more effective at easing campus socialization and creating a veteran-inclusive environment. The student support categories of Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support are where this researcher sought to identify cultural experiences affecting the student veteran community college experience.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach produced a unique and deep perspective of the cultural experiences associated with military friendly community colleges and provided this researcher with a holistic approach to data collection. According to Kalra et al. (2013), "Qualitative method is used to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions" (p. 1) and produces a rich source of data, but also has several design options. Phenomenology, case study, ethnography, and narrative inquiry are common research designs used by qualitative researchers to understand human lived experiences, and each methodology has its advantages and disadvantages. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), "The aim and function of qualitative inquiry is to understand the meaning of human action by describing the inherent or essential characteristics of social objects or human experience" (p. 23).

With a focus on characteristics, chronology, culture, and human experience, this study was conducted using a narrative inquiry research model. Narrative inquiry records the experiences of an individual or small group, revealing the lived experience or particular perspective of that individual, primarily through interview, which is then recorded and ordered into a chronological narrative (Delmas & Giles, 2023). Chronology was an important aspect of this study, and narrative inquiry methods place a special emphasis on the background and influential experiences of study objects leading up to the time of examination. Narrative inquiry

is a process of entering into the lives of each participant through dialogue, deep discussion, and storytelling (D. Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Story is the portal through which researchers enter the human world of study participants and how participants describe their social interactions and experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). According to Xu and Connelly (2010), “Story is portal to experience” (p. 477).

As Clandinin (2013) noted, narrative inquiry focuses on stories and their meaning based on how the narrator arranges and links the various pieces. Josselson (2010) explained:

Narrative research aims to explore and conceptualize human experience as it is represented in textual form. Aiming for an in-depth exploration of the meanings people assign to their experiences, narrative researchers work with small samples of participants to obtain rich and free-ranging discourse. (p. 1)

Listening to stories is a hallmark of narrative inquiry, and the free-ranging discourse approach to data collection has produced a rich source of data for analysis. According to Polkinghorne (1988), stories hold significant promise for qualitative researchers because stories are particularly suited as a linguistic form in which human experiences are communicated. According to J. S. Bell (2002), “One of the defining features of a culture is the story structures through which it makes sense of the world” (p. 207).

Alignment Table

According to Anft (2019), “An alignment table contains the alignment of research questions, variables/factors/constructs, data collection, and data analysis methods. An alignment chart helps us be sure we are collecting the right data to answer our research questions” (p. 1).

The alignment table for this study contains a review of the literature findings, interview and research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and methodology (see Appendix A).

Delimitations and Assumptions

Delimitations

Delimitations are margins set by research study design and are imposed deliberately by the researcher (Creswell, 2009). According to Roberts and Hyatt (2018), “delimitations clarify the boundaries of your study and indicate how you narrowed your study’s scope” (p. 110). Student veterans participating in this research study were selected from military-friendly community colleges. All participants must have been enrolled or had graduated from a military-friendly community college to be considered for this study. A group of 20 participants were selected from two military friendly institutions, and nonmilitary-friendly institutions were not considered for this study. Regardless of their enrollment status, all other military members were not considered for this research approach. This research study only focused on the community college experience of veterans at military friendly institutions and did not consider any other veteran-related perspectives.

Assumptions

Roberts and Hyatt (2018) defined assumptions as “what you take for granted relative to your study” (p. 111). This study assumed students’ testimonies were truthfully and accurately compiled based on their personal community college experiences at military-friendly institutions. Additionally, an assumption was that veteran students have different community college experiences and perceptions than traditional students. Finally, the researcher assumed that a positive campus cultural experience improves student adjustment, academic success, and institutional integration.

Significance of Study

The unique participants of this study provided an interesting testimonial to a complicated student cultural experience that can better inform military friendly institutional support practices. The findings from this study provided the researcher with an authentic narrative of reliable military veteran student testimony about their cultural experience at a community college. Further, research that provides a narrative of the student experience from a military friendly cultural perspective adds value to the current body of scholarship on veterans at community colleges. New qualitative studies exploring student veteran cultural experiences could inform researchers if this aspect contributes to enrollment declines.

Military friendly institutions place a special significance on culture when considering the veteran student experience, and this study provides insight into the cultural inclusion experience of veterans at military-friendly community colleges. Little research has explored military veteran enrollment declines at community colleges in the context of the student cultural experience at military friendly institutions, and this study contributes a narrative of student veterans' experiences. Previous research has focused on topics related to veteran student transitions (DiRamio et al., 2008; Vacchi, 2011; Wheeler, 2012), academic outcomes (McDonald, 2011; O'Rourke, 2013), and student success; however, few studies have situated these themes within the military friendly context. This narrative inquiry study provides a rich description of the cultural factors influencing the veteran student's experience and will better inform community college veteran student support philosophies and practices. Veterans contribute significantly to U.S. society, yet little is known about their cultural experiences at military-friendly community colleges. Understanding these experiences can improve the quality of community college practices and contribute to a positive student experience.

Definitions of Terms

Community College: A community college, sometimes known as a junior college, is a higher education institution that provides a 2-year curriculum that can lead to an associate degree. Other programs in place include a transfer program toward a 4-year degree, occupational programs, and 1- and 2-year programs of study (Chen, 2022a).

Culture: According to Schein (2010):

Culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration and is taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to problems. (p. 17)

Global War on Terror (GWOT): GWOT is an international, U.S.-led military campaign launched following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (National Archives, n.d.-b).

Military Friendly: This term is a higher education approach to supporting the student experience and academic success of veterans. It includes designated campus support personnel, mental health counseling capabilities, and a VRC (Lederman, 2008).

Military Veteran: A military veteran is a person who served in the active military, naval, air, or space service and was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022).

Military Occupational Specialty (MOS): An MOS is a role or job someone has while in the military. Over 10,000 different occupational specialties across the military cover an entire range of skill sets and levels of responsibility (Bledsoe, 2019; Kirin & Winkler, 1992).

New Student Veteran: A new student veteran is an individual who accesses their education benefits and enrolls in higher education for the first time (Student Veterans of America, 2023).

Post-9/11 GI Bill: The post-9/11 GI Bill is the primary education benefit available to current military veterans (VA, 2023).

Student Support Services: This term refers to the administrative service professionals who bring a breadth of understanding and scope of institutional responsibility to creating the postsecondary student experience (Bartram, 2009).

Special Veteran Student Personnel: These staff are student support specialists who manage military veteran VRCs, benefits processing, and veteran student engagement at institutions of higher learning (Cook & Kim, 2009).

Student Veteran: In this study, a student veteran is defined as any former member of the military who has attended, still attends, or graduated from a military-friendly community college and is currently serving or has previously served in a branch of the armed forces (McGee, 2023).

Veteran Resource Center (VRC): A VCR provides resources and a sense of community for veterans transitioning to civilian life. VCRs can help veterans develop self-reliance and independence. These centers can also help veterans remove barriers to their academic, career, and life goals (Hill, 2019).

Veterans Upward Bound (VUB): VUB is an education support program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and part of federal programs (i.e., TRIO) designed to assist student veterans in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-b).

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 of this research study covered the statement of the problem, background of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, and theoretical and conceptual frameworks. This information was followed by sections devoted to the study methodology, alignment table, delimitations and assumptions, significance of the study, and definitions of terms. A closing section is dedicated to the organization of the study.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters, a bibliography, and appendices. Chapter 1 provides the introduction and overview of the study. Chapter 2 provides an extensive literature review of themes and methodologies that inform military-friendly academic scholarship. Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of the research methodology used for this study. Chapter 4 describes the findings and analysis of the study. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the findings, implications, recommendations, and conclusions for future research on the military veteran student cultural experience.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This literature review approach explored research on veterans at military-friendly community colleges and identified themes, trends, methodologies, and conceptual frameworks that have emerged from relevant scholarship. The purpose of this literature review is to identify an entry point into the academic conversation and discover themes relevant to the military-friendly student cultural experience.

Literature Search Strategy

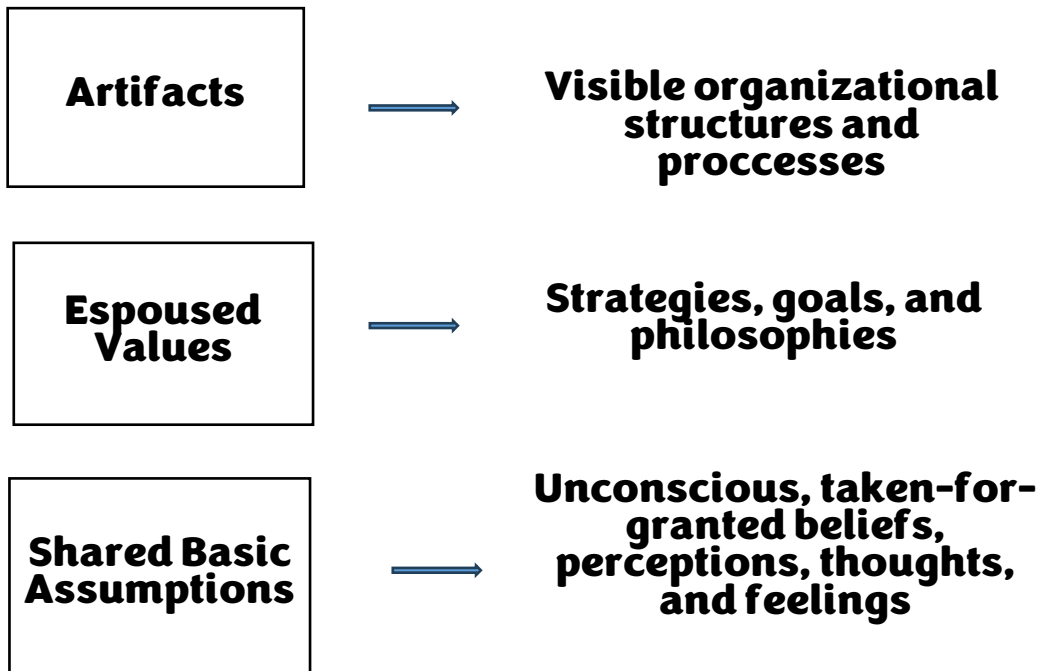
This literature review is thematically arranged and includes sections dedicated to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the study, historical background of veterans in higher education, military culture, the concept of military friendly, veteran resource centers (VRC), and transition from active duty to community college student. Additional explored themes include veteran student support services, veterans as nontraditional learners, external partnerships, faculty and staff professional development, and the importance of effective administrators. Lastly, the post-9/11 GI Bill, combat exposure and the student experience, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), veteran student wellness, and declining enrollment are reviewed.

This review of literature examined leading academic journals, dissertations, and relevant print pertaining to the military veteran community college student cultural experience. Various academic databases contributed to a review of important studies, research, and initiative evaluations that have aimed to inform a positive military veteran student experience. The primary themes explored in this literature review were influenced by the four tenets of Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Frameworks

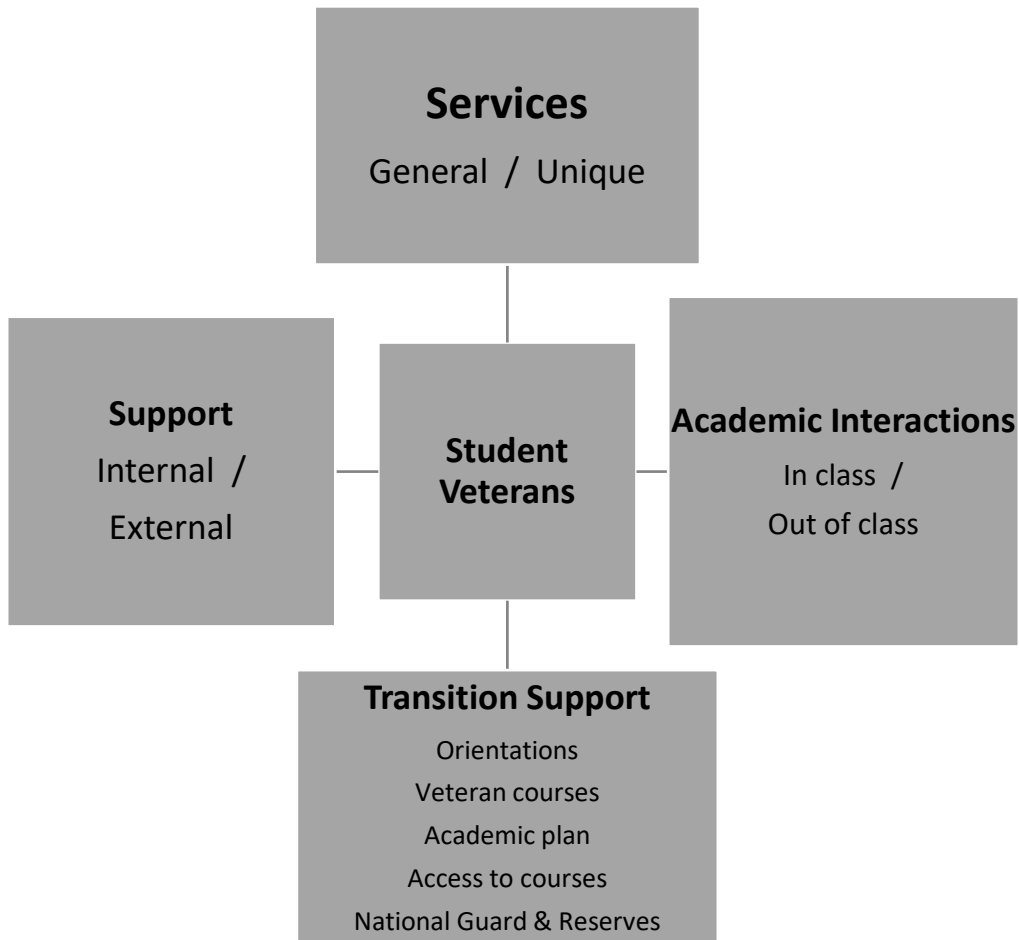
Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership served as the theoretical framework for this study (see Figure 2.1). Schein (2010) framed organizational culture into three levels: artifacts, espoused values, and underlying beliefs. The conceptual framework for this study was Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support (see Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.1. Levels of Culture



Note. Adapted from *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (Vol. 2) by E. H. Schein, John Wiley & Sons. Copyright 2010 by John Wiley & Sons.

Figure 2.2. Vacchi's Model of Student Veteran Support



Note. Adapted from *Student Veterans in Higher Education* by D. T. Vacchi & J. B Berger. In *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (Vol 29), by M. Paulsen (Ed.), 2014, Springer, Dordrecht. (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8005-6_3). Copyright 2014 by Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht. In the public domain.

According to Vacchi et al. (2017), the model of student veteran support “adapts theory from several scholars (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985; Weidman, 1989) and represents a broader conceptualization of the experiences of student veterans” (p. 34). According to Vacchi (2011, 2013), services provided to veterans, academic interactions, transition support, and personal support are key areas on which community college personnel should focus to provide a positive student experience. This perspective identifies themes within the four categories that institutions should use to improve the veteran student experience.

Services provided include programs that recognize the unique background of veterans and the need to provide informed personnel to support transition, benefit acquisition, and processing (Vacchi et al., 2017). According to Vacchi et al. (2017), there is no “cookie-cutter” (p. 35) approach to supporting student veterans. Overgeneralizing the backgrounds, experiences, and education of student veterans is problematic to success (Vacchi et al., 2017), and specific accommodations should be designed. Efficient benefit processing, credit for military service, and disability services are focus areas of support philosophies (Cook & Kim, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

According to Weidman (1989), academic interactions involve frequency and intimacy of contact—in and outside the classroom—with classroom peers and faculty as variables to consider for research. Vacchi et al. (2017) considered this area an overlooked variable by current research approaches. According to Vacchi et al. (2017), “ineffective or inconsistent advising and faculty interactions may have a negative impact on student veteran success” (p. 36). DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) found out-of-classroom interactions with faculty and peers were essential to a positive veteran student experience.

According to Vacchi et al. (2017), “A key area to help student veterans succeed is support to overcome obstacles during the transition to and through college” (p. 35). Transition is a consistent theme of modern research, and acclimation challenges have persisted. Veterans who participated in a qualitative research study by DiRamio et al. (2008) noted transitions to community college from active duty reflected the primary difficulty associated with the veteran student experience. The final area of Vacchi’s (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support covers student support frameworks; this notion refers to the practices of peer mentoring, advising, and personal support, along with its impact on the student experience. Often, peer

mentoring has a positive effect on the student experience (Vacchi et al., 2017), but other researchers have confirmed student veterans do not seek mentoring opportunities due to the nature of military culture and the negative perception associated with presenting signs of weakness (Soeters et al., 2006).

Vacchi's (2011, 2013) support model is designed to represent the unique needs of individual student veterans and represents a "departure" (p. 34) from deficit modeling. Deficit modeling is the notion that students struggle with higher education because each student and their families have "internal deficits" (Valencia, 1997, p. 2) that challenge higher education success. Examples of deficits include limited secondary education, motivational factors, and inadequate family support (Valencia, 1997). Deficits are distinctive needs that require unique cultural considerations by community colleges for all students. According to Vacchi (2011, 2013), to have an effective veteran student support model that recognizes their unique needs, institutions must embrace specific culturally informed practices, and Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership's categorized description of culture perfectly captures notions from Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support.

For instance, Schein (2010) describes artifacts as visible organizational structures and processes—in the case of community colleges, that would be veteran recognition events such as Memorial Day or Veterans Day, and even the designator of military friendly could be interpreted as an outward visible process. Schein (2010) mentioned espoused beliefs and values, and these concepts can be found within a community college's strategic plan, mission statement, or published institutional values regarding military veterans. Finally, Schein (2010) referenced underlying assumptions, which apply well to the disposition of community colleges toward returning military veterans regarding transition, mental health challenges, and physical

disabilities. Schein (2010) organized culture categorically and situates themes within groups, and as described, they are the manifestation of Vacchi's (2011, 213) model of student veteran support. The marriage of Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership with Vacchi's (2011, 2013) culturally informed model of student veteran support as a lens to examine the lived experiences of veterans maintained the consistent focus of this study.

Historical Background of Veteran Education

Just a few weeks after the invasion of Normandy during World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt signed into law the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (1944), more commonly known as the GI Bill. The original GI Bill of 1944 was an educational benefit available to veterans of World War II. Updated versions of the education benefit were made available to Cold War (1945–1991), Korean War (1950–1953), Vietnam War (1955–1975), Gulf War (1991), and Global War on Terrorism (2001–2019) conflict veterans. Each era's GI Bill is named after the conflict the bill accompanies, and the current iteration of the benefit is called the post-9/11 GI Bill.

According to the U.S. National Archives (n.d.-a), "The GI Bill is considered one of the most significant pieces of federal legislation ever produced" (p. 1). Unprecedented access to higher education provided by the 1944 GI Bill transformed the university landscape as World War II military veterans flooded universities and doubled enrollment rates nationwide (Greenberg, 2004). Many influential historians, social scientists, and academic scholars have agreed that the 1944 GI Bill "contributed to widespread rhetoric that brought about the democratization of American higher education" (Bound & Turner, 2002, p. 16).

Nearly 8 million returning veterans used the entire allotment of the education benefit associated with the original GI Bill, and future civil rights leaders, politicians, and influential

artists benefited from the education support model (Mettler, 2005). Variations of the GI Bill have accompanied every major U.S. military conflict, and millions of veterans and their families have continued to benefit from its generous education support (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024). The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT)-associated post-9/11 GI Bill is perhaps the most generous of all the previous variations and provides students with a substantial financial support structure (Steele et al., 2010).

Currently, military veterans represent approximately 5% of community college students, and 564,501 former servicemembers accessed their post-9/11 GI Bill in 2022 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Benefits Administration, Office of Performance Analysis and Integrity, Performance and Analysis Service, n.d.). According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), 610,009 veterans accessed the post-9/11 GI Bill education benefit in 2021, representing an 8% reduction in users. First-time GI Bill users at a community college in 2022 totaled 17,852, which was down from 21,448 in 2021 and reflected a reduction of approximately 18% from year to year (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Benefits Administration, Office of Performance Analysis and Integrity, Performance and Analysis Service, n.d.). Although these reductions have been consistent, the post-9/11 GI Bill remains the primary education benefit for recently discharged veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Benefits Administration, Office of Performance Analysis and Integrity, Performance and Analysis Service, n.d.).

Declining Veteran Student Enrollment

A perspective too new to penetrate current research trends is the decrease in veteran student enrollment at community colleges. The last 2 decades of academic research, recommendations, and innovation have been based on a significant enrollment increase

perspective that could have never imagined the postpandemic environment. According to the Veteran Benefits Administration (VBA, n.d.), the number of new post-9/11 GI Bill student users at community colleges has declined by nearly 80% since 2017. There were 41,651 new GI Bill users enrolled at 2-year institutions in 2017, whereas in 2022, there were 17,852 (VBA, n.d.). Community college enrollment has struggled across all demographics, and new eligible beneficiaries of the post-9/11 GI Bill enrolled at 2-year institutions have declined drastically since 2017. How this trend will impact the veteran academic support improvements of previous years has yet to emerge.

According to Chen (2022b), community colleges offer affordable tuition, veteran-inclusive environments, and targeted support programs, but enrollment has been challenged by historically low veteran unemployment rates and reductions in usage rates of eligible users (Lutz, 2023; Shane, 2023). Though these challenges are difficult for community colleges, the low rates of veteran enrollment cannot simply be dismissed to the circumstances of a positive job market and low eligible post-9/11 GI Bill enrollment rates. Low rates of post-9/11 GI Bill enrollment represent a unique opportunity for community colleges to recruit new students with full tuition education benefits, high grade point averages (GPAs), and higher completion rates than traditional learners (Nelson, 2023). A significant focus on the negative cultural experience of underrepresented students is prevalent in modern research and reveals alarming trends of cultural ignorance and its effect on the student experience, faculty interactions, enrollment challenges, and racist encounters (Gurung & Prieto, 2023; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Meyer et al., 2016; Mills, 2020). However, missing from academic literature is research dedicated to the cultural sensitivities of military veterans and its potential effect on declining enrollment at community colleges.

Military Culture at Community Colleges

According to Tylor (1974), culture is a term that describes the social behaviors, institutions, and norms found in human societies and the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, symbols, capabilities, and habits of individuals in a group. Military culture “represents the ethos and professional attributes, both in terms of experience and intellectual study, which contribute to a common core understanding of the nature of war within military organizations” (Murray, 1999, p. 27). According to Murray (1999), “Military culture represents the intellectual and spiritual capacity of the armies, naval forces, and air forces to come to grips with the business of preparing for and executing war” (p. 27). Military culture is a powerful social construction that becomes engrained in servicemembers and is difficult to disconnect from even after having separated from the service.

Haynes (2016) found military culture had a bearing on student veterans’ behaviors in the community college setting. Using an exploratory case study approach, Haynes interviewed student veterans and found participants cited a culture clash heavily in the data findings. Study participants mentioned a lack of discipline by younger students, loose environment structure, and classroom disorganization, all of which frustrated student veterans and contrasted starkly with their previous life experiences. Culture clash is not unique to military veterans at community colleges; according to Zambrana and Hurtado (2015), nontraditional Latino students experience more barriers on campus while interacting with peers and faculty from different cultures.

A mixed-method research study by Walter (2019) confirmed the importance of cultural conflict on retention. Walter interviewed 10 veterans who stopped out from a community college and found institutional structure and lack of direction were missing and frustrated participants’ student experiences. Direction and structure are hallmarks of military duty, and Meyer et al.

(2016) explained, “Immersion in military culture can be such an indelible experience that veterans will identify with it more than any other cultural influence even decades after leaving active-duty service” (p. 26). Although military culture is complex and many attributed core behaviors contrast civilian norms, community colleges can develop ways to incorporate cultural recognition into their approaches to serving veterans positively (Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

Military Friendly

According to Heineman (2016), a military-friendly community college is an institution that uses strategies to address the unique needs of military veterans. Military-friendly institutions support veterans through campus programming, dedicated events, and recognition memorials. Moore (2017) found commemorative ceremonies and military-themed events raise an institution’s public profile and enhance the student experience. According to Kelley et al. (2013), veteran-specific orientations, single point of contact for services, and access to campus disability programs are hallmarks of a successful military-friendly institution. Military-friendly community colleges recognize the challenges of their veteran students and accommodate them with best practices regarding enrollment, tuition, and academic support.

The military-friendly approach recognizes the sacrifice of military service, and often, military veterans will manage initiatives, student clubs, and engagement philosophies (Stewart, 2016). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2021), student veterans face a host of challenges that can impact their student experience, including significant physical disabilities, higher risk of financial barriers, and multiple dependents. McGovern (2012) found providing coordinators who are “familiar” (p. 21) with military culture enhances the student experience and promotes positive college-going attitudes. The concept and practices of military-

friendly institutions are a relatively new phenomenon and represent a culture of veteran inclusivity at U.S. community colleges.

VRC

Community colleges prioritizing serving military veterans and their families commonly design those services around a VRC (Stevenson & Le Buhn, 2019). Often, VRCs are a one-stop-shop approach to student support services, mental health support, and transition assistance (Osborne, 2013). VRCs are a vital aspect of supporting veterans on campus, and community colleges have embraced the resource center approach to other prioritized demographics. VRCs offer military veterans a safe space that fosters a sense of community and improves access to education benefits (Hill, 2019).

The VRC approach to student veteran support is a common research focus of qualitative analysis pertaining to the student veteran experience. Stevenson and Le Buhn (2019) selected study participants from a community college and conducted semistructured interviews that sought student veterans' perceptions of the campus experience. Stevenson and Le Buhn (2019) found that a VRC provided veteran students with a physical space on campus, contributed to a welcoming environment, and promoted a sense of camaraderie. A VRC also centralizes support services, creates a higher sense of purpose, and attracts new students (Stevenson & Le Buhn, 2019). Additional results emphasized VRCs' importance for building connections with other veteran students.

Researchers have also found a VRC is a primary aspect to consider when building a military veteran student support program and will have a positive effect on the student experience (Heineman, 2016). Barmak et al. (2021) used qualitative research methods and found the overwhelming theme that emerged was the importance of a campus VRC. In-depth,

semistructured, one-on-one interviews were conducted with staff and student veterans.

According to Barmak et al. (2021), “Thematic analyses were conducted to identify salient factors that help promote successful transition to college life and the overarching theme was the significance of the institution’s [VRC]” (p. 10). A VRC is a consistent theme of military veteran student experience research and is considered an important aspect of effective best practices (Barmak et al., 2021; Stevenson & Le Buhn, 2019; Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

VRCs are also an excellent space for community partnership activity. A study by Rumann and Hamrick (2009) confirmed that partnering with local VA support frameworks was effective in creating a military-friendly environment. In a study conducted in Minnesota, Lokken et al. (2009) reported, “For colleges and universities to adequately address the needs of their student veteran population, effective resources in the form of financing, space, and equipment must be made available” (p. 53). A challenge to the VRC approach for community colleges is funding and resources. Stevenson and Le Buhn (2019) similarly opined on the need for greater resources, noting, “Costs for the development of a VRC will vary depending upon the size and needs of the student veteran population” (p. 21). Grants and donations are regularly secured for construction costs, personnel, and furnishings and are an important aspect of the process. Local veteran organizations, generous businesses, and supportive community members are reliable sources of funding for institutions developing a VRC. Vacchi (2013) noted funding a veteran VRC is a significant challenge for community colleges that serve military veterans.

Improving the student experience is an important focus of community college presidents, deans, and faculty members (Selingo, 2022). Enhancing the military veteran student experience is a common goal of the reviewed scholarship, and VRCs are a vital component (DiRamio et al., 2008; Vacchi, 2011). VRCs, dedicated coordinators, and student clubs encourage student

engagement and foster college-going attitudes among military veterans on campus (Anft, 2019). Stevenson and Le Buhn (2019) found a VRC was important to student comfort, and participants expressed satisfaction with the experience. Research from Azpeitia and Emerson (2022) confirmed the cultural significance of a VRC, and study respondents held the initiative in “high regard” (p. 6). Azpeitia and Emerson (2022) surveyed 126 student veterans and used an online method to gather data pertaining to VRC usage, effectiveness of veteran student services, and transition support from active duty to student.

Transition From Active Duty to Community College Student

One identified barrier that has received significant scholarly attention is the transition from active-duty military to college student. According to R. Jenkins and Morgan (2018), funding program coordinators, facilitating professional development, and supporting the transition of military veterans from active duty to the classroom are primary missions of community colleges. Institutions often receive veteran-related grants to develop veteran academic support centers, specialized coordinators, and professional development programs designed entirely to enhance the veteran experience on campus (Elfman, 2022). The confluence of available funding and enthusiastic institutional support provides military veterans with a student experience that is holistic, informed, and sensitive to their experience. Sander (2012) found higher education institutions ease the transition from active duty to education through effective support services, faculty awareness campaigns, and friendly enrollment processes. Transition assistance is at the forefront of community college veteran support philosophies, and VRCs provide veterans with a physical space to meet likeminded individuals and cultivate relationships (Stevenson & Le Buhn, 2019). Positive internal relationships improve the student

experience and well-being of student military veterans on community college campuses (Stevenson & Le Buhn, 2019).

Mahoney et al. (2021) found transition is a difficult barrier to overcome and a significant challenge to military veterans. According to DiRamio et al. (2008), “A key area to help student veterans succeed is support to overcome obstacles during the transition to and through college” (p. 13). Transition from active duty to community college student is a persistent challenge facing military veterans, and researchers have explored this barrier through an abundance of qualitative research (Diamond, 2012; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Mahoney et al., 2021; Vacchi, 2013).

O’Connor et al. (2017) explained that military veterans “constitute a unique group with specific needs as they transition from the military to academic setting” (p. 9), and this notion is often the focus of current academic research.

Through qualitative case study, Wheeler (2012) confirmed the transition experience of military veterans to community college is one of the most dramatic adjustments a veteran student will experience. According to Vacchi and Berger (2014), the transition from active-duty military to community college student is the primary difficulty a military veteran must endure. Zinger and Cohen (2010) found military veteran students often feel overwhelmed by the transition experience, and their academic performance suffers as a result. It is clear from existing academic scholarship that veterans’ transition difficulties at community colleges present significant challenges to a positive student experience (DiRamio, 2017; Jones, 2016; Wheeler, 2012).

The disciplined nature of the military often clashes with the autonomous campus environment and creates feelings of uncertainty that complicate the adjustment. DiRamio et al. (2008) found veterans have difficulties relating to peers and dealing with student maturity and have diverse backgrounds that complicate interpersonal relationships. Vacchi (2011) identified

peer relationships as a key area and essential aspect of a positive military veteran student transition. Further, DiRamio et al. (2008) found student veterans felt unprepared academically for college no matter their stage of degree progression. Heineman (2016) reported, “Despite recognizing these challenges, only 37% of colleges and universities serving student-veterans provide transition assistance” (p. 221). DiRamio et al. (2008) explained, “An important means of building inclusive communities on campuses is to provide services that support the needs of unique groups of students” (p. 2). Indeed, military veterans are a unique demographic with backgrounds, experiences, and capabilities atypical of community college students. Creating an inclusive campus environment for veterans is essential to their transition, and student support structures available within a campus VRC is a proven student support model (Ackerman et al., 2009).

Veteran Student Support Services

According to Bartram (2009), student support services “are the cadre of administrative service professionals who bring a breadth of understanding and scope of institutional responsibility to shaping the postsecondary student experience” (p. 7). These individuals provide services within support structures constructed to aid students. Student support services include financial aid offices, tutoring centers, enrollment specialists, librarians, staff, faculty, and veteran coordinators. Moreover, federal grant programs designed to support veterans on college campus date back to the Vietnam War; for instance, Veterans Upward Bound (VUB) is an education support program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and part of the federal (TRIO) programs (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-b). The federal TRIO programs are outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. TRIO includes eight programs targeted to serve and assist low-

income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to postbaccalaureate programs (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a).

The veterans support initiative of TRIO is a free education program developed to assist low-income and first-generation college-bound veterans in preparing for and completing postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-b). The VUB initiative was introduced as an additional benefit for Vietnam War veterans who needed remedial-style coursework. VUB has remained a successful veteran support program since it was established over 60 years ago. Currently, 49 VUB programs across the United States serve nearly 6,000 veterans a year (Council for Opportunity in Education, 2023). Effective student support frameworks are an essential aspect of military veteran student support practices.

Sitzes's (2015) research study at 58 North Carolina community colleges confirmed the importance of quality veteran student support frameworks on campus. Sitzes explored multiple community colleges to identify programs, initiatives, and best practices that produced measurable results. Campus VRCs, special coordinators, memorial events, enrollment accommodations, and peer mentoring emerged as the common themes of the study. Jones (2016) noted accommodating resources such as veteran-specific orientation coursework, regular program sequence classes strictly for veterans, and veteran honors societies improve the military veteran community college experience. Accommodation was the overwhelming takeaway from both studies.

Peer support is an effective approach to veteran student campus integration, and Whiteman et al. (2013) found positive mentorships will improve the student experience; however, Moore (2017) found no correlation between a positive student experience and peer–

mentor relationship when the interactions were virtual. Peer support has often been cited as an indicator of effective veteran support philosophies, and these relationships have been forged within the culture of VRCs. Inside the veteran safe spaces of VRCs, a sense of belonging develops, accelerating college emersion, motivation, and successful transition.

Barragan et al. (2022) found a sense of belonging emerges when effective student support models target veterans specifically; however, if not conceived carefully, support programs with good intentions can also create a negative student experience. Student support programs must be culturally informed of the military experience and reflect those values within support frameworks (Young & Young, 2023). According to Cook and Kim (2009) of the American Council on Education, a clash between military and higher education cultures is a complicated process associated with the veteran student experience. Military culture is defined by structure, discipline, and team mentalities, which have been found to contrast with the relaxed campus environment and nature of civilian culture (P. H. Wilson, 2008). Research from Long (2020) found that veterans grew frustrated in the classroom with traditionally aged civilian students due to their lack of discipline, unpreparedness, and lack of life experience.

Veterans as Nontraditional Students

Nontraditional college students are students who have characteristics that are different from the typical college student (Barrington, 2023a). Characteristics include graduating high school at least 1 year before enrolling in college, having a GED or other certificate instead of a traditional diploma, having a full-time job, having dependents other than a spouse, and enrolling in college part time (Battiste & Battiste, 2022). Nontraditional students are older than the typical age, independent of parents, often single parents, and financially independent (Remenick, 2019). These students experience financial challenges, lack of enrollment flexibility, and lack childcare

options (Barrington, 2023c). Military veterans share many of these characteristics, and according to Rausch and Buning (2022), veterans are a “portion of the nontraditional student population” (p. 2).

Student veterans are generally first-generation college students who balance family responsibilities, financial difficulties, and adjustment issues (Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012). In research conducted with the American Council on Education, Cook and Kim (2009) described veteran students as “a subpopulation of adult learners that often have unique challenges that other nontraditional students do not face” (p. 15). Gregg et al. (2016) found veteran students have similar challenges as other nontraditional students, but with additional considerations related to their military service. Research has found that military members from every branch have positive and negative experiences that shape their maturity level, social integration, and economic stability (Spiro et al., 2015). According to Ackerman et al. (2009), veterans choose community colleges due to low costs, demographics, and a college structure more relatable to the student than a 4-year institution. Morris et al. (2023) explained the nontraditional characteristics associated with student veterans position community colleges as a natural fit for military veterans.

Vacchi (2011, 2013) explained student veterans’ prior social experiences, maturity levels, and independence place them firmly in a nontraditional category. Supporting this demographic requires targeted outreach, enrollment, and support philosophies that recognize and embrace the military experience. This concept returns to the importance of Schein’s (2010) organizational culture and leadership focus on espoused values. According to Schein (2010), institutions must embody a philosophy recognizing participants’ beliefs and values. For military-friendly institutions, this notion of inclusion is essential and a common finding of modern research.

External Partnerships

Often, community colleges create community partnerships to enhance campus services and partner with local VA departments and veteran support organizations (McCaslin et al., 2013). Internal and external partnerships can benefit the student experience of veterans, and research has found both are essential. Researchers have suggested that partnering with the VA will provide a layer of credibility to veteran support programs and raise awareness of the support frameworks already available to them (Lokken et al., 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). According to Parry et al. (2021), college campuses provide a unique and critical opportunity to reach veterans who may not be enrolled in VA services and connect them with similar campus veterans. Dillard and Yu (2016) found partnering with local community veteran support organizations will bolster campus participation and community perception. A positive public perception is essential to recruiting, retaining, and graduating students (Association of Community College Trustees, n.d.).

Institutions that maximize partnerships and demonstrate an understanding of military culture create a positive student environment and improve the transition experience (Jordan, 2019). The military veteran student experience is complicated by academic considerations, transition barriers, and cultural transformations to which community colleges must recognize and respond (DiRamio et al., 2008; Foster, 2023; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Partnerships can ease student transition experiences and improve institutional military cultural awareness, which benefits veterans if informed by proven best practices (Dillard & Yu, 2016). Research conducted at the state of Utah's largest community college, Salt Lake Community College (SLCC), found external partnerships with state, federal, and local veteran-focused agencies improved the student experience (Ahern et al., 2015). Ahern et al. (2015) recommended community college

partnerships with state employment agencies, VA health support systems, and local veteran support agencies.

Faculty and Staff Professional Development

Professional development can prepare community college staff who interact with veterans and have positive results. According to research by Osborne (2013), professional development will create a “knowledgeable and supportive network of faculty and staff members who will serve as veteran liaisons in their colleges or administrative offices” (p. 8). Faculty, staff, and administrators with basic knowledge of the veteran experience can enhance community college diversity initiatives and equality philosophies. Military veterans are a protected class of students, and discrimination and harassment policies exist for their benefit (Rule 3359-11-13, Ohio Anti-Discrimination and Harassment Policy, 2020). Raising institutional awareness of the support structures, available programs, and challenges veterans encounter will benefit community college faculty, staff, and administrators (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Professional development that informs campus leaders about the implications of military service on the student experience should focus on raising awareness of the issues, barriers, and needs of each individual veteran (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Rumann and Hamrick (2009) further stated, “Campus administrators, including student affairs and academic affairs leaders, can provide students, staff members, and faculty with opportunities to better understand the kinds of military experiences that may be absent from their own set of experiences or knowledge base” (p. 31). Research from Clary and Byrne (2023) found higher education veteran student support personnel that develop student engagement strategies for improving interactions and participation improve the student experience. Clary and Byrne recommended straightforward communication and that administrators show genuine interest in a student beyond their veteran

recognition. These minute details can improve the level of veteran satisfaction at community colleges, and robust faculty development opportunities will enhance services.

Importance of Effective Administrators

The importance of effective community college administrators is a well-researched subject (Artis & Bartel, 2020; C. Johnson & Voelkel, 2019; McNair, 2009; Townsend & Bassoppo-Moyo, 1997); however, few studies have explored the impact of leaders who are sensitive to the culture and support mechanisms that enhance the veteran experience. Providing students with a culturally sensitive experience is an emerging approach on community college campuses and inclusion programs embrace cultural aspects of the identified demographic (Castro & Cortez, 2016; Taylor, 2015; Ulrich & Freer, 2020). Erskine-Meusa (2017) confirmed by case study that negative cultural experiences can have a profound effect on the student experience. Although Erskine-Meusa's study examined both positive and negative cultural exchanges, the negative implications of a poor interaction outweighed the positive and frustrated students, complicated dedication, and affected morale. Awareness of veteran issues and professional development can improve administration effectiveness, cultural sensitivity, and inclusive environments; for veteran students with complicated education benefits, continuing education for support personnel is essential (Bellvin, 2018).

Proper administration of VA-related education benefits by community colleges is a vital aspect of effective military-friendly institutions. Efficiently processing VA education claims has a powerful impact on the veteran student experience, and poor administration can disrupt student momentum. Adedoyin (2022) found if institutions did not accurately and efficiently process education benefits, student funding would be disrupted and financial instability was a primary cause of student noncompletion. The primary community college veteran education benefits

administrator is a certifying official responsible for processing student education benefits with the VA; if not properly administered, tuition, monthly allowances, and book stipend requests will be delayed (VA, 2023). Singleton (2019) found the majority of research participants (i.e., certifying officials) were completely unaware of the repercussions associated with poor performance.

Delayed financial support can have catastrophic consequences on the community college student experience of military veterans. A designated certifying official is a VA requirement for institutional eligibility to accept education benefits. Strict adherence to Memorandums of Understanding from the federal government is required, and audits are regular (VA, 2023). Failure to provide effective veteran services can result in the revocation of an institution's VA contract, and it will no longer be able to accept VA education benefits. Although the duty of the certifier is essential to a positive veteran student experience, these individuals should not be responsible for core outreach, recruitment, and support efforts (Vacchi, 2011). Researchers have found these activities should be conducted by standalone veteran support initiatives focusing on transition, VRCs, and student outreach (Schiavone, 2014).

Post-9/11 GI Bill

The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, known commonly as the post-9/11 GI Bill, is the primary education support benefit earned from completing a period of active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces on or after September 11, 2001. The benefit includes full tuition accommodations, monthly financial support, and an annual stipend for books or other educational supplies (VA, 2023). Compared to previous military education benefits, the post-9/11 GI Bill provides significantly more financial support and more than doubles the monthly

housing allowance of the previous version. The post-9/11 GI Bill is available to veterans for 36 months of usage and is transferable to family members under conditions.

The education benefit's effectiveness, impact, and design have been contested in research, government, and public discourse, and the support program is not without issues (G. L. Bell et al., 2013). The U.S. government spent nearly \$10 billion supporting the post-9/11 GI Bill in 2022, and the program's value is under consistent scrutiny. Usage rates among eligible users have remained low; in 2022, community colleges had the lowest rates of post-9/11 GI Bill enrollment in history (VBA, n.d.). Less than 18,000 post-9/11 users enrolled at a community college in 2022 (VBA, n.d.). Post-9/11 GI Bill data pertaining to outcomes, retention, and performance are complex, and drastic data variations exist in modern research.

Research from G. L. Bell et al. (2013) found student reviews of the post-9/11 GI Bill were mixed, and veterans had challenges with benefit processing, institution efficiency, and inadequate financial support. Other students from the same study expressed a positive opinion of the GI Bill and lauded its importance to their success. Steele et al. (2010) confirmed the living allowance portion of the benefit was financially supportive, and other students found it lacked dependent considerations. Financial support effectiveness of the post-9/11 GI Bill is unique to students' needs, family considerations, and support networks, and researchers have found mixed experiences. Many veterans eligible for the post-9/11 GI Bill are combat veterans.

Veteran Student Wellness

Albright and Bryan (2018) determined mental health and well-being are major concerns of modern-day community colleges, and military veterans provide a unique challenge to institutions. Currently, a portion of the community college movement is devoted to awareness beyond academic support and routinely implements mental health professionals, programs, and

initiatives designed to support the growing number of students with mental health issues (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Katz and Davison (2014) found mental health issues reported by community college students have increased. In a study that surveyed 67 counselors from 54 community colleges, Katz and Davison reported stress, depression, anxiety disorders, academic problems, crisis intervention, bipolar disorder, adjustment disorder, substance-related disorders, and addictions were all considerable concerns.

As such, the mental health and well-being of military veteran students remains a concern. Albright and Bryan (2018) found student veterans experience mental health concerns at higher rates than their civilian counterparts. According to Albright and Bryan, 40% of student veterans screen positive for serious mental health issues, and community colleges have responded with veteran-focused counseling services, partnerships with the VA, and faculty awareness training. Still, mental health and physical wellness reflect emerging challenges for community colleges and represent a sincere concern for the post-COVID-19 global pandemic institutional environment (Corrasco, 2021).

Currently, a portion of the community college movement is devoted to supporting military veterans outside the classroom. These include mental health professionals, mentoring programs, and initiatives designed to support the growing number of student veterans with mental health issues (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). According to Warner and Castro (2023), 41% of military veterans have a mental health-related need, and nearly 30% have a physical disability. Schiavone (2014) found a significant amount of community college resources and support programs are dedicated to support disabled service members. Improved combat medicine has dramatically improved wound survivability, and more than 40% of student veterans have a service-connected disability (DiRamio & Spires, 2009). Combating the negative

effects of PTSD, traumatic brain injury, and physical disability on the military veteran student experience is a primary focus of community colleges (Flink, 2016; Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017; Ochinko & Payea, 2020). How leaders in the community college environment address these issues and prepare their teams to support the environment and culture becomes mission critical if one has the desire for their college to be considered military friendly.

Combat Exposure and the Student Experience

The GWOT has no single frontline, and forward-deployed military personnel have been exposed to the tragedy, horror, and violence of warfare on a higher statistical basis than previous conflicts, resulting in comparably higher rates of suicide, mental health issues, physical injury, and death (Bowen, 2011). Often, student veterans are combat veterans with PTSD, other mental health issues, physical disabilities, and traumatic brain injuries that negatively affect academic performance. McLay et al. (2010) found insomnia is a common side effect associated with the aftermath of combat that could negatively impact student performance, enthusiasm, and positive attitudes.

Exposure to combat is a stressful event that can cause depression, anxiety, and anger issues for students attending community college (Ackerman et al., 2009). Litz et al. (2009) found combat creates moral injuries that persist long after exposure and present significant barriers to college performance, transition, and positive college-going attitudes. According to Elliott (2015), mental health counseling prior to enrolling in college has a positive effect on veteran students' academic emersion and can ease the transition. Ostovary and Dapprich (2011) found combat exposure negatively impacts sustained attention, memory, and recall. Veterans struggling with these challenges can have heightened testing anxiety, difficulty navigating campus, and poor interpersonal interactions with nonveteran student peers.

Combat is a traumatic event that has long-lasting implications for family life, personal relationships, and mental health well-being. Wheeler (2012) found if symptoms are left untreated, they can have an adverse effect on military veterans' acclimation to civilian life, healthy relationships, and academic success. Complicating the veteran experience further is the addition of physical and mental disabilities. According to the Student Veterans of America (2022), nearly two thirds of student veterans have a service-connected disability. Typical disabilities include traumatic brain injury, PTSD, and various physical injuries of a serious nature.

Recognizing that student veterans may have unique traumatic experiences associated with combat is a challenge to which community colleges are still adapting (Long, 2020). Mental health challenges and physical disabilities are aspects of the student experience for which community colleges must prepare, and military-friendly institutions are evaluated on services provided to this demographic (Military Friendly, 2024). According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 41% of military veterans who have served since September 11, 2001, have a service-connected disability (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2020). The most common disabilities are serious physical injuries that affect mobility, hearing, cognitive abilities, and PTSD (Holder, 2016).

PTSD

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (n.d.), PTSD is a disorder that develops in people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event. Symptoms include flashbacks or the reliving of a traumatic event, irritability, anger issues, and avoidance behaviors. Other side effects include trouble sleeping, moodiness, exaggerated feelings, and loss

of interest. A study conducted by the VA concluded approximately 16% of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom veterans have PTSD.

Rudd et al. (2011) found 45% of student veterans in their study reported symptoms of PTSD. According to Elliott (2015), PTSD can have a negative effect on the adjustment to college life, coping skills, and social complexes. Thomas et al. (2010) similarly found individuals with PTSD reported lower levels of social functioning, depression, and vitality. PTSD is a significant mental health disability that negatively affects academic performance, stress-coping skills, and campus immersion. Community colleges have responded to these challenges with disabled student support services, faculty and staff awareness campaigns, and mental health counseling options.

Ackerman et al. (2009) found PTSD significantly impacted study participants' abilities to focus on school-related tasks and complicated transitions from active duty. Barry et al. (2012) confirmed this difficulty, finding PTSD is negatively correlated with GPA and academic motivation. PTSD presents a significant challenge for veterans, and community colleges must provide support services related to the issue. According to Paulson (2014), effective student support programs are essential to a positive student experience for military veterans.

Chapter Summary

This literature review was arranged thematically and explored prevailing research on military veteran student experiences within the identified areas of Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support. Themes included military culture, transition assistance, combat experience, campus interactions, services provided, importance of effective administrators, support frameworks available, veteran student wellness, the post-9/11 GI Bill, and historical background. This review sought to gain insight into the cultural experiences of veterans at a

military-friendly community college by reviewing relevant scholarship associated with the veteran student experience. Researchers have found that difficulties with transition, campus life, interpersonal interactions, and acclimation are significant challenges for student veterans. Though these issues have been researched thoroughly, studies focused on the cultural experience of veterans at community colleges remain lacking. This study filled a gap in research on military veteran students at community colleges by identifying specific cultural practices that improved their experience and uncovering practices that had a negative effect.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Chapter 3 is organized into 15 sections and includes a review of the study purpose, research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and research design. A review of the study selection, participants, and instrumentation is followed by a description of data collection and data sources. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to data analysis, alignment table, limitations, ethical considerations, study quality, and a final chapter summary.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived cultural experiences of veterans at military-friendly community colleges.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the lived cultural experiences of student veterans at military-friendly community colleges?
2. What cultural challenges did student veterans experience at military-friendly community colleges?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership served as the theoretical framework for this research. According to Schein (2010), culture is defined as:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 17)

Schein's organizational culture and leadership created the theoretical boundaries of this research study with its categorized description of the components of culture. The framework effectively defines cultural components that align vertically with this study's conceptual framework. The theoretical approach to this research took the position that a military-friendly institution is informed by the cultural experience created by the organization and its leadership. The culture of the organization deploys the values, mechanisms, and structures that inform effective military-friendly philosophies and support programs.

Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support was the conceptual framework for this study. According to Vacchi (2011, 2013), institutions that understand military culture are more effective at easing campus socialization and creating a veteran-inclusive environment. The student support categories of Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support are where this researcher sought to identify cultural practices affecting the student veteran community college experience. Researchers have found cultural aspects heavily influence a positive military student veteran experience, and this study's interview and research questions were created to identify specific practices where cultural implications may reside (Haynes, 2016; Heineman, 2016; Threatt, 2023; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). The theoretical and conceptual frameworks of this study were confined to the cultural categories and practices of Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership and Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support. Both frameworks place a special significance on culture and its ability to foster success.

Research Design

This research used qualitative methods to gain a deep understanding of the veteran student experience at military-friendly community colleges. Specifically, this research used narrative inquiry methods to explore the lived experiences of veterans at military-friendly

community colleges. According to Clandinin (2013), narrative inquiry focuses on stories and their meaning based on how the narrator arranges and links the various pieces. Narrative inquiry methods allowed this researcher to effectively gather rich testimony through stories about specific aspects of the veteran student experience. According to Duff and Bell (2002), narrative inquiry “allows researchers to present experiences holistically in all their complexity and richness” (p. 209). Gathering a deep dialogue from research study participants was essential to this dissertation and to the methodology.

Testimony richness is the hallmark of narrative inquiry and provides the researcher with a volume of dialogue on experiences that can effectively be categorized within Vacchi’s conceptual framework of student veteran support and thematically evaluated. Duff and Bell (2002) argued that narrative inquiry “lets researchers get at information that people do not consciously know themselves” (p. 210) and can only be discovered through extensive dialogue. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) explained that experiences are best studied narratively “because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it” (p. 18). This research study was designed to gain knowledge through a narrative inquiry-style process to illuminate themes related to the military veteran student experience that can only be properly explained through thick study of participants’ unbounded explanations.

This study used open-ended questions during recorded semistructured interviews to listen to stories related to the veteran student experience at military friendly community colleges. Open-ended interview questions are questions that cannot be answered with a yes or no, and instead require the respondent to elaborate on answers (Weller et al., 2018). A semistructured interview is a qualitative research method that combines structured and unstructured interview styles (Boswell, 2024). There is structure to this interview process; however, the researcher is not

beholden to the same question order for every interview conducted. Semistructured interviews are often used to gain an in-depth understanding of the interviewee's feelings and beliefs on specific topics (O'Brien et al., 2014). According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), semistructured interviews allow the researcher flexibility to ask follow-up questions based on respondent answers. George (2023) explained semistructured interviews provide a method for collecting data by asking questions within a predetermined framework. The predetermined frameworks for this research study were the concepts associated with military friendliness, Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership, and Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support. Follow-up questions explored the cultural experience of veterans at military-friendly institutions and provided the researcher with valuable testimony that could be arranged thematically.

Study Setting

Two publicly funded community colleges were selected for this research study, and each institution was recognized as military friendly. Both institutions had a VRC and targeted veterans with special student support programs, outreach efforts, and specialized counseling. College A was a large public district-style 2-year college with five campuses. College A had received multiple veteran student support recognitions at the state level and from other private organizations that evaluate veterans' education. The institution had been recognized as a "military friendly" community college for 15 years and was designated with the collegiate Purple Star Award. The Purple Star Award recognizes higher education institutions prioritizing veteran student success and inclusivity (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.). As of 2024, more than 300 military veterans were enrolled at College A.

College B was a small, publicly funded community college in a rural area with approximately 150 veterans enrolled. The institution had been recognized as military friendly by private evaluators, and the state governing board had awarded them with the collegiate Purple Star Award (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.). The college had several dedicated administrative and student support staff members and a VRC. The institution partnered with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), local and regional veteran support agencies, and prioritized veteran inclusivity in their strategic plan. This institution had an active veteran student club that partnered with local businesses as a strategy to ease transition and foster student success (Troy, 2021). Both institutions dedicated significant institutional resources to military veteran student support and prioritized their success in their mission, vision, and values. Each institution selected for this study was examined through the culturally categorized direction of Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership and evaluated against important aspects of Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support.

Study Participants

Participants for this research study were selected using purposeful sampling. According to Robinson (2013), purposive sampling is the intentional selection of participants based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon. All study participants were veterans, either previously enrolled, currently enrolled, or graduated from a military-friendly community college. Graduates and previously enrolled students were recruited through veteran support organizations, and enrollment verification was conducted by the identified institution. Additionally, participants must have used, or currently were using, the Chapter 33 post-9/11 GI Bill education benefit at the time of data collection.

Instrumentation

Patton (2002) stated in qualitative research, the researcher serves as the instrument, and findings can stem from multiple sources of data collection. Interviews are a primary source of data collection with qualitative research methods, and, in this study, the researcher was the primary data collection instrument and interviewed participants according to a protocol (see Appendix B). According to Jacob and Furgerson (2012):

An interview protocol is more than a list of interview questions; it also extends to the procedural level of interviewing and includes a script of what you will say before the interview, script for what you will say at the conclusion of the interview, prompts for the interviewer to collect informed consent, and prompts to remind the interviewer the information that she or he is interested in collecting. (p. 2)

The interview protocol for this research study was semistructured with predetermined, open-ended questions (see Appendix C). According to Creswell (2009), interviews and observations are qualitative research techniques; the researcher in this study functioned as the key instrument and collected data by observing behavior and interviewing participants.

Data Collection and Data Sources

After receiving permission from the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix D), recruitment of military friendly colleges and student participants began. Prior to starting the study, the researcher gained approval from the selected community colleges by contacting their institutional leaders. The researcher provided letters of introduction to campus presidents, VRC managers, and other relevant stakeholders that detailed the importance of this study and asked for support (see Appendix E). These institutions were asked to assist in identifying participants, and participation was voluntary. Conducting interviews in the comfort

of the VRC benefited the interviews and created a relaxed, informal discussion around specific topics related to the purpose of the study.

A pilot study was conducted to assess the interview questions and procedures.

According to In (2017):

A pilot study is performed reflecting all the procedures of the main study and validates the feasibility of the study by assessing the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the participants, preparation, storage, and testing of the instruments used for analysis in the study. (p. 3)

As Malmqvist et al. (2019) noted, a pilot study enhances credibility and trustworthiness of research. Majid et al. (2017) explained, “Piloting for interview is an integral aspect and useful in the process of conducting qualitative research as it highlights the improvisation to the major study” (p. 1073). The pilot study for this research had four participants, and eligibility was based on the same criteria as the final study. Participants were currently enrolled or graduated from a military-friendly community college and were using the Post 9/11 GI Bill. The pilot study benefited the final research study by effectively evaluating the person-to-person effectiveness of the research design and interview process. Adjustments to language, researcher personal disposition, and question arrangement were made based on the experience gained from the pilot study.

Data Analysis

According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), “Data analysis is the process of moving from raw interviews to evidence-based interpretations that are the foundation for published reports” (p. 201). The researcher used thematic analysis methods to analyze the data, which “involves the identification of themes through careful reading and re-reading of the transcribed data” (Dawadi,

2020, p. 62). Next, the data were coded for concepts and themes relevant to cultural experiences and Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support. Vacchi's model of student veteran support identifies four areas that are essential to serving military veteran students. Transition support, personal support, services offered, and academic interactions.

These four identified areas represent the student experience this study was designed to examine. This researcher used the areas described by Vacchi's model of student veterans support as a guide to interview question development, literature review direction, and finding's theme development. This research analyzed the gathered data by examining the data for themes in relation to Vacchi's model of student veteran support conceptual framework. Transition experiences, academic interactions, interpersonal relationships, and available institutional services are important to this study's conceptual framework and this researcher identified themes within these conceptions. Themes that emerged outside of the selected theoretical and conceptual framework and literature review were evaluated, and literature review updates were made.

Additionally, this researcher used the qualitative research software, NVivo, which assisted the researcher with organizing and coding multiple sources into one central project. Interview transcribing was conducted with the same software, which helped assign attributes, interpretation notes, search queries, and data visualization to the gathered data. The coding process of assigning themes to data was informed by the cultural aspects of Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership and the four target student support areas defined by Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support. Both frameworks place importance on culture in their design and function. For this research design, the theoretical framework represents the leadership philosophies that create the experiences that the conceptual framework is designed to examine. Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support conceptual

framework identifies areas that affect the student experience in a positive or negative way, and themes that emerged can be found within this model. Transition from military to student, complicated emotions, and the importance of a VRC are essential aspects of Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support, and this researcher aligned identified themes with this student support philosophical framework. A summary of findings created a holistic view of data obtained and provided a clear and complete examination of the veteran student experience that provided insights into other research frameworks.

Member checking was used to reinforce the credibility and accuracy of the interviews. According to Birt et al. (2016):

Member checking, also known as participant or respondent validation, is a technique for exploring the credibility of results. Data or results are returned to participants by way of a transcript of the interview, the interviewee will be asked to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences. (p. 1735)

Peer debriefing was also used to increase study reliability. According to Spall (1998), peer debriefing is the process of consulting with one or more peers who have no personal interest in the study to enhance the validity of research; it involves allowing a "qualified, impartial colleague to review" (p. 8) and assess interview transcripts, methodology, and findings.

Alignment Table

An alignment table for this study contains a synopsis demonstrating alignment between literature findings, interview and research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and methodology (see Appendix A).

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study was the potential for researcher bias. This researcher was a veteran of the U.S. Army and Ohio National Guard, and this positionality had the potential to create further researcher bias, which was mitigated by a reflexive statement. This researcher selected reflexive journaling to mitigate the negative effects of personal bias. Purposeful sampling may have also posed additional limitations to this study. According to Robinson (2013), purposive sampling is the intentional selection of informants based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme or concept. Patton (2002) noted, “People unfamiliar with purposeful sampling may think of small samples as biased” (p. 563). Bias is considered any influence that provides a misrepresentation of the results of a study (Polit & Beck, 2013).

Transferability

Transferability is the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts or settings with other respondents (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability confirms trustworthiness and rigor of qualitative findings. For example, in this research study, data were collected from only military-friendly community colleges, which raises questions about the validity of the findings. However, the uniqueness of the study participants and the commonality of the community college approach to the veteran student experience is transferable to any educational institution that serves military veterans. Community college practices that incorporate military culture into their student experience philosophies, whether military friendly or not, will provide a cultural experience based on the best practices explored in the literature review of this study.

Ethical Considerations

According to Sanjari et al. (2014), “Researchers face ethical challenges in all stages of the study, from designing to reporting. These include anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent, researchers’ potential impact on the participants and vice versa” (p. 2). The primary ethical concerns of this study were privacy and confidentiality. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of participation. Each participant was provided with a pseudonym alias to protect their anonymity. Participants were informed that interviews would be recorded and data would be secured. All data pertaining to this research study have been digitally secured within encrypted storage. Hardcopy data will be secured in a locked location for 5 years in accordance with IRB regulations. Participants were asked to review and sign a letter of consent that outlined the processes associated with IRB privacy and confidentiality. They were also informed of their ability to withdraw from the interview at any time. Names of the community colleges reviewed in this study received the same ethical considerations and remain unidentified by name or specific location.

Reflexivity involves examining a researcher’s judgments, practices, and belief systems during the research process (Dodgson, 2019). The goal of reflexivity is to identify any personal biases that may incidentally affect the research processes (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). The researcher in this study is an experienced veteran student support administrator with 15 years of community college employment. Additionally, the researcher is a veteran of the U.S. Army and Ohio National Guard, and the researcher’s personal experiences required careful reflexivity. Accountability, trustworthiness, and transparency are vital to qualitative research, and the researcher engaged in a reflexive journal practice to mitigate personal biases. According to Olmos-Vega et al. (2022), “Reflexive writing is the best-known set of approaches to reflexivity.

It includes forms of documentation such as researcher memos, field notes, and other written or recorded reflections occurring at any point in the research process” (p. 245).

Study Quality

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability are primary components of a trustworthy qualitative research study. Stenfors et al. (2020) explained that study credibility is achieved if the research findings are plausible and “there is alignment between theory, research questions, data collection, analysis, and results” (p. 598). Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that dependability suggests study findings could be repeated if the “same process” (p. 299) were followed. Transferability is the notion that study findings can be transferred to another setting, context, or group (Stenfors et al., 2020), which is achieved by providing a thorough description of the research context, findings, and methods. According to Tobin and Begley (2004), “Confirmability is concerned with establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer’s imagination but are clearly derived from the data” (p. 392).

This study demonstrated credibility by aligning theoretical and conceptual frameworks, interviews, and research questions. A consistent theme throughout the research was reinforced by appropriate data collection processes and alignment of interview questions (Stenfors et al., 2020). Dependability was demonstrated by the reliable nature of qualitative semistructured interview analysis, and the study is replicable in design and methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking reinforced the trustworthiness and credibility of the research, and a pilot study enhanced dependability. Confirmability was established through extensive external auditing to determine if the findings were grounded in data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher demonstrated confirmability by keeping a reflexive journal (see Appendix F).

Summary

Chapter 3 covered the purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and research design. Descriptions of the study site, selection process, study participants, and data collection process were explained. Further included were sections on data analysis, alignment table, limitations, ethical considerations, and study quality. In this study, the researcher collected data through semistructured interviews informed by relevant research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and study design to prepare a thematic narrative of the research findings.

Chapter 4 - Research Results and Analysis

This chapter presents an analysis of data collected and results of the narrative inquiry research design and begins with a review of the research questions that guided the study. This information is followed by a participant background section and a presentation of themes that emerged through the lens of Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership as the theoretical framework and Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support as the conceptual framework. Then, a section is dedicated to a review of the research findings in relation to the research questions. Findings for Research Question 1 include military culture, the emotions of cultural transition, soft skill application, and veteran resource centers. Findings related to research question number two are cultural friction, loss of structure, and lack of camaraderie. This is followed by a section dedicated to an unexpected finding related to negative peer-student perceptions.

Research Questions

This research study was designed to understand the lived cultural experiences of veterans at military-friendly community colleges and was guided by the following research questions.

1. What are the lived cultural experiences of student veterans at military-friendly community colleges?
2. What cultural challenges did student veterans experience at military-friendly community colleges?

Participant Backgrounds

This researcher selected 20 participants using purposeful sampling. Every participant in this study was a military veteran who attended a community college that was recognized as a military friendly institution. Nondistinct categorization of study participants was used to protect

confidentiality, and participant identity was ethically protected. Four women and 16 men were selected for this study, and every branch of U.S. military service was represented: the Marine Corps (7), the Army (7), the Navy (4), and the Air Force (2). Twelve participants were white, six were African American, and two were Hispanic. Participants' ages ranged from 23–27, 28–32, and older than 35 (see Table 4.1, Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3).

Figure 4.1. Gender of Participants

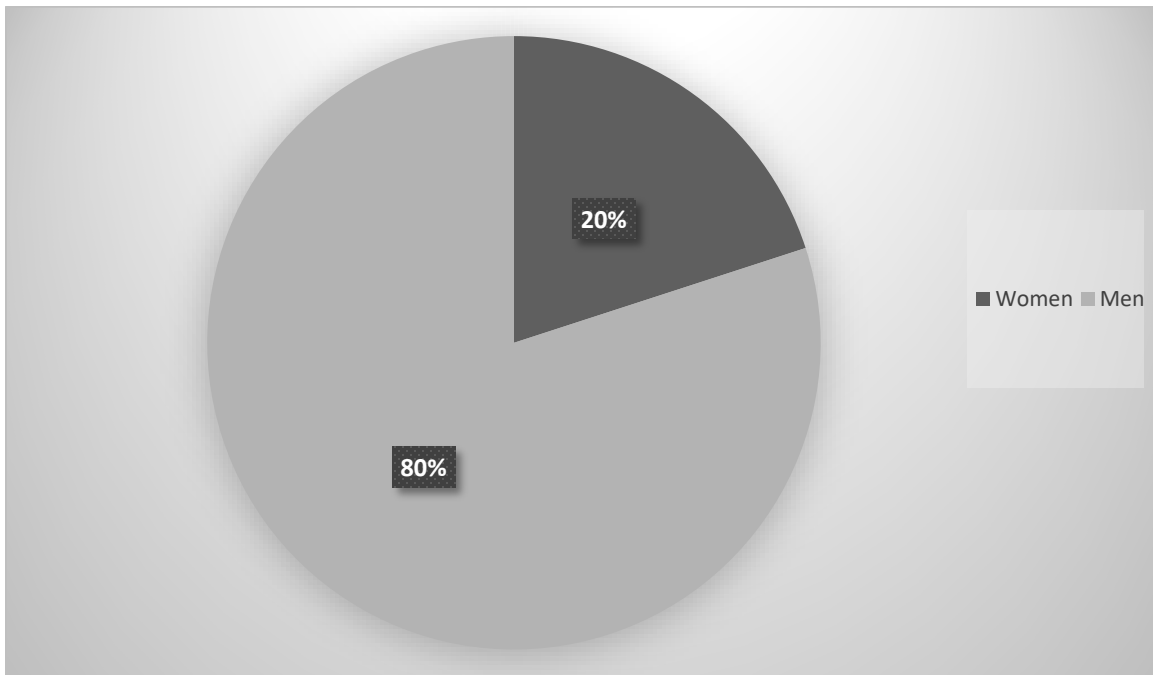


Table 4.1. Demographic and Informational Table

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Military branch	Age	Degree level pursuing/pursued	Gender	Institution type
Participant 1	Black	Marines	Above 30	2- year	Male	Small CC
Participant 2	White	Navy	Above 30	2-Year	Male	Large CC
Participant 3	White	Marines	Below 30	2-Year	Male	Small CC
Participant 4	Black	Marines	Below 30	2-year	Male	Large CC
Participant 5	White	Marines	Above 30	2-Year	Male	Large CC
Participant 6	White	Air Force	Above 30	2-year	Female	Small CC
Participant 7	Hispanic	Army	Above 30	2-Year	Male	Large CC
Participant 8	White	Navy	Below 30	2-Year	Male	Large CC
Participant 9	White	Air Force	Above 30	2-Year	Male	Small CC
Participant 10	White	Army	Above 30	2-Year	Male	Large CC
Participant 11	Black	Army	Above 30	2-Year	Female	Small CC
Participant 12	Black	Army	Above 30	2-Year	Female	Small CC
Participant 13	Black	Navy	Below 30	2-Year	Male	Large CC
Participant 14	Black	Marines	Above 30	2-Year	Male	Large CC
Participant 15	White	Navy	Below 30	2-Year	Female	Large CC
Participant 16	White	Army	Below 30	2-Year	Male	Large CC
Participant 17	White	Marines	Below 30	2-Year	Male	Large CC
Participant 18	Hispanic	Marines	Below 30	2-Year	Male	Large CC
Participant 19	White	Army	Above 30	2-Year	Male	Large CC
Participant 20	White	Army	Below 30	2-Year	Male	Large CC

Note. CC = community college.

Figure 4.2. Participants' Backgrounds

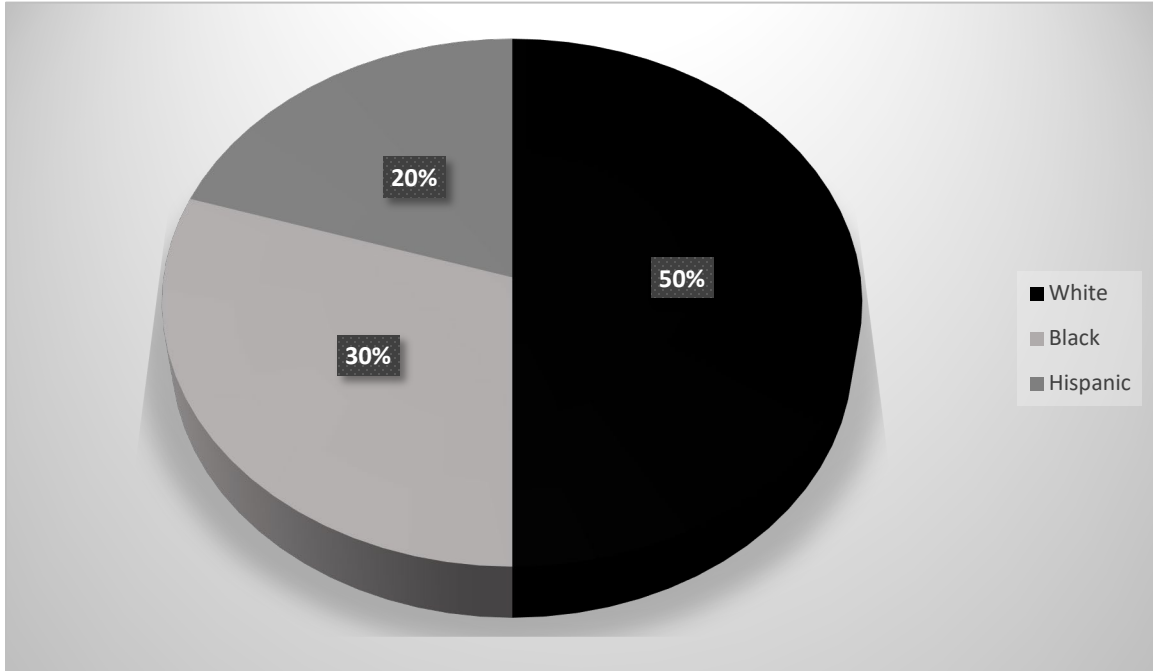
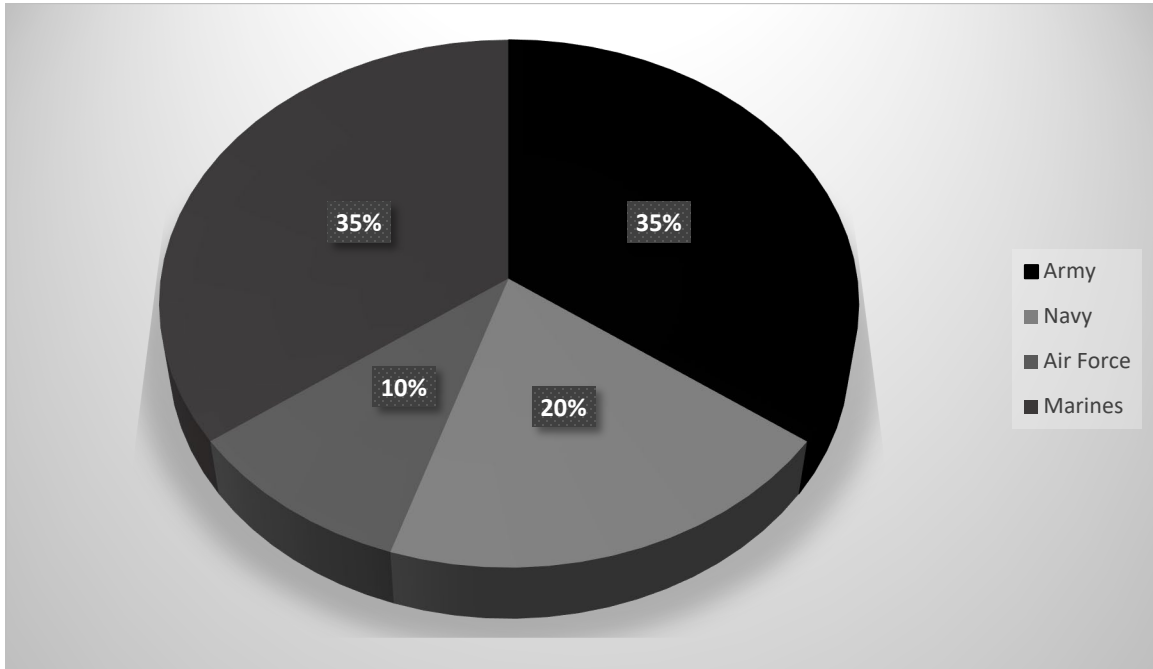


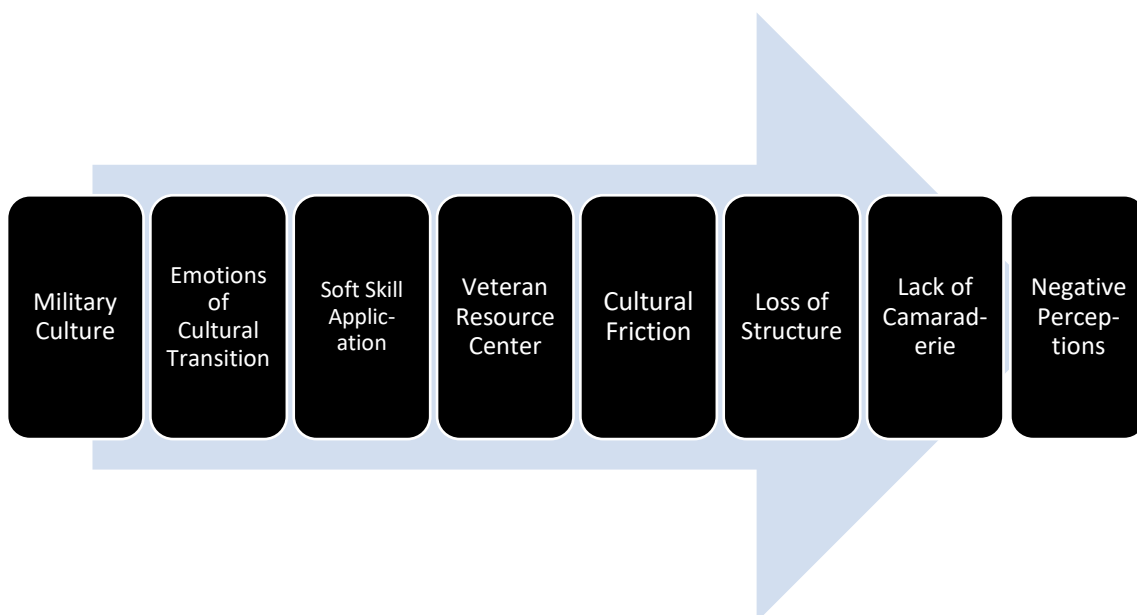
Figure 4.3. Participants' Branch of Military Service



Research Findings

Eight themes emerged from the semistructured, open-ended interviews that focused on the lived cultural experience of student veterans at military friendly community colleges (see Figure 4.4). Four themes were related to research question one and three themes emerged related to research question 2. Theme 1 was military culture and represented the starting point of this research study, followed by the emotions of cultural transition, soft skills application, and the VRC. The next section was dedicated to Research Question 2 and yielded three themes that explored the effects of cultural friction, loss of structure, and lack of camaraderie on the community college experience of military veterans. A final section explores the unexpected finding and its relation to the lived cultural experience of veterans at military friendly community colleges. This chapter explores these themes chronologically and in relation to the study's research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and methodology. The findings were extrapolated by effective interview questions that offered comparative style inquiries related to the differences between community college and military culture.

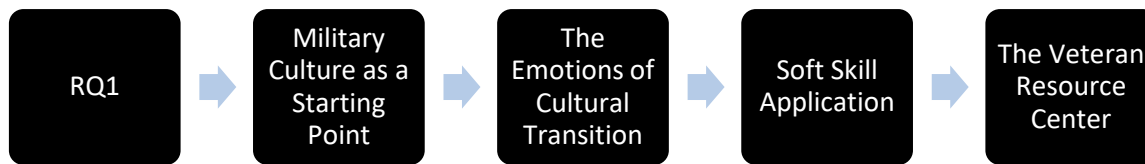
Figure 4.4. Themes



Findings and Narratives of Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked, “What are the lived cultural experiences of student veterans at military friendly community colleges?” Themes related to this research question are represented in Figure 4.5 and explored in chronological order according to participant experience.

Figure 4.5. Research Question 1 Themes



This study gained insight into the culture that influenced veteran students’ personal dispositions within a community college setting to understand the experiences of veterans at a military friendly community college. Gaining an understanding of the values, customs, and behaviors of military culture was an essential aspect of this research study. Every veteran in this study described adapting to a rigid set of traditions, high-expectation environments, and dangerous situations that shaped their perspectives, worldviews, approaches to human interactions, and challenge negotiation styles. Military culture influenced the perspectives, values, expectations, and strategies of the participants of this study and was a consistent topic throughout the open-ended interview process.

Theme 1: Military Culture

Theme 1 of this study was military culture and represented the cultural foundation of every participant in this study. Participant 1 was a Marine Corps veteran and described military culture as a “mindset” that is “mission-oriented, accountable, and responsible.” According to this

participant, important values in military culture include “accountability, bearing, and camaraderie.” He elaborated:

Military culture is how we conduct our day-to-day business. It involves objectives with structure, and camaraderie but also customs and hierarchies. When we’re in the military, we get structured on how to learn, how to operate, and how to behave.

Participant 1’s observation highlighted the structure and discipline of military culture. Military service requires that members adhere to long-established processes and traditions grounded in rigid hierarchal relationships.

Participant 2 was a white male Air Force veteran older than the age of 30. Participant 2 described military culture as a “mission-oriented” lifestyle with a “unit cohesion” type of experience. He explained:

Basic training is where they literally strip you of everything that makes you who you were before. And they provide the material to build up a new identity that doesn’t eliminate your personality. It is a very intense, shared experience with a diverse group of people.

Participant 2 mentioned that military culture will bring together a group of individuals and instill them with “shared values and shared responsibilities.” “Accountability and trust” are essential aspects of military culture, according to this participant. Participant 2’s description elucidated the shared transformational processes military veterans have experienced. According to this study’s participants, these common experiences are a core component of military culture.

Participant 3 was a white male combat veteran of the Marine Corps and served as a military police officer. For this participant, “camaraderie” was a major aspect of military culture, and that relationship was created by a “trauma bond.” He elaborated:

Military duty, whether in garrison or overseas, is the worst thing that can happen to a human, literal horror on occasion. We're tied together during traumatic moments and all we can depend on is camaraderie.

According to the participants of this study, strong interpersonal relationships are forged during military service, and this participant's description was a powerful testimonial on the importance of friendship during military service. The bonds connecting service members are strong and are an important aspect of military culture.

Participant 4 was an African American male veteran of the Marine Corps. According to this participant, military culture is a "patriotic" endeavor that is undertaken because of "pride and love of country." Participant 4 described tenets of military culture as "Dependability, initiative, decisiveness, tact, integrity, enthusiasm, endurance, bearing, unselfishness, courage, knowledge, loyalty, and duty." "Teamwork" is an essential aspect of military culture, according to Participant 4, and the notion of a "shared mission" was a vital aspect of his military duty. This veteran's focus on the values of military culture highlighted the personal accountability aspects of military duty. Creeds, pride, and devotion are instilled in the personal characteristics of veterans, and these values influence their community college experience.

Participant 5 was a white male combat veteran of the Marine Corps and was over the age of 30. To this participant, "brotherhood and loyalty" best encapsulates military culture. He shared:

Self-respect is a big thing in the Marines, and it teaches you to have confidence in your friends and leaders. Serving as a Marine elevated my self-esteem and I took comfort in the fact the everyone knew their job, their role, and they committed to it.

“Tradition and camaraderie” were important cultural takeaways from this individual’s service in the Marine Corps, and these notions remained important to this veteran’s set of values.

According to the participants of this research study, the cultural imprint of military culture is an attribute to which veterans identify, seek out, and are drawn.

Participant 6 was a female veteran of the U.S. Navy and was over the age of 30.

Participant 6 was passionate about veterans and spent her free time assisting veteran support agencies. Camaraderie was an important aspect of military culture to this participant, but in the context of a “rigid and structured environment.” She elaborated:

There is a schedule for everything. You can't wake up one day and decide you're missing that day of work. There's a good sense of responsibility and work ethic among veterans that we maintain for the rest of our lives.

To this participant, the “collective trauma” of military service creates a fierce “bond” between individuals, and the “shared suffering” creates a “family-like” environment. Her focus on the shared experience was a common theme throughout the one-on-one interview, and her attention to interpersonal relationships elucidated the dependent nature of military culture.

Participant 7 was a Hispanic male veteran of the U.S. Army and over the age of 30. This participant described military culture as a “highly structured” environment with “high expectations.” He continued:

There are a lot of people that depend on you in the military. There's a really strong connection between everybody involved. There's a lot of machismo and attitude, sometimes it's toxic but everyone has a role. Everyone knows their role and must meet expectations. That is the culture. No excuses.

Military culture is a “tough and rigid” environment that demands success from its members. This veteran elucidated the inherent high-expectation landscape and group mentality of the culture as integral.

Theme 1 Summary

As described by the participants of this research study, military culture is a unique and dynamic system of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, and behaviors that have served the U.S. military for generations. According to the participants of this study, acclimation to this culture is mandatory and will continue to influence the decisions, behavior, and values of military veterans well after their service. Team-oriented environments, camaraderie, and tradition are essential aspects of the personal disposition of these participants. Military culture develops members to have a strong work ethic and sense of responsibility for shared missions, sacrifice, and commitment. The veterans of this study embraced military culture and incorporated it into every aspect of their daily lives. Its effect on their cultural experience at a community college was powerful and influenced their approach to learning, interpersonal relationships, and college-going attitudes.

Theme 2: Emotions of Cultural Transition

Theme 2 was the emotions of cultural transition from military service to community college students. The veterans of this study expressed deep emotions about the loss of structure, friends, and family during transitions. Participant 20, an Army veteran, described his transition from the military to community college student as “difficult” and “without resources.” The lack of direction when he was discharged from the military created a difficult situation from the very beginning. She remarked:

It just felt like at times that there was more effort to keep me in rather than assist me when I'm separating. It could have been a lot better. I didn't know anything about the benefits I was eligible for or how to access them.

This veteran's focus on lack of direction when discharged from the military was a common theme throughout the one-on-one interviews of this study. Negative transition processes were hastened by benefit unawareness and accessibility issues. Participant 11 "struggled with transitioning from airmen to community college student" and was left feeling "isolated and lonely." Participant 11 shared:

I would say I had a really hard time transitioning out of the military, I felt lost. I felt like a trap door opened and I just kind of fell out of my existence. The structure of my life was gone, and I was unable to find a replacement.

Participant 3 had a difficult transition out of the military and described moments of intense "anger and frustration" during his immediate post-military service. This participant struggled with mental health and "contemplated suicide" and shared, "If it wasn't for my child, suicide would have been a real option. I was totally overwhelmed with emotion and felt like nobody cared."

The testimony of this veteran highlighted the intense emotional distress associated with transitioning out of the military. Many of the veterans who participated in this research study said they struggled with periods of powerful emotional discomfort.

Participant 4 described his transition as a period of "solitude" that had profound implications on his mental health, saying, "I was thrown to the wolves" and in complete "isolation from everything I was comfortable with." He continued:

I no longer understood my role in the world and felt utterly lost and without purpose.

Transitioning out of the Marines was a very somber time because you know military life is over and you can't help but miss it.

The transition experience of these veterans involved periods of intense emotions that had a profound effect on their college-going attitudes and community college acclimation. Participant 5, a veteran of the Marine Corps, described his transition to community college student as “terrifying.” He continued:

I was afraid that I was going to be judged in general due to my military background.

When I first walked on to campus, I thought I was going to be judged for political or ideological reasons. I had financial difficulties, no friends, and I could not adjust my level of preparedness to match the civilian world. It was difficult.

Participant 6, a veteran of the Navy, described her transition as “emotional” and explained, “I was a little closed off, I had a barrier up.” She continued:

I was missing personal connections, and I was unable to create any meaningful relationships on campus. I kept my head down, got my work done, and just left campus. I didn't foster much involvement in my 1st semester.

Theme 2 Summary

Transition from the military to community college student was a difficult journey for participants of this study, and periods of “depression, frustration, and loneliness” were a persistent challenge. Loss of structure created anxiety, lack of interpersonal relationships caused feelings of isolation, and the unavailability of helpful resources frustrated the early community college experience of these veterans. Feelings of solitude, anger, and sadness persisted throughout the transition process, and these emotions complicated performance, acclimation, and

commitment. Fear of age-related judgment from student peers and self-determination-style individualism left these veterans feeling lost and vulnerable.

According to participants of this study, transition challenges are caused by the opposing nature of community college culture and military culture and manifest in many different situations. Participants of this study described experiencing cultural transition as a series of responses to relaxed atmospheres, undisciplined peers, diversity of opinion, perceptions, and lack of shared values among students. According to the participants of this study, cultural acclimation is affected by the voluntary nature of participation, loose schedules, and general flexibility of community college culture and represents a sea of change from the culture to which they are accustomed. During the interview portion of this research study, participants consistently described the community college environment as “relaxed, optional, and free.”

Theme 3: Soft Skills Application

Theme 3 was the application of soft skills gained during military service to the community college environment. This theme explored how these veterans applied the values, attitudes, and work ethic gained from military service to their college-going disposition. The participants of this study spoke of dedication, commitment, and perseverance attitudes that kept them focused on their academic goals. According to the participants of this study, the military cultivates soft skills such as accountability, dependability, adaptability, and work ethic, and these traits were vital to the student success of the veterans who participated in this study. The discipline, integrity, and teamwork-oriented attitudes these individuals maintained during their community college experiences were a consistent theme throughout the open-ended interviews of this study. Participant 1 explained, “I feel like my military experience gave me an edge over

the other students. I was able to persevere when times were tough and stay committed because of the competitiveness I had from the military.”

This veteran’s testimony highlighted the positive use of values and abilities gained from military culture. Positive attitudes and disposition are traits veterans apply to their civilian lives, and they inherently depend on them. Participant 10 explained:

At college, you have to discipline yourself just as you did in the military because otherwise, you’re going to fall behind or fail. I had to use my leadership experience a lot of times and encourage my teammates during class projects.

Leadership tendencies had a positive impact on the community college journey of this veteran and elucidated a military veteran’s approach to team-oriented environments. Participant 11 elaborated:

I had to take the initiative during my group projects, I had to. The other students were not social, and I had to get them going. The military always put me in a position of leadership, so I was used to it.

Leadership situations were discussed by participants of this study throughout their testimony.

The interviewees of this research explained that taking a leadership role in group coursework or classroom projects was a regular occurrence. Participant 7 was a Hispanic veteran of the Army and often took leadership of his group projects. He explained, “I was the one who got in front of the class and said, hey, we should put together a study group. Let’s write down names and numbers and I’ll make a group chat.”

Feelings of responsibility were a commonality of the veterans who participated in this study. Throughout the interviews, participants expressed taking initiative during class projects and group activities. Participant 6, a female veteran of the Navy, relied on this military value

throughout her community college experience. She explained, “I felt like I had a higher sense of responsibility and better work ethic than the students in my classes. Military life is structured, and I maintained that discipline throughout college.”

Participant 3, a male veteran of the Air Force, had a similar response and explained:

I think my military values helped me have a purpose and a higher sense of responsibility, which makes social interactions better. I kept my discipline as a student and always scheduled early morning classes.

Theme 3 Summary

Soft skills refer to traits and skills acquired during military service that benefited veterans during their community college journey. Problem solving, drive, adaptability, and dependability are common traits acquired during military service, and participants of this study applied these skills with great success. Dedication, accountability, discipline, and integrity are foundational values instilled in participants of this study and guided their approach to education. Teamwork, flexibility, leadership, and a strong work ethic are traits that benefited the students of this study and were an important aspect of their personal disposition. The veterans in this research study believed these skills set them apart from the nonveteran students on campus.

Theme 4: VRC

To the research participants, their campus VRC was an important resource, and every veteran interviewed during this study expressed appreciation for the “safe space.” In the campus VRC, these veterans developed positive interpersonal relationships, felt culturally “at ease,” and found a “relatable environment.” Campus VRCs relieved challenges associated with transition, anxiety, and isolation. The dedicated environment provided these veteran students with a familiar

sense of camaraderie and opportunities to build meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Participant 11 explained his VRC experience and said:

We were all veterans or still serving and we all took care of each other. We kept a good portion of that culture going together and I found a similar sense of camaraderie to the military at the VRC. We all felt safe and comfortable there.

The VRC provided veteran students with an area that recognized their culture and cultivated interpersonal relationships with other veteran students on campus. Participant 15 had a similar experience and described the resource center experience, saying, “The veteran’s center was honestly a lifesaver, not just to me but to many others, too. We felt safe and comfortable to express ourselves in there. We could be ourselves and not be afraid to tell stories and recollect.”

The VRC was an area where student veterans found a culturally specific experience that recognized their military background and created opportunities to build camaraderie. Participant 16 explained, “There was a good brotherhood in the veteran resource center. We are all very tight knit, and we watch out for one another. Honestly, without that, I don’t know if I would have finished.”

The veterans who participated in this study expressed high opinions for their VRC and the camaraderie and comfort they found there. Veterans recovered a sense of military culture in the campus VRC, which relieved transition tensions and bolstered their confidence. Participant 1 explained:

When I first visited the veteran center, I was in a dark place and definitely benefited from the relationships I found there. It felt really nice to find other people with similar experiences and struggles. I have many combat deployments and met other veterans at

the VRC that were also dealing with the stress of that. And the staff genuinely cared about me and were also veterans. That helped a lot.

Participant 2 was enthusiastic about his VRC experience and credited the space for some of his community college success. To this participant, the VRC was a military community with common goals and a shared cultural background. He remarked, “The VRC was one of the best communities I’ve ever been a part of.”

Theme 4 Summary

The campus VRC was a crucial aspect of the community college experience of the military veterans who participated in this study. The difficulties associated with cultural transition, interpersonal relationships, and negative emotions were relieved when students got involved at their campus VRC. These students found the camaraderie to which they were accustomed to military service in their campus VRC and created positive social structures that benefited their college-going attitudes. They found resources, created friends, and participated in veteran student club activities, which fostered positive attitudes and community college acclimation.

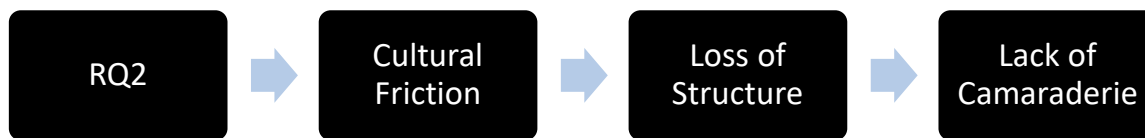
Findings and Narratives of Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked, “What cultural challenges did student veterans experience at military-friendly community colleges?”

Research Question 2 was designed to understand specific student experiences from a cultural context. The literature on the veteran community college experience has demonstrated that military veteran students have difficulties transitioning to community college students and with campus social inclusion, and they participate in student engagement events at lower rates than nonveteran students (Morris et al., 2023). This research study approached those challenges

from a cultural perspective, and this researcher designed the interview questions to illuminate specific experiences associated with challenging areas of the community college experience. The open-ended interview questions related to this research question were constructed to create a comparative response that created thematic precision about the source of demonstrated challenges. This approach to the interview process produced rich testimony about specific military veteran student cultural experiences that were challenging. The researcher designed this aspect of the study to strongly consider participants' cultural backgrounds as potential sources that influenced student behavior, personalities, and social acclimation (see Figure 4.6).

Figure 4.6. Research Question 2 Themes



Theme 5: Cultural Friction

Cultural friction is the point of cultural merging between community college and military cultures. For these students, the confluence of cultures occurred through micro encounters with students, staff, and faculty. The campus experience of these student veterans was filled with community college cultural aspects that formed their opinions, perceptions, and attitudes. This cultural intersection represents the beginning of a new cultural journey and is the exact point where cultural transition begins. In the classroom and on campus, participants of this study encountered unfamiliar situations created by the freedom and self-determination style environment of community college culture. Opinions were formed based on visual analysis, which created cultural perceptions about their new environment, peers, and atmosphere. Relaxed schedules, no dress code, and diversity of opinion were new cultural considerations not

associated with military service but that were vital to community college culture. Participant 1 explained:

A lot of my classmates didn't go through the things that I went through. And I'm not talking about deployments, but just military structure. They don't have the discipline or drive we have. They are full of excuses and are always late for class.

Study participants created perceptions of peers based on cultural considerations throughout their community college journeys. The relaxed structure of the community college experience and the perceived lack of commitment of nonveteran students fostered negative judgments. Participant 10 explained, "A classroom of soldiers in that same classroom would have been more disciplined, quieter, and I believe, more things would have gotten done." Lack of discipline in a military environment is not tolerated, and the veterans of this research study held their peers to high standards. During the interview process of this study, it was frequently reported that participants felt annoyed, frustrated, and were irked by the behavior of community college students. Participant 4 expressed, "I complain all the time about some of my fellow students. People will show up the day before an assignment is due and be completely unprepared. It hurts everyone when that happens." Commitment is a hard-wired aspect of military culture and the perceived lack of commitment by fellow students was a point of cultural friction. Participant 6 explained, "Everybody's in their own bubble at this community college. Even though we have team assignments during class, everyone remains very independent. I'm not used to that."

The independent nature of the community college experience was a point of cultural friction, and the veterans participating in this study expressed discomfort with the individualism of peer students. Participant 3 explained, "Community college students seem much more individualistic, much more self-focused. The military is one massive group project, and college

is the complete opposite. It's night and day." Participants of this study were guided by perceptions of other students, faculty, and staff as they interacted with community college culture. They learned to navigate campus interactions individually, which was in complete opposition to their previous cultural experience.

Theme 5 Summary

The independent nature, relaxed atmosphere, and individualism of the community college experience were points of considerable cultural friction for participants of this study. These students formed opinions based on perceptions of behavior, appearance, and assessed level of commitment of their peers. Participants grew frustrated with community college student culture, and acclimation was disrupted by the lack of structure and "chaos" of the campus experience. Lack of discipline in the classroom and perceived low standards of teammates during team-oriented assignments frustrated military veterans and had a negative effect on their community college experience.

Theme 6: Loss of Structure

The lack of personal structure during the community college experience created discomfort for participants of this study. The loss of accountability measures, hierarchy, and sense of purpose had a negative effect on their college-going attitudes. Participants of this study were accustomed to high-pressure environments, intense responsibilities, and a shared mission mentality that the community college experience could not match. Participant 3 explained, "In the Navy, we have a structure, and you have to be accountable for yourself. If one of my teammates was late or not prepared, I was on him, and that's not how things are at community college."

A sense of purpose was diminished by the individualistic nature of student life, and the perceptions formed negatively affected the community college cultural experience. Participant 18 expressed, “In the Navy, we served a higher purpose. The reason you’re doing it is just higher; there is more at stake. I would argue at a community college, the students don’t take it as seriously as they should.” Additionally, lack of accountability in the classroom was a notion participants spoke about at length. Relaxed peer student behavior, tardiness, and absenteeism were perceived to be unchecked in the experiences of the veterans who participated in this study. Participant 6 elaborated, “There is a gap between veterans and regular students. They don’t have the same experiences or mentality as us. They lack commitment and accountability. They do whatever they want!”

The optional nature of the structure and systems of community college culture was another point of cultural friction. A community college lacks systems of accountability that are comparable to a military cultural experience, and independent student behavior was perceived negatively by study participants. Participant 12 explained:

There is a culture here on campus where systems are in place and there’s structures in place but a lot of things, are optional. If you don’t go to class, you just don’t go to class, and nobody seems to care.

Theme 6 Summary

The structural differences between military and community colleges are apparent and expected; however, their negative effects on the community college experiences of veterans are significant. The participatory nature of the structures of community college and the lack of personal accountability measures left these veterans questioning the effectiveness of the environment. Negative perceptions of student peers emerged that complicated classroom

interaction and dampened positive attitudes. Participants of this study expressed openly the judgments of other students that influenced their perception of community college culture. Feeling alone and isolated, these veterans formed opinions of other students based on physical appearance, behavior, and attitude. Punctuality, grooming standards, and perceived commitment of peers influenced perceptions and often contradicted the inherent values of the military veterans who participated in this study. Participants felt their fellow students lacked sufficient “life experience” and were “naïve” to the functions of the world.

Theme 7: Lack of Camaraderie

Camaraderie is a core component of the cultural background of military veterans, and the students who participated in this study spoke highly of the friendships they had created during their service. The closeness of military environments and the shared sacrifice create bonds that last a lifetime. Lack of camaraderie, however, had a powerfully negative effect on the community college experiences of these veterans. Absence of camaraderie was a consistent theme throughout the interviews of this study, and participants described periods of loneliness, isolation, and seclusion throughout their community college journeys. Failure to create interpersonal relationships with nonveteran peer students was an issue for the students interviewed during this study.

The team-oriented experiences that forge camaraderie are not typical of the community college experience, and classroom group work, projects, and assignments did not alleviate the related issues for veterans. Participant 1 explained, “Community college just lacks any sort of team environment, even though there are team assignments, it didn’t feel like the other students were taking it very seriously.” Age-related challenges and individual perceptions negatively impacted the ability of these veterans to create meaningful relationships. Participant 18

elaborated, “I think that has a lot to do with life experience. I was 23 years old but didn’t have anything in common with the other 23-year-olds on campus. I didn’t make a single friend in college.” The inability to connect with nonveteran students on campus was a persistent issue for participants of this research study. Veterans expressed difficulties finding common ground with nonveteran students. Participant 10 explained, “I didn’t realize I had my guard up. I tried to communicate with people the best I could, but I felt standoffish. Not interested.” Creating meaningful relationships is an important aspect of the community college experience, and the veterans who participated in this study had challenges connecting with other students on campus. Participant 15 elaborated, “I would love to say like, ‘Yeah, I’ve met a bunch of people and have made a bunch of networking opportunities and made good friendships.’ Sadly, that’s not the case.”

Theme 7 Summary

Lack of camaraderie was a powerful experience for participants of this study. These students expressed difficulties creating meaningful interpersonal relationships with nonveterans on campus, which exacerbated transition and acclimation challenges. This lack of camaraderie had a profound effect on these students, and their emotional reaction was potent. Group activities hardened opinions, and a lack of shared sacrifice between community college students had a negative effect on the student veteran cultural experience. The independent nature of the community college experience was a difficult cultural aspect to overcome for the veterans who participated in this study.

Theme 8: Unexpected Findings

The effect that negative perceptions of other students had on participants of this study was an unexpected but prominent theme throughout the open-ended interviews. Military veteran

students described their peers as entitled, arrogant, naive, and lazy. Their opinions were formed based on the appearance, behavior, and attitudes of fellow students while operating in community college culture. Relaxed attitudes and attire reinforced conceived notions and further exacerbated isolation behavior. Participants of this study expressed openly that they felt peer students lacked life experience, motivation, and commitment. Poor perceptions of fellow students influenced the community college cultural experiences of research participants and had a negative effect on their ability to form interpersonal relationships, embrace community college culture, and maintain college-going attitudes. Participant 12 explained:

They [other students] are polar opposites when compared to us. They come late, leave early, and it's all about them. Their mindset is totally different. They are sensitive and their emotions dictate everything they do. They are clueless to the world.

An “us and them” attitude developed between participants of this study and their peers that complicated interactions and nurtured judgments. Frustrated, military veterans felt compelled to take initiative, organize, and coordinate team-oriented projects. Participant 15 explained:

When working with other students on team projects they are constantly looking for a way out of any responsibility. They are lazy! They have no internal focus and will always take the easy way out. At every class in which there was someone to speak, give a presentation, hand out documents, or any other data collection, I was the one that took that initiative.

Perceptions of peer students complicated relationships, attitudes, and team-oriented experiences for participants of this research study. Negative opinions of other students were formed based on a series of perceptions related to assessed commitment levels, life experiences, and classroom behavior. Disruptive behavior in the classroom and lack of respect for professors

exacerbated negative perceptions of peer students and created division among veterans and nonveterans on campus. Veterans felt “turned off” by the unruliness of fellow students and were critical of their individual values.

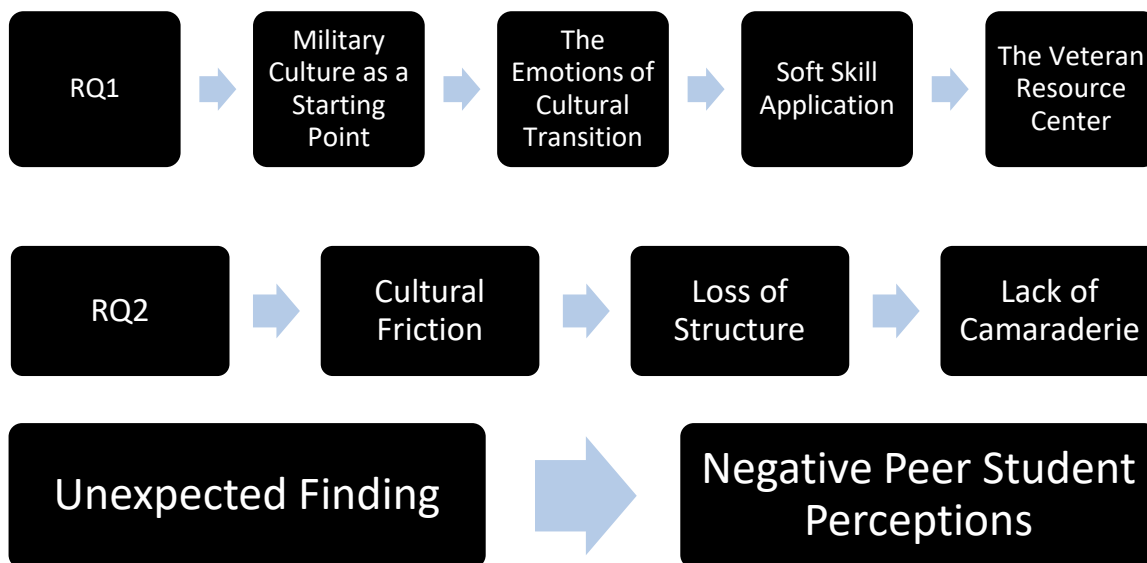
Findings Analysis and Review

Theme 1 is military culture. Military culture influenced the perspectives, values, expectations, and strategies of the participants of this study and was a consistent topic throughout the open-ended interview process. Theme 2 was the emotions of cultural transition from military service to community college students. The emotions of cultural transition affected the community college journey of these veterans significantly. Transitioning from the military is not strictly a geographical challenge, and the cultural implications associated are powerful. The veterans of this study expressed deep emotions about the loss of structure, friends, and family during transitions.

Theme 3 was the application of soft skills gained during military service to the community college environment. This theme explored how these veterans applied the values, attitudes, and work ethic gained from military service to their college-going disposition. Theme 4 was the VRC. The VRC was an important aspect of the student experience at a military-friendly community college and eased participants’ difficulties with transition, acclimation, and cultural challenges. Themes 5 and 6 were related to Research Question 2. Theme 5 explored the effect that loss of structure has on the community college experiences of veterans at a military-friendly community college. Structure is an important part of the cultural background of former servicemembers, and the veterans of this study expressed challenges related to the “looseness” and “optional” aspects of the community college structures. The next sections explored the effect that lack of camaraderie had on the veteran student experience. Forming interpersonal and

meaningful relationships with nonveteran students on campus was a significant challenge for participants of this study. A final theme section discusses the unexpected findings of this research. Figure 4.7 is a visual categorization of the themes that emerged and research question relation that I presented in this chapter.

Figure 4.7. Themes Related to Research Questions



Chapter Summary

This chapter began with a review of the methodology, institution profile, and participant background section. The next sections were devoted to a review of themes, research study questions, and thematic analysis. The final section was dedicated to the student narratives of the lived cultural experience of veterans at a military-friendly community college. The findings were organized using the theoretical and conceptual frameworks as a foundation and highlighted the challenges and experiences of military veterans during their community college journeys. Eight themes emerged from the data collected. Four themes are dedicated to Research Question 1, and three are devoted to Research Question 2, with a final theme related to unexpected findings.

Chapter 5 provides further analysis and conclusions of these findings relative to the research questions and theoretical and conceptual framework of the study, along with recommendations for further research.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions and Recommendations

The preceding chapter presented findings from the collected data chronologically and into eight themes. This chapter revisits the research questions and provides a summary of the study and research design. This information is followed by sections dedicated to the implications for practice and in relation to the literature, recommendations for practice and further research, and a conclusion.

Background of the Problem

Low rates of community college enrollment, education benefits usage, and college credential completion among veterans are key concerns in the higher education sector (Bond-Hill et al., 2019). Recent enrollment declines are attributed to job market demands, cost of tuition, COVID-19 global pandemic recovery, and competition from other institutions (Barrington, 2023b; Edelman, 2023; D. Jenkins, 2023; Marcus & Report, 2023). These challenges have forced community colleges to reevaluate their institutional designs, programs, and structures, with a particular focus on improving the student experience (Bailey et al., 2015; Blankstein et al., 2020; Morgan, 2013). Improving the student experience has been found to have a positive effect on retention, enrollment, extracurricular activity, and degree completion (Beauchamp et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2021; Wood, 2020). Community college recruitment strategies often focus on improving the student experience and will incorporate cultural considerations in new designs. Community colleges have dedicated significant resources to improving the student experience of military veterans, and cultural inclusivity philosophies have driven this approach.

Veteran inclusivity practices at community colleges recognize the importance of culture and are comparable to other support programs that target specific demographic groups. Similar community college initiatives aim to support students and leaders through community

partnerships, academic support, and designated cultural spaces. A military friendly community college will adopt a similar approach to culture, partnerships, and academic support for student veterans. Military culture is a unique social construction that produces specific characteristics, behaviors, and personality traits that influence the personal disposition of its participants far after their removal from service (Burek, 2018).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this narrative inquiry, a qualitative study, was to explore the lived cultural experience of veterans at military-friendly community colleges.

Research Questions

The following research questions grounded this study:

1. What are the lived cultural experiences of student veterans at military-friendly community colleges?
2. What cultural challenges did student veterans experience at military-friendly community colleges?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership created the theoretical boundaries of this research study with its categorized description of the components of culture. The framework effectively defines cultural components that aligned vertically with this study's conceptual framework. The theoretical approach to this research took the position that a military-friendly institution is informed by the cultural experience created by the organization and its leadership. The culture of the organization deploys the values, mechanisms, and structures that inform effective military-friendly philosophies and support programs. Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support was the conceptual framework for this study. According to

Vacchi (2011, 2013), institutions that understand military culture are more effective at easing campus socialization and creating a veteran-inclusive environment. The student support categories of Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support were where this researcher sought to identify cultural experiences affecting the student veteran community college experience.

Research Design

This qualitative narrative inquiry aimed to explore the lived cultural experience of veterans at military friendly community colleges. This research used qualitative methods to gain a deep understanding of veteran students' cultural experiences and provided a thematic review of the findings. Using purposeful sampling, this researcher partnered with campus veteran resource centers (VRCs) at each selected college to recruit the appropriate participants for this study. The researcher then conducted semistructured interviews with open-ended questions (see Appendix C) designed to elicit data about the cultural experience of these participants at a military-friendly community college. The interviews were focused on creating dialogue about cultural experiences in the military and at a community college that would provide the researcher with a rich set of qualitative data. Interviews lasted 30–60 minutes and were conducted via Zoom web meetings and in person at the selected campus VRC. The interviews were then transcribed and coded for themes relative to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks and literature review.

Summary of Study

Qualitative research is a discovery-oriented process that involves exploring and understanding social or cultural phenomena (Forman et al., 2007). This qualitative research study used narrative inquiry to explore the lived cultural experience of veterans at military friendly community colleges. The aim of this study was achieved by constructing effective open-ended

interview questions (see Appendix C) that elicited descriptive responses about specific cultural experiences during the community college journeys of study participants. Alignment of culturally based theory, subject literature, and methodology guided this research and produced valuable testimony about the cultural implications of the military veteran community college experience. By gaining a better understanding of the cultural challenges associated with the military veteran student experience, community colleges can improve student support models and outreach efforts.

This study sought to explore the student cultural experiences of military veterans at institutions that recognize the cultural complexities of veterans in their approach to student support services and provide a narrative of their experiences. This qualitative exploration highlighted the cultural implications of military veteran student behaviors, social interactions, experiences, and approaches to decision making. By framing the community college experiences of study participants in a cultural context, this study demonstrated cultural experience thematic precision with its findings.

Implications Related to Literature

Existing literature on the community college cultural experiences of military veterans focuses on the concept of shock. Culture shock is a common interpretation of similar research findings, and this research study suggests that shock is an inaccurate description of the cultural experiences of veterans at a community college (Brohawn et al., 2023; Dilliard & Yu, 2016; Howe & Shpeer, 2019). Twenty hours of qualitative data was collected during this research study and the word shock does not appear a single time in the transcripts. Shock induces a state of paralysis and none of the participants of this study ever indicated a period of shock. Participants described how they responded rather than how they were shocked. This is an important

implication on the academic literature and offers an alternative view to dominant theories regarding the cultural experience of veterans at a community college.

Influential research findings on military veterans at community colleges suggests that navigating a new cultural environment is a source of challenge for student veterans (DiRamio, 2017; Jones, 2016; Wheeler, 2012; Zinger and Cohen, 2010). The research findings of this study, however, suggest that the loss of an old environment is more apparent of a challenge than navigating a new one. Themes that emerged from this research study's findings focus on loss of structure and lack of camaraderie, and these findings suggest that the new cultural activities and customs of community college are far less of a hurdle than the loss of old cultural norms. The findings of this research study suggest that academic scholarship on the military veteran student experience is underestimating the negative effect of culture loss and overemphasizing the negative effects of navigating a new culture.

The conceptual framework of this study, Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veteran support, offers effective student support theories to the modern academic conversation, and participants of this study reinforce the student support notions of that structure. Vacchi's (2011, 2013) model of student veterans support identifies transition as an important veteran student support area for community colleges and the findings of this study confirm that the challenges associated are powerful. The implications of this research suggest, however, that cultural support is missing from his model.

This study confirms that the military veteran student challenges at community colleges explored by previous research studies have a significant impact on the veteran student journey. This research uncovers the cultural implications associated with the military veteran student experience and adds a set of reliable data to the current academic scholarship. Participants of this

study expressed deep emotional distress during their community college journey and the literature consulted during this study agrees with this experience. Research examined during this study finds that a campus Veteran Resource Center (VRC) can reduce negative emotions associated with transition (Diamond, 2012; Jenkins & Morgan, 2018; Mahoney et al, 2021; Sander, 2012)

Eighteen of the 20 participants of this study expressed a special connection to their campus VRC, and the literature consulted for this study corroborates that relationship. Previous research finds that a VRC has a positive effect on interpersonal relationships, confidence, and performance of veterans at a community college and this study reaffirms those findings (Barmak et al, 2021; Heineman, 2016; Stevenson & Le Buhn, 2019). While the findings of this study have much commonality with research on VRC's and the veteran student experience, it's the cultural focus of this research that sets it apart.

Implications to Practice

The findings of this study could potentially produce innovative approaches to military veteran support by focusing on known challenges from the cultural perspective used in this study. The findings of this research study suggest that cultural challenges to the veteran student experience are significant, and military friendly community colleges are not placing enough emphasis on the cultural background of student veterans. Further findings from this research study suggest that community colleges can improve efforts to raise awareness to the available institutional support structures available. Throughout this research study the participants described an array of emotions but also never participated in any sort of mental-health campus-based support. This shortfall could partly be due to the institution's focus on treating the correct mental-health issue but misunderstanding its origin. The research findings of this study suggest

that current military friendly practices are only marginally effective at supporting veteran students and woefully overlooking the significant cultural aspects associated with military veteran student challenges at a community college.

Further findings suggest a communication breakdown between students and available resources may be occurring at these military friendly institutions that left students feeling isolated and lost. Every participant of this research study described a period during their enrollment at a military friendly community college that left them feeling culturally isolated. This is further evidence of poor communication about the services and programs available at the campus VRC. Additionally, the students that participated in this study credited their campus VRC for many positive things but simultaneously described concerning periods of emotional distress. This finding suggests a lack of communication about available mental-health resources at military friendly community colleges.

The findings from this study suggest that the military friendly frameworks developed by community colleges are only partly successful at effectively serving military veterans. While participants of this study found the VRC to be a valuable resource, that value was mostly limited to basic camaraderie scenarios. Campus interactions did not improve for the participants of this study because of the military friendly philosophies deployed and participants of this study were completely unprepared for community college student culture. From the findings of this research study, it is apparent that military friendly philosophies have become stale, unattractive, and lacking creative student engagement activities. Student cultural preparedness isn't solely the responsibility of the military friendly institutions and the United States military harbors some of the responsibility for creating such emotional distress among its discharging members.

The sudden relocation to an unfamiliar environment for returning veterans can be better prepared for by each branch of the military. If the military would consider the possible outcomes, locations, and pursuits of discharging members they could better design out processing procedures. Participant 20 remarked:

It just felt like at times that there was more effort to keep me in rather than assist me when I'm separating. It could have been a lot better. I didn't know anything about the benefits I was eligible for or how to access them.

These findings reinforce the notion that discharged service members need to be better prepared for the environment they are returning to. This finding could have implications on impactful partnerships and initiatives between the U.S. Military and community colleges that could connect active-duty service members with community college support structures, academic processes, and coursework prior to discharge.

The military friendly institutions that participated in this study are not effectively preparing student veterans for the cultural challenges associated with the veteran student experience. The findings from this study suggest that the military friendly frameworks developed are only partly successful at effectively serving military veterans. Study participants expressed emotional distress, loneliness, and isolation, but never expressed that they sought out supportive resources either. The findings of this research study suggest that communication from veteran student support structures to enrolled students is ineffective. Further findings indicate that veteran student preparation efforts, and student engagement activities are non-effective at the researched military friendly institutions.

Recommendations for Further Research

This research study would be well used as the foundation for a series of studies examining military culture's effect on the veteran student experience. This study has established that cultural implications are involved in the military veteran student experience; new studies could build on this to explore whether culture affects community college veteran student enrollment and persistence declines. Of primary importance to this exploration of the cultural experience of veterans would be conducting a research study with community college stop outs. A follow-up study should work to identify if the cultural experience at a community college influenced their decision to drop out. Further research could focus on identifying positive cultural practices by community colleges and their effect on the military veteran student experience. This study would also be well conducted as a multi-site case study that examines organizational culture and its impact on the student experience. Further research could examine the leadership culture that produces military friendly philosophies and the effectiveness of deployed student support frameworks.

The methodology used for this research study produced a large quantity of data pertaining to the community college experience of military veterans, but information obtained was not confined solely to cultural considerations. Data pertaining to military veteran transition, relationship building, and campus interactions could be extrapolated from the data collected during this research and prepared using different methodologies, philosophies, and theories to understand these issues. Different approaches to the data could yield unforeseen themes and build on the conclusion of this study. A secondary analysis of the open-ended interview data would combine well with a mixed-methods approach to the cultural experience of military veterans at a community college. By adding a quantitative component to this methodological

approach, researchers could provide the academic community with measurable data and statistical analysis on the community college cultural experience of military veterans.

Recommendations for Practice

Community colleges that want to better serve military veterans must provide a VRC on campus. The participants of this study expressed a special connection to their VRC and credited it with their successful acclimation to community college culture. A campus VRC will provide student veterans with a central location for education benefits acquisition, academic programming, and student club activities. A campus VRC will connect veterans to one another and provide a cultural safe space for students when they feel emotionally overwhelmed. A campus VRC will lessen the negative impact of feelings of isolation and provide a physical location to form interpersonal relationships.

Loss of camaraderie was a prevalent theme throughout the data collected from this research study, and institutions can combat this negative experience by providing connections to other veterans on campus. A mandatory new student orientation for military veterans is recommended to help situate veterans in their new environment, connect them with other veterans, and prepare them for cultural conflicts that may occur. Preferably, this coursework will be delivered by a veteran and include information about available resources, the VRC, and community college student culture. This coursework will increase awareness in the veteran student community and connect veteran students with one another. Additionally, this coursework can prepare student veterans with cultural awareness activities that will better situate them within community college student culture. A military veteran-oriented new student orientation will have a positive effect on the challenges associated with interpersonal relationships, loneliness, and isolation.

Institutions can work to create military veteran networks on campus and encourage participation in student clubs, government, and campus activities. Studies have shown that participation in extracurricular activities on campus will improve college-going attitudes, commitment, and academic persistence (P. Brown & Gross, 2011; Chandra, 2021; Morgan, 2013). Creating effective partnerships with the Veterans Administration (VA) and local and state veteran support agencies will provide institutions with a needed layer of support at no cost to the community college. Institutions can host resource and student engagement fairs that raise awareness of the support structures available to student veterans. Through a process of embracing, supporting, preparing, and prioritizing military veterans, community colleges can create a positive environment that cultivates their skills and recognizes their background.

The participants of this study expressed disappointment at peer students' preparedness for group work and general classroom activities. To combat these negative perceptions institutions can engage faculty and encourage new guidelines that raise expectations in the classroom. A team project assessment is recommended that can be anonymously administered by faculty and will rate each participating student's participation in team-oriented exercises. This process will reinforce the importance of active participation in group work as well as provide students with an avenue to direct their concerns.

Professional development is recommended for academic counselors that interact with student veterans and should include training on mental-health concerns among former servicemembers. The participants of this study expressed feelings of deep emotional distress during their community college journey and better-informed counselors can lessen this impact. Additionally, a once a semester counseling appointment is recommended that will assess student

veterans academic progress, mental-health condition, and college-going attitudes. This process should be intrusive, proactive, and mandatory.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the lived cultural experiences of military veterans at military-friendly community colleges. The findings revealed a complicated and emotional cultural journey that had profound implications on student veterans' transitions from the military to community college, acclimation, and student culture participation. The values of military culture guided participants of this research and informed their decision-making skills, relationship disposition, and performance attitudes; however, in contrast to military culture, participants had difficulties adjusting to the relaxed values of community college student culture. Transition from the military to community college student was a prominent theme throughout the data collected from this study and revealed a complicated emotional experience with many culturally influenced aspects.

The negative effect of loss of structure, personal accountability measures, and shared mission orientation was an unintended result that emerged from the data collected. Participants expressed throughout the open-ended interviews that the lack of discipline associated with community college enrollment was a challenge they had to overcome. The free-style customs associated with the community college experience were a cultural adjustment for participants of this study and exacerbated negative perceptions of nonveteran students. Data pertaining to the transition experiences of the veterans who participated in this study revealed a powerful emotional experience that complicated the military veteran community college experience. Participants described periods of severe depression, alcohol abuse, and domestic separations during their cultural transition that profoundly affected their community college journey.

Participants used the soft skills gained from military culture and applied them successfully in their approaches to coursework, problem solving, and general academic performance. Dependability, adaptability, and discipline emerged as common themes from the data collected, and these descriptors were used regularly throughout the open-ended interviews. Participants struggled with interpersonal relationship building but found relief in their campus VRC. The campus VRC was an important student support and engagement office for the veteran participants, and most of them attributed some of their academic success to the functions of their VRC. Additionally, participants discovered a military-friendly environment within the VRC that provided familiar customs, experiences, and cultural considerations.

Points of cultural friction emerged from the data that illuminated precise examples of cultural challenges. The cultural intersection of military and community college culture revealed areas that antagonize the veteran student experience and complicate veteran and nonveteran campus interaction. Lack of camaraderie with nonveteran students emerged as a prominent theme in the data and had a profoundly negative effect on the military veteran community college experience. Nineteen of the 20 participants interviewed in this study never created meaningful relationships with nonveteran students due to perceptions of them informed by the performance values gained from military service. Participants formed perceptions based on personal evaluations of nonveteran student characteristics, perceived commitment, and personal appearance. These perceptions often created negative opinions of nonveteran peer students and emerged as an unexpected finding from the data collected. Participants expressed low opinions of nonveteran students and were harshly critical of their commitment, discipline, and attitudes.

Assisting military veterans with their academic goals is a primary objective of the community college mission, and many institutions strive to create a culturally accepting

environment for former service members. This study informs administrators, VRC managers, and the academic community of the important cultural aspects of the military veteran student experience. By gaining a deeper understanding of the cultural background of military veteran community college students and identifying the existence of powerful cultural influences on their personal characteristics, values, and community college experience, it is now possible to inform practices to consider these variables. For many participants of this study, overcoming military culture and the associated values created significant challenges. By raising awareness of the unique challenges military culture present to the veteran student experience, this research has contributed an important perspective to consider for community college veteran-related academic research and student support philosophies.

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Appendix A - Alignment Table

Literature findings	Interview questions	Research questions	Theoretical and conceptual frameworks	Methodology
<p>Tyler (1971), culture is a term that describes the social behavior, institutions, and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, symbols, capabilities, and habits of individuals within a group.</p>	<p>1. Can you describe exactly in your own words, how military culture and community college culture are different?</p>	<p>1. What are the experiences of veterans at “military-friendly” community colleges?</p> <p>2. Describe the cultural experience of your campus Veteran Resource Center (VRC).</p>	<p>Schein’s (2010) Organizational Culture and Leadership</p> <p>Vacchi’s (2011, 2013) Model of Student Veteran Support</p>	<p>Qualitative</p>
<p>According to Heineman (2016), a “military-friendly” community college is an institution that uses strategies to address the unique needs of military veterans.</p>	<p>2. Can you describe how the campus Veteran Resource Center (VRC) was helpful?</p>	<p>1. What cultural challenges did student veterans experience at a military-friendly college?</p>	<p>Vacchi’s (2011, 2013) Model of Student Veteran Support</p>	<p>Narrative inquiry</p>

Appendix B - Interview Protocol

Prior to the interview, the researcher will provide the following introduction:

Hello, my name is Matthew Miller. I am a doctoral student at Kansas State University. Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study designed to capture the lived cultural experiences of veterans at military-friendly community colleges. The interview is scheduled to take approximately 1 hour and will be recorded to ensure all information is captured. Your identity will be kept confidential, as a pseudonym will be assigned to your information and used throughout the narrative of the data reported. You will receive a copy of the transcription of this interview once it is complete and will be asked to review the transcription for accuracy. I will store your signed consent form, interview recording, and transcription electronically and on a flash drive, which will be locked in a safe for 5 years, after which all information will be destroyed. Remember, this interview is voluntary, and you can withdraw your consent at any time. You will not be penalized or receive any negative consequences should you decide to withdraw from the interview.

Do I have your permission to record the interview?

Upon agreement provided by the participant, the researcher will begin the recording.

At the conclusion of the interview, the researcher will make the following statement:

Thank you for participating in the interview and research study. You will receive a copy of the transcription to check for accuracy once it is complete. Your information will remain confidential, and there will be no way of identifying your responses. If you have any questions regarding this study, please email me at memiller13b@ksu.edu.

Appendix C - Interview Questions

Interview Protocol Interviewer: _____ Date: _____

Interviewee (pseudonym): _____

Following review of the information sheet and the student veteran completion of the Demographic Information Form, the following questions will be asked with probing and follow-up questions as required.

1. Tell me a little about yourself and your military experience:
 - a. What branch of the service were you?
 - b. What was your MOS?
 - c. Do you have any deployments?
 - d. Are you married?
 - e. Do you have children?
1. Describe, in your own words, what military culture means to you.
2. Describe the cultural experience of your campus Veteran Resource Center (VRC).
3. Describe how military culture influenced your approach to learning, campus navigation, and classroom interactions.
4. Explain, in your own words, the differences between community college culture and military culture.
7. Discuss, in your experience, how military values compare to nonveteran student values.
8. Please describe to me your academic transition into community college and explain the cultural difficulties and successes of the transition.
9. Describe your emotions during your transition moving from the military to the community college setting.
10. Did you experience any type of identity misconceptions from faculty, staff, or students regarding your veteran status?
11. What were some of the reasons you decided to attend this specific community college?

Appendix D - Institutional Review Board Approvals



TO: Janice Marshall
Educational Leadership

Proposal Number IRB-12101

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 04/05/2024

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "Examining the lived experiences of veterans at military friendly community colleges to identify cultural practices that influenced their journey."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for three years from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 04/04/2024

EXPIRATION DATE: 04/03/2027

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

No more than minimal risk to subjects

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 04/05/2024 9:55 AM ET

**Human Subjects Review Committee
Notice of Review and Approval**

TO: Matthew Miller

SUBJECT: Notice of Review and approval

The Human Subjects Review Committee of [REDACTED] College [College A] has reviewed and approved your proposal entitled:

Examining the lived experiences of military veterans at veteran friendly community colleges to identify cultural practices that influenced their journey

You are advised that with respect to:

1. the rights and welfare of the individual(s) involved;
2. the appropriateness of the methods used to secure informed consent; and
3. the risks and potential benefits of the investigation

Your project has been deemed to be:

- Exempt
- Fully acceptable (without reservations).
- Acceptable with the reservations noted below

If your study involves the use of student information that is protected under FERPA (including student email addresses) then as part of this approval, you are required to:

1. Only use the provided data for the purposes of the approved research
2. Protect personally identifiable information (PII) of all study participants and not release any PII to parties outside of those approved to do the research
3. Destroy all PII when it is no longer needed for the study, or when your approved study end date of **August 15, 2024** is reached (whichever comes first).

Approval date: **June 24, 2024**

Signed for the Committee by:

[REDACTED] Chairperson
Human Subjects Review Committee
[REDACTED]



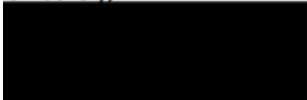
April 25, 2024

Dear Matthew Miller:

Thank you for submitting your application to the [redacted] Community College Institution Review Board ([redacted] IRB). The [redacted] IRB has approved your request to conduct research. Your proposal titled **"Examining the Lived Experiences of Veterans at Military Friendly Community Colleges to Identify Cultural Practices That Influenced Their Journey"** was found to be exempt under code 45CFR 46.101(b), 45 CFR 46.101 (b) (2) and CFR 46.101 (b) (3). It has been assigned the internal IRB number **2099** for internal IRB tracking purposes.

We wish you the best as your study moves forward. Please contact us should you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,



IRB Coordinator

Appendix E - Introduction Letter

Dear (NAME),

My name is Matthew Miller, and I am a current doctoral candidate enrolled at Kansas State University (KSU). I am conducting a research study with my advisor, Dr. JaNice Marshall, entitled, “Examining the lived cultural experiences of veterans at military-friendly community colleges.” I am seeking to interview 6 to 10 veteran students who meet the following criteria: Potential participants must have served honorably in any branch of the military and are enrolled, transferred from, or graduated from your institution. The research study will consist of a series of questions relating to the lived cultural experiences of student veterans at this institution, their transition, and general student experience.

Participation in this study will potentially inform community college leaders, administrators, and community stakeholders of the important cultural factors to consider when creating military veteran student support services. Academically preparing veterans of the U.S. military is a vital aspect of the community college mission, and this research may enhance recruitment strategies, academic support, and the overall veteran student experience. Military veteran student enrollment at community colleges is at historic lows, and without research dedicated to serving military veterans on campus, these trends may never reverse. In closing, thank you for considering being a part of my research study, and I hope to further discuss this project in the near future.

Matthew Miller

Appendix F - Reflexivity Reflection

Considering my personal bias and how to avoid its pitfalls was a complicated aspect of this study. I have a strong community college professional background that focuses primarily on supporting military veteran students. Additionally, I served in the United States Army and Ohio National Guard as a cannon crewmember (13B), which afforded me a lived experience within the culture that emerged as a primary theme of this research study. With this in mind, objectivity became essential to this research and was maintained through vigorous peer debriefing sessions and reflective thought about the data and research methods of this study. This research approach to the interview questions, methodology, and data analysis was strictly informed by the literature review.

I knew military culture would be a noteworthy influence on the nature of the research subjects, but I was unprepared for the narrative that emerged. I never imagined that in the context of this study, military culture would present both a challenge and a benefit to the students interviewed. This unconsidered aspect of the data that emerged is evidence that my personal bias has not corrupted the gathered data. I mitigated personal bias by remaining objective, conducting comprehensive peer debriefing sessions, and following the information trail that was covered in the literature review. I did not conduct this study with a preconceived hypothesis, and the impact of my personal exposure to the U.S. military and community college veteran student support on this research was alleviated by following recommended mitigation strategies.