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# In country, on campus: a study of combat veteran integration into higher education

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## In Country, On Campus: A Study of Combat Veteran Integration into Higher Education

A doctoral thesis presented

By

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To The Department of Education

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In the field of Higher Education Administration

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#### Abstract

The circumstances of each war vary greatly for different generations of veterans. As such, research on the veterans of previous wars may not be applicable as colleges look to prepare for veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. What specifically is missing is an analysis of how the experience in a combat zone affects educational engagement for Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans and what colleges and universities are doing to aid them in their return. For that reason, the primary and secondary questions that frame this research center on enhancing our understanding of this phenomenon, as well as how the veteran perception of institutional culture enhances or inhibits their experience. Two theoretical frameworks have been utilized to further organize and enhance our understanding of the veteran experience in higher education: transition and critical theory.

A phenomenological design has been utilized to address the primary and secondary research questions. It allowed veterans to express how their experiences in war affect the conception of their roles as students and the role colleges play in assisting them in meeting their educational goals. Individual interviews, as well as a focus group have been conducted in accordance with this methodology, as well as in an effort allow veteran perspective to remain the primary focus of the conclusions that have been reached.

Ultimately, the conclusions of this research confirm the prior programming recommendations of previous research on veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars but differ in the manner in which they should be conceived. A new theoretical framework, student-veteran integration theory, is introduced to give practitioners more informed guidelines when creating effective programming that engages veterans based on a deeper understanding of if their

experiences at war, rather than addressing them as a population with a uniform cultural background.

Key words: veterans, Iraq/Afghanistan, higher education, engagement, combat, phenomenology, cultural capital, critical theory, GI Bill, transition, integration, adaptation, adult transition theory

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Ben, I did not know it when I started to write this, but I know now that I wrote this for you. You'll probably never read it (and God knows you wont be alone) but I hope you are only slightly as proud of it as I am of you. I love you. Now go to bed/clean your room/get a job.

#### Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memories and sacrifice of all those that have honored our country with their service, including Victor Waryas Sr., William Waryas, William Lackaye, Robert Scalise, Edward Lackaye, Sr., and my father, Edward Lackaye, Jr.

### Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction	10
Problem of Practice	
Goals, Significance, and Importance	12
Research Questions	14
Research Organization	15
Chapter Two: Theoretical Frameworks	20
Critical Theory	
Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital	
Transition Theory	25
Chapter Three: Literature Review	30
Literature Review Overview	
The Original GI Bill to the Post 9/11 GI Bill	
The Vietnam Veteran Experience in Higher Education	42
Institutional Programming Approaches to the Current Student-Veteran Population	
The Veteran Demographic	
An Ethnographic View of the Veterans in Higher Education	
Literature Review Conclusion	59
Chapter Four: Methodology	62
Purpose and Approach	
Phenomenological Approach	
Site and Sample Selection Goals	
Data Collection	
Data Analysis	
Validity and Credibility	
Protection of Research Subjects	
Chapter Five: Data Findings	
Chapter Content and Goals	
Pre-Military Background	
Military and Combat Experience	
Entering and Experiencing Higher Education	
Findings Conclusion	9/
Chapter Six: Data Analysis	99
Chapter Contents and Goals	
Connecting the Data to the Theoretical Frameworks	
Transition Theory	
Cultural Capital	
Addressing the Primary Research Question	
Analysis-Conclusion	126
Chapter Seven: Student-Veteran Integration Theory	. 129
Conclusion	135

Chapter Eight: Conclusion	137
Implications for Practice	137
Confirming and Furthering Current Literature	
Conclusion	144
References	148

"They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried."
- Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (1990)

"I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me."

- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

#### **Chapter One: Introduction**

#### **Problem of Practice**

At the close of the Second World War in 1945, Congress signed into law what is generally considered one of the most successful pieces of social legislation ever enacted in the United States, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, more commonly known as the GI Bill (McBain, 2008). The GI Bill was responsible for training millions of Americans in the post-war era and stemming a potentially disastrous social and economic (unemployment) problem.

Throughout the course of subsequent military action by the U.S., the bill has undergone several revisions, as the need to aid veterans in their transition back to civilian life has remained an issue. On August 1, 2009, the latest version of the GI Bill, the Veteran Educational Assistance Act (VEAA), otherwise known as the Post 9/11 GI Bill, went into effect. The enactment of the VEAA is anticipated to have a significant affect on higher education almost immediately.

The VEAA greatly increases the amount of educational benefits veterans are eligible to receive, providing for 100% of the tuition and fees of an in-state college or university<sup>1</sup>. Almost 2 million service members who have served in combat zones since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 are eligible (ACE, 2008). As the Afghanistan war approaches its tenth year, and the war in Iraq begins to draw down with the end of combat operations, many of those who have served numerous tours will begin to return home. These factors combine to pose a great but familiar challenge for higher education on the immediate horizon. Considering the sheer number of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The Veterans' Educational Assistance Act's provisions vary from state to state.

veterans having already served, coupled with the enactment of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, a significant increase in veteran enrollments for colleges and universities seems certain (ACE, 2008).

The problem of practice that this research is designed to address asks how prepared are colleges for returning veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. The circumstances of each war and each veteran's experience vary greatly for different generations. Research on veterans of previous conflicts may find less resonance as colleges prepare for veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Unlike veterans of the Second World War and the Vietnam War, veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars comprised an all-volunteer force. Being a member of an all-volunteer force will make them different from other veterans based on a number of influential background characteristics, the preeminent of which is socioeconomic status (Teachman, 2007). This is to say that whereas conscription pulls soldiers from all walks of life, soldiers in an all-volunteer force utilize military service for a variety of reasons, such as an escape from their current conditions or the realization of benefits that might otherwise not be unattainable (i.e. employment, retirement funds, and educational access) (Teachman, 2007). As such, the soldiers that comprise an all-volunteer force will likely be those that may not have been likely to attend college in the first place (Teachman, 2007).

From the standpoint of the wars they fought in, the Afghanistan War is the longest this country has been engaged in throughout the course of its history. Veterans of this war and the Iraq War have been subject to more than one deployment (ACE, 2009; Alverez, 2008: Cook & Kim, 2009). Consequently, the longevity of these wars, multiple deployments, friends lost, as well as those that remain will be just some of the factors that continue to affect veterans as they return to civilian life. Further, returning veterans will reenter a society that has both learned from

the Vietnam War and is still greatly influenced by the experience (Heller, 2006). From a higher educational perspective, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities called the Iraq and Afghanistan war era the "revival of college campus culture clashes," (2005). Outright protests were also seen on campuses across the country (Lin, 2003; Pritt, 2008; etc.). This is environment that veterans are conscious of re-entering. The personal experiences at war, as well as the social atmosphere that veterans will encounter at home combined to create a unique experience in need of further examination.

Couple the stark contrast of the experiences of current and past veteran populations with the general lack of current data on the student-veteran population, and one can see that higher education is in need of new data to draw upon when engaging the current population of veterans (ACE 2008; DiRamio, et al, 2008). What is missing is an analysis of how experience in a combat zone affects educational engagement for Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans and what colleges and universities are doing to aid them in their return to higher education. For that reason, the purpose of this research is to aid in the understanding of how veterans perceive their military experiences impacts their new roles as students and how institutional climate aids or inhibits their engagement.

#### Goals, Significance, and Importance

Research on educational engagement and attainment for previous generations of veterans is extensive. The body of literature pertaining to the lasting effect of trauma on veterans enhances our understanding of the importance of preparing for the readjustment of veterans (Egendorf, Kadushin, Laufer, Rothbart, & Sloan, 1981; Fairbanks, Langley, Jarvie, & Keane,

1981; Foy, Sipprelle, Rueger, & Carroll,1984). As history has shown, disregard for veteran populations in any setting produces not only a disenchanted group, but serves as an example of our chronic neglect of underserved populations (Egendorf, et al, 1981; Mattila, 1978; Summerfield, 1995). While institutions of higher education are not solely charged with the responsibility of helping veterans readjust to society, the industry remains uniquely positioned to provide a thorough analysis of effective engagement strategies, as well as comprehensive support structures sought by veterans. As such, the practical goals of this study include creating a more informed framework for engaging veterans in higher education. In order to do so, this research will delve deeper into how the personal combat zone experiences of veterans affect their engagement in education, and how this information can aid in the development of more effective educational programming.

Apart from the need for higher education to prepare for the incoming population of veterans, consideration of the nature of veterans' experience in higher education is an important scholarly inquiry. The understanding of how unique experiences advance or inhibit educational engagement for a specific population will enhance the bodies of literature beyond those concerning veteran-students. Ideally, this research will also apply to all underserved populations. In this way, the goals of this research are broader than the immediate programmatic applications.

Aside from the practical and intellectual implications, aiding veterans in their readjustment is an ethical obligation that influences this research as well. Too often, prevailing political opinions on the rationale behind the current American conflicts cloud our perception of the sacrifices made by the men and women who serve in our military. A great many veterans of the Vietnam War were denied gratitude for their service, collectively suffering because of it

(Horan, 1989; Summerfield, 1995). Research that attempts to understand and explain veterans' transition back to civilian life, and subsequently to education, is a necessary recognition of the sacrifice many have made for this nation.

#### **Research Questions**

The goals of this research both inform and are informed by the central research questions of this paper. These research questions are as follows:

Primary

- 1. How does experience in a combat zone in Iraq/Afghanistan affect veteran transition and engagement in higher education?
  - Secondary
- 2. How does veteran perception of institutional climate regarding the value of their experience affect how they engage in their education?

When developing answers to the research questions above, it is important to clarify a few of the key terms. First, *engagement*, which is used in both questions will refer to academic (i.e. registering for and going to class) and social (i.e. joining student groups, attending student events, etc.) participation in higher education. A *combat zone* is, "designated by an Executive Order from the President as areas in which the U.S. Armed Forces are engaging or have engaged in combat," (Military.com, 2011). Iraq and Afghanistan are currently such zones. Finally, *institutional climate* is defined in the context of this research as how the university is perceived to welcome and value the experiences of the veteran population.

#### **Research Organization**

In order to address these research questions and the problem of practice, two theoretical frameworks, critical theory and transition theory, will first be discussed in chapter two in light of how they will focus the proposed research. Critical theory seeks to highlight the value of an individual's experience as it relates to education (McClaren, 2002). The use of this theory demands an analysis of how combat can change common conceptions of educational engagement. Critical theory also shows how traditional educational models pose barriers for veterans in attaining their educational goals.

Transition theory seeks to explain why adults adapt to events differently (Schlossberg, 1995). This theory will reveal how higher education institutional mechanisms can affect the veteran transition to college and civilian life. This theory seeks breakdown the different stages of engagement in order to show how institutional programming supports educational missions of access and attainment. These theories will be used in combination, as well as individually, in order to address both of the research questions of this paper.

Following the establishment of theoretical lenses, this research will explore four bodies of veteran literature in the third chapter, the literature review. First, historical literature on federal assistance for veterans in higher education is investigated. Each generation of veterans, from World War II through the Vietnam War, changed how higher education dealt with student engagement and attainment (McBain, 2006; Teachman, 2007). Contained in this body of literature, the salient characteristics of previous generations of veterans, as well as the successes and failures of past institutional approaches, and the impact of fluctuating levels of federal aid to

veterans will aid in understanding of how higher education arrived at its current conception of this population.

Literature on the importance of the social climate during the Vietnam War and its affect on veterans returning to college will also be explored. While the war in Vietnam was arguably more politically charged (Figley, & Leventman, 1980), the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have also met significant protest (Lin, 2003). By reviewing literature that focuses on the climate that surrounded veterans' return from the Vietnam War and their participation in higher education, the institutional and cultural biases that inform our society's current perception of war and military service will be revealed. In answering the proposed research questions, it will be of continued importance to be cognizant of these historical lessons, as this population of veterans will not return to a country where the experience of Vietnam has been forgotten.

A third area of literature that is explored within the literature review is the current research on veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Research on veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars is in its infancy (DiRamio, et al, 2008; Teachman, 2007; Minnesota Association of Colleges and Universities, 2008; ACE, 2008). Literature that explores the prominent characteristics of this population will be important when considering the development of institutional programming, as well as to how or whether it is perceived to enhance or inhibit the educational experience for veterans. This body of research develops our understanding of the circumstances in which veterans enlisted, served, and left military services.

The final area of literature that will be explored will be on higher educational institutional programming for the current cohort of veterans. The secondary question focuses on programmatic literature as it relates to the evaluation of institutional climate and the measures

taken to meet the needs of veterans. Institutional programs are often designed purposefully to meet the needs of specific populations. The degree to which colleges are successful, if at all, in these efforts will be important to our understanding of the current state of veteran educational engagement.

While this literature review creates a comprehensive picture of the historical and current concepts of the veteran transition from the military to institutions of higher education, it also emphasizes that the one aspect that is continually absent in the assessment of this transition is the impact of combat zone experience on student-veterans. In chapter four, the impact of combat experience on student-veterans is investigated through the use of a qualitative-phenomenological methodology. In particular, the use of phenomenology is discussed as it most aptly addresses the identified gaps in the research, as well as how it answers the questions that frame this research. Within the examination of this inquiry design, a detailed presentation of the processes used in data collection, analysis, reliability checking, and the protection of research subjects will also be addressed.

In the fifth chapter, the findings of the data collection process are presented in order to organize the data for the reader. This section will feature the broad categories that were addressed during individual interviews and the focus group, such as pre-military background, combat experience, civilian and higher educational transitions.

The sixth chapter provides an in depth analysis of the data and discusses the implications for practice. The data analysis chapter is organized to first give the reader a broad interpretation of what veterans said and how themes from the theoretical frameworks emerged in veteran statements. Following this contextual analysis, the data will be examined in its application to

answering the primary and secondary research questions of this paper. Notions of identity, personality, and changed worldviews will be discussed as it applies to veterans' roles as college students.

The final chapter discusses the ways in which this research addresses the themes and gaps presented in the literature review, as well as programmatic implications for higher education administrators. Notably, this research re-enforce the program recommendations of previous research by DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008), as well as the American Center for Education (2008) in that it endorses the creation of a veterans' affairs specialist and a veteran specific orientation, among other recommendations. The theoretical and practical implications of a student-veterans group are also examined in light of the answer to the primary question of this research, emphasizing the principles of identity and adaptation.

Using both the conclusions drawn from the literature review, as well as the significant themes highlighted by the critical and transition theory, experience in a combat zone will be introduced as a valid paradigm in the assessment of the determinants of educational engagement. The impact of combat is often measured in physical or emotional tolls. This research concludes that perhaps there exist socio-cultural aspects to this experience and proposes that a new theory, student-veteran integration theory, is necessary to capture the essential elements necessary for higher education in understanding how veterans approach their roles as students. Ultimately, this research illustrates how experience in a combat zone has implications for the general understanding of the educational experience of veterans, the impact of higher education programs upon student-veterans, and how both are researched in the future.

**Chapter Two: Theoretical Frameworks** 

**Critical Theory** 

**Background and Principles** 

At its heart, critical theory aims to fundamentally transform society as a whole. The founding of this school of thought is often traced back to the Institute of Social Research at the Frankfurt School in 1922, where theorists initially sought to explain the inequities of the rise of capitalism (McClaren, 1998). Capitalism, they said, was characterized by relationships of power and injustice that were inherent to its evolution as political-economic system (Held, 1980; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Essentially, they believed that within capitalist systems the dominant culture so pervasively influences the rest of society's institutions that it ultimately devalues alternative lifestyles and experiences. Heavily influenced by Marxist philosophy, critical theory seeks to breakdown the power relationships within society that subjugate one part of society based on incongruence with the dominant culture (Held, 1980).

Critical theorists believe that vast contradictions exist within societies, and these contradictions originate in the interaction between society and the individual (McLaren, 1998). This concept, otherwise known as dialectical theory, calls for the analysis of relationships between actor and actions, and between society and social norms (McLaren, 1998). Through this analysis, natural contradictions and forms of oppression are seen to be based in power contexts, tradition, and repetition, and are inherent to the behavior of an unjust society (Held, 1980). By questioning the very nature of our relationships as a society, critical theory invites us to reform our most basic social institutions in order to create a more equitable society (McLaren, 1998). The use of this theory will inform how this research seeks a deeper analysis of commonly held

ideals that exist in opposition to institutional actions: our rhetoric versus our reality (Carr & Kemmis in McClaren, 1998).

Modern theorists have expanded the basic principles of critical theory to the educational context. McLaren (1998) and Friere (1970) emphasize the Marxian view that traditional schools are sites of indoctrination aimed at social reproduction. Educational institutions that resist input from students and disallow questioning of accepted societal norms are dictatorial in nature, and thus oppressive. This is the predominant picture of traditional classrooms, where education is a tool for maintaining accepted power structures and relationships that, in turn, resist true and universal educational engagement (Friere, 1970).

Conversely, McLaren (1998) and Friere (1970) also emphasize the potentially transformative nature of education. In order to realize the true benefits of education, the traditional student-teacher relationship must be changed. Friere (1970) uses the concept of "banking" in order to illustrate how traditional teachers view the student, as an empty vessel into which they deposit knowledge. Freire states that, "projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry," (Freire, 1970 in McClaren, p. 58, 1998). Critical theory demands that in order to change this relationship students need take a more active role in determining the course of their education by entering into a dialogue with the teacher and the material. As active participants in education, students will begin to see their society and world as malleable. Therefore, theirs will be lives where their current condition is not accepted as fact but questioned as a subjective circumstance only to be improved through their own actions (Freire, 1970).

Active learning requires self-actualization not only on the part of the learner but on the part of the teacher as well. Educators must engage in "mutual humanization", where the processes of teaching and learning become reciprocal (Freire, 1970). Critical theorists call upon educators to re-conceptualize their basic interactions with students and curriculum. Similar to the progressive learning pedagogy, which dictates that teachers actively guide students in the discovery of their own environments, critical pedagogy would have teachers engage in their own process of learning along side the student. In this way, the traditional transmission of knowledge from student to teacher becomes a mutual awakening and education for both (McClaren, 1998).

#### **Critical Theory and Student-Veteran Research**

The salient principles of critical theory inform how this research conceives of institutional change for veterans in higher education. The American veteran population is not new to higher education as it has been a significant population in our colleges since the close of World War II (McBain, 2008). What has changed in this population, however, is the manner in which our colleges and nation have received them. Critical theory will force this research to look more deeply at basic educational interactions and collegiate engagement of veterans. The transformation of our institutions, in this respect, will require not only the evaluation of our ability to serve veterans, but will require the empowerment of this population in the value of their experience.

#### **Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital**

The validation of a student's experience is significant to the concept of culture for critical theorists. McLaren (1998) defines culture as the ways in which a social group makes sense of

their experiences, their "conditions of life". This definition of culture, according to critical theory, calls for a deeper analysis of how relationships of power are formed. Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of cultural capital and symbolic power illustrate how a critical theorist's definition of culture is manifested in social institutions. Cultural capital is in essence the idea that certain experiences and backgrounds are inherently more valuable to society than others. This theory, based on economic theory, assumes there is an inherent value, capital, in cultural expression (LaBrie, 2010). In an educational setting, this consists of informal academic standards that elevate certain groups based class on certain attributes and conversely punishes groups that do not share dominant cultural values (Bourdieu, 1986; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Consequently, by rewarding the dominant culture, the educational system reproduces existing power structures and symbolic relationships between classes (Bourdieu, 1977, in Lamont & Lareau, 1988).

Examples of the value of certain types of cultural capital can be seen throughout our educational system. In traditional higher education, institutions all too often focus on the needs of the traditional college student at the expense of adult or other non-traditional students. In an even greater sense, it would seem that the educational system has routinely left behind minority, poor, and high-risk students as the benefits of education seems closed off to their backgrounds, experiences, and cultures (Friere, 1970). If the educational systems favors one group of students over another because of a more accepted background or cultural capital they hold, it then does all of society a disservice. Our dependence as a society on education to serve as the main tool for social mobility, compensating for the disadvantage of economic or social origin, enhances the need for continual critical reflection of these institutions (Traub, 1994).

#### **Student-Veteran Capital and System Transformation**

Veterans will enter higher education with an inherently distinctive set of experiences.

Theirs will be a background labeled "non-traditional" as they bring a vastly different perspective from their non-veteran counterparts to college classrooms and campuses. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital will aid in how this research interprets this experience in a higher educational setting. Specifically, this theory focuses our assessment of the ways in which veterans can be excluded from engagement in higher education via dominant cultural assertions.

Perhaps the most important aspect of critical theory is the transformative nature inherent in its assessments (McClaren, 2002). This research will ask questions of higher education that will aid not only in our understanding of college environments, but also will emphasize the areas in greatest need of change for veterans and underserved populations. Where do we succeed in our efforts to create access in higher education? How does higher education value the experiences of veterans and other non-traditional students? Do our traditional structures shut off meaningful educational experience for veteran students? Along with the central research questions of this paper, these questions will drive the thoughtful reconsideration of higher educational programming to meet the needs of the current veteran population, as well as to ensure that this population is not forced to conform to the norms of the traditional college-age population.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Non-traditional students have been described by various research as those that fall outside the realm of what would be considered "typical college goes". This populati0on included part-time, adult, and commuter students.

#### **Transition Theory**

Veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan go through several phases of personal, emotional, cultural, and social transitions in their return to American society (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Their experiences prior to and while in combat zones will affect how they return to the roles of their former lives. The re-conception of these personal roles (i.e. fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, sons and daughters, friends, partners, etc.) will accompany the transition into roles as students and movement into the distinct cultures within higher education. In light of this, the theoretical framework of transition theory will be utilized in order to provide structure for our understanding of how veterans interpret this experience.

Sociologists specializing in transitional theory have tended to focus on the correlation between social origin, education achievement, and social mobility in analyzing the transition to college (Deil-Amen & Lopez Turley, 2007). These sociologists often emphasize the impact of personal characteristics over systematic variables, where outcomes are measured by both academic achievement and socioeconomic status after college (Deil-Amen & Lopez Turley, 2007). The "status attainment model" utilizes factors such as parental income, previous education, college preparation, college access, financing, and social class to interpret the effects of higher education and educational contexts on students (Deil-Amen & Lopez Turley, 2007). This body of research strongly influences the analysis of how groups of students are impacted by shared characteristics or a common condition. In this way, transitional theory provides a broad structure with which we can begin to extract impactful characteristics from the military backgrounds of the current veteran population.

#### **Transitional Theory in Veteran Research**

The use of the status attainment model in research on veterans of previous wars is prevalent. Bound and Turner (2002), as well as Little and Fredland (1979) argued that World War II veterans greatly benefited from government programs, namely the GI Bill, that increased the group's access and made higher levels of educational attainment possible relative to the general non-veteran population. Card (1983), Cohen, et al (1986), and Teachman and Call (1996) found that veterans of the Vietnam War did not experience the same increase in educational attainment over their non-veteran counterparts due to the prevalence of increased forms of educational aid which in turn provided broader access for all. Teachman (2007), highlighting a variety of contextual and social factors, showed that there is a negative impact of service on educational attainment for an all-volunteer force (such as the current U.S. armed forces). While the majority of previous research on veteran populations focuses on access influences, future studies following the example of Teachman (2007) will need to consider the diverse composition of the veteran population. The volunteer context and combat experiences alone introduce a variety of factors well suited to the sociological transition theory tradition. The status attainment model provides a broad background from which we can begin to understand that impact of certain veteran characteristics on educational engagement.

#### Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory

Much like DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008), this study will be informed by a slightly different approach to transitional theory by utilizing Nancy Schlossberg's (1995) adult transition theory. Schlossberg (1995) provides a framework for understanding adults in transition and the adaptations they make during periods of transition. Origins of this theory can be found in

the education and identity theory of Chickering (1984), as well as in the status attainment model tradition through its analysis of the impact of personal characteristics on transitional outcomes.

A transition is defined as any event or non-event that results in a change in relationships, perceptions, roles, or routines (Evan, 1998; Schlossberg, 1995). Schlossberg (1995) asserts that three sets of variables interact to affect how adults differ in their adaptation to events/non-events: an individual's perception of the transition, characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environments, and characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition. Adult transition theory aids in how we understand the impact of a transitional period for an adult learner by providing constructs for the manner in which an individual makes meaning of an event.

However, if a person does not recognize or acknowledge an event, than a transition is not experienced (Schlossberg, 1995). As such, the impact of a particular event or non-event is almost solely determined by how a person recognizes the event and that person's recent personal or emotional history; what an event means to someone.

Schlossberg's (1995) theory is not only valuable because it allows us to analyze when a person is going through a period of transition, but it also helps indentify major factors that affect an individual's ability to cope. Four sets of factors are identified in adult transition theory for individuals in assessing how an event is perceived: *situation*, *self*, *support*, and *strategies* (Evans, 1998). In each of these categories, a person's "assets and liabilities" can be used to determine how a person will be impacted by a particular event, as well as their ability to cope and transition to a new phase of their lives (Evans, 1998). In other words, the impact of stress on an individual is dependent on the ratio of an individual's recent good experiences to their recent bad

experiences. This theory as used in this research highlights how experience in a combat zone can affect veteran transitions.

The role of perception is extremely important to transitional assessment. As we endeavor to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that influence veteran engagement in higher education, particularly the individual veteran's experience in a combat zone, it will be important to consider how veterans assign relevance to these factors in their changing roles and routines. This theory will inform how this research interprets the various influential institutional and personal factors that lead to a rewarding educational experience for veterans. Conversely, as veteran's report areas of stress, this theoretical lens will aid in drawing out various institutional and personal mechanisms that can be used to help veteran cope with perceived impactful transitions.

#### Schlossberg's Theory of Marginality and Mattering

Schlossberg (1989) also addresses institutional effects on individual engagement and involvement by providing definitions for what it means for an institution to make students feel as though they matter. Under this construct, mattering is not simply a feeling of acceptance or rejection, but serves as an influential motivating factor in human behavior. Schlossberg (1989) states that mattering is the latter stage of the feeling of marginality in individuals. Marginality is felt when one is not evidently accepted by the dominant culture and can be forced to withdraw (Schlossberg, 1989). The influences of Astin's (1984) involvement theory and critical theorists' concept of an inaccessible dominant culture are clear within these concepts of marginality and mattering. In turn, this theory informs how we conceive of institutional approaches to student interaction within the higher educational context.

#### Conclusion

The theoretical frameworks of this research are utilized in order to frame a highly complex phenomenon. As veterans leave the military, they will be simultaneously transitioning back into the civilian world and potentially into academic culture. This will demand a myriad of personal adjustments to be made on their part. An examination of their background experiences and the process of adjusting to higher education will require the use of both critical and transition theory. These theories also highlight how institutions address the very personal nature of this experience for veterans from a programmatic standpoint. In sum, the use of critical and transition theory allows this research to approach both internal and external perspectives of the movement into higher education for veterans in its analysis.

#### **Chapter Three: Literature Review**

#### **Literature Review Overview**

In an effort to further explore the effect of combat on veterans' educational experience, literature that defines and explores the current context in education for veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars will be investigated. This body of literature is still very much in the developmental stage. The anticipated return of veterans to higher education in greater numbers due to the enactment of the Veterans Educational Assistance Act has only just begun to materialize on college campuses (ACE, 2008). Nonetheless, early research is characterized by a diversity of approaches, themes and conclusions with regard to the salient characteristics of this population and their educational experiences.

Researchers have attempted to address veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars in both qualitative and quantitative ways. Authors that have utilized statistical approaches, by nature, have attempted to describe the characteristics of this population and the differences they feature in relation to their non-veteran, college going counterparts. Age, race, gender, educational attainment, enrollment patterns and location, as well as institutional choice are all highlighted by quantitative researchers within this body of literature (King & Selbe, 2009; Minnesota Association of Colleges and Universities, 2008; Teachman, 2007). The number of predictive and behavioral studies, at this point however, is few. Nonetheless, this body of research provides a brief glimpse into the expectations and high-risk behaviors of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans entering higher education.

This body of research also features several ethnographic studies that focus on the veteran experience in higher education. Researchers have attempted to draw out the unique experiences of veterans, both prior to and while enrolling in higher education. There are trends within this research that point to the transition period between when veterans decide to enroll and their enrollment in college as their most vulnerable point (Cook and Kim, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; 2009; Higgins, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). While conclusions differ slightly as to the role higher education can play in affecting veteran transition, this body of research is able to provide important insight in highlighting the influential characteristics of the experience (Cook and Kim, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; 2009; Higgins, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). This aspect of current veteran research provides an influential framework for the aims of this study.

Not all that has been written on veterans entering higher education has been published research in peer-reviewed journals. Anecdotal accounts of the issues veterans face in higher education, the distribution of the VEEA funds to veterans attending college, and the personal experiences of veterans are published in reputable periodicals almost daily (Alverez, 2008; Berrett, 2011; Field, 2008; Heller, 2008; Higgins, 2009; Huus, 2008; Kerr, 2008; Stripling, 2009). Articles on current veteran educational experience provide an important perspective. While statistical and ethnographic studies offer an important framework for our understanding of this population, anecdotal pieces fill in the gaps where theory is unable to go.

The body of literature on veterans in higher education, regardless of the research approach taken, is generally focused in four major areas. First, literature concerning the distinctive characteristics of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans dominates most of what has been

written. Contained within this theme, researchers have highlighted transitional issues, health and emotional concerns, demographic data, and the constitution of the current American military (ACE, 2008; DiRamio & Spries, 2009; Minnesota Association of College and Universities, 2009; Stripling, 2009; Teachman, 2007).

It is important to point out when discussing the literature's focus on characteristics of current veterans that this population is highly documented in medical journals as well due to the prevalence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Hoge, Achterlonie, and Milliken (2006), as well as Roehr (2007) propose that up to 30-35 percent of returning Iraq veterans suffer from PTSD. Clinical literature highlights the personal attributes that contribute to the likelihood of veterans experiencing PTSD (Foy, Sipprelle, Rueger, and Carroll, 1984; Friedman, 2006). While it is not the intention of this research to act as the basis for treatment of veterans suffering from PTSD, a thoughtful consideration of a highly relevant condition suffered by a sizable portion of Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of this population and their experience in higher education.

Another theme is the focus on the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the Veterans Educational Assistance Act. The authors that address the VEEA attempt to gauge the effects of the bill, what the most important features are, how it compares to past iterations of the GI Bill and government support of veterans educational endeavors, as well as how the bill is currently being administrated (Dao, 2009; Eisman, 2009; McBain, 2008; Redden, 2009; Redden, 2009a; Sennott, 2008; Simon, 2008). In attempting to understand how certain factors affect a veteran's educational engagement, one would be remiss to not acknowledge the effect government funding has on this phenomenon. Within this analysis this paper will review previous iterations of the GI Bill and the

impact it had on veterans and the entire American higher educational system. A review of literature on previous versions of the GI Bill, as well as on the VEAA, will provide important context to the discussion of greater societal issues facing current veterans' return.

By illustrating the historical relevance of previous versions of the GI Bill, this review will show how the design and impact of the GI Bill is important to how veterans perceive institutional climate. As the GI Bill impacts veteran enrollment, so too do institutional efforts to engage this population.

Literature that examines the experience of Vietnam veterans in higher education will be important to understanding the educational context for veterans. Authors of this research have attempted to highlight the social, cultural, and educational environments that Vietnam veterans received as they returned home from a highly controversial war (Figley, 1980; Horan, 1980). This population of veterans encountered multiple barriers in their transition back to civilian life, as well as into higher education (Horan, 1980). Overtime, this body of research has shown that these barriers adversely affected employment and education attainment (Teachman, 2007). Arguably, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have not been met with as much public outrage as the war in Vietnam. Nonetheless, this body of literature provides important historical analysis of how the Vietnam veteran population was treated upon their return to higher education. This literature highlights the importance of higher education institutional outreach and acknowledgement of veteran populations on their campuses. The Vietnam veteran experience remains a highly relevant lesson for administrators and researchers to draw from when considering the treatment of this and future generations of veterans.

The final theme within this body of literature addresses veteran educational

engagement from the institutional side of the equation. Beginning with the mass influx of World War II veterans as a result of the original GI Bill and continuing through the veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, college administrators have grappled with serving this population (Adams, 2000; Angrist, 1993; Bound & Turner, 2002; McBain, 2008; Olson, 1973; Redden, 2009; Rockoff, 2001; Schwartz, 1986; Serow, 2003). As veterans of each war have returned under vastly different circumstances, higher education is forced to reassess what we know and do not know in attending to veterans' needs. Research that evaluates current institutional programs, identifies barriers, and calls for the creation of new policies will be important to this research for a number of reasons. Veterans will not enter higher education in a vacuum. As such, their experiences will be influenced by national programming efforts. Knowledge of how their needs are met and how well higher education is prepared for the proposed influx of veterans will allow this research to highlight the areas where we fall short of our goals. As we propose solutions to the shortcomings faced in veteran services, the models and strategies presented provide the opportunity to review how it is theory is manifested in practice.

The themes and methods contained within this body of literature compose a rich, albeit still developing, background on the current state of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans' entry into higher education. For the purposes of this review, an analysis of the four general research areas, the GI Bill, Vietnam veterans in higher education, Iraq and Afghanistan veteran experiences, and higher education institutional approaches, will be used to draw out the prominent themes in this research. In citing the differing approaches, this review will look critically at the research of authors on veteran behavior and characteristics, and how they differ from traditional students. The experience of moving from the military to an academic and campus culture is highly unique.

This review aims to reflect the diversity in thought and method used in its description and understanding. Further, we will seek to illustrate where highly influential and effective theory has been established and where areas for further research remain.

In highlighting where gaps exist, this review will establish the place of the research contained herein with regard to the greater body on veterans in higher education. Specifically, this research will seek to show how current veteran literature emphasizes the all-consuming characteristic of being "veteran." This paper endeavors to go deeper by extracting differences and attempting to understand the impact of a particular characteristic within this population, experience in a combat zone. It is intended to use the current concepts of the veteran experience in higher education to highlight that the true impact of combat has yet to be measured in an educational context. Ultimately, using these foundational themes will show that while past and present generations of veterans have been examined in higher education, current research has neglected to delve into the specific experiences of veterans in war and how these experiences relate to educational engagement.

#### The Original GI Bill to the Post 9/11 GI Bill

In order to understand how the modern educational environment for veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars evolved, a review of previous iterations of the GI Bill is essential. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, the original GI Bill, has been the subject of several studies in varied disciplines, including economic, sociological, geological, and of course, educational (Adams; 2000; Angrist, 1993; Bound & Turner, 2002; Brubacher & Rudy, 1997; Clark, 1998; McBain, 2008; Nam, 1964; Olson, 1973) The research tends to agree that the

Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 was generally one of the most successful pieces of social legislation ever enacted. By most any measure, the impact is startling.

Originally conceived as both a reaction to the discontent of veterans that returned to a country without jobs in the wake of World War I, as well as an effort to stem a systematic unemployment problem in the years following the close of World War II, the GI Bill served a greater purpose (Olson, 1973). The bill provided several different benefits to returning soldiers, including home, farm, and business loans, vocational training/re-training, and one year of unemployment benefits (Clark, 1998). It is well known that almost no one who wrote the Servicemen's Readjustment Act cared to place the greatest emphasis on the educational portion of the bill (Clark, 1998). However, what resulted with regard to the structure and institution of higher education is undeniable.

The GI Bill is generally considered to be a high-water moment in the "massification" or democratization of higher education, making college possible for many first-generation, minorities, and low-income students (Bound & Turner, 2002; Brubacher & Rudy 1997). In what ways did the GI Bill affect access for so many? First, as the American higher educational system was unprepared for the influx of veterans to college campuses, the federal government's involvement in higher education had immediate and profound ramifications for all institutions (Olson, 1973). In an attempt to respond, higher education expanded greatly over the next four decades at a rate hitherto unseen in educational history. "Before the Civil War began in 1861, the mean rate of college founding was less than two colleges per year. Between 1861 and 1943 (the period following the enactment of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1861), the mean founding rate had risen to 18 colleges per year. After the GI Bill was enacted in 1944, the mean founding rate

rose to 32 foundings per year, with the highest annual mean occurring between 1960 and 1979," (Adams, 2000). Amongst the schools founded in response to the influx of veterans returning from World War II, junior and community colleges were perhaps the most notable in terms of the access they provided. Consequently, the supply of higher education was greatly expanded, increasing access for all.

Within the broader context, the impact of the actual educational benefits was also substantial. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 was, for all intents and purposes, comprehensive in providing for the full cost of a college education or vocational training for veterans<sup>3</sup>. For a minimum of one year and up to four years, benefits included up to \$500 in tuition and educational expenses paid to the institution per academic year, with a monthly cash allowance of \$65 (\$90 if the service man was married) (PL 78-3469, 1944). This amount was sufficient for tuition and books at the most expensive colleges at the time and the stipends were about half the opportunity cost of not working (Bound & Turner, 2002). These amounts represented one of the most significant federal programs influencing participation in higher education to date and would set a precedent future federal involvement.

The GI Bill was felt on college campuses and throughout the whole of American society. Total enrollments increased by more than 50% from the pre-war era of 1.3 million to over 2 million after World War II in 1946 (Bound & Turner, 2002). Veterans themselves also saw in increase in schooling of almost a year and a half, with post-college estimated earnings increasing 6% higher than it would have been absent these benefits (Angrist, 1993). McBain (2008) estimated that the GI Bill ultimately produced "450,000 engineers, 240,000 accountants, 238,000

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 summary taken from PL 78-3469, 1944.

teachers, 91,000 scientists, 67,000 doctors, 22,000 dentists, 17,000 writers and editors" (p.2), and thousands of other professionals. By these and various other measures, the GI Bill was a resounding success, even if it was a generally unplanned consequence.

The success of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act spawned two direct revisions for the subsequent wars in Korea and Vietnam. The Veterans Readjustment Acts of 1952 and 1965 differed in many ways from the original GI Bill, perhaps most significantly in the reduction of educational benefits (Bound & Turner, 2002; Rockoff, 2001). There are a variety of interpretations as to why veterans' benefits were reduced. Serow (2003) summarizes many of the perceptions, stating that worthiness of the conflicts (World War II being a considered a more "superior" conflict than those in Vietnam and Korea), the sizes of the wars, and wide ranging institutional abuses by colleges raising tuition and fees to take advantage of the full educational voucher, all factored in the changes of benefits (Serow, 2003).

The length that these benefits were available to veterans was reduced from 48 months from the time of enrollment to 36 months with the enactment of the 1952 GI Bill. Further, whereas in the 1944 version of the bill educational tuition benefits were paid in the form of a \$500 voucher directly to the institution, the 1952 iteration changed this practice paying educational benefits directly to the veteran. Veterans received \$110 per month from which they were to pay tuition, books, fees, and living expenses. At the time the bill was signed into law in 1952, the stipend provided sufficient for moderate living expenses (Serow, 2003). This stipend was adjusted with the subsequent revision of the bill in 1966, as well as extended to veterans serving in peacetime (Serow, 2003).

The use of this monthly total and the rate at which it was paid would have ramifications for future generations of veterans' institutional and degree choices (Bound & Turner, 2002; Serow, 2003). Specifically in the case of Vietnam veterans, the stipend failed to keep pace with inflation (Serow, 2003). As such, the return rate of Vietnam and Korean veterans differed with Vietnam veterans being half as likely to attend college than Korean veterans (3.4% versus 7%) (Schwartz, 1986).

The fourth and fifth versions of the GI Bill represented an even further departure from the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. The Veterans Educational Assistance Program (VEAP) of 1977 and the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) of 1987 were designed primarily for the recruitment of an all-volunteer force (Serow, 2003). These bills required participants to contribute monthly in exchange for the utilization of educational benefits. For the Montgomery GI Bill, service members were to pay \$100 a month up to a total of \$1200 (Serow, 2003). The full time MGIB benefit rates for the 2008-2009 academic year were \$1,321 per month, providing to a veteran approximately \$11,889 per academic year, totaling 45% of a four-year public college and 34% of private four-year college tuition (College Board, 2009). Service member enrollment in the MGIB program routinely exceeds 90% (Serow, 2003). The usage, however, has historically been much lower. In 1999, a federal commission estimated that, due to the low monthly payout, only half of all eligible veterans used any of their MGIB benefits (US House Committee on Veteran Affairs, 2000 in Serow, 2003).

When discussing the historical context for all GI Bills, it is important to highlight how these bills differ and the impact of their differences. For the VEAP and MGIB, the most impactful factors in this equation are the skyrocketing costs of college tuition over three decades

coupled with the relative decrease in the value of veterans' educational benefits. For example, between 1985 and 1999, tuition for a four-year public college rose 65% and 66% for a private four-year college, while the MGIB benefits grew only 16.2% (Bound and Turner, 2002).

Subsequent military actions by the US military in Korean and Vietnam have been met with less support than World War II. As public support for these wars waned, so too did the benefits offered to the veterans of these wars (perhaps to the greatest extent for Vietnam veterans). Has the public's notion of worthiness and sacrifice impacted how we measure the debt owed to US servicemen (Serow, 2003)? Even when considering that versions of the GI Bill that came after the 1965 version were designed for an all-volunteer force, this is an important question to ask when measuring the relative levels of benefits offered to veterans of later wars.

The Veteran's Educational Assistance Act (VEAA)<sup>4</sup>, enacted on August 1, 2009, greatly increased the amount of educational benefits awarded to eligible veterans (McBain, 2008; Redden, 2009). The act created a new veteran educational benefits program for soldiers on active duty on or after September 11, 2001 and for thos who had served at least 90 days of continuous active duty or at least 30 days and were discharged with a service related disability. Veterans who meet eligibility requirements are entitled to 100 percent of the tuition at a degree granting public two- or four-year institution. Veterans who choose to attend private institutions can receive tuition and fees that cover up to \$17,500. This is a nationwide cap. Housing and living stipends are also provided by the bill and are dependent upon the state's cost of living. This

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Benefits from the Veterans' Educational Assistance Act are taken from a summary provided by Simon, C. in the New York Times.

stipend contains an additional \$1,000 a year for books and supplies. These benefits are offered for a length of 36 months.

Even though the impact of this particular bill has yet to be measured, literature on the subject has attempted to analyze its strengths and weaknesses (Dao, 2009; Eisman, 2009; McBain, 2008; Redden, 2009a, 2009b; Sennott, 2008; Simon, 2008). While authors such as Dao (2009) and Sennot, (2008) have written about the administrative shortcoming of the bill, citing delays in tuition payments and short payments to universities, certain other features have come to the fore. Firstly, the VEAA allows veterans to apply the cost of an in-state public institution to the cost of a more expensive private school. If a veteran is to do this, the Yellow Ribbon program, which is administered by Veterans Administration, will match the contribution of the private university up to half of the difference in tuition costs (Redden, 2009). Similar to the level of benefits offered to World War II veterans, this effort represents a significant upgrade in veterans' educational benefits.

Contrary to the efforts inherent to the Yellow Ribbon program, current literature highlights another aspect of the VEAA that has been more controversial. According to the VA, in 2008 the top 10 colleges chosen by GI Bill recipients were the University of Phoenix (online), American InterContinental and American Public Universities (online), University of Maryland, Central Texas College, Colorado Technical, Kaplan (online), Strayer (online), Grantham University (online), and Florida Community College (Redden, 2009). Under the VEAA,

veterans taking courses online are entitled only to a living stipend of \$673.50<sup>5</sup>. Even though the VEAA goes further than many of its predecessors in providing educational benefits, this limitation is noteworthy if only for the fact that it may prove influential to veteran institutional choice.

A review of veteran educational benefits from the first GI Bill in 1944 to the present has shown a variation in federal contribution to veteran education over the course of the past 65 years. A myriad of factors outside of the benefits themselves have contributed to the steady decline in veteran participation in these programs, including increased federal aid for the general population, skyrocketing tuition, the differing demographic of enlisting and drafted soldiers, along with many others. While a thorough analysis on the impact of the VEAA has yet to be completed, a review of the history of the different iterations of the GI Bill has provided context for the possible ramifications of the increased benefits provided by the VEAA.

#### The Vietnam Veteran Experience in Higher Education

As important as understanding the impact of federal assistance on veterans entering college is the understanding of how different generations of veterans adjusted to this experience. To this end, literature that addresses Vietnam veterans provides insight into the factors have impacted the educational experience of previous populations of veterans.

Experience in a combat zone is a sacrifice that is shared by few and serves to separate veteran populations from the general public. Over the course of successive US conflicts since

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The original version of the VEAA did not include a housing stipend for fully online veterans. The 2011 changes also adjust the level of housing stipend based on the amount of credits a student-veteran is enrolled for.

World War II separation has also occurred in how we categorize the veteran population itself, emphasizing differences between groups that have fought in each conflict. For example, World War II veterans sacrificed greatly for the general fate of their country and the whole world. A far greater percentage of these veterans died during service to their country than did veterans of the Korean or Vietnam War (Serow, 2003). Often referred to as "The Good War", World War II was an unquestioned and necessary conflict for American military forces (Serow, 2003).

Veterans of the Vietnam War, however, were perceived in a very different light. Figley (1980) and Patterson (1982) highlighted the negative public opinion that Vietnam veterans met on their return. This perception was seen by many to be propagated by biased media coverage and interpretation of the war (Figley, 1980). Veterans were received by chants of "baby killer", as they were now members of a "discredited status group...viewed as a dupe of American imperialism by the left and as a loser by those on the political right," (Horan, 1990, p. 4). These feelings permeated many societal institutions to a significant extent. Kelter, Doggett, & Johnson (1983) wrote that professionals in mental health, social work, and educational sectors, the very people veterans turned to for help upon their return home, often voiced their opinions against the war and the alleged behavior of all American veterans that fought in it.

The Vietnam veteran's experience in higher education, with regard to these negative experiences, is perhaps best illustrated when viewed in contrast to the experience of World War II veterans. As stated, when World War II veterans entered higher education they nearly doubled the current population as a whole (Bound & Turner, 2002). Veterans tended to find larger populations with which they could identify. As such, Veterans of World War II were inclined to

experience much easier transitions than those of future wars- most specifically, the Vietnam War.

Veterans of the Vietnam War, in contrast, comprised a much smaller number and percentage of the population (10%) in higher education (Horan, 1989). Their relative lack of presence on college campuses, coupled with the feeling that public opinion was against them led many Vietnam veterans to feel as though they were misfits, leading them to generally keep a low profile (Figley, 1980). Their lack of presence as a minority group on campus was matched by their invisibility to administrators and institutions. They were not provided the same campus resources as other underrepresented groups, nor were they viewed as a campus resource themselves (Horan, 1983).

Numerous researchers have also sighted the shortcomings in Vietnam veteran education attainment compared to their non-veteran counterparts, as well as some of the social readjustment problems that they encountered. Egendorf, Kadushin, Laufer, Rothbart, & Sloan, (1981), Teachman (2007), along with Card (1983) show that nonveterans of the same generation have generally higher educational attainment levels than Vietnam veterans. This, in turn, created a disparity between employment rates, occupational differences, and income levels (Egendorf, et al, 1981). The former can be seen as a direct result of the latter.

The economic and education pieces of the experience in higher education can be seen by researchers to be almost inseparable from the psychological aspects of readjustment for Vietnam veterans (Egendorf, et al, 1981; Horan, 1989). While many Vietnam veterans that returned home were able to adjust to life after war, thousands of others suffered the after effects of war that made them the poster-children of the experience (Horan, 1989). One study illustrates how the

psychological aspects of the Vietnam veteran experience played out in higher education. Michael Horan (1989) conducted research on an informal group of Vietnam veterans on the Florida State University main campus in Tallahassee. These veterans had self-organized in a small group to "share the camaraderie of their military and college experiences," (Horan, 1989, p. 21). This group of veterans experienced the same feelings of isolation as earlier Vietnam veterans<sup>6</sup>, Horan (1989) noted, where they felt they could not engage with the greater community as they had been cast as outsiders from their arrival. While this particular group of veterans studied by Horan (1989) was not found to have continually suffered the worst effect of their experience at war (i.e. post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)), it was their experience in combat that led them to be separated from the rest of the campus community in the first place.

Their creation of a separate subculture within the greater student body is a highly important phenomenon with respect the current population of veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. While the Horan (1989) study is not the sum of the Vietnam veteran experience in higher education, it is indicative of the separatist nature of this group of students in the educational context. This study highlights a group of veterans who have been marginalized by their experience and the culture they have re-entered. The institutions they depended on to support their re-adjustment to society provided no shelter from the negative images and opinions that surrounded the highly controversial war. The experience in higher education that is underscored by Horan (1989) shows not only the manifestation of a variety of factors that go into

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The study was conducted in 1989, a considerable delay for veterans of the Vietnam War to be attending college.

how veterans readjust to civilian society, but how neglectful institutional policy can truly impact the experience of this population of students.

While the social context of the Vietnam War was much different than that of the Afghanistan or Iraq Wars, this body of literature highlights why it is important for higher education to acknowledge the special circumstances and needs of veteran populations. Horan's (1989) uncovering of a self-contained veteran subculture is indicative of the behavior higher education encounters from other minority or underserved groups. Horan's (1989) research serves as further historical justification for the call for veteran outreach and directed services.

#### **Institutional Programming Approaches to the Current Student-Veteran Population**

Veteran services require innovative approaches for a highly unique population. The American Council on Education (2008) convened a group of administrators, faculty, researchers, and veterans in order to explore the important issues when preparing for the return of veterans to campuses. What was produced was a variety of broad institutional recommendations in order to make campuses more "veteran friendly". In addition to the basic recommendations, which included having a point of contact for veterans, creating a space for veterans to gather, and having specific orientation services for this population, the ACE also recommended that administrators and faculty go back to their institutions and do a thorough self-assessment of how their current services meet the benchmarks established by their recommendations (2008).

Less than one year later, ACE (2009) produced a report surveying the programs, services and policies that national colleges and universities offer to veterans on their campuses. Some of the key findings of the survey showed that there was a general increase in the services offered by

colleges for veterans since 9/11, but that public colleges offer the most extensive and majority of these services, with private institutions lagging behind (ACE, 2009). The level and availability of services also seems to depend on the size of the veteran population at the institution, with the critical mass being quite low at 1-3% of the total student population (ACE, 2009). Ultimately, the survey provides a detailed reference point for administrators in assessing their own institutions, as well as in the development of more targeted programs for returning veterans.

Current literature on veterans' services in higher education also provides a more in depth look into the individual programs being offered, as well as theory to be used in development of future programs. Kerr (2008) and Kandaroo (2008) detail efforts on campuses that ensure the success of returning veterans by setting up scholarships, support networks, and outreach programs. One key theme that seems to be present within this literature is the need to provide directed access to information for veterans in helping them navigate both federal and institutional bureaucracies (Kerr 2008; Kandaroo, 2008). While access to information would be helpful for most all within higher education, it seems particularly relevant for veterans considering much of their funding resources are federal.

DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008), DiRamio and Spires (2009), and Rumann and Hamrick (2009), show research that indicates veteran services are most needed and successful when they are aggressive in pursuing veterans. These authors most frequently highlight transitional coaches, as well as veteran mentoring programs that guide students during their transitions as successful approaches. Additionally, administrators are called on to enlist the help of external partners and faculty members in addressing the needs of student-veterans (DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). These efforts resemble many of those utilized for

high-risk students. While Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have not been specifically identified as "high-risk" in the academic sense or in their persistence patterns, these authors recognize the distinctive characteristics of this population and the need for specialized services. A more in depth review of current conceptions of their behavior and experiences will reveal that this need is well grounded.

## The Veteran Demographic

Preparation for a rise in veteran enrollments will require not only referencing programs of the past, but the reformation and development of programs that are more specifically applicable to the characteristics of this population. To this end, researchers have attempted to begin to develop picture of what the population of Iraq and Afghanistan student-veterans will look like. The American Council on Education (2008) and others (Minnesota Association of Colleges and Universities, 2009; Terry, 2011) have compiled research, as well as anecdotal evidence, in an effort to comprise a comprehensive profile for this population.

What are the prominent characteristics of this population? With regard to their combat experiences, veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars have seen considerable violence: 86% received artillery fire, 93% were shot at with small arms, 77% fired at the enemy, 95% saw dead bodies or remains, 89% were attacked or ambushed, 86% know a soldier that was killed or injured, and 65% saw a dead or injured American (Terry, 2011). While combat experience estimates may vary by study, it is clear that the levels of violence witnessed and experience by veterans of these wars is considerable.

While there are different approaches to understanding how veterans return to higher education, the American Council on Education (2008) initiated the call for the re-examination of

veteran services throughout higher education. In a summary report entitled "Military Service Members and Veterans in Higher Education", ACE authors compared the post-9/11 veteran population to the veteran population as a whole, as well as non-veteran traditional undergraduates and non-traditional undergraduates (2008). According to the findings, post-9/11 veterans were more likely to be older than traditional undergraduates, bearing greater similarities to non-traditional student populations, particularly adult learners (defined as 24 and older) (ACE, 2008). Regarding ethnicity and gender, post-9/11 veterans and military undergraduates are also more likely to be African American and female than their traditional counterparts, and more likely to be non-white than veterans in general. As these factors stand out among various others highlighted, the ACE provides an important starting point for what the post 9/11 veteran-student population will look like as a whole.

All-Volunteer Force- Important to the discussion of the characteristics of the post-9/11 veteran population is the fact that they are members of an all-volunteer force (Teachman, 2007). Teachman (2007) discusses the relationship between the characteristics of an all-volunteer force (AVF) and the effects of prominent characteristics on their prospective educational attainment. Teachman's (2007) study contrasts previous groups of veterans from World War II and the Vietnam War with the current AVF and nonveterans, discussing the significance of military service in a person's life by stating, "(m)ilitary service (sic) provides a unique set of resources, such as removal from negative environments and the GI Bill, which may alter the educational trajectories of veterans," (Teachman, 2007, p. 306). The circumstances in which many enlisted in the military or were conscripted during WWII or Vietnam differ greatly from those that affect our current military veterans. Several studies have reported that socioeconomic factors, as well

as educational aspirations, weigh heavily in the decision to enlist in the military (Kleykamp, 2006; Teachman, 2007). Teachman (2007) goes a step further in highlighting the influence of pre-educational attainment, age, and economic status of veterans prior to their enlistment as influential in final educational attainment. Coupled with the rise in basic educational expectations, the current climate creates drastically different expectations for current veterans than those of previous generations and is an indication of why more research is needed on this population following their experience in war zones.

In order to provide more detail about the current population of veterans, the Minnesota Association of Colleges and Universities (MAUC) (2009) conducted a study of Minnesota veteran student experiences and behaviors in order to provide an in depth glimpse into factors that separate veterans from traditional students. While generally the behaviors of this veteran population were found to be similar to those of non-veterans, two factors stood out in this research. Predictably, supporting the findings prevalent in clinical literature, this report highlights the significance of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among the post-9/11 veteran population. While estimates have varied for the general population of veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars between 15 and 30%, the MAUC study stated that 14.1 percent of females have been diagnosed with the condition, compared with 5.4 percent of the overall population (DiRamio & Spries, 2009; Minnesota Association of College and Universities, 2009; Stripling, 2009). The male veterans-students, conversely, had a lower PTSD rate of 9.1%, while still exceeding the general male population rate of 6.3% (Minnesota Association of College and Universities, 2009; Stripling, 2009).

Perhaps the most alarming statistic uncovered by the MAUC study was the rate of female veterans who claimed to have been sexually assaulted in their lifetime. According to the study, 43.5% of female veterans reported having been sexually assaulted, which is nearly 14 percentage points higher than the general female population (Minnesota Association of College and Universities, 2009; Stripling, 2009). It may not seem reasonable for the entire veteran population to be treated for the specific experiences of a minority of veterans. However, the extent to which administrators can recognize the experiences of the few as an increased risk factor may go a long way in their effort to meet the needs of the overall population.

This research holds that service in a combat zone is one such experience that ought to be accounted for in this manner. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have drastically increased the number of veterans, relative to the overall population of veterans, with experience in combat zones (Cook & Kim, 2009). Because many share the experience of service in combat zones, it should not be disregarded as an invalid or non-influential experience in and of itself. While it is important to recognize the greater contextual characteristics of the veteran population, this experience in combat zones will be important to understanding how veterans engage in higher education and how effectively colleges and universities can endeavor to connect with them.

# An Ethnographic View of the Veterans in Higher Education

Beyond why it is important that we know whom the veteran-student population is we must endeavor to know what impacts their experience in higher education. In order to build groundwork for how colleges can move forward in understanding the veteran-student experience, several authors have conducted research that focuses on veteran perceptions of what factors are

most important in their experience in college (ACE, 2008, 2010; DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell, 2008). The American Council on Education (2008) issued a brief entitled, "Serving Those Who Serve: Higher Education and America's Veterans," that illuminates some of the current characteristics of Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans, their concerns, as well as the concerns of college administrators. The author's conducted focus groups of veterans to explore the factors that can positively affect veteran participation in higher education (American Council on Education, 2008). Among their findings, access to information, benefit processing, and academic credit for military training were among the greatest concerns for veterans. This study was limited in its analysis of veteran responses and sought only to present a summary of concerns that were expressed. While the themes that are drawn from the ACE (2008) study are important for all institutions, research that goes deeper in exploring how veterans interpret their experiences will provide a greater contextual understanding of the college experience for this population. Nonetheless, even though the report lacks specific data on veteran profiles, it does highlight institutional responsibilities for recruiting veterans to campus and keeping them there. The basic tenants of the report create a framework of issues administrators and veterans see as important in successfully completing the transition into higher education, providing an important basis for moving forward on serving this specific group of veterans.

The ACE (2010) convened again in early May, 2010 to update the lexicon of current issues in the student-veteran community. The publication, entitled "Veteran Success Jam: Ensuring Success for Returning Veterans" (2010), sited several key areas exposed by early student-veteran programming approaches. Familiar issues such as the evaluation of transfer

credit, increased involvement by university stakeholders in veterans issues, and a single point of contact were all reaffirmed as essential aspects to a strong veteran program.

The ACE (2010) also directly addressed the delivery of benefits to veteran students.

Often the payments processed and received from the VA are thought of only in the federal or external context. The report contends that there is more that can be done on the institutional side to aid veterans in receiving their payments on time, as well as in partnering with local VA representatives to improve communication channels. These conclusions are important to the idea that institutions can do more to assist veterans who have had their payments or stipends delayed.

One recommendation that is of particular note is the use of veterans in key veteran services roles, such as the sole point of contact or in health services. The ACE (2010) brief stated, "(n)othing is more powerful than one veteran telling another that they may need to seek help,". This aspect of the report is important as it separates itself from the common notion of a peer mentor group. Having veterans employed in roles of service is an uncommon and welcomed notion in student-veteran research and services. This recommendation along with the others provide a deeper analysis of the needs of veterans in higher education. It is important that veterans were again drawn into this conversation to provide their own perspective on the continued changes that need to be made by colleges to effectively plan for this population.

DiRamio, Ackerman and Mitchell (2008) utilize veteran interviews in order to focus on the major events in the college-going experience, providing an outline for the transitions experienced by veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The authors' use of Schlossberg's (1995) transition model in identifying factors that influence how individuals cope with transition is effective in demonstrating where higher education programming can succeed in improving the

veteran-student experience. DiRamio, et al (2008) utilize Schlossberg (1995) to suggest that moving from the military to college is a stage-by-stage process in which student-veterans work through the experience. This framework suggests that there are several opportunities where higher education can be influential in getting veterans in and through college. Schlossberg's (1995) theory provides a comprehensive framework that has aptly supported the study by DiRamio, et at (2008). However, this theory is capable of providing greater depth in understanding how traumatic experiences can affect how a person makes meaning of significant events. While DiRamio (et al) (2008) have utilized the "stage" emphasis of adult transition theory (i.e. moving in, moving through, and moving out), this study is designed to examine that while the transitions themselves are important, it is specific experiences in combat zones that can affect how veterans process these transitions. Nonetheless, the influence of this theory and the DiRamio, et al (2008) study are important in supporting the conclusions of the research contained herein.

DiRamio (et al) (2008) utilize veteran student interviews to highlight the most vulnerable points in a veteran's transition out of the military, back to civilian life, and into higher education. According to the study, the college transition is the most difficult for veterans to make when returning from service. In contrast to entering the military, where the transition entails "letting go of one's self", the transition into college requires the reacquisition of several basic skills that have not been utilized for a prolonged period of time (DiRamio, 2008). Further, the level of maturity and importance of task that they have undertaken while serving in combat zone dwarfs that of the responsibilities of a traditional college student. Veterans then find themselves having difficulty identifying with their new environment (DiRamio, 2008).

In reflecting on these experiences, veterans openly termed campuses that not only received them, but also actively took part in their transitions in as "veteran-friendly campuses," (DiRamio, et al, 2008). In light of this, DiRamio, et al (2008) provide practical recommendations, specifically the creation of an institutional "veteran-transition coach", for institutions willing to reach out and serve the student-veteran population. Ultimately, the responsibility of assisting veterans in meeting their educational goals falls on all parts of an institution.

By providing a critical analysis of veteran transitions, DiRamio (et al) (2008) are able to deconstruct the experiences and highlight where higher education could be more successful in helping these students make their transitions smoother. While valuable and highly influential to the research of this paper, the authors provide several avenues for deeper exploration, namely the analysis of the impact of experience in a combat zone on veteran educational engagement. By including analyses of how a specific experience is perceived to affect these transitions, this research further the conclusions presented by DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell (2008).

DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) have clearly gone further than any current research in applying a theoretical construct in an attempt to understand the Iraq and Afghanistan student-veteran experience. Nonetheless, other sources within the body of current literature provide descriptions of different aspects of veterans entering, matriculating, and withdrawing from college.

A variety of factors are seen to affect the veteran experience as they return to college. Perhaps the most obvious of these factors is the age of veterans in relation to the age of traditional college-going students (ACE, 2008). As the vast majority of veterans will return to

school in their mid- to late-twenties, they will fall under the traditional profile of adult learners (Bauman, 2009). Many will return after a prolonged absence from education, having since left a career commitment (military). They will also come with greater personal responsibilities and commitments than "traditional" college-age students (Bauman, 2009). Many are considered "adults" not only due to their age, but the fact that they fully financially support themselves and a family.

The costs of education, both in real and theoretical terms, are considerable. Real costs of education include tuition, books and living expenses. While many of these costs may be covered under government assistance programs (the Montgomery GI Bill or the Veterans Educational Assistance Act) the coverage varies greatly depending on the veteran's choice of school, location, and length of study. The theoretical costs endured by veterans mainly involve those of lost income. Every hour spent in class for a veteran student is an hour not spent earning. With these costs weighing heavily on the minds of returning veterans, full engagement in higher education may appear difficult to achieve (Bauman, 2009).

How adults experience transition is important to our understanding of how veterans experience the transition from military to civilian life. Articles on the veteran transition include adult transition theory elements which regard the re-entry into education as a critical step, often motivated by a change in the person's life (Kasworm. 2003). The reason, whatever it may be, adults and student-veterans return to higher education serves not only as their primary motivating factor, but also impacts how they adjust to college culture (Alverez, 2009; Bauman, 2009; Heller, 2006; Higgins, 2009).

"Have you ever killed anyone?"-One aspect that is consistently visited in current literature is the personal culture clash between veterans and their new environment in higher education. In a nutshell, military life is drastically different than the one encountered in higher education. Veterans are leaving a life of structure and discipline framed by strict adherence to instruction and routine, whereas the college experience demands that one questions and critically examines their own environment (Balkoski, 2009; Heller, 2006). This cultural clash not only occurs personally, but also takes place in interactions on campus. "Have you ever killed anyone?" is all too often heard on campuses across the nation by veterans (Heller, 2006; Higgins, 2009).

It is not only the misinformation regarding the experience of war that separates veterans from their traditional college going peers, but prioritization and personal responsibilities distinguish these populations as well (Alverez, 2009). A common reaction by veterans to these types interactions with fellow students, faculty, or administrators can be to withdraw from the greater population. Often their withdrawal results in their effort to gather with the only people that truly understand the veteran experience in war- other veterans (Heller, 2006; Higgins, 2009). This body of literature highlights instances where veterans have sought to remain anonymous in class, only to be exposed and made a spokesman for all other veterans on specific viewpoints (DiRamio et al, 2008; Rumann & Hamrich, 2009).

Clashes with the dominant culture in higher education do not comprise the whole of the veteran-student experience. Current literature also highlights positive experiences that are often the result of relationships with understanding and supportive campus personnel (DiRamio, et al, 2008; Heller, 2006). In light of this, supportive campus personnel represent the face of campus

culture for veteran-students. As DiRamio (et al) (2008) highlighted the importance of transitional services, campus personnel are seen to be able to positively affect the veteran perception of campus culture and consequently their ultimate educational engagement (Balkoski, 2009; Bauman, 2009; DiRamio et al, 2008). "Institutional heroism" by an individual stands to profoundly impact how the greater campus culture is viewed (Bauman, 2009).

Current literature goes on to discuss how other internal realities change veterans and are manifested in their experiences in higher education. As cited above, Bauman (2009) and Higgins (2009) highlight some of the similarities that exist between adult learners and the veteran student population. One aspect of the Kasworm (2003) theory used by these authors sites that adult students return to education with a renewed sense of purpose. While there is very little direct theory applied to this perspective within current veteran literature, some authors do approach the idea that veterans can exhibit renewed purpose in education (Balkoski, 2009; Bauman, 2009; DiRamio et al, 2008; Heller, 2006). Whether it is the incorporation of military discipline into their daily lives, the focus on "the important things" when one returns from life in a combat zone, or other personal motivating factors, groups of veterans can often show a greater motivation to commit to and succeed in higher education (Alverez, 2008; Bauman, 2009).

Conversely, there are elements of the veteran population that often find the experience of war difficult to overcome. Current research states that, perhaps most obviously, the inability to focus, paranoia, and other emotional preoccupations can be the result of PTSD (Alverez, 2008; Bauman, 2009; DiRamio et al, 2008). With the advance of battlefield medical technology many more wounded soldiers are returning home, with a greater percentage of these showing symptoms of PTSD (Hoge, Achterlonie, and Milliken, 2006; DiRamio, et al, 2009; Roehr, 2007).

The existence of PTSD amongst this population is not seen as prohibitive to their ultimate success in higher education as their sense of purpose and drive remains an asset (Alverez, 2008; Heller, 2006). Nonetheless, mental health issues remain a concern for this population (Bauman, 2009). It should be noted that while many of the topics contained within this body of literature are not in the scope of this research, it is nonetheless important to highlight.

Balkoski (2009), Bauman (2009), and Heller, (2006) all refer to veterans' renewed focus for education and responsibility. However, the topic of renewed focus for this population is rarely addressed. These researchers have treated the subject as an independent phenomenon, rather than providing a more thorough analysis of the causes and effects of this changed perspective.

#### **Literature Review Conclusion**

Veterans of military service in combat zones are profoundly affected by their experience. While the literature examined herein speaks of this change as an aspect of understanding how veterans experience the transition to higher education, there was a need for deeper analysis, specifically as it relates to educational engagement. DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) have written extensively on the important moments in veteran transitions moving from combat and military service to civilian life and higher education. While their work gives mention to the stress imposed by service in a combat zone, as well as the stark contrast between military and civilian life, their analysis does not specifically address the ramifications of such experiences. Two quotes from their veteran interviews highlight the possibilities for more extensive research in this area:

"I think it (combat) helped me out a lot and it has given me a lot of self-discipline, establishing goals, time management, and everything. There are so many things you can get from the military to help you out as a college student." (DiRamio, et al, 2008, p. 8)

"You are going to come back changed. It's not necessarily good or bad, but you will fundamentally be a different person." (DiRamio, et al, 2008, p. 8)

Military life is often described as one of constant procedure, routine, and instruction (Alverez, 2008). These values are indoctrinated during recruit training, or boot camp, and are designed to "fundamentally change" a civilian into military personnel. These changes, however, are not the sole consideration with the current population of veterans returning to higher education. Experience in a combat zone brings with it a whole host of additional considerations. Aside from the damaging effects, both physical and emotional, experience in a combat zone demands that service members assume enormous amounts of responsibility for themselves and for the lives of others. The personal growth that accompanies this experience is almost immediate (DiRamio, 2008).

To leave the impact of experience in a combat zone for veteran-students at their "renewed focus" or lack there of would be a mistake. In doing so, we would be overlooking the impact of the drastic change in roles for veterans. To illustrate the point, imagine one day you are on patrol in Mosul or Kabul, responsible for the lives of the other soldiers in your platoon. This is not the first such experience, but perhaps the most important in your life up to this point. Flash forward then to a typical college lecture hall, where one's greatest responsibility is to listen well and take good notes. How veterans are impacted by the contrast between their roles as soldiers and as students is an important aspect of how they approach higher education. Ultimately, the

experience as a soldier in a combat zone affects how they will make meaning of their future educational experience. It is the contention of this research that understanding this aspect of the veteran student experience will allow us to further measure toll of combat on our soldiers.

While these two examples are perhaps extreme, the question still remains; how do veterans perceive this change in roles from soldier to student impacts their educational engagement? While transitional perspectives remain highly relevant for higher education to understand in the student-veteran experience, our knowledge of the impact of "in country" experiences can only stand to further how well we serve this population. As the impact of combat can be measured in various ways, it is important for the prevalence of this experience to be considered in the discussion of the transition back to civilian life. Combat and combat zone experience is something that a great many of the veterans that enter higher education are dealing with and will remain a prominent feature in their experience. As has been shown by this review, a gap exists in the current body of literature where researchers may conduct an examination of how combat affects veteran-student engagement.

How veterans perceive their own personal changes as a result of their experience in a combat zone is a deep and perhaps unending area of inquiry. As veterans return to higher education, it will be important for administrators to ask these questions as the answers will provide the groundwork for effective programming in engaging this population. Understanding their motivations and apprehensions will aid in the construction of a welcoming environment. These specific questions regarding how combat is seen to affect veterans will be important in designing purposeful initiatives to meet their needs.

### **Chapter Four: Methodology**

### **Purpose and Approach**

The problem of practice addressed by this research looks to create a more informed approach to serving veterans as they enter higher education. In order to accomplish this, higher education must attempt to further understand how they view their experience. This research investigated the effect of a veteran's experience in a combat zone on their engagement in higher education through the primary research question; How does experience in a combat zone in Iraq/Afghanistan affect veteran transition and engagement in higher education? The secondary question of this research sought to understand how veterans view institutional climate further impacting how they approach education, their roles as students, and their identities as veterans; How does veteran perception of institutional climate regarding the value of their experience effect how they engage in their education? In asking and answering these questions, a few terms need first be clarified so that they can be understood in this context. A combat zone is defined in the context of this research, as well as by the US government as, "any area the President of the United States designates by Executive Order as an area where the United States Armed Forces are engaging or have engaged in combat," (Military.com, 2011). Veterans are those who have formerly served in the US Armed Forces<sup>7</sup>. Engagement is defined as involvement in curricular matters, as well as socially on college campuses (i.e. clubs, sports, events, etc.). As this research is not looking to quantify engagement, specific measures of how much times in class or on

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> As noted, this research has only considered veterans of combat zone experience from the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. In the most basic sense, veterans need not serve in combat in order to be considered "veterans" of military service.

campus veterans spend has not been explored. Traditional measures considered by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and others serve as the benchmark for this research.

In order to fully understand this phenomenon, a qualitative research design was utilized to allow for the veteran perspective to serve as the basis for an analysis of their higher education experience. A qualitative design best accounts for the depth of an individual's circumstance, as well as the individual's context with regard to a highly complex experience. It is unknown to this author as to the existence of research that attempts to fully quantify what experience in a combat zone means to veterans; one could safely speculate that it does not exist. As this research attempts to more fully understand how experience in a combat zone is manifested on college campuses, it would seem that only a qualitative design could incorporate the required individual veteran perspectives.

#### Phenomenological Approach

A phenomenological approach provides the greatest utility in reaching a comprehensive understanding of a combat veteran's educational experience. Davis (1995) wrote that, "phenomenology is an attempt to understand and describe phenomena exactly as they appear in an individual consciousness, to get at the interrelationship between life and the world, and to understand how phenomena interact with the way humans actually live in the world." (p. 7) This research provides a broad platform for this basic idea. Be it in combat, returning to civilian life or entering higher education, the personal experiences of veterans in these settings are best illustrated by the veterans themselves. Veteran interpretation of the significance of these

different events, as well as how the events interact, provides the most informed framework for higher education's understanding of this population and their educational reality.

Inspired greatly by the "interpretive phenomenological analysis" framework presented by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) this methodological design seeks a "detailed examination of a lived experience" (p. 47). Phenomenology, "aims to conduct an examination in a way which as far as possible enables an experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems," (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009, p.32). In order to achieve this, veterans were asked to describe various phases of their experiences in the military and as they moved into higher education. Inasmuch as theoretical frameworks have been utilized to highlight specific themes, the words of the veterans themselves and how they describe their experiences are where the bulk of meaning for this research will be drawn from. It is important to note that the coding structure and design of this research inherently involve the researcher's understanding of the effect of combat on the veteran experience in higher education. It is a description of a perception. While the veteran perspective retains its primacy in the body of this research, the data has been categorized and identified through the eyes of the researcher and based on the research agenda.

The central research questions of this paper were designed to reveal the impact of a particular experience to an individual, as well as to a unique population. The phenomenological approach allows for greater flexibility in designing research that provides the subject with room to interpret their own experience, as well as allow the researcher to continually develop and modify their methods as the subject requires (Maxwell, 2005). As not all veterans have experienced combat or the transition into higher education the same way, recording individual

veterans accounts of the experience will require a degree of flexibility within the design to allow for the unique nuances of each experience to be highlighted. With regard to the combat experience, phenomenology allows veterans to either recall specific experience in combat or reflect on the value and impact of it. In this respect, the design grants a great degree of flexibility to the subject and the researcher. It should also be noted that with this flexibility there comes the possibility that the findings may not illustrate the initial goals of the research. It is essentially the recording of a conversation between two actors with a mutual interest rather than similar goals (Davis, 1995). Nonetheless, this approach has allowed this research to attempt to give structure and meaning to the experience of veterans in higher education, rather than dictate its' meaning as it applies to our current institutional constructs.

# **Site and Sample Selection Goals**

Northeastern University, the location chosen for this study, is a private urban research university with approximately 27,733 graduate and undergraduate students (NU QuickFacts, 2009). This institution was chosen for a number of reasons. First, as it is the author of this research's current institution of employment, Northeastern University provided the greatest access to a student-veteran population. As this study looks to examine a highly specific population, the availability of institutional resources was important to accomplishing the goals of this research. A second reason for choosing Northeastern to perform this study was that the setting provided a compelling backdrop for this particular population of veterans. Considering the sheer size of the university, along with its urban location, veteran presence on campus is met by several intuitional and cultural factors presented by this distinct setting. As the university is a

large private university in the northeastern US, student-veterans represent a smaller percentage of the total student population than they would in southern or midwestern schools. Further, the city of Boston has traditionally been home to a greater degree of liberal political bent. Generally speaking, military culture tends to be more politically conservative. The interaction of the two cultures is of note. The design of this research was continually impacted by the diversity presented by Northeastern University and the city of Boston. This setting demands a constant analysis of the variety of factors that can impact veterans entering higher education and provides deeper insight to this experience.

The central research questions of this paper identified the selected population; veterans with experience in the combat zones of Iraq or Afghanistan that are re-entering higher education. According to Maxwell (2004), "purposeful sampling is a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that cannot be gotten as well from other sources," (p.88). The sampling technique used for this research most resembles this definition, as several criteria have been used in order to pull the desired sample. More specifically, Northeastern University student-veterans of the Iraq or Afghanistan Wars currently utilizing a version of the GI Bill with experience in a combat zone were sought. This population was chosen due to the uniqueness of their enlistment and military experiences. Their return to higher education, in light of greater access provided by the post 9/11 GI Bill, is fraught with challenges for both veterans and higher education administrators. By attempting to understand specific experiences of this group, a purposeful sampling technique was utilized because it stood to yield the richest data in this respect. This study set out with the goal of attaining ten students-veterans with this background.

The size of the sample that was chosen was based on perceived attainability for this particular institution, as well as being a factor of the sample sizes of similar prior research. DiRamio, et al (2008), sampled 25 student veterans at three research institutions. The sample size was also derived from the current population of veterans on the Northeastern University campus, which is estimated to be approximately 170. Conversely, the student-veterans that were sought for this research represent a highly unique experience. While it is important to a certain extent that the number chosen represent the greater population of veterans on the Northeastern campus, a phenomenological design is not necessarily concerned with generalizability. Rather, it is the essence of an experience that this research aims to examine.

#### **Data Collection**

In order to answer the central research questions of this study, data on how veterans interpret their experiences moving out of the military, back to civilian life, and into higher education was needed. A phenomenological design calls for first person accounts of these complex experiences where the conversation aimed at the researcher attempting to understand the interviewee's point of view or definition of meaning of an experience (Davis, 1995). In order to collect these perspectives from veterans themselves, interviews were conducted with the sample population. This method was used in an effort to allow veterans to share their point of view on what factors impact their educational experience, as well as how they perceive combat plays a role in their transition to college campus culture. This method also provided the greatest congruence with a phenomenological approach, as well as with the critical theory framework. Phenomenology and critical theory aim to bring value to the experiences of each individual and

to have those experiences recognized institutionally, specifically within an educational setting (Flowers, Smith, & Larkin, 2009; Freire, 1970).

The interviews with individual veterans were based on a semi-structured approach, which features open-ended questions that allow for the interviewer to adapt or add questions. "Semi-structured interviews unfold in a conversational manner offering participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important," (Longhurt, 2003, p. 103). This method was also utilized in by DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell (2008) and has proven effective in allowing veterans to fully share their experiences.

The concluding focus groups also utilized a semi-structured interview question approach. The focus group conversation was executed in much the same manner as the individual interviews. The purpose of the focus group was to allow veterans to interpret their experiences in a collective way, as well as address themes that had collectively emerged in their individual interviews. It was further designed so that the participants would have the opportunity to engage with each other in their reflections on their experiences in both combat and higher education. As combat can be experienced collectively (to a certain extent), the focus group was intended to allow the veterans to interpret their educational experience in the same manner, perhaps providing a more comfortable forum for these conversations. Much like the individual interviews, student-veteran participants were given the opportunity to dictate the direction and tone of the conversation that resulted, as this flexibility is essential to the phenomenological design (Flowers, et al, 2009).

#### **Data Analysis**

Coding-The initial coding of veteran interviews was based generally on pre-determined codes that fell into the coding interpretive phenomenological strategy described in Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). First, textual coding categories essentially provide a breakdown of the different areas addressed in each interview and describe the interviews as they happen. What occurred and what veterans described with regard to military entry, combat zone experience, and educational entry and experience points, were specifically addressed.

Initial textual coding is designed to examine the actual experiences of veterans during these phases of their lives. Areas addressed by veterans, such as their daily experiences at war, their first days in college, and the kinds of services they were provided upon entering college were important to the comprehensive understanding of the phenomena from a structural sense. This is to say that they give shape to our understanding. These codes were used to not only organize the data, but to give a better understanding of what veterans themselves saw as the milestones in this experience. Thus, textual coding provides an important and broad framework for understanding what happens to veterans as they move from a combat zone experience to higher education.

Contextual coding provides a second level of analysis where broader themes are identified within the responses given by veterans and further interpreted by the researcher. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) stated that, "(a)lthough the primary concern of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis is the lived experience of the participant and the meaning which the participant makes of that lived experience, the end result is always an account of how the analyst thinks the participant is thinking," (p. 80).

Contextual codes were drawn from two sources: from the theoretical frameworks of this research (critical theory/cultural capital and transition theory) as well as from the common themes that emerged in the interviews themselves. With regard to theoretical framework codes, the broad terms that define transition and critical theory provided this research with a tool for conveying the information provided by veterans. In using these codes, great care was taken to communicate the exact thoughts of veterans in their own words, rather than to change the meaning within the analysis to fit within these predetermined codes. As the following analysis will show, veteran interpretation of their own experiences provided ample depth for understanding how they make meaning of their experience in higher education. Contextual-theoretical coding was important to providing structure and organization in approaching this experience from an external perspective.

Emergent themes were also used as another aspect of contextual coding. These themes were drawn from initial analysis of each interview and continued to develop gradually as the research was conducted. "Worldview change", "maturity", "combat perspective", and "transitional services" are examples of themes that were identified only through a close reading of interview transcripts. Like codes that were developed from the theoretical frameworks, these codes are used to frame an analysis of the veteran experience, but also allow their interpretation to remain unaltered in its presentation. The use of emergent themes as a coding device is important to the conclusion of this research in that it draws on the true nature of what veteran interpret their experiences to be.

These coding techniques have allowed for a multi-level analysis of the data provided by the veterans. As these personal experiences are extremely rich in their content, context, and importance to the veterans themselves, the greatest emphasis is placed on the contextual categories that illuminate the veteran framework for making meaning of these events. As Husserl (1931) described the essence of phenomenological study, we can only approach events or occurrences through our broader sense of what we think to be true. We can never know what phenomena truly mean, only how someone interprets those phenomena (Davis, 1995). These coding categories attempted to allow veterans' perspectives to emerge unfettered in their description, but also organized in a way that allows the reader to see the importance.

## Validity and Credibility

As Maxwell (2004) has pointed out, there are validity threats to qualitative research that are unavoidable. This research has been designed to structurally address as many of these threats as possible. By continually acknowledging these anticipated and unanticipated threats, this research has been able to make the proper adjustments in order to maintain the credibility of its conclusions. Ensuring the validity of this research is essential to the integrity of the findings and recommendations. The following is a description of ways that issues of validity and credibility were addressed throughout the design, collection, and presentation of this research.

*Bias*-Researcher bias in interpreting veteran responses is the primary threat to the conclusions of this research. While the interpretation of veteran responses to interview questions is essential to the research of this paper, it will be important to guard against the mis- or over-interpretation of veterans' responses so that they fit into the basic assumptions of this research. In order to protect against the prospect of researcher bias, reflective journaling was undertaken at the conclusion of each interview and at several points during the development of the analysis.

Reflective journaling was utilized for two reasons. First, journaling enables to researcher to maintain a record of initial impression from each interview cataloging the evolution of how veteran responses are interpreted (Creswell, 2009). The ability to revisit the differing perspectives of veteran responses allows the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of what is being examined, rather than letting initial assumptions guide analysis. Second, journaling is particularly useful in a phenomenological design as it allows the researcher actively remove themselves from the expressed experience of the subject (Maxwell, 1996). The use of reflective journaling within this research has not only addressed the threat of researcher bias on the analytical level, but has also served to enhance the interpretation of the data presented below.

It is also important to address the role of the researcher as an administrator at Northeastern University. The personal and professional relationships of the researcher as an administrator at the university were influential in recruiting two of the eight members of sample population. The researcher's role as an administrator at the university is contained within graduate student admissions and student services for one college. This job scope does not contain designated services for veterans in any respect. As such, professional bias, while an issue with regards to two of the students who participated in this study, was generally a limited threat to the validity of this research.

Research bias on a personal level must also be addressed. Throughout the course of the research, the topic of veteran transition into higher education and how combat plays a role in engagement has been undertaken from a purely academic and practitioner perspective. However, as relationships with the subjects of this research were necessarily developed in order to produce a rich body of data for examination, these personal relationships influence some of the

perspective expressed in the conclusions of this research. As such, even though veterans' perspectives are relied upon for the majority of what is described and interpreted throughout this research, the recommendations and implications for practice have been inherently influenced by the personal relationships that have been developed.

Question Validity-As important as avoiding the misinterpretation of veteran responses to interview questions is the validity of the questions themselves. Question structure and presentation stands to influence veteran responses (Maxwell, 1996). Several steps were taken to attempt to create an environment where the most honest, open, and detailed accounts could given. First, the researcher's scholar practitioner community and a current Northeastern University student-veteran reviewed the general structure of interview questions for wording and content, as well as the contact protocols used to gather the sample population. Secondly, veterans were met with personally prior to the interviews taking place in order to develop a level of trust with the researcher. These meetings were important, as the answers given should not be filtered for "popular content" (i.e. what the veteran think the researcher wants to hear or "reactivity") if there is a baseline of trust developed between the interviewer and interviewee (Maxwell, 2009). In this way, the level of trust is used to mitigate the researcher's influence on the responses given and ultimately allow for greater authenticity of the data collected (Maxwell, 2009).

*Member-checking*-Another way in which this study ensured the validity of the findings is inherent to the design of the research. Allowing participants to review post-interview analysis served as a form of member checking that was used to determine the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2009). In member checking, the researcher included themes or a brief summary as part of a follow-up interview, allowing for subjects to comment on the findings. This technique

serves as another checkpoint for data that has been gathered and synthesized. Similar to this technique, the focus group that was conducted toward the end of the data gathering process also provided another form of respondent validation for the findings of this research.

# **Protection of Research Subjects**

The experiences that were described by veterans as part of this study have raised ethical questions. These have been considered. First, while veterans have not been asked to describe their "in country" or combat zone experiences exclusively, these experiences were important to the discussion of the impact of combat on educational engagement. Previous research in various disciplines has highlighted the traumatic experience of war.

As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have seen a lower rate of battlefield deaths and a higher rate of wounded veterans returning, high percentages of these veterans suffer from PTSD (Friedman, 2006). While the research of this paper is not intended to be clinical in nature, the subject matter inherently touched upon similar PTSD clinical themes, which are out of the scope of this research. Asking veterans to recall memories that may be traumatic requires that the subject be assured of the complete voluntary nature of their participation. If the participants were to become mildly upset by the line of questioning in the interview, the interview would have been stopped and the veteran provided with on and off-campus clinical support. Beyond these approaches, veterans were also briefed as to the context of the interviews prior to the interviews taking place. Should veterans have voiced objections regarding the content of the questions that were asked, they were afforded to the opportunity to opt out of the study.

Another consideration in asking veterans to share their experiences in higher education was the protection of their confidentiality. While veterans were asked mainly about how their personal experiences affected their engagement in college, they were also asked about their perception of the effectiveness of higher education programming. Even though the loss of confidentiality does not present a significant risk for participants of the study, their willingness to share candid views on this topic maybe subject to the guarantee of confidentiality. To protect the identity of the participants, each was given a pseudo-name in order to ensure their anonymity. Additionally, only necessary and general demographic data was recorded as it pertained to the aims of this study. Finally, any identifiable links to personal information were removed from interview transcripts and the data analysis.

Upon completion of the data collection phase of this research, audio recordings of each interview and focus group were destroyed. While the pseudonyms will remain with the typed transcripts, all other connecting identifiers have been removed as of the completion of this research.

These research plans were approved on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010 by the Northeastern University Institutional review board.

#### **Data Collection- Process and Results**

Data collection began with purposeful sampling and the recruitment of Northeastern University veterans to take part in this research. While a particular population had been identified, the method in which they were recruited varied. Several methods were employed, including the posting of flyers at different campus locations (no veterans responded to the

random placement of flyers), word of mouth, and direct recruitment. The two methods were most effective in attaining the sample used. First, direct recruiting was used for half (four) of those who chose to participate. The rest of the sample was comprised of those recruited either by snowball sampling<sup>8</sup> or by group-presentation recruiting. To this end, the researcher attended three separate student-veteran group meetings off-campus in an effort to recruit the sample. At these meetings, the research was briefly introduced, as were the purpose and goals of the study. No veterans directly signed up at the time of the presentation but were left with the researcher's contact information if they were interested in learning more. Veterans were also encouraged to speak with their colleagues about the aims of the study and their experiences being interviewed.

Using these techniques, a total of ten veterans were targeted for this study. Over the course of four-plus months, only eight veterans volunteered for the study. Throughout the course of the interviews, as the data that emerged was consistent over the first eight participants, the researcher and the primary investigator determined that the sample size was sufficient to fulfill the aims of the study. Recruitment, however, did continue through the completion of this research.

Of the eight veterans that volunteered to participate in the study, all were males. They fell between the ages of 24 and 37, and included seven Caucasian and one African American. With regard to the branches they served in, three were veterans of the Marine Core, another three from the Army, and two from the Air Force. In their roles as students, three were from the College of Computer Science, two from the College of Arts and Sciences, and one each from the College of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Snowball sampling, where participants referred others to take part in the study (Patton, 2001 as cited in DiRamio, 2008),was also used to recruit student-veterans.

Business, Professional Studies, and Criminal Justice. Five of the eight veterans participated in the concluding focus group.

Interviews took place between December 1, 2010 and April 1, 2011, with the concluding focus group taking place on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Seven of the interviews were conducted in the researcher's on-campus office, with one occurring via telephone. The interviews generally took place just before 5pm in the evening or later. The dates and times were agreed upon prior to each interview and chosen at a time most convenient for the participant.

Each participant met with or conversed with (electronically, by phone, or in person) the researcher prior to the individual interview to discuss the aims of the research and any concerns they may have. Each participant was also provided with the informed consent prior to the meeting<sup>9</sup>. At the start of each interview, each veteran was given a pseudonym and was to asked acknowledge that they had read and signed the informed consent. Veterans were also given a list of counseling resources both on and off-campus should they require further assistance at the conclusion of the interview.

The interviews followed similar format, beginning with basic demographic questions concerning age and the branch of military that the veteran enlisted. From there, general areas in the lives of the veterans were addressed: Pre-military background, combat experience, post-combat experience, and educational experiences. The use of semi-formatted questions allowed veterans to expand upon any one area they chose. As such, depending on the individual

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> All materials used in recruitment and execution of the veteran interviews had met the prior approval of the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board as of November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

participant, veterans chose to speak at length on anything from their experiences in combat to their recommendations for college veteran programming for the future.

Just as the areas that veterans felt comfortable talking about varied, so too did the duration of each interview. The interviews ranged from 25 minutes to 82 minutes in length. After interviews were completed, each veteran was provided with the transcript of the interview. Veterans were given the opportunity to make any additions or deletions they felt necessary to the transcript if they were misquoted or felt that a response needed clarification. None of the veterans that took part in the study added or removed anything from the transcripts they received.

A concluding focus group was also conducted in an effort revisit some of the emergent themes touched upon in the individual interviews. The focus group took place in an on-campus conference room at Northeastern University on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011 at approximately 5:30 pm and lasted approximately 53 minutes. The veterans that participated in the focus group were drawn from the sample of those that participated in the individual interviews. Five of the eight veterans that participated in the individual interview participated in the focus group. Each veteran was reminded of the voluntary nature of participation, as well as the protections afforded in the informed consent.

The areas primarily addressed by the focus group involved the notion of a "combat gear" or "combat buzz" that lays over how each approaches education, the importance of the veterans group and how these veterans see it evolving, commentary on service provided by the university, as well as their suggestions for programs for future populations of veterans. Veterans were encouraged to engage with one another on issues that arose in conversation surrounding the areas addressed in the research or other areas they found to be relevant to the topic. Such topics

included how to recruit veterans to the university, differing military branch notions regarding education, as well as programming ideas for veteran participation in orientation.

### **Chapter Five: Data Findings**

### **Chapter Content and Goals**

Presented below is a broad summary of the emergent themes taken from the veteran interviews that have been conducted as part of this research. The phenomenological methodology, in light of which this research was conducted and its data analyzed, relies heavily upon an examination of the actual perception of the study's participants. Deep analysis of each word, phrase, and sentence is required to understand the true meaning of the phenomena being described. As such, this section will consistently feature quotes from interview transcripts. The use of the numerous quotes within the analysis is essential to keeping with the true nature of the chosen methodology (described in Chapter 3).

Emergent themes are highlighted within the three sections of the combat and higher educational experience discussed in each interview: pre-military background, military/combat experience, and higher education experience. A textual breakdown is provided first so that the reader can see the organization of the data collection process. This organization was also an effort to allow veterans to describe the experience as it happened to them, chronologically, in accordance with the phenomenological design (Flowers, et al, 2009).

Veteran responses highlight impactful factors in their movement through the military, combat, and into higher education. Veteran responses regarding influential factors in their enlistment into the military include notions of escape and personal transformation, lack of prior educational success, and practical resources like the lure of educational benefits. With regard to their experiences in the military and in combat, responses included the idea that the experience was all consuming, that a combat tempo and the constancy of activity were salient features of

combat deployment, and that these impressions impacted the movement back into civilian life influencing their lack of identification with other civilians. Finally, responses on civilian life and higher education echoed the themes of a lack of identification, personality incongruence, and an experiential separation from traditional college going students. On a practical level, veterans expressed both positive (Yellow Ribbon) and negative (Freshmen Orientation, lack of VA contact) impressions of university attempts to engage them.

### **Pre-Military Background**

Enlisting in Order to Escape- All interviews began with questions that surrounded the pre-military backgrounds of veterans. Questions were designed to allow veterans to discuss the circumstances that led to their enlistment, their highest previously attained education levels, and anything else they felt that was relevant to their experience prior to joining the military. Veteran motivation for entering the military varied. One recurrent theme that surfaced was the need for a change or escape from one's current personal circumstance. For some participants, the military presented an opportunity to do something new and exciting with their lives. Whether the draw of "jumping out of planes" or a guaranteed job at the end of their enlistment, the military presented a chance to live out a different path than their current circumstance would dictate.

So when I was 17, I dropped out of high school, I worked two jobs. I got a favor from somebody that said, "Hey, come out and work at this bar. They do pretty well." So I started doing that. I became really good at it and I didn't go back to school. Money was coming in. But I wanted something more, and in the end, the only way to get out of that was to do something drastic, so that is why I joined the military. I was bartending from 1994 until the day I left...(Personal communication, December 1, 2010).

In a slightly different respect, other veterans saw the opportunity that the military presented to be more personally focusing and transforming. A number of the veterans mentioned that their previous experiences in higher education, or prior to their current enrollment in college, had not been successful in most any respect. Veterans described rather typical early college occurrences where priorities were placed on partying, drinking, and making friends rather than on getting an education. Others were simply not prepared for college personally and saw the military as an opportunity for a positive life change. One veteran stated:

I recognized that I was not doing well at all, so in order to not fall into a bad trap, I told my dad, "Hey, I gotta get out of here." We sat down for a while and discussed what the different jobs that there were to do and such. I was like, "Wow, lets just go down to the Marines," (Personal communication, February 11, 2011).

While the core reasoning for each veteran joining the military differed slightly, the descriptions show common themes of escape and change pervade individuals' motivation for enlisting. Even though veterans may not refer back to these experiences when describing their initial transition into higher education, they remain important to understanding the entire transition from military to higher education. The impact of these experiences will be discussed further in the sixth chapter.

Veterans were able to look back on their previous experiences in higher education and reflect on them in light of their current mindset; one affected by war and the circumstances of time. These experiences continually influenced how they approached higher education and are not wholly unrelated to their subsequent reflections on the influence of combat.

I mean, I definitely can see, in the scope of what we are going to be talking about, is my efforts towards school is a totally other side of the world thing because I understand the implications of not getting an education and what you end up

doing. I learned the crap jobs that the people that are less educated or don't have the luxuries that some other people have will do (Personal communications, February 11, 2011).

References to how their current situation differs from their previous experiences in higher education shows the continual and pervading influence of the pre-transition environment.

Participants referred to these experiences in the context of their current situations and how their conceptions of education and life had changed. According to the participants, the impact of combat can be influenced by one's prior life experiences. These experiences provide an initial benchmark for perhaps how we can gauge the impact of combat on how veterans perceive their roles as students.

## **Military and Combat Experience**

All Consuming- The next area addressed by veterans during the interviews was their recollection of military experience. Some of the veterans interviewed highlighted the lack of recognized transition in favor of a general and total immersion into the military. As one participant stated, one moment he was leaving for the Marines, and the next moment he was sitting on a bus in the complete dark being yelled at by three drill instructors.

In about 24 to 48 hours, you are stripped of everything that you currently own. You're in a uniform. Your head is shaved. They take pretty much everything that you used to know from you. So, there is no chance to transition. You get dropped into it and you pretty much either swim or sink (Personal communication, February 11, 2011).

This commentary is highly notable because it is immediately relevant to parts of the transition back to civilian culture that this research was attempting to draw out. Similar to the combat experience itself, military experience is all consuming for many veterans. Military

culture, with its emphasis on the whole rather than the individual, as well as conformity rather than independence, differs starkly from the world academia. Noting this complete and sudden immersion into military life is important in the understanding of the meaning of the transition into higher education and the myriad of adaptations to be made by college-going veterans.

Almost everything was foreign... They pretty much strip you of all freedom, and then slowly give it back to you over the course of the basic training... Even after leaving basic training, for the first few weeks or months after, anytime you heard someone with taps on their shoes, because that is what the training instructors wear, anytime you heard that, the hair on the back of your neck stands up. You start looking around (Personal communication, December 16, 2011).

If nothing else, college represents a change in the daily lives of veterans that will be impacted to a degree by the experience of military indoctrination. This is to say nothing yet of the impact of combat which has been described to impart its own challenges on veterans at that time and over future transitions. Nonetheless, these initial experiences are important to the overall understanding of the adjustments that veterans must make transitioning into college.

"Combat Tempo"- Discussions of the initial immersion into the military or combat inevitably led veterans to speak about the details of their experiences in combat, as well as the impressions that were left by their time in country. Veteran recollections of their experiences in combat varied with the nature and number of deployments, as well as in their intensity. Even though the experience was described in several ways, the height of the experience and its intensity leaves an unquestionable impression on veterans.

You see muzzle flashes while you are riding along to where your safe house is and you know you are getting shot at...I was thinking about everything I had done up to that day, up to when I use to take the bus when I was little, when I used to throw lemons at cars, everyone I knew in my life, everyone that I had had a good time with, in the blink of an eye were just in and out (Personal communication, December 1, 2010).

For first deployments, veterans' were required to make personal adjustments during the first days due to the intensity of the experience. Phrases like "buzz", "combat mode", or "machine cog" were used to describe the constant activity of the initial days in country. For some veterans, their first moments on the ground were spent gathering themselves, their gear and moving to a temporary station.

So, we got in there and our rules of engagement were military aged males 15 to 65, if they are in the city, they are dead. That is what it was. So for myself, you know, like, I was like, "Wow, this is pretty intense. Here we go."... So as we are driving in to the city, just before we dismount and start walking in, there are these two little girls on the side of the road, probably five and seven...The first thing that popped into my head was my two little sisters. So for me, that was...You know, for no other reason, I have to kill these assholes so these little girls can live the same life my sisters do. So that was what allowed me to go ahead and do the mission (Personal communication, January 10, 2011).

Other veterans described similar feelings with regard to being consumed by the combat experience. War, for them, meant constantly having a job or a mission to complete. One veteran described the initial experience as a blur that ultimately begins to make sense the more experience one has being immersed in it, stating:

Its like, "God, what do I need to do now?" Most people just think of comfort. I just have to just, you know, try to calm down to my normal self so I can grasp, take it all in, so that I can function (Personal communication, December 2, 2010).

Another utilized a sports metaphor in his explanation, saying that with experience "the game just slowed down," (Personal communication, January 10, 2010).

During their three months of training and the transition to combat, veterans experience a series of emotional and personal adjustments, highlighted in their statements; security to insecurity, safety to danger, order to chaos, trust to mistrust (Terry, 2011). Underlying these

transitional events for veterans is the notion of a different and increased "combat tempo" (Personal communication, February 11, 2011). Many that view war from afar may consider the horrors of death and destruction to be the preeminent impressions left by this experience. While this may still be true in many cases, in this population there also exists lasting mental and emotional adjustments to the pace and stress of combat.

I knew it would be very difficult to come back home and say, "Oh God. I made it...No, I've got a mission to do. I've got to do this and I've got to do that." You almost forget where you came from. You are so focused on the job (Personal communication, December 1, 2010).

Common feelings of security and comfort are no longer common to the everyday experiences of veterans. Instead, their worlds are flipped upside-down.

(My wife) has made the comments that my personality has changed, that I am a lot more, you know, short tempered and also short on everything. I mean, I ask a questions, I want an answer because, like they say, combat tempo. I need an answer now. If you don't give me an answer now, the difference could be life for death (Personal communications, February 11, 2011).

Veterans indicated that they rely on their focus and mental strength to make the adjustment to the hectic pace of deployment. Eventually in every deployment, "you get to sleep, you get to eat, and do the things that make you more human," (Personal communication, December 2, 2010).

Action v. Inaction- Consistency of activity left an impression on this group of veterans. Even though tasks varied among those interviewed, ranging from 12-14 hour patrols on foot to 16 hours days behind a computer evaluating intelligence briefs, veterans spoke about the need to be working towards "getting the job done."

They (the days) blur to the max because you wake up in the morning to do your PT and then you are out on your patrol every single day. There is no Saturday and

Sunday off. You are patrolling for 14 to 17 hours sometimes. It actually got to a point where I didn't want to leave because I had already situated myself in that environment (Personal communication, December 1, 2010).

These words are very telling in a number of ways. First, it would seem that there is a basic equation to action and life. By continually doing, one is able to continue to live. By live, it is not meant in the most basic sense of breathing and moving, but perhaps in a sense that was mentioned above: doing the things that makes one feel human. The busier you are, eating, sleeping, and simply being become regular. Waiting, it would seem then, could be equated with a greater detachment with the life one has known. Combat recollections underscore the importance of action over inaction to this veteran population.

I realize that a lot of the time I am like, "Go, go, go," for no good reason. A lot of the time, it's just like, "Just go. I just need to get here. I don't know why, I just need to get here." There's this engine inside you that just goes (Personal communication, February 11, 2011).

What remains germane to the topic is that this experience is important to how the returning population of veterans view their lives in a civilian world and higher education. Action and certainty retain a primacy of importance and are necessary to understanding how they may come to interpret higher education's attempts to serve them in their efforts to participate on campus and academic life.

**Reactions to Death-** Almost invariably, veterans with experience in combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan will witness death of one sort or another. Whether killing someone else, losing a friend, or being witness to the loss of unknown bystanders, death has impacted several veterans that participated in this study. In recalling their combat experiences, one veteran described the

constant sight of death as numbing, likening his reaction to dead bodies to his former reaction to "a dead deer on the side of the road." While not all veterans outwardly described the same "numbing" effect, many spoke about how they viewed violence in general. Attacks were commonplace. On a daily basis, their positions would be shelled, they would encounter fire on patrol, or they would be the targets of an improvised explosive device or IED attack. In any and all forms, the veterans interviewed saw combat in a very personal light. What they witnessed and experienced, in many ways, was indescribable to those unfamiliar with the environment. The "numbness", as eloquently illustrated by one veteran, serves to separate this group from their former lives<sup>10</sup>. When asking veterans about their perspectives on their combat zone experience, many seemed to feel that it was beyond description for those not there to witness it first-hand.

I mean, no one ever really wants to go to combat, in a way, because things you see...Part of my job, which I really cant go into, wasn't the best part. I reviewed propaganda for intelligence value and propaganda can be anything from IED attacks to torture on a person. So I watched that on a daily basis, seeing people pretty much beaten and abused, killed and dragged through the streets, and everything else... (Personal communication, December 1, 2010).

**Disconnection with Civilian Life-** The return from war imparts many challenges on veterans moving into the civilian world. From a social perspective, veterans mention a disconnection with the people and things that they knew. One veteran stated,

(Y)ou know, that was the whole thing about coming back home. How can you sit down with family and friends and tell them what you saw? You really can't. You really can't because lets say we are there. One, there wouldn't even be a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> As these experiences are further discussed within the context of this research, it will be shown that how veterans come to personalize these experiences is important to our understanding of their engagement in higher education.

discussion. Two, they still wont get it. You know, why would you want them to experience that (Personal communication, December 1, 2010)?

There is more than one aspect of this statement that is indicative of what veterans described as their experience transitioning back into the civilian world. "One, there wouldn't even be a discussion..." Conversation about the experience in combat or in combat zones seems to be something veterans feel only other veterans can truly understand (this may be accurate). The experience is beyond both comprehension and explanation to non-veterans. It is further something that they do not wish their loved ones to truly know about. While not all veterans expressed feelings of guilt, grief, or loss, their insistence on how even those closest to them cannot understand their experience is an important aspect of the transition.

Yeah. I kind of came back to my hometown and it was really different because a lot of people I hung out with before I didn't hang out with anymore. I didn't have any desire to even socialize with. It was like I was at a different point in my life than a lot of them (Personal communication, April 1, 2011).

Whether describing a disconnection with family members or friends, veterans saw the combat experience as a separating factor in their personal lives. This notion of separation straddles the movement from combat into civilian life and into higher education.

### **Entering and Experiencing Higher Education**

Veterans described educational experiences in both positive and negative ways. At an institutional level, many of those interviewed described both frustration and appreciation with their college's efforts<sup>11</sup>. Northeastern University was sited as a "veteran friendly" institution by

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Two veterans that were interviewed are currently graduate students at Northeastern University. Prior to enrolling in graduate school, they completed their undergraduate degrees at other domestic colleges.

participants both in a historical sense and in their current participation in the Yellow Ribbon<sup>12</sup> program. The university's efforts to organize a veterans group were also welcomed by veterans. A participant who serves as one of the leaders of the veterans group recalled an experience with a newly enrolled veteran that highlights the purpose and need for the group:

Having a guy come in like a guy did, one marine, standing at parade-rest the entire time I was talking to him. "Yes sir. Yes sir. Absolutely sir." Everything was sir, sir, sir, sir. I wanted to tell him, "You probably outranked me by the time you got out. One, you don't have to call me sir," but I don't say that because I know that is how they are comfortable right now. And then watching them transition out of that. Seeing that they are a little bit easier in talking and relating to people. (Personal communication, December 16, 2010)

While the group had yet to develop a true mission or direction, the fact that it existed was seen to fill a need for this population. To this end, veterans highlighted the need to identify and connect with other veterans over their previous experiences at war and their current roles as students at the university.

It allows me to meet people who are like-minded. A lot of the people I deal with are the exact opposite, especially with my major. I am a type-A kind of person. A lot of them aren't, so it is nice to meet people that are more of my background. (Someone repeats "A lot of them aren't." and laughs in the background.)...I am not used to dealing with these kinds of people, so it's really different. I am pretty much the old one. I met a professor who is a veteran, so I have more in common with him. He is an Israeli veteran. I have more in common with some of the faculty than I do with the students. So yeah, the veterans group definitely helps to meet people that you wouldn't normally meet (Personal communication, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> The Yellow Ribbon program, described briefly above, is a volunteer program in which private universities elect to pay up to 25% of the difference in tuition cost and what the Post 9/11 GI Bill provides. The Veterans Administration matches the university's participation. With regard to Northeastern University specifically, they participated at the full 25% level, meaning that veterans that were able to participate in the Yellow Ribbon program attended Northeastern University for free.

Connection to the veterans group, as well as other veterans themselves, seems to be influenced both by this internal need, and by their identification (or lack there of) with the greater college student population. These themes of mutual identification and separation will also be discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

Veterans entering the university as undergraduates noted displeasure with their required attendance at freshmen orientation. In general, the issues addressed at the university's undergraduate orientation are directed at traditionally aged college freshmen, 18 to 20 year olds. Conversely, veterans that return from deployment will be entering college in their early twenties and older.

I remember going to orientation and they are talking to you like you are a freshman, which is understandable. Its orientation, but I am like, "I don't need this." I don't need you to tell me about, "Don't drink on the weekends." I am twenty-something years old. I will go have a beer if I want. I can buy one. I don't need you to tell me and treat me like I am eighteen. I understand its orientation and they are trying to get you acclimated to the school but I don't need to ask these questions (Personal Communication, February 11, 2011).

I was in an auditorium with like 400 people and the woman is like, "Who is under 21? Everyone raise your hand. Who is over 21?" And I am like there are going to be a couple of us raising our hands and I was the only person in the entire auditorium... I don't really care. I mean, at this point, being singled-out, whatever. It was like, obviously, this is going to be (just me)...Who am I going to hang out with? I was expecting...I know Northeastern tends to be young, but some of the other colleges I have been to there are some older, non-traditional (students). I don't feel like there is that here at all (Personal communication, May 9, 2011).

Playing ice-breaking games (at orientation) where they say, "Step forward if this has happened to you. If you have cried in the last year?" Stuff like that. Like I am standing here... (Personal communication, May 9, 2011).

The responsibilities that come with living in a dorm and being out of your parents' house for the first time do not apply to this population. Undergraduate and graduate veterans alike

expressed the need for more targeted information that pertained to them, the funding they receive from the federal government, and services that would be available to them. Freshmen orientation can be seen as a perfect example of the lack of understanding of this population. Their required participation in orientation is symptomatic of larger institutional issues that will be discussed within the analysis of this data.

Another theme that veterans discussed was the lack of a central point of contact at the university to handle veteran issues. This population will enter college with very specific needs that cannot be addressed within the current structure of higher education institutions. Participants of this research frequently identified the need for a specific professional to address veteran services.

To have a full-time processing agent for us, knowing everything there is to know about the veterans, the GI Bill, the Yellow Ribbon, all of the different veteran services that are available to us, so on and so forth. Know the ins and outs of the veterans' community, to help transition us and also process our credits into the VA as well...Right now its like different people we have to call all over the place. So if we could just consolidate it into just one person, gave us one office with one of the girls from a sorority and just go ahead and make appointment, and answer phones (Personal communication, January 10, 2011).

Like I said, since World War II and probably before then, this has been one of the most veteran-friendly private institutions in New England and to go ahead and keep that reputation, this is something that the university needs to do. They have to have one person or an office that is a subject matter expert on everything that is VA and that can facilitate 95% of our needs (Personal communication, May 9, 2011).

Yeah, that is definitely a role for the veterans counselor or a veterans office, because without having inside contacts, you are pretty much just throwing darts out and seeing if you can hit something (Personal communication, May 9, 2011).

Veterans also discussed the lack of academic credit for their military experience and a poorly planned campus Veterans' Day Ceremony as other negative impressions from the

university. These instances, however, were emphasized less within the individual interviews themselves, and were infrequent in the sample as a whole.

Personal Adjustments to Academics- Among those interviewed, there did not seem to be a single or distinct way that veterans adjusted to academics. Some felt that their age played a significant factor in their perception of the college adjustment. Like their typical adult student counterparts, some veterans view going back to college as though it was a form of employment. One stated,

I am not here to have a good time. I have already done all of that college stuff. I lived in the dorms in the army. I get paid to be here and I get paid to go here. I get a stipend. I get paid myself to go here. (Personal communication, January 10, 2011)

For myself, again, I see being here as a job. I see being here as, you know, a profession. I take it in a professional manner. I am not here to screw around. I am here to do the work and get out of here. It's a steppingstone for where I want to be and I think that being removed from college, for myself, it was easier for me to come back and go ahead. (Personal communication, January 10, 2011)

Another cited the vast differences in approach to life that surrounded college as a barrier to greater cultural adjustments:

I don't connect with a lot of the people because they are ten years younger than me, a lot of them. I have a wife and kid, and they are like, "I'm going drinking." "I'm going to a party" or "I'm going to do this all weekend" or "I'm playing video games." I'm like, "Video games? My daughter has ballet tomorrow. I got this and that." And they are like, "Oh, I got up noon today." No, my daughter woke me up at 7:30am. She's gotta get ready for ballet. (Personal communications, February 11, 2011)

For these veteran and others like them, engagement with campus culture is very superficial. Their college careers are, generally speaking, for training purposes only.

Personal Impressions of the Combat Experience- On an individual level, many veterans expressed their educational experiences being tainted by questions from their colleagues and faculty members. Questions like, "Did you ever kill anyone?" "Don't you think the war was a waste of time?" "Do you still have your gun?" (Personal communication, December 1, 2010) were cited by veterans as being unwelcomed. These questions were described as infrequent and did not tend to influence the overall veteran experience in college. Nonetheless, these encounters remained common amongst the veteran population interviewed.

With regard to the academic demands of college, on the whole veterans said they felt prepared for the academic work of college, both mentally and intellectually. The greatest challenges discussed by veterans entering college were social and cultural. Aside from the aforementioned questions, veterans felt that their experiences and age separated them from their younger colleagues. One veteran stated, "You know, we can't relate, most of us, to most of these kids." (Personal communication, March 31, 2011) While the impact, response, and adjustment to this disconnection with the majority of the student body will be discussed in following sections of this analysis, veterans did describe it as part of their regular experience in college.

Like I said, we don't fit in, which is part of the reason I gravitated towards the (veterans) group. I kind of helped to get that going because I really...I needed it and other vets, they don't really need it, but I like the group. It's really the only people I really talk to at Northeastern. I just don't fit in with the students (Personal communication, March 23, 2011).

On an individual level, veterans described a continual transition out of their military and combat zone experiences affecting their impressions of college. The typically slow pace of higher education was discussed as personal adjustment that many veterans needed to make.

You feel like everything is moving so slow. It's like you can't even... I can't even deal with this. You go up there and you ask someone, "Do you know where so-and-so is?" They are sort of taking their time. You become sort of aggravated. Its like, "You know what, I'll just do it on my own." You kind of sense that (Personal communication, December 2, 2010).

The change of pace between a combat zone and higher education is obviously drastic. For those interviewed, this was an area where they had noticed the change in themselves and where they felt an adjustment needed to be made.

Personal Incongruence- How veterans illustrated a personal incongruence with the majority of the college population and administration was expressed in a variety of ways. Many did not site a specific source, such as age (even though age was mentioned more than once). Veterans felt that the common student experience and frame of mind was not something that they could identify with. While it was not mentioned as a distinct barrier to their own engagement in higher education, it remained a dominant theme in veteran responses. Commenting on the perceptions that prevented them from fully engaging in college, veterans stated:

I'd say, just because you know I am in classes with freshmen right now, so between thirty 18, 19 year olds. So, yeah I'd definitely say socially. I mean, you know, you meet kids in class and they are friendly, but they're 18, 19. They're idea of fun on the weekend and mine are definitely different... (Personal communication, February 11, 2011)

So yeah, I think it's definitely the social aspect of it. I kind of live...I have an apartment up on Mission Hill. I come to class, do my thing, go to the gym, and come back. So it's almost like I have a separate life. I see a lot of kids that I think their lives revolve around campus. They live in the dorms. My life is a little bit separate from that. You know that it's not necessarily a bad thing. I am just in a different place in my life than I think they are (Personal communication, March 31, 2011).

Veterans also referred to interactions with university administration as a source of personal incongruence, where they felt that there was a lack of understanding as they attempted to articulate their needs.

Well, I never had those interactions before. I'd never been at a university, so to speak. It was like, "Well, what do I do?" when I ask for help. "You need to do this on your own." Well, I get that, but would you be so kind as to point me in the right direction? So, I think what got me through those difficult days were other vets that had the same problem. Same exact problem. (Personal communication, December 1, 2010)

Worldview and Pride- Veterans identified changes in their worldview and pride in the job they performed as salient features of their experience in higher education. With regard to the broader experience, when asked if they felt that their experience in war had a positive or negative effect on their lives, the vast majority of participants sited the pride in the work they had done, as well as the pride in the men and women they had served with as positives taken from the experience.

But certainly, I mean I have a lot of experiences from it. You know, I am allowed to go to school for free. I get the veterans status all the time, projects me up above everyone else, but even then I am not really sure I agree with that. I am torn, conflicted with that, personally. I don't really see it as much. Friendships allow me to...that was one of the great positive. And the overall experience, you know, I went to a war twice, I met a lot of cool people, did a lot of cool things, I jumped out of planes, I blew shit up, shot all sorts of guns, got paid for all of it, kicked down some doors, and had some fun (Personal communications, January 10, 2011).

As the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq seemed open to the judgment of others on campus, veterans expressed their experiences as another point of separation from the college experience. They identify the wars with friends they lost, missions they accomplished, and adjustments they

had to make for long periods of time. For many, the pride they feel in themselves, as well as the soldiers they served with, informs all of their recollections about experience in a combat zone.

Then they learn what I have done and what not and I have actually found that some kids are intimidated when the find out that I was in the military, which is kind of disconcerting for myself... To find out that they were actually intimidated because I was in the (branch of the military removed) and had been deployed and done all this stuff, so they shy away from me. And then going both ways, neither one of us have anything to relate to one another (Personal communication, January 10, 2011).

It is important to note that these experiences were expressed as differentiating factors in the veteran experience in higher education. The lack of identification and the separatist behavior it fostered are two salient features of the conclusions of this research and should be noted as such (See Chapter Six).

# **Findings Conclusion**

In discussion of the effect of combat on educational engagement for veterans, it is necessary to begin with a textual breakdown of the three phases of their experience: pre-military, combat/military, and higher education experience. Pre-military themes of escape and personal transformation are an important starting point for understanding this entire transition from military to combat and into higher education. Emergent themes within the combat experience, such as the notion of a "combat tempo" and the value of action over inaction, further our understanding of the depth of impact of the combat experience for veterans. How these experience are seen to impact integration within higher education, be it the questioning of veteran background, separatist responses, or notions of pride and a change in worldview, all frame our understanding of the various factors involved in this complex phenomenon.

A deeper understanding of how veterans see these experiences in combat affecting their educational engagement requires a basic understanding of the interactions of these assorted influences. While a textual breakdown has brought to light significant aspects of the greater experience for veterans, the contextual analysis utilized by this research, and discussed in the subsequent chapter, highlights how these themes come together and their impact on how veterans truly engage in higher education.

### **Chapter Six: Data Analysis**

### **Chapter Contents and Goals**

Central to answering the primary research question (*How does experience in a combat zone affect veteran transition and engagement in higher education?*) is an analysis based on the findings presented in the previous chapter. The emergent themes in this analysis surround primarily the ideas of adaptation and identity. The internal and external cultural adaptations that are made by veterans highlight how students, administrators, and faculty receive student-veteran approaches to college. Practical adaptations veterans make emphasize the importance of the presence of other veterans on campus. With regard to the notion of identity, whether in the form of practical skills, differing thought processes or approaches to education, veteran responses indicate that their experiences in combat serve as a resource for them. They identify this experience with who they are and recognize it in others who have served.

Experience in a combat zone is continually processed in both internal and external ways. Externally, impressions like a change in worldview, approach to education, and the outward identification as veterans serve as a reminder of the difference between student-veterans and the rest of the college community. In this way, the uniqueness of their experience separates them culturally and socially. Internally, veterans move from being soldiers to their roles as students. Their responses highlight notions of pride, self-image improvement, loss, and remorse. The dual nature of these impacts is not only central to the understanding of how combat zone experience affects integration into higher education, but also how veterans are received by college campus communities. Ultimately, this research shows that our understanding of this experience is shaped

simultaneously by how veterans view the larger campus community, how these communities receive them, and also how veterans view themselves within this context.

A discussion of these themes is first presented by highlighting connections to the theoretical frameworks used by in this research: transition and critical (cultural capital) theories. This chapter will subsequently conclude with an examination of the primary research question in light of how the theoretical frameworks converge to enhance our understanding of student veteran integration into higher education.

### **Connecting the Data to the Theoretical Frameworks**

## **Transition Theory**

Cultural Adaptations- Perhaps many of the most obvious causes for adaptations by veterans in civilian life and higher education will be cultural. Veteran cultural adaptations were discussed in two different ways. First, veterans spoke about the experiential divide between themselves and the rest of academic culture they encountered. Veterans were often asked intimate and, as some felt, inappropriate questions about their experiences in war; whether or not they had killed anyone or if they thought the war was a waste of time. These questions were seldom, but sometimes, accompanied by openly hostile attitudes. One veteran recalled one reaction in stating:

I knew how to take care of myself, but I never knew how to make the dreams go away or, you know...or have people take me seriously when I am asking for something simple at the school. They say, "Well, you're in the military. You're a baby killer." What the hell are you talking about? One, they said that in Vietnam. And two, have you ever served (Personal communication, December 1, 2010)?

Even though openly hostile interactions were not referred to as a frequent occurrence among the veterans interviewed, how their combat experiences were questioned seems to impact

aspects of their transition into academia. As statements like the one above would indicate, when confronted by complete strangers, veterans are forced to defend themselves and their actions. These experiences are impactful. As such, the experience of transition stands to be tainted by these, however brief, experiences. While veterans will continue to adjust to a variety of encounters moving into higher education, basic interactions with their colleagues are an important aspect of this complex dynamic.

Military Cultural Adaptations- Cultural adjustments are further emphasized by the impact of military cultural immersion as highlighted by the findings of this research. The idea of being stripped of all one's freedom is important to understanding the drastic nature of transition into the military and how different the movement into academia can be for some. How they conduct themselves interpersonally, in class, as well as in their basic appearance, are all areas in the lives of veterans likely to have been changed by their experience in the military. Along with adjusting to questioning of their experiences prior to entering higher education, veterans are moving from the strict and regimented culture of the military into the more liberal and independent experience of higher education. Veteran responses have indicated that they are aware of the differences that exist in the culture they are emerging from and the culture they are entering.

*Employment-like Approach to Education-* To this end, the findings also indicate that veterans approach their education in an employment like manner. To these veterans, it would seem that anything that does not lend to the accomplishment of their goals is considered unnecessary. As such, the cultural adaptations made here are not necessarily as impactful as those made by veterans who choose to attempt to be more actively involved in campus life.

Nonetheless, veterans are in a position that remains one that is negotiated with respect to the prevailing traditional student approach to education. Transition theory highlights the various ways that veterans' prior experiences and cultures impact how they engage in higher education.

**Personal Internal Adaptations-** Veteran personal adaptations when emerging from a combat zone and the military were not seen to be instantaneous. Veterans described their adjustments as a process that was to be continually experienced. These adjustments, in some cases, were even unwelcomed.

Its like, you still don't realize you are home. You still don't realize you are home. In fact, as soon as you get back, your kind of like, "This isn't right for me." You kind of want to be in that hurry up and go sort of mentality, always on edge. There is something pleasing about having the adrenaline rush about being on edge. I don't know what it is, but adrenaline just genuinely feels good to have that edge. While you are at home, everything moves slow. (Personal communication, December 2, 2010)

Veterans indicated that they were fully conscious of how they were personally adjusting to their new environment and how their military and combat experiences affected that. The statement above is indicative of how veterans moving into higher education consciously revisit combat adaptations and ramifications. While the difference in their "personal pace" and that of higher education will not ultimately determine how they assimilate into campus culture, it is continually important to realize the significance of this event for veterans and the personal adaptations they make to it on a daily basis. The notion of "combat tempo" helps to illustrate how these experiences stay with veterans.

As evidenced by the findings, the notion that the initial immersion into a combat zone can jar veterans to the point of feeling "inhuman" tells us something about the potential lasting impact of the adjustments that were made. What takes three months of training to prepare for

(combat) and still shocks the system can perhaps be described as wholly traumatic. The implications for future adjustments into civilian life are clear. In essence, their struggle to find "routines that make them feel human" in the midst of war can certainly continue when they arrive back home. How do they begin to feel fully human again? These transitions unto themselves seem to be more durable than many other experiences and are an evident theme (i.e. "combat tempo") in the veteran responses surrounding combat experience. Consequently, transitioning out of this mentality when leaving a war zone remains an understated aspect of the lasting effects of war and is an important consideration framing the understanding of veteran experiences in higher education.

Personal External Adaptations- One means of adjusting to higher education that veterans rely on is the existence of a student-veterans group. As was emphasized as a continuing theme in their responses, the Northeastern veterans population sites a reliance on each other in adapting to higher education. According to transition theory, an important aspect of understanding how individuals make transitions is being able to identify the social support systems of the environment they are entering (Schlossberg, 1981). As veterans enter higher education, many will be making transitions into both academic/college culture and back into the civilian world. Their reliance on the veterans group as a constant system of support has emerged from the data. Veterans mentioned actively seeking other veterans, as well as professionals to speak with.

So, we (veterans) just sat around and used to talk about that. Just try to be amongst other soldiers that can sort of relate. I felt like my out was sitting down and just talking. Just being able to get it out, get it out somehow. You feel a little better. Like tonight, I might go back and start having flashback and stuff. You just gotta...you just deal with it (Personal communication, December 2, 2010).

For many veterans, their experiences did not allow them to relate entirely with those that did not share their unique experience. As such, many veterans would often seek the company or conversation of other veterans in order to fulfill this need. The group gives veterans an opportunity to talk about both their experiences in the military and in combat, as well as in higher education. In this way, they veteran groups serves not only a personal means of adaptation, but serves a practical purpose as well, acting as a social readjustment tool.

In the group, veterans are able to find not only commonality in their experiences in combat, but also commonality in how they perceive and experience the college environment.

So me and (name removed) got together with a couple of the other guys and we formed a veterans group. We still don't know what the hell we are going to do. Mostly we just sit there and drink and tell bullshit war stories...It's good for us because they are all the same issues. None of them have... You know, we can't relate, most of us, to any of these kids (Personal communication, January 10, 2011).

While many veterans expressed the need to speak with other veterans about their experiences, they did not mention this need as a prohibitive social barrier in adjusting to academic culture or civilian life in general. According to transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981), seeking out veterans as an outlet for dealing with previous traumatic experiences is an active adaptation to their current surroundings. Whereas in their "previous lives" in combat zones they were living a shared experience with those around them, they now find themselves at a large institution possessing a highly unique background. The findings show that this background will separate them in many respects in higher education. This aspect of their adjustment back to civilian life and into higher education seems to be a necessary social outlet for this population and one that is generally experientially selective. The identification and expression of this need

by veterans is an indicator of the impact of this transition into higher education for them. As this adaptation can be viewed as both individual and institutional, it remains essential to our understanding of this phenomenon.

# **Cultural Capital**

While the effect of the movement into higher education for veterans can be understood partially as series of transitions and adaptations, it is helpful to recognize the vast cultural implications for these individuals as well. To this end, Bourdieu's (1974) theory of cultural capital and other aspects of critical theory, including concepts of exclusion and mattering, bring to light important aspects of how combat can affect veteran engagement in higher education.

Lamont and Lareau (1988) define Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital as, "institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behavior, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion," (p. 156). The Bourdieu (1974) theory of cultural capital is not, however, completely focused on how status is gained by individuals or groups. Rather, like this research, the theory focuses on the cultural structure itself and how status is defined within that structure. Much has been written on academic culture and the characteristics of traditionally aged college going students. The traditional students' backgrounds, motivations, and experiences have been shown to differ greatly from the non-traditional or adult students (Kasworm, 2008). This is certainly the case with regard to the veteran student population. The student-veteran population bears greater similarity to adult students than traditional college going students. Perhaps more so than adult students, however, their backgrounds, experiences, and motivations will act as their identities;

they are the cultural capital that they possess. This is to say that the complexity of an adult student's circumstances cannot always be simply defined as the result of their age difference from traditional students. Student-veterans, on the other hand, identify with their status as veterans of military services and, in this case, combat. In this regard, cultural capital and critical theory provide a necessary depth to our understanding of how veterans experience higher education.

# **Cultural Value and Identity**

Defining Cultural Value and Identity- LaMonte and Lareau (1988), in defining how cultural value is assigned, stated that cultural legitimacy is attributed to specific practices in contrast to other practices: the value of each element of a system being defined in relation to the other elements of the same system. In this respect, veterans spoke about their experiences in higher education with a measure of sensitivity in how it was valued in comparison to that of traditional college going students, as well as to society in general. Their responses confirmed that they are keenly aware of the popular sentiment towards them and the work that they have done at war in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Waning support for the wars still affects them. Opinions expressed in class or on campus that run counter to what they or other servicemen tried to accomplish affects how they feel they are accepted. This feeling, as stated, is accentuated by their perception of the political history of the region and the city. How veterans internalize negative opinions can affect how they engage not only in the classroom, but also in most every aspect of their higher educational experiences.

Negativity has been seen to originating from both members of the faculty and other students. When commenting on the tendency of others to express their opinions on the war, as well as on veterans themselves, one participant stated:

(K)nowing the effect it has on people (veterans) and trying to think of a way to impress upon the student body that you don't have to be afraid of student-veterans (is important), but there are probably some topics that you shouldn't...Tread lightly with," (Personal communication, January 10, 2011).

These opinions, while perhaps stated with the intent to comment on the situations surrounding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in general, have the ability to be personalized by veterans. The perception of a lack of inherent value in their experience, whether expressed outwardly or merely interpreted through cultural signals is not uncommon for veterans. Even though the perception of societal valuation was not wholly pervasive amongst the populations sampled, the notion that their experiences in combat are open to judgment is certainly felt by Northeastern veterans.

So, academics was easy. Its what I had to do, just like what you have to do for the military. But the thing is that some the people were unsympathetic or, I don't know how else to describe it. But that was the problem. It was more of mental problem, more of a mental challenge (Personal communications, December 1, 2010).

Seemingly also not uncommon are the culturally ignorant or neutral expressions toward veterans. Not all of the opinions on the war or on veterans themselves are expressed in a negative way. Often, veterans sited genuine curiosity on the part of individuals they interact with academically. However, while veterans stated that they understood the inquisitiveness of others, sometimes others' motivation or sensitivity can be called into question. One veteran stated;

It (identity as a veteran) would come up in conversation and then everybody wanted to know my opinions about the war. So that was pretty much the extent of

the conversation. It wasn't so much, "How did this affect you?" It was more, "How can you re-enforce my existing beliefs about what is going on?" (Personal communication, December 16, 2010)

Some of the veterans interviewed have a clear sense of how they would prefer to be approached regarding their experiences. Obviously, this experience is highly unique within higher education and has no precedent for much of the current college going population. The highly personal nature of a combat zone experience manifests itself in how veterans think of themselves on a very individual level. The findings have shown that the pride that veterans feel with regard to their services serves as a core notion of their identity and personal value. While they all worked within intricate and interconnected units, soldiers work constantly in combat to keep themselves alive (Terry, 2011). The civilian worlds' evaluations of their accomplishments at war are understandably internalized because of the very nature of the experience. As a result, questioning seems to have been interpreted not only as an evaluation of the experience of veterans, but also a lack of understanding and an intrusion on the part of non-veterans.

Another side of these encounters that influences how veterans define their identities within the higher education experience entails a withdrawal on the part of those they interact with. Veteran noted that their colleagues were sometimes intimidated when they learned of their experience in the military. While not considered an outwardly negative reaction to learning that a fellow student is a veteran of combat (negative being categorized as a more aggressive questioning or judgment of the experience), withdrawal on the part of the non-veteran seems to elicit a similar reaction. Withdrawal, quite obviously, is not reaction that signifies endearment to another; it too can be seen as a value judgment on the experience of others. As cultural capital theory rests on the concept that the value of one's experience is defined in relation to the

experience of others, this interpretation of the combat experience, even in the most neutral sense, seems mostly negative amongst veterans (Bourdieu, 1974). Veteran responses indicate that they do participate in a valuation of their own experiences in relation to those that they interact within class and on campus. One veteran noted that either neutral or negative responses forced him to question himself and how his experience continued to affect his perceptions of his college going and civilian experience:

So, here I go again, going back to how I grew up and being independent. I knew how to take care of myself, but I never knew how to make the dreams go away or, you know, or have people take me seriously when I am asking for something simple at the school (Personal communication, December 1, 2010).

It is important to reflect on one aspect of this statement at this point. "...I never knew how to make the dreams go away or, you know, have people take me seriously when I am asking for something simple at school." In a discussion of how veterans define their identities in relation to the greater population of students, statements of this nature provide the observers with a glimpse of the pervasiveness of combat experience. As discussed, withdrawal has been sited as a reaction to both neutral and negative reactions from peers and administrators on campus.

However, withdrawal seems not to be an end to the experience but a continuation of the personal adjustments that are made by veterans transitioning back into the civilian world/higher education. "Making dreams go away" or the feeling that one is not being taken seriously indicates a level of personal, psychological, and emotional adjustments that are ongoing for some of these students. As indicated by this veteran, it is not seen as a source of strength, but one that continually separates them from other non-veterans. Combat is an experience that is never forgotten, but perhaps can also be re-interpreted and processed differently the further one is

removed from it. As veterans continue to make sense of their experience, they will be engaging in the re-establishments of their identities; who they are as students, who they are as veterans, and how these two roles relate to one another.

While even neutral responses have a tendency to be interpreted negatively, veterans have, in some instances, responded by drawing strength from their experience. That they are veterans, while perhaps misunderstood by others, is a matter of pride for many. Their experience remains a source of value for them. In fact, pride is sited in both the broader experience of accomplishing their missions, as well as the lessons learned in the everyday routines and struggles. Veteran responses indicate that the day-to-day skills they acquired from the military and in combat have given them abilities they feel in some ways set them apart from others. Even though maturity is also sited as reasoning for a greater aptitude within education, references made to specific skills, thought patterns, and experiences are ways in which veterans were able to take a positive out of an otherwise traumatic experience. The data has shown that these notions of pride serve as a source of value for veterans when making the transition into higher education. The value of their identity rests on the notion that the knowledge and experience gained in the military and combat has left them with fully devoted friends and skills that are unattainable for many others.

Even those that expressed displeasure with the idea or experience of war were able to put these fillings aside when it came to those they served with.

I am bitter towards the whole idea of war, but I am not towards the brotherhood of like being a soldiers and knowing that I wont let any of my soldiers down. I am certain they wont let me down. Together, we just have to do what we can (Personal communication, December 2, 2010).

While much has been written on the effects of the traumatic experience of war, matters of pride and brotherhood are often left to creative or biographical representations (Mailer, 1948; O'Brien, 1990). When we view these effects as part of the cultural identity of veterans that manifests itself in how they engage in higher education, we can begin to understand the effects of societal valuation of the combat experience on veterans.

So we must then ask what these experiences mean for our understanding of veteran cultural identity within a higher educational context? McLaren (2002) defined cultural identity as, "the particular ways in which a social group lives out and makes sense of its "given" circumstances and conditions of life," (p. 74). McLaren (2002), like Bourdieu (1974), feels that definitions of culture are inherently used to understand structures of power and value. Succinctly, interactions with their colleagues, faculty, or administration are impactful in how student-veterans engage in their education and to how they think their experience is valued on campus. The ability of this population to find significance in their experience is influential in how this population will ultimately integrate within higher education.

Experience in combat is a prism through which veterans view their future experiences. As their statements contained within this analysis and throughout the interviews conducted show, their combat and military experiences are a part of who they identify themselves to be. Entrance into the dominant forms of higher educational culture, with respect to how it applies to this identity, is simultaneously the result of the effect combat has on them, as well as how the greater college community perceives their experience to have value. Ultimately, veterans are forced to negotiate these two vastly different perceptions, the external and internal, in order to truly engage in higher education.

Separation- Bourdieu's (1974) theory hypothesizes that the cultural capital possessed by different populations within these structures represents a "resource for power which is salient as an indicator/basis of class position," (LaMonte & Lareau, p.156, 1988). Those that are identified or identify themselves with dominant cultural norms are allowed access to a greater amount of higher education resources- culturally, socially, and academically (LaMonte & Lareau, 1988). On the other side of this equation, those that do not identify with dominant cultural norms are summarily excluded from higher educational resources.

Veterans will, for the most part, enter or re-enter higher education as adults. This fact notwithstanding, veteran statements regarding how they remove themselves from the dominant college culture shows elements of what Bourdieu (1974) termed "self-elimination". "Self-elimination" is when members of the "dominated culture" adjust their aspirations because they are not at ease with certain social norms (LaMonte and Lareau, 1988). In other words, veterans may be unable to fully engage in higher education because they find the culture unwelcome or because they are unable to relate to traditional students. Veterans expressed a difference in motivation, self-image, and overall attitude regarding the aims of higher education. When the culture on campus does not meet up with their personal philosophy, veterans separate themselves and carry out parallel academic careers; ones that engages perhaps in only the classroom and actively avoids other aspects of college life. "Self elimination" or separation in this respect is not the result of an adverse confrontation with dominant college culture but the perception of a personal incongruence that cannot be (and perhaps is not desired to be) rectified. Again, the data has shown that veterans' inability to find connections between their experiences and those of

traditional college going students results in their conscious separatist behavior. Consequently, the manner in which they are able to integrate and engage in higher education is limited by this reaction.

Marginality and Mattering- Similar to the Bourdieu's (1974) concept of cultural legitimacy, Schlossberg's (1989) theories of marginality and mattering allow us to view emergent themes in how veterans spoke about being accepted. Schlossberg (1989) theorized that every time a transition occurred for an individual, there was the potential for feelings of marginality. Essentially, the greater the difference between the new role and the old role for the individual, the greater the potential is for feelings of marginality.

Within this theory Schlossberg (1989) provides a definition for what it means for institutions to make students feel like they matter. Mattering is not simply a feeling of acceptance or rejection, but serves as an influential motivating factor in human behavior (Schlossberg, 1989). As such, the degree to which institutions can create cultures where students feel as if their presence, engagement, and ultimate educational fate are significant, the greater chance they stand at full systematic integration.

Several instances emerged in veteran testimonials where it appeared the university had the opportunity to re-enforce a feeling of mattering but was perceived to have fallen short. Perhaps the most common instance of veterans expressing feelings of marginality was during the new student/freshman orientation. Veterans often express frustration with the applicability of the majority of topics addressed at orientation. While it was understood that the purposes orientation serves are essential for acclimating freshmen to campus life, many of these same issues do not concern veterans in their twenties.

Veteran statements regarding the inapplicability of orientation are not just about the specifics of freshmen orientation. They are about how veterans perceive the institution valuing their presence on campus. The current veteran population is a known quantity to university administration. While the university has taken several steps to serve veterans, there are clearly areas that veterans are made to feel as though their identities as veterans are ignored. Within the context of this research, this is a seminal idea with regard to the problem of practice being addressed. It would seem that the current veteran population within higher education is being dealt with as though they belonged to the traditional student population. While there have been accommodations made on their behalf, higher education appears to have taken only cursory steps in attempting to meaningfully engage student-veterans on campus. True integration should be informed by a deeper understanding of their experiences as individuals, and as a population as a whole.

According to Schlossberg (1989), rituals are part of transmitting the message to students that they matter to the institution. Orientation is clearly one of these rituals where institutions invest in student success. By being lumped in with traditional freshmen and having basically all of the issues that apply to them ignored, veterans perceive that the college has not taken the essential steps to ensure their full integration. As the transition from the military and combat zone experience emphasizes the differences between current and past experiences for veterans, the feeling that their sacrifice is unappreciated becomes more influential in their perception of the institution. Much like the devaluation of one's cultural identity, veteran perception of this kind of slight can result in separatist behavior and even full withdrawal.

On a far less formal level, veterans noted having trouble interacting with college administration, a problem they viewed as both personal and institutional.

If I was gonna deal with somebody at the registrar's office...There were some people there that were like, "We don't care if you served or not, this is what you have to do." And I was like, "Why are you talking to me like that?" So, there was definitely an adjustment period in getting used to asking civilians for help which if I were to follow orders on a military base, it would have been done for me. You just follow a chain of command and things get done for you (Personal communication, December 1, 2010).

While this statement displays elements of a veteran having difficulty transitioning out of "combat tempo" or the expectations of military culture (action vs. inaction), the interaction is indicative of the incongruence some veterans perceive between their background and higher education. Put plainly, veterans indentify these interactions as a lack of concern for their engagement or success. Again, while the concept and perception of "mattering" are more abstract than specific instances of personal transition, veteran interpretation of basic institutional interactions impact how they engage with the institution.

Aside from these instances, veterans generally felt positive about the investments made by the university in helping them to succeed. On the forefront of these institutional efforts was Northeastern University's participation in the Yellow Ribbon program.

We got out of there and we heard on the radio about the Yellow Ribbon program and all the new schools that were listed. So I went home and looked it up, and Northeastern was on there, and I was like, "Oh." So I sent out my application and, you know, I am not kissing the school's ass but this has always been a veteran friendly school…So, it was really, really good that I got in. I was real fortunate. I can't not be happy with it, I can't not happy with the situation I am in. Of the private schools, this was the only one that pays for everything (Personal communication, January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

By partaking in the program, the university is seen to go further in showing veterans how important they are to the Northeastern community. In contrast to the experience in orientation, this initial impression is influential to how veterans engage even before their arrival on campus.

While initial impressions are important, messaging and directed programming are required to maintain this sense of mattering to the institution (Schlossberg, 1989). One way Northeastern has sustained this is through their creation and support of a student-veterans group. Efforts by the institution that target a specific and underserved population are recognized and appreciated by veterans. Statements by veterans show that this one small effort by the university, the approval of the creation of a campus group, has indicated to veterans that they are valued on campus. Perhaps as much as their presence, veterans suggests that the group was created so that veterans were able to give feedback, as well as influence the development of future dedicated campus services. In this way, veterans not only see that the college community values their presence, but they value their opinion as well. Literature on previous Vietnam War veterans has shown that a lack of engagement initiated by the university results in a fully separated subculture of students (Horan, 1989). This simple effort shows a measure of progress in how universities conceive of veteran populations on their campuses. As exhibited by this research, however, these efforts do not go far enough.

It is worth noting that the veterans group is not perceived to merely exist, but it is also seen to work. One participant stated, "...that is why I am kind of glad I got us recognized finally as a recognized organization. I mean, we are actually doing some good stuff, which I am really happy about." (Personal communication, March 23, 2011) The veterans group is perhaps not only thought of by these veterans as a means to separate from the greater campus community. Rather,

the group keeps them involved within their particular community, as well as connected to the administration of the university itself. Involvement and a sense of connection are the core concepts of engagement in higher education. They are the essence of mattering. The university's administrative support for the student-veterans group and the group's ability to purposefully function are essential to establishing buy-in from veteran populations and are indispensable to the conclusions of this research.

### **Addressing the Primary Research Question**

It is important to return to how these findings apply to the primary research question. This research has asked, "How does experience in a combat zone in Iraq/Afghanistan affect veteran transition and engagement in higher education?" This question has best been answered by the content of veteran combat reflections, as well as their thoughts on how their own worldviews have changed.

When examining veteran descriptions of their experiences in combat zones, the emergent themes of cultural capital value and transitional adaptations converge again to highlight the essential aspects of this phenomenon. The role of how combat experience impacts both identity and adaptation within a higher educational context informs our recognition that this experience has an appreciable effect on how veterans are able to engage in higher education. Because this experience is highly individualized, it is essential to examine nuances in the words of the veterans themselves exactly how they perceive combat affects their lives in higher education.

In addressing the types of changes combat zone experiences impart, veteran recognition of the existence of a change seems like a logical place to begin. One participant stated:

Some guys have the whole movie experience in getting hit with IEDs and I definitely am glad I didn't have to go through that. I am glad I was in a profession that I didn't have to put people back together but as far as that changing me, yeah, I would like to say it didn't and I kind of tell that to people. But, yeah, ultimately, it probably did. Like when you asked me getting into "did I have a transition" it almost made me laugh because it's like, oh well. But when you get out, that transition is when you realize, "Wow, you are really fucked up." The totality of circumstances (Personal communication, March 23, 2011).

Whether directly involved in combat or indirectly by serving in a combat zone, the experience is illustrated to be all consuming for veterans. "The totality of circumstance" describes both the experience at war and how this experience stays with veterans upon returning home. The statement above shows the recognition that the lives of veterans are forever changed by their experience and that it does not affect just one aspect of their lives, but all they do and will endeavor to do in the future. Another participant spoke about how his experience stayed with him in a similar manner:

I was more unsure of who I was before I went. I mean, it is difficult to sleep because sometime I have nightmares. You know, I have nightmares about it. I talk to my girlfriend and said, "You know, I have nightmares. Do you think that is wrong?" Probably because I can't let go of something. I did what I had to do to get home to my family and friends. The minute you see muzzle flashes and you know someone is shooting at you, and then you fire and you go and do a search and all you see is bodies. So, I definitely don't feel bad about that. That guy was trying to take me out. But it teaches you (Personal communication, December 1, 2011).

These statements support the notion of how this experience stays with veterans and affects how they approach their lives upon their return home. "It teaches you."

Combat Effect- Personality, Identity, and Worldview Changes

**Personality** 

As the interpretation of combat zone experience varies by person, exploring a number of specific impressions described by veterans helps to arrive at a clearer picture of the meaning of the entire experience in the context of higher education. When veterans were asked specifically if they felt combat had changed them, and if so how, many first mentioned personality differences. Some accounts show that veterans were able to pinpoint how it is their personalities had changed as a result of their experience.

No, it's changed my life in many ways. Yes, I do have a better appreciation of what I have and what I want. You kind of set a more defined goal of what you want to do but it changes you. I don't know about other veterans you have talked to but for me, it changed my personality. My wife says that since I came back in 04', I am short tempered and stuff like that. I react to things differently. She hates going to the food store with me because I treat it like a combat operation (Personal communication, February 11, 2011).

This passage exhibits a significant understanding by the participant of who he was before he was deployed and the changes that have occurred as a result of his experience. The temporal nature of this recollection is indicative of the maturity and a heightened sense of identity for some veterans. In this way, they are not merely subject to a one-time impact of their experience. This participant and others like him are constantly working through the changes that have been experienced in their lives. They recognize the transition that they are currently going through, how it is a significant part of who they are and perhaps who they will be in the future.

#### **Worldview Changes**

I kind of just take life worth a grain of salt. I don't really get worked up about anything. I've kind of learned that you can really get through anything. So...so, I think in that regard it has changed me (Personal communication, March 31, 2011).

These words speak not only to specific personality nuances, but they perhaps represent something more significant to the veteran. The participant above is stating that his experience changed how he processes stress or adverse situations. While this perception can be seen as the result of a life or death experience and may also include a significant worldview change, this particular statement also indicates a change in personality as it pertains to a specific thought process and reaction to a situation. This process evaluation is further informed by one's experiences prior to engaging in combat.

In addition to a greater worldview change, the resulting sense of confidence and selfawareness are two major effects of this experience that directly relate to how one engages in higher education.

I had more experience meeting challenges and overcoming challenges than I did before. So, school just posed another challenge, just a longer and more drawn out one. So I took it more seriously having been in the military (Personal communication, December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010).

These responses do not seem to indicate casual references to accomplishments of the past, but a personal investment that is now part of who veterans see themselves to be.

I guess I feel like I have grown up a lot just in those few years. Kind of grew up real quick and also just have a whole different kind of view of the world, like I said before. Just, now I don't take things for granted as much (Personal communication, April 1, 2011).

This statement represents a further opportunity to view the impact on a person's sense of identity and how their worldview can change. Perspectives on meeting challenges, reaction to adverse situations, or valuing life in general are ways that veterans spoke about their combat zone experiences positively influencing their transitions back into civilian life and into higher education. As literature on the experience of Vietnam veterans in higher education highlights

(Horan, 1990), not all previous groups of veterans have felt this way about their experience in combat zones. Vietnam veterans were consistently viewed to suffer the adverse psychological affects of war (Figley, 1980). Veteran participants of this research, on the other hand, have clearly been able to draw a measure of personal gain from the traumatic experience, as the statements above would indicate. How veterans conduct themselves in the classroom, with other students, as well as on campus in general is invariably influenced by their self-identities and their personal ethos. The individual positive effects, such as focus, work ethic, as well as the respect for authority and themselves, are qualities gained from combat that stand to greatly influence their approaches to higher education. If, as Northeastern veterans have indicated, the experience can be viewed as constructive in these respects, then perhaps this should influence how higher education views this population as well.

#### Sense of Pride

Perhaps not as encompassing as the change in a person's worldview, but certainly as important to a veteran's sense of self, is pride in their accomplishments while in the service. In a very specific sense, the veterans in this study felt that they provided service towards a positive end for the wars they fought in. They fought to defend their country and to give the opportunity of choice to those that never had it.

I would say I was able to, on my first deployment, go ahead and secure an area and give people, who had not been allowed to vote for their leader, who had been oppressed...To go to allow them to go and elect freely who they choose, to provide kids a life that I grew up in, or at least try to, for families to go out and do whatever it is they feel like doing, you know, if they want to leave an area because they choose to and not because they force to, well then so be it. To clear an area for a kid to play soccer, to provide water, or electricity, that was an accomplishment (Personal communication, January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

For many within civilian society, particularly within higher education, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are an issue for examination and debate. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities called the Iraq and Afghanistan War era the "revival of college campus culture clashes," (2005). For veterans, these wars aren't only a subject to be examined by those that have not lived through it. They identify pride in themselves and those they served with in their recollections of their deployments. That veterans are able to draw from this sense of pride is extremely important to how these experiences as a whole can be understood by educators. While neither the circumstances, nor all of the outcomes of war can be considered wholly positively, the ability of veterans to identify their accomplishments as a source of good within themselves speaks not only to how they continue to process this, but also their potential as students. While it still stands to be established how their experience will impact academic achievement, veteran testimonials have shown that they view at least part of their experience as a strength in how they will engage in higher education. A life and death experience seems to put the importance and relative stress of higher education in perspective. While they approach their education as though it was their job to be there, they are able to realize that the stresses imparted by academia are insignificant in comparison to their previous life experiences. Their clarity of purpose and the approach they take to their roles as students appears to be, at least partially, the result of their experience in combat zones.

### **Combat Effect- Negative Ramifications**

A discussion of how combat is interpreted to affect engagement in higher education for veterans would be incomplete (as well as being an injustice) without a thorough consideration of the negative impacts of the experience. Veterans spoke intensely about the effects of their

combat zone experiences, often mentioning the personal ramifications. These included flashbacks, nightmares, depression, psychiatrist visits, and medication prescriptions. Enduring a combat zone experience often takes emotional, physical, and mental tolls that seldom leave veterans.

Yeah, there is the obvious stuff. Physically, mentally, it just drains you...I don't know. It is tough to see both sides of...its kind of hard to explain. When you are there, you are like, "Oh man, this sucks. Why am I here?" You start to doubt things and that kind of takes a toll on you after a while (Personal communication, April 1, 2011).

Clinical literature has highlighted the rise in PTSD diagnoses among Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans since troops began returning home (Hoge, et al, 2006; Roehr, 2007). Not all negative impacts, however, are encapsulated by the clinical definition of PTSD. It seems likely that veterans may be left with emotional or psychological scars that do not fall within this broad diagnosis, but are significant to the individual nonetheless (Terry, 2011).

The veterans interviewed described some of the negative impacts of their deployments both from a personal perspective, as well as how they impacted their adjustment to higher education. While the personal perspective, in and of itself, is not necessarily the focus of this research, their descriptions are still relevant to the broader picture of how combat is perceived to affect higher education integration. When recalling the experience in combat, one veteran lamented that he was not able to rid himself of the memories, by stating:

If I had to do it all over again, I probably would not only because I don't want absorb all of the...the things that have been brought upon me, in my mind, all of the things that I have seen, is just bad all around...Because you can't erase. You can't go in your mind and mouse click and right-click-delete all of those images and stuff out of your brain... (Personal communication, December 2, 2010).

Veterans carry with them the negative images of their experience. Even though the impact and ramifications may vary, the occurrence is still significant for the individual. The internalization of the damaging effects of war is as prevalent among this population as the pride veterans took in their accomplishments. The negative effects of combat are described in a few pointed ways. While not cited as a purely negative internalization of the experience, the "combat tempo" or "combat speed" was mentioned to produce instances of social incongruence between veterans and civilian administrators or students.

Some veterans feel that the urgency of war remains with them in their entrance into higher education. Within the context of higher education, the adjustment is drastic. Interactions with administrators, faculty, and students are colored by urgency felt on the part of the veterans; "Why will no one help me?" This urgency is then reflected back negatively upon them; "Am I crazy?" "Slow down. Relax. You aren't in combat anymore. Things will happen." (Personal communication, December 1, 2010; Personal communication, December 2, 2010). These expressions were viewed as a hangover from or the result of the aforementioned "combat tempo". These impressions force veterans to negotiate their position within higher education in a far more intricate way than traditional students. Many veterans realize that what once was their way of life no longer translates to the civilian world. As a result, temporal awareness of the personality changes that accompany the experience in combat is heightened. While veterans mentioned distinct personality changes they have seen in themselves, it is the overall responsereflection interaction that is most relevant to the inquiry of this research. This is to say that the negative impact of war as it relates to the identity of veterans is further amplified by the reception within higher education. The result is what many veterans see as a personal

incongruence. Their personalities upon returning from war must now be negotiated within the culture of higher education. This dynamic represents yet another level of adjustment veterans must make in order to fully engage.

## **Combat Effect- Summary**

Ultimately, when considering how to describe the experience in a combat zone affects veterans as they engage in higher education, it is the inherently dual nature of their experience that must be understood. Life and death, positive and negative, pride and resignation were all conflicts that existed within each of the veteran interviews given for this research. It may be difficult to make simultaneous arguments while analyzing the data that veterans are both vulnerable and possess higher achievement qualities in a higher educational setting. It seems that with regard to the conclusions of this research the two need not be mutually exclusive. This is especially true when we are speaking of the effect of combat on how veterans approach their roles as students in higher education.

That's one thing I have noticed, especially walking around campus compared to a lot of other kids, I guess just confidence. Even in class, I sort of know...I say what I mean. I am more direct. I don't know, I guess, I just carry myself differently. And then, on a deeper level, the whole life and death experience. That, I think, has affected me somewhat too. I mean, I guess death's not that...I wasn't exposed to tons of death or anything like that, but you know, I just kind of realized early on at 19-20 I was exposed to that possibility. There was a few suicides in my unit. And you know, we lost one guy actually on my first deployment, but...So, you are kind of exposed to that and you just kind of...I don't know...I think most 22 or 23 year olds don't really realize. You know, they know death can happen but they don't really think about it at all. So for me, its kind of something I have accepted and acknowledged and, I don't know, I guess it makes me a little bit different compared to all of (the other students)... (Personal communication, March 31, 2011)

According to the veterans interviewed, what makes them stronger and more focused than other students can also serve as a personal distraction and barrier to full educational engagement. Their sense of purpose in accomplishing their goals is a direct derivative of serving in the military. These veterans also mention confidence in the way they carry themselves both in class interactions, as well as on campus. As evidenced by the statement above, this confidence may not only be the result of simply having been in the military. It may be that veterans have evaluated their experiences in a far more temporal manner.

As veterans compare their former selves in the civilian world with their post-deployment perspectives, it would seem as though many are able to see personal, emotional, and psychological development. The application of these experiences will provide veterans with, as they see it, a distinct advantage in the classroom and beyond. Their ability to focus, their mental capacity in stressful situations, as well as their general worldly experiences place them on a different plain than traditional college students. Again, it is important to note that it is not only the experiences themselves that can be seen as beneficial to veterans, but their ability to analyze how their experience applies to their current roles as students that matters.

### **Analysis-Conclusion**

Veteran interviews have provided important insight into their own perspective on the adaptations made when moving into higher education, as well as how their experiences are interpreted to either clash with or find value in campus culture. Understanding the full impact of experience in a combat zone on veterans is a highly complex endeavor.

Veterans' concept of their own identity can prohibit them from being fully engaged in higher education as a result of exclusion based on the value their background or experience.

Since their deployments, many veterans have focused on education as their payment for their service to this nation. Their commitment to the completion of their degrees is clear from their responses. The perception that the experience at war now poses as a barrier to their realizing the full benefits of higher education could potentially result in frustration, resentment, apathy and resignation. In a nutshell, if veterans do not believe that, because of how their experience is valued by higher education, they have a chance at fully succeeding or are forced to start at a handicap to other students, their own investment in their education stands to be less.

This analysis has shown that veterans will make several levels of adaptations when moving into higher education, along with negotiating their own experiences in combat internally. There are two aspects to the experience in a combat zone that are essential in understanding veteran engagement in higher education: the notion that this highly unique experience cannot be fully understood by non-veteran students, administrators and faculty, and that this experience is internalized by veterans to the point that "combat veteran" is who they define themselves to be. The dual nature of these adjustments, supported by the notions of adaptation and identity, help give greater clarity for how administrators can understand this experience.

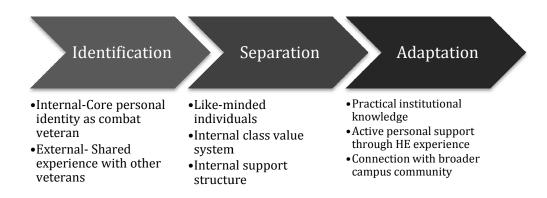
An understanding of the impact of experience in a combat zone, as well as how it is manifested in higher education, is essential to how we attempt to engage the current veteran population. Effective engagement should begin with respect and acknowledgement of the gravity of this unique experience. While those of us that have not also endured a combat deployment can only speculate on the true meaning of these experiences, it is our institutional efforts can convey our intention to endeavor to comprehend the myriad of factors that influence educational engagement for veterans. The cultural capital concepts of identity and legitimacy should inform

how these efforts are constructed. If properly considered, higher education stands to help veterans achieve not only their educational goals, but also full reintegration into civilian life.

# **Chapter Seven: Student-Veteran Integration Theory**

The analysis provided in the previous chapter gives rise to the broader conceptual implications of this research that warrant specific attention. A student-veteran integration theory represents a summation of the most important findings of this research and provides a framework for student-veteran programming for the Iraq and Afghanistan veteran population. Student-veteran integration theory has been drawn from the themes highlighted in the veteran interviews conducted for this research, as well as principles from both theoretical frameworks. Specifically, this theory is based on notions of *identification*, *separation*, and *adaptation*. This chapter will provide a breakdown of student-veteran integration theory, how the data contained herein serves as the basis for the principles of the theory, and what the theory means for future student-veteran research and programming.

Figure 2: Student-Veteran Integration Theory Graphic



### Identification

This research has been based on the idea that veterans are profoundly changed by their experience at war, a notion that has been verified by the data collected. An examination of how veterans perceive these changes has shown that this experience will never completely leave them and is to a great extent internalized by the veterans themselves. Their experiences in combat zones alter not only how they see themselves, but also how they view the external world.

The concept of identification within this theory is based on these changes and how they have been expressed both internally and externally. Identification from an internal perspective is as it would seem; it is about how veterans view their core identity as a result of their experiences. Essentially, veteran identification with their experiences at war serves as a basis for how they see themselves. Veterans have expressed feelings of pride, remorse, loss, and resolution in reflecting on what their combat experience meant to their lives. These internal changes are very much a part of who they are when they engage in their roles as student entering college.

From an external perspective, veterans expressed identification with other veterans through a commonality of experience. An often-understated aspect of the veteran population is that the cultures that surround the branches of the military vary greatly. For example, how the Marines approach training, discipline and (for the purposes of this research) education differs greatly from that of the Air Force or the Army. When it comes to adjusting to their experiences in higher education and finding a common ground in their past experiences in the military, veterans have indicated that their differences in branches are negligible. What seems to matter is their status as veterans and their common bond in service. While veterans did not indicate that

this was based in a supposition of service in combat, their responses seemed to point toward an assumption of a deeper connection.

The veteran connection lies in a bond of common experience and identification with that experience. Veteran statements re-enforce the depth of circumstance that underlies the importance of external identification. The connections that veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars will make, however, rest not simply in a common background. Whether speaking about combat-veterans or simply a veteran of military service, the notion of a "shared experience" amongst veterans serves to bind this population.

Student-veteran integration theory considers identification to be the first pillar of effective engagement practices. In creating effective programming, acknowledgement of the changes imparted on veterans as a result of their experiences, as well as the need for these individuals to connect with others they can relate to is an essential first step. As this research has shown, student-veteran communities can serve as a means of support for many personal and social adjustments that must be made when moving into college. Both critical and transition theory influence the concept of identification in that it serves not only as an institutional recognition of the circumstances that veterans have been subject to, but also provides a tangible support structure in the form of the presence of other veterans.

#### **Separation**

As identification is based on the internalization of combat experiences and the recognition of these experiences in others, separation emphasizes the differences between student-veterans and the majority of the college-going population. It should be noted that within the context of this theory, separation is not meant to advocate the division of veterans from the

rest of the college community. Separation is the recognition that veterans view their experiences in combat zones (as well as in life and death situations) as a disconnecting experience from traditional college-going students; its what makes them unique, not outcasts.

As experience in a combat zone has been shown to possibly affect how a veteran conceives of their own identity, this experience also changes one's worldview and perspective. Whether it is their ability to easily endure the stresses of academic work or their employment like approach to their roles as students, veterans experience in a life or death situation has provided them with mature perspective that they identify in other veterans. As was the case for many Northeastern veterans, their identification with each other was also a bi-product of their inability to identify with the rest of the greater student population.

Veteran identification with one another is not only based in a common experience or internalization of their experiences. Rather, they see other veterans now holding familiar views or beliefs, as well as having similar approaches to their roles as students and life in general. These commonalities serve as another source of identification for individuals. In highlighting veterans as "like-minded individuals", the concept of separation implies more than simply bring people of similar backgrounds or experiences together. It is based on the notion that students-veterans tend to view their current experience through a similar lens. Separation dictates that veterans should be allowed to process the transition into and through higher education collectively in the instances that they are unable to find this support elsewhere on campus. As higher education endeavors to provide this group with greater access to campus resources, understanding the inherent bonds that have been formed by their shared views and experiences is essential to engaging this population in a meaningful way.

Drawing from cultural capital theory criticism by LaMonte and Lareau (1988), this theory is based on notions of cultural capital value being established in a relational context. That is to say that the value of a dominated class's capital is based directly off of the standards set and practiced by the dominant class. In contradiction to this idea, LaMonte and Lareau (1988) posit that "cultural practices are not all compared continuously and equally to one another...Consequently, the relational answer is insufficient," (p.158). They go on to state that "dominated groups" tend to have their own standards and practices within which they find their own value. These separate systems can be greatly autonomous and valuable to a particular population.

The concept of separation is drawn from this notion that veterans find value within their own community. Their capital is not always valued in the civilian world. While this was not expressed as an overwhelming barrier to full participation in college, it was continuously sited as a distinctive feature of their experience. How relationships develop and support structures form within this separate community may influence higher rates of participation by veterans within the greater campus environment. The notion of separation within this theory is based on the inherent value veterans see within their own community and the potential for that value to translate into greater engagement in college for these students.

### Adaptation

Adaptation is a further recognition of the potential for transformative impact on members of the veteran community. The nature of support veterans are able to provide each other appears to be multi-dimensional. From the personal and social aspects, veterans are able to empathize and support each other in ways that civilians may be incapable of. Cultural support is provided

within veteran communities in the continual identification of their similar experiences and points of view. Identification and separation are based on the idea that veterans are experiencing many of the transitions out of the military in the same way. Adaptation builds on these core concepts and further addresses them in the context of higher education institutions.

The findings indicate that traditional support structures, ones they may have been familiar within their lives before deployment, no longer retain the same value. This conceptual framework suggests that the ability of veterans to identify and communalize with other veterans directly affects how they adapt to the challenges posed by their movement into higher education. From the very practical, such as the location of campus offices and institutional navigation know-how, to the emotional and psychological, veterans support each other's adaptations in a very real way. Theirs is an experience that involves both external and internal actors consistently throughout the time spent in college. No one is as familiar with the nuances of the veteran experience like veterans themselves.

While comprehensive veterans programming on college campuses includes a myriad of personnel and departments across institutions, in light of the concept of adaptation, veterans themselves would seem to serve as an ad hoc resource in this regard. Veteran statements throughout this research indicate that veterans see opportunities to serve other veterans from the very outset of their time in school. By providing an information channel directly to the resources that veterans need, veterans themselves become a hub of information for those entering and moving through college. Being out front of the obstacles of the experience serves as another manner in which student-veterans can ease the transition into college for other veterans.

As it would seem that combat is experienced both individually and collectively, the

transition into higher education made by veterans mimics this duality. Adaptation brings to light the notion that as veterans work through personal and group challenges simultaneously, they become their own resources in their transitions into college. Adaptation refers to the very real functions of the veterans community in negotiating the common pitfalls and celebrating the successes of their members. It is both internally and externally functional. As veterans indentify with each other in these communities, as well as value in their collective experiences prior to and in higher education, they will be more equipped to make the adaptations necessary to participate fully in and complete college successfully.

#### **Conclusion**

Student-veteran integration theory provides a framework for the important aspects of veteran integration into higher education communities. Their integration begins on a very individualized plain, moving into a distinct veteran community, and eventually out into greater integration with the rest of the institution. Like this research, student-veteran integration theory is aimed at emphasizing the value of a particular experience to a unique population, and then using this understanding to inform practice. This concept is essential to our understanding of how veterans will move into higher education settings. It provides not only a deeper understanding of how their experience will apply to a higher educational context, but also proposes ways in which higher education can systematically address the obstacles they will encounter in moving through college. Perhaps more than anything, however, this framework implores administrators to be more thoughtful in designing veteran programming. Implied in student-veteran integration theory is the call to go beyond simply having an office or a VA representative on campus. Colleges and universities should foster meaningful connections amongst veteran communities on campus, both

within the communities themselves and connecting them with the wider campus.

### **Chapter Eight: Conclusion**

# **Implications for Practice**

The purpose of this research has been to inform how we prepare for the imminent return of veterans to college campuses. Higher education has been called to reassess how we address veterans as much of the research that exists on this population is either outdated or has yet to address the current population in depth. This research is an attempt to better understand how combat-veterans will experience the entrance and movement through college. In an effort to fulfill these goals, two questions have framed this research:

Primary: How does experience in a combat zone in Iraq/Afghanistan affect veteran transition and engagement in higher education?

Secondary: How does veteran perception of institutional climate regarding the value of their experience affect how they engage in their education?

These questions were designed to clarify the meaning of a particular experience to a highly unique population, and make that experience relevant to higher education administrators. The more we know about how veterans approach college education, their needs, and their perception of how institutional culture and programming contributes to their experience, the better we will be prepared to serve them. These ideas are essential to programming for the current student-veteran population and need be considered thoroughly.

This concluding chapter will discuss the overall findings of this research as they apply to higher educational programming for veterans, other new ideas, as well as ways to improve our existing structures. In an effort to accomplish this, how this research fits within the greater body of current student-veteran literature presented, along with the implications for future research,

will be discussed. Additionally, a confirmation of program approaches recommended by the American Council on Education (2008) and DiRamio et al (2008), will be presented in light of the findings of this research. Finally, this chapter will conclude with discussion of the importance of the findings to future student-veteran research.

### **Confirming and Furthering Current Literature**

How much progress has higher education made in the ways that it serves veterans and what do we know about this particular population? These questions that are asked by current literature address what the return of veterans means to college campuses. Early studies show that successful student-veteran programs feature a designated point of contact for veterans, affords them a space to gather, and/or offers them a hub of information for all of their internal (higher education) and external (federal) needs (ACE, 2010; Terry, 2011). One key theme is the need to provide directed access to information in helping veterans to navigate federal and institutional bureaucracies. While a variety of methods are considered for veterans within this body of literature, with still many iterations surely being developed across the country, the general principles of specifically tailored information, space, and specialized personal are salient (ACE, 2008; ACE 2010; DiRamio, et al, 2008; DiRamio & Spires, 2009).

Confirming Practical Recommendations- This research is in agreement with these basic principles of effective programming for veterans, as well as specific programs sited in the literature. Three services in particular are identified and recommended:

• Student-Veterans' Affairs Specialist- One of the salient features of veteran commentary on the services they were and were not provided was the consistent need for access to

accurate information. Veterans are subject to at least two large bureaucratic institutions: higher education and the federal government. Negotiating these two systems can be difficult for even the most informed. When seeking out specific information from university officials, veterans stated that there was no single point of contact or office that they could refer to for all of the issues that encounter during their matriculation. In light of this, and in accordance with previous research in veteran engagement in higher education (ACE, 2008; DiRamio, et al, 2008), the creation of a designated student-veteran affairs professional is necessary for institutions to fully acknowledge and address the needs of this population.

- Veteran Orientation- This research is in agreement with previous studies that have recommended the creation of a veteran specific orientation (ACE, 2008; ACE, 2010; DiRamio, et al, 2008). Veterans expressed frustration, feeling that their attendance at freshmen orientation only highlighted the lack of veterans' services on campus, the university's lack preparation for their presence, and how different they were from the majority of students at the university. Veteran specific orientations not only acknowledge veterans as a special needs population, but they also serve as the university's recognition of issues veterans face that separate them from traditional college going students.
- Peer Mentoring- Veterans indicated that the presence of other veterans was essential to
  the adjustment associated with leaving a combat zone experience. The creation of a
  veteran-peer mentoring program is therefore recommended in light of this and in
  confirmation of previous research (ACE 2008; ACE 2010). The creation of a veteranpeer mentoring program, while confirming prior research, is further justified by the core

findings of this research, student-veteran integration theory. Veterans rely on each other for personal adjustment in negotiating their prior experiences with their current one. They also will move through higher education in a distinctive way, one much different than traditional college going students. As such, this program will help them serve as practical, social, cultural, and emotional resources for each other in the successful completion of college.

It should be noted that even though this research is in agreement with the basic principles behind the practical recommendations of previous research, these recommendations are obvious. Current research by the ACE (2010) has shown that many of these programs have been implemented on campuses across the country. The research contained herein differs from these practical recommendations in that is calls for a re-conception of the nature of the services that should be provided, rather than dictating what the services should be. While it will be of continual importance to develop directed access to information and space for veterans on campus, these services do not address the issues that surround true integration into the wider campus culture. This student-veteran population will necessitate more creative and integrative approaches from higher education administrators. Services that do not acknowledge the unique background of this population, the need for identification within their own community and the difficulty they will have with moving out into the wider campus community stand to not only under serve them, but may also result in a general balkanization of the population as a whole.

Current literature also addresses the general demographics of the population of veterans returning from the Iraq and Afghanistan War to college. While it was not the purpose of this research to draw upon specific personal characteristics in order to reach conclusions as to how

they affected the educational experience for veterans, Teachman's (2007) study on the educational attainment of an All Volunteer Force was found to be applicable to the circumstance of many of the veterans that took part in this study. Teachman (2007) wrote that the circumstance in which many enlist in the military today differ greatly from those during the World War II or Vietnam Era. For one, there currently is no conscription. Socioeconomic factors, as well as education aspirations, act as primary factors in enlistment for the current military (Teachman, 2007). These notions were echoed throughout the veteran interviews conducted for this research.

This research differs from the conclusions offered by Teachman (2007) that veterans of an All-Volunteer Force will continue to have lower educational attainment than that of their non-veteran counterparts. This research and other studies have shown that if veterans are afforded the proper services, they can and will succeed at a higher rate than non-veterans (Park University, 2011). Further, their success rate notwithstanding, veterans have shown high levels of motivation and discipline in their approach to higher education (DiRamio et al, 2008; Field et al, 2008). The veterans sampled for this research are a testament to this and are not unique in this mindset. Motivation is an important concept when considering how this population differs from the traditional college-going student.

While demographic research is used in order to give a clearer picture of the population that is currently returning to higher education en masse, this research has separated itself in that it considers the experience in a combat zone to be an impactful characteristic of this population that warrants consideration. The findings of this research discuss the various impacts this experience can have, both positively and negatively. Combat zone experience, like racial

background or gender, is a characteristic that needs to be considered in a more in-depth and personal manner. Even though it has not been studied as deeply as previous educational attainment or socioeconomic background, the combat experience remains a legitimate paradigm when examining this population.

DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) authored the most influential work with regard to this research. Their research attempted to dissect the veterans experience moving out of the military and into higher education. DiRamio et al (2008) provides a deconstruction of the veteran experience in order to highlight areas where higher educational programming can be more effective. By utilizing a transitional theory framework, the veteran movement out of the military, into civilian life, and into higher education shows a veteran population in the midst of a series of personal adjustments, not the least of which is dealing with their experience in combat. Research by DiRamio et al (2008) provided the most in-depth attempt to understand the veteran experience in higher education to date and provided several avenues for deeper exploration into the phenomenon.

How an experience in a combat zone can positively or negatively affect an individual is an essential consideration for the future of veteran programming as over two million have served overseas since September 11, 2001. This research has shown that veterans do, in fact, acknowledge their experience in combat zones as a factor in how they experience higher education. The loss of friends, the personal and emotional impact of combat itself, as well as the drastic shift in cultures all ought to be considered when engaging this particular population. This research has shown that veterans not only acknowledge their experience in combat as a separating factor between themselves and the rest of the college-going population, but also an

experience that is deeply internalized. Veterans are not merely moving from one experience to another. Much of who they are when they enter higher education is the result of their military and combat experience. This research has attempted to bring to light some of the impacts that these experiences have on a veteran's role as a student. In this respect, the current body of literature on student-veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars has been furthered as a result of these findings.

Alternative Approaches and Future Research- The methodology chosen for this research looked to address veteran perspective on a particular phenomenon. Following a phenomenological methodology (Flowers, Larkin, & Smith, 2009) individual interviews and a focus group were used to gain a detailed perspective on how veterans saw their experiences in combat zones impact their leaving the military and enrolling in higher education. While this approach was suitable for the primary and secondary questions that framed this research, a longitudinal study with veterans over the course of their college careers would expand on these findings. The research of this paper addressed the veteran perspective on their own experience and the cultures they encountered at one point in time. A longitudinal study may allow for examining how veterans' services affect student-veterans as they progress through college. This approach would allow for multiple data points to be incorporated, such as veteran academic performance and persistence.

Another method that may be effective in further understanding how this population approaches education would involve an ethnographic design, preferably with researchers from varying disciplines. The basic aims of an ethnographic study would be the same. However, the study could approach issues of trauma, as well as psychological and emotional adjustment in a

clinical manner. This study would serve to greater inform how universities design veteran support services, and as well as further our understanding of the lasting effects of combat.

As the greater body of research on Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans is still developing, future studies that are designed to address the experience from a phenomenological perspective may further breakdown the population. Examples of ways in which the population can be further examined fall mainly into demographic categories like age, gender, or race. However, student-veterans from different branches, rank, and previous education attainment levels can also be further examined within this population to provide another level of analysis. While the suggested methods are primarily qualitative in design, quantitative methods that examine demographic composition, overall attainment measures, and enrollment will be important to continually consider as well.

This research has provided a deeper understanding of how experience in a combat zone affects how veterans engage in higher education. As this population continues to enroll in greater numbers, it will be important to continually revisit and rethink how we program for these students. The realization that this is not a small or one time event in higher education will be important to remain conscious of. These alternative methods and future study suggestions will allow administrators to continually adjust to the changing needs of this population.

#### **Conclusion**

We must ask then what the veteran return from combat truly means for higher education.

Are colleges prepared for this particular population? What do higher education administrators consider important in their preparation for veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan War? With

regard to this population and their utilization of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, even though the receipt of direct government payments to institutions of higher education may seem fairly straightforward, this research has shown that colleges and universities have a far greater role to play than simply cashier. It is essential for our approaches to this population to be thoughtful and informed in their conception. The proposed conceptual framework and the words of the veterans themselves beg that greater attention is paid to the current population of student-veterans.

Several instances over the course of this research stand out with regard to what may be wrong with how colleges plan or do not plan for the return of veterans to campus. The requirement of Northeastern veterans to attend freshmen orientation is most notable for this researcher. Not only is their required attendance symptomatic of higher education's tendency to put all students into the traditional undergraduate student mold, but it also remains a blatant example of our lack of effort in attempting to understand the circumstance that surround veteran enrollment. While recollections of the combat experience and the impact it still has on student-veterans were shocking to listen to, how this population felt their backgrounds were being ignored may have been the most influential point during that data collection as it relates to the conclusions of this research.

The need for parallel services for student-veterans should not be understood as the call for the creation of a separate university. Rather, this population requires that higher education take additional action in order to integrate them into the wider campus community. Similar to other minority student populations, student-veterans will find that their background limits their access to the full resources of higher education. Our programs are ways in which we attempt to rectify educational access deficiencies, ensuring that they provide a pathway *into* the university,

rather than along side it. Parallel and separate services should be the beginning of integration into the university. They are not and should not be the end goal. This is an important idea to continually consider.

Ideally, student-veteran integration theory will serve as a framework for programming approaches that address not only the veteran population, but other minority groups as well. Many of the same themes highlighted in this theory, especially identification and separation, are found to apply to the experiences of minority students. Perhaps more so than any other idea, this theory recognizes that perhaps our current structures are ill equipped to address the ever-changing composition of our student populations. The experiences of the participants of this research serve as further examples of how we apply one construct when attempting to integrate and engage an extremely diverse population. Our rituals and structures need to be rethought. This research and the theoretical implications contained herein are an example of what universities are doing incorrectly and what is needed to fix them.

Student-veteran integration theory was developed in light of very personal veteran responses regarding their educational experiences. This framework reflects an intimate understanding of the factors that challenge veterans in higher education, as well as those they find aid in their engagement. Student-veteran integration theory is clearly not the end of this conversation, but should be considered a starting point. Deeper analysis will continually be required if we are to meaningfully engage these students on our campuses. Veteran experiences at war and in college will continue to change over time. The idea that we as administrators will never fully understand the impact of their experience should drive the continual inquiry into this population.

Veteran responses reveal a great deal about the veterans themselves, but what they can also serve as a reflection of the values of our society and institutions. This population has sacrificed greatly. That they are now entering higher education institutions in greater numbers where support structures remain absent is, in a word, tragic. This research was conceived in an effort to not only assist in their engagement, but to bring to light this aspect of societal neglect.

The more we know about how veterans approach college education, their needs, and their perception of how institutional climate and programming contributes to their experience, the better we will be prepared to serve them. This study remains important not only for the effectiveness of the services higher education provides, but also for the duty of our social institutions to aid in the readjustment of an all too often overlooked population. While the results of this research will provide higher education with important information for serving this particular population, it stands to have perhaps far greater implications for our understanding of all underserved populations.

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