

RESEARCH

"I Just Don't Like to Have My Car Marked": Nuancing Identity Attachments and Belonging in Student Veterans

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Feelings of belonging factor importantly in college student retention and degree completion; for student veterans, these feelings are strongly associated with college adjustment. The experiences of student veterans in higher education continues to be an area of inquiry, as favorable expansions to GI Bill benefits ease access pathways and institutions adopt support services specific to their veteran and military populations. Despite a wealth of research, explicit investigations into identity conflict and cultural incongruence as aspects of student veterans' postsecondary experiences are less frequent. This article shares findings from the interview portion of a three-phase, mixed-methods study with student veterans currently enrolled in, or recently graduated from, four-year colleges and universities in the United States. The study investigated the degree to which 10 diverse undergraduate student veterans aligned their identities as similar to typical military service-members, student veterans, and college students using an adapted approach from Mael and Tetrick's (1992) Identification with a Psychological Group instrument. Results reveal complexity in their identity alignment as well as an acute awareness of the identity negotiations they experience in repatriating from the military into civilian culture largely and higher education culture specifically. The findings support previous scholarship by reiterating the multifaceted nature of identity association for student veterans and underscoring the importance of recognizing diversity among student veterans. Finally, this study adds uniquely to veterans studies research by attending to the ways some student veterans deliberately curate identity performances with faculty and college peers.

Keywords: student veterans; belonging; identity; adjustment; higher education; qualitative

Student adjustment to college has a significant impact on retention and degree completion (Credé & Niehorster, 2012; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Gray et al., 2013). This adjustment involves a number of factors beyond academics and includes psychological, personal, emotional, and social components (Chickering, 1969). Students' sense of belonging is one particularly critical component as they engage themselves in the various intellectual and social aspect of college life (Bowman et al., 2019; Freeman et al., 2007; Zumbrunn et al., 2014). Bowman et al. (2019) explain, "[t]hese students' college experiences then shape their sense of belonging, institutional commitment, and/or academic achievement, which then lead to persistence intentions and decisions" (p. 275). Belonging, however, does not just happen or not happen; belonging evolves along a spectrum, responsive to individual experiences and subject to changes in a student's dispositions and identities. While forming an initial sense of belonging is important to college students' early adjustment experiences, maintaining that sense of

belonging is just as imperative for persistence and degree completion.

For veterans entering or reentering college, feelings of belonging are especially important to college adjustment (Bagby et al., 2015; Eakman et al., 2019; Elliott et al., 2011; Livingston et al., 2011; McAndrew et al., 2019). In the last decade, higher education scholars, educators, and administrators have learned a great deal about supporting student veterans' adjustment and belonging. Some research has examined the transitional experiences of student veterans through the filter of the potential challenges they may bring with them—particularly combat and trauma exposure as well as visible and invisible injuries and disabilities—and how those challenges might serve as obstacles to their adjustment, their academic success, their persistence, and their degree attainment (Eakman et al., 2019; Ness et al., 2015; Schonfeld et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2017; Wagner & Long, 2020; Young, 2017). Alternatively, recent research has focused more on investigating student veteran resilience,

coping mechanisms, and flourishing as a way to promote positive adjustments from a strengths-based perspective (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Hinton, 2013; Institute for Veterans and Military Families [IVMF], 2019; Sullivan et al., 2019; Umucu et al., 2019). Consequently, college campuses who seek to be "veteran friendly" may put in place services, spaces, and programs to ease the transition and improve student success (e.g., tutoring, designated academic advisors, veteran centers, as well as improvements in counseling and disability services). While student support services like these may address some needs, most do not address concerns regarding cultural incongruence that can also impact student veterans' sense of belonging (Atuel & Castro, 2018; Carne, 2011; Livingston et al., 2011; Smith & True, 2014).

Qualitative studies with student veterans have revealed that some veterans do not feel they belong in or are understood by their postsecondary institutions because of their military experiences (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Bagby et al., 2015; Elliott et al., 2011; Hinton, 2012; Jones, 2013; Olsen et al., 2014). Student veterans, shaped in varying degrees by their military service, may bring forward organizational cultural values with which they may have to contend as they separate from service and rejoin the civilian world (Carne, 2011; Killam & Degges-White, 2018; Messerschmitt-Coen, 2019; O'Herrin, 2011; Smith & True, 2014). This reintegration process has been described by scholars as "reverse culture shock" (Livingston et al., 2011; Wade, 2017), "converse culture shock" (Carne, 2011), and "cultural repatriation" (Hinton, 2012) among others. Higher education researchers and administrators should not dismiss the concurrent cultural readjustments many veterans undergo and the influence of those readjustments on their tripartite identities as servicemembers, as student veterans and as students (Carne, 2012; Association for the Study of Higher Education [ASHE], 2011; Hinton, 2012; Jones, 2013; Li, 2012; Mullins, 2013; Naphan & Elliott, 2015). Likewise, student veterans would benefit personally and academically from opportunities to develop and sustain feelings of belonging (Durdella & Kim, 2012; Eakman et al., 2019; Elliott et al., 2011; Livingston et al., 2011).

This article shares interview data from a mixed-methods study investigating undergraduate student veterans' self-assessments of their group identity affiliations with military servicemembers, with student veterans, and with college students. The 10 undergraduate student veteran participants range in personal, service-related, and college demographics, and they discuss the degree to which they affiliate their own identities to those of typical servicemembers, student veterans, and college students. Data from these interviews support prior work engaging student veteran identity that finds the identity negotiation of student veterans is more complex than we may think (Atuel & Castro, 2018; Killam & Degges-White, 2018; Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). Further still, this study's findings reveal that many student veterans are acutely aware of the identity negotiations taking place as they move from the service through college and into post-college employment. Additionally, interview

participants offered insight about particular aspects of *veteranness*,¹ including gender and age, combat experience, and service length that generate a more comprehensive and complicated picture of how veterans conceptualize veteran identity. Finally, this article offers recommendations for how veteran studies scholars, postsecondary institutions, and student veterans would benefit from better understanding how the variations of identity (re)orientations may impact student veteran transitional experiences, senses of belonging, and adjustment.

Literature Review

Research concerning the experiences of student veterans is a specific area of inquiry within veterans studies, a growing interdisciplinary field "devoted to developing a clearer understanding of veterans and the veteran experience in the past, the present, and the future" (Craig, 2015, p. 113). Student adjustment to college has a significant impact on retention and degree completion (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). This adjustment involves a number of factors beyond academics and includes psychological, personal, emotional, and social components (Chickering, 1969). Improving our understanding of the experiences of veterans as they work into, through, and out of higher education programs has been an essential concern of colleges and universities across the nation since the end of World War II. In continuation of that history, a growing collection of contemporary research provides valuable knowledge about programs, course designs, policies, pedagogies, student support services, campus personnel training, and the strengths and contributions of our more recent student veterans in two-year colleges, universities, and graduate programs. To summarize adequately the history of student veteran research in the Post-9/11 era is beyond the scope of the present project, but those interested should review syntheses provided by Barry et al. (2014), Blackwell-Starnes (2018), and Jenner (2017). For this project, the review of extant scholarship will focus specifically on research about the transitional experiences of student veterans with explicit attention toward understanding how aspects related to cultural incongruence and identity factor into their experiences.

Student Veterans' Adjustments to College

Research examining student veterans' adjustment to college is diverse in scope, adjustment factors, methodology, and conceptual framework. One line of inquiry within this area attempts to uncover challenges in student veterans' adjustment processes, often in consideration of additional risk factors such as deployments or combat exposure (Livingston et al., 2011; McGuffin et al., 2019; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009), trauma (Smith et al., 2017), service-connected disabilities (Flink, 2017; Wagner & Long, 2020), stressor severity (Sullivan et al., 2019), or a combination of physical, mental health, or behavioral outcomes attributable to their military service (Eakman et al., 2019; Ness et al., 2015; Schonfeld et al., 2015). While some of this scholarship considered veterans' *academic* adjustment (e.g., motivation, achievement,

self-regulation, self-efficacy) as the primary domain indicative of the broader adjustment experience (Eakeman et al., 2019; Ness et al., 2015; Wagner & Long, 2020), some researchers assessed adjustment under other domains of functioning including social, emotional, and sense of belonging.

Social adjustment is a particularly relevant domain for student veterans' adjustment to college, as this includes social support, help seeking, and belonging. In their study with 157 student service members and veterans, Bodrog et al. (2018) employed the College Mattering Inventory (Tovar et al., 2009) to assess mattering as "perceived sense of belonging in academic environment" (p. 114). "Mattering emerged as the strongest predictor of college adjustment... More specifically, mattering mediated the relationships of the social (campus and social connectedness) and cultural (emic view of self-positive and negative) dimensions in predicting college adjustment" (Bodrog et al., 2018, p. 118). From their study with 588 student veterans, McGuffin et al. (2019) determined that veterans, combat and noncombat alike, reported lower social adjustment but higher personal-emotional adjustment than civilian students (p. 220), but veteran status did not significantly impact institutional attachment (p. 218). Importantly, however, their findings also revealed that after controlling for additional personal factors, older age, being married, and having a higher income also predicted weaker college adjustment.

Contemporary research in this area generally focuses on examinations of potential challenges to social adjustment (e.g., trauma, combat, psychiatric symptoms) as well as coping mechanisms student veterans have developed to aid them in their social adjustments. Both sets of findings are relevant here. Young (2017) developed the Veteran Adjustment to College (VAC) scale, a 12-item, Likert scale of questions addressing specific experiences (particularly in the domains of belonging and support) reported by student veterans during their adjustments to college. Tested with a sample of 391 student veterans across three public universities, the scale showed good reliability and validity. Young was also able to correlate the scale with PTSD and depression symptomologies; student veterans with PTSD and depression scored lower on the VAC (p. 20). Similarly, Smith et al. (2017) determined that trauma, rather than veteran status, better predicted college students' sense of fitting in from their investigation that included 61 undergraduate student veterans (p. 78). The authors offer that because student veterans with trauma likely expect to experience some adjustment difficulties, they may be better positioned to compensate for and persist through them compared with civilian students.

How might trauma exposure yield improved resilience and a higher propensity for successful adjustment? In their study with 128 student veterans and military students, Sullivan et al. (2019) attended to meaning making of participants' military experiences and stressor severity related to their academic, social, and emotional adjustment in college. Based on scores from Holland et al.'s (2010) Integration of Stressful Life Experiences Scale (ISLES), "[p]articipants who

derived more meaning from stressful military experiences tended to report more positive adjustment to college, regardless of stressor severity" (Sullivan et al., 2019, p. 6). Unlike deficit-based research that seeks to uncover challenges student veterans experience during their civilian reintegration or college adjustment, Umucu et al. (2019) was interested in identifying factors that contribute to student veterans' well-being and success. When examining personality traits (the "Big-Five") in relationship to flourishing, Umucu et al.'s (2019) findings suggest that "personality traits may directly affect flourishing for student veterans. More specifically, [they] found that emotional stability is the strongest predictor of flourishing" (p. 9). Thus, making meaning from military experiences and a greater sense of emotional stability may positively correlate to successful social adjustment in the college environment.

Identity Attachment, Cultural Incongruence, and Belonging

For student veterans especially, cultural incongruity has been strongly associated with college adjustment (McAndrew et al., 2019). Yet, fewer studies have explicitly examined student veteran identity, cultural incongruence, and sense of belonging in college. The Association for the Study of Higher Education's (ASHE) 2011 report, *Crisis of identity? Veteran, civilian, student*, provided a comprehensive look into identity and cultural incongruity among student service members and student veterans. The report considers the varying degrees by which student veterans may be shaped by their military service and, as a result, the "additional layer of complexity of intersecting identities" (p. 56) that becoming a college student evokes. Using Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) Multiple Dimensions of Identity model, the ASHE (2011) report includes a framework of four typologies students with military experience might inhabit, depending upon the veteran's commitment to his or her military identity and the student veteran's awareness of the identity conflict (p. 60). "Ambivalent" student veterans (i.e., uncommitted to a military identity and unconcerned with developing a new one), "skeptical" student veterans (i.e., strong military core with little desire to reconceptualize), "emerging" student veterans (i.e., connected to their military identity but recognize it "may not serve effectively in other contexts"), and the "fulfilled civilian self" (i.e., a balanced core identity) make up the four typologies in the report (ASHE, 2011, p. 63).

Subsequent studies, particularly smaller qualitative studies, have helped add to what we know about identity attachment, conflict, and belonging among student veterans. Jones' (2013) case study of three student veterans focused on identity negotiations during higher education from which three themes emerged: adapting to civilian identity, higher education's role in the transition, and services for student veterans. Jones asserted, "[t]hose who end their military service are leaving more than just a job; they are leaving a way of looking at themselves in the world, and all that that entails, good and bad" (p. 13). Alschuler

and Yarab (2018) conducted semi-structured focus group interviews with seven student veterans from a large urban university. One of Alschuler & Yarab's emerging themes about their participants' experiences focused on "managing multiple identities," some of which may result in "competing demands" (p. 58). One immediate identity that requires managing is that of college student, and some research has specifically examined student veterans' connections to their college student identities. Using the Tropp and Wright (2001) Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale, Lostutter et al. (2020) examined the relationship between veteran identity and college student identity in conjunction with alcohol use and psychiatric symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety, and PTSD). They concluded, "[v]eteran college students do not strongly identify with typical college students. Rather, even after matriculation to college they retain a strong identity as a military veteran" (p. 37). Interestingly, both nonveteran and veteran participants with stronger college student identity attachment reported fewer psychiatric symptoms. Similarly, Lostutter et al. (2020) suggested more research to determine if developing stronger attachment to one's college student identity acts as a "protective factor" against psychiatric symptoms like PTSD, depression, and anxiety for student veterans (p. 38).

Identity conflict and incompatibility can generate obstacles to student veterans' sense of belonging on campus. Student veterans in Bagby et al.'s (2015) study reported feelings of "establishing a new identity" (p. 227) and challenges with negotiating their veteran identities and experiences with civilian faculty and peers. Feeling alienated on campus can also occur because of poor experiences with faculty and peers, especially experiences that explicitly disregard or disparage veterans or service members (Elliott et al., 2011). As Elliott et al. explained, "Although we cannot tell how frequently student veterans felt offended in class, it is clear that when it did occur, it was quite distressing" (p. 288). Another theme that emerged from Alschuler & Yarab's (2018) study was the veterans' "sense of belonging and involvement on campus" (p. 59). Similar to previous research, their student veterans reported being "socially isolated from their civilian classmates" (p. 59) and preferred bonding with other student veterans. One theme from Hunter-Johnson et al.'s (2020) qualitative study with student veterans also fell into familiar "us versus them" territory; relevantly, one participant commented about "the strength of military identity" (p. 9) as the reason for feeling closer to fellow veterans and, at the same time, further from nonveteran peers. From the available research, the importance of improving our understanding of student veteran identity is clear; however, more attention should be paid to understanding the greater nuances of how student veterans understand the veteran identity, how they negotiate their identities, and the ways they cultivate institutional belonging.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the broader, mixed-methods study from which the presented interview data derives sought to

examine the learning and writing experiences of student veterans in four-year universities and colleges, specifically those who had advanced into upper-division writing courses and coursework in their major fields of study. Given that veterans' identity attachments and negotiations, particularly those shaped by their connectedness to military culture, can impact these experiences, this study also included the participants' self-reported affiliations with three group identities: college students, student veterans, and military service members.

The findings reported here were generated from interviews with 10 student veterans attending or recently graduated from four-year colleges and universities across the United States in an effort to answer the following research questions: First, how do student veterans report identifying themselves with typical military service members, with typical student veterans, and with typical college students? Secondly, how do student veterans' identities impact their negotiation of experiences with teaching and learning in higher education? The responses and explanations accompanying the participants' self-perceived identity attachments yielded additional insights relative to student veteran identities as multifaceted, dynamic, and autonomous. Further understanding of the characteristics and how they manifest for student veterans during their postsecondary experiences are necessary for higher education faculty, administrators, and veterans studies scholars working to understand and support student veterans in college.

Methodology

The larger mixed-methods study targeted a national population of student veterans currently enrolled or recently graduated from a four-year college or university. The study included an electronic survey during which participants could self-select for participation in phase two of the study: a set of electronic questionnaires assessing group identity attachment using an adapted version of Mael and Tetrick's (1992) Identification with a Psychological Group (IDPG) instrument. Participants completing the three adapted questionnaires could self-select for participation in the final phase, the interview, from which the findings presented herein derive. The study, in its entirety, was approved through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the principal investigator's institution and, when necessary, at respective institutions during participant recruitment. All stipulations governing ethical work with human subjects in research were followed in accordance with National Institutes of Health (NIH) and Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program guidelines.

Participants

Participants in the study included student veterans currently enrolled in or recently graduated from a four-year college or university anywhere in the United States during academic years 2014–2015 and 2015–2016. The researcher sought the greatest diversity of student veteran representation; therefore, the only exclusionary criteria included stu-

dents without military affiliation, students not enrolled during the time of data collection, student veterans enrolled in two-year colleges or vocational programs, and students who graduated more than a year from the time of data collection.

Participants for the study were recruited using three primary methods: in-person at the 2016 Student Veteran Association (SVA) National Convention (Nat Con) exhibitor's hall; electronically through email solicitations to Veterans Services Officers (VSOs), VA certifying officials, and SVA chapter contacts at a collection of colleges and universities across the country; and through referrals by previous participants (snowball sampling). Prior to participating in the study, participants were presented with a consent form embedded within the initial electronic survey. A subsequent version of the consent form was provided and electronically acknowledged prior to the other two phases when participants elected to continue.

From the 137 qualifying student veterans who completed the initial phase one survey, 89 elected to participate in the phase two electronic questionnaires. From the 89 student veterans who completed the questionnaires, 12 student veterans completed interviews, two of which were discounted from the study (one excluded participant previously completed a bachelor's degree prior to seeking a second while the other participant was still active duty at the time of the interview). This left the researcher with 10 student veteran participants from which the data and findings shared here originate.

Procedure

Student veterans electing to participate in phase three of the study communicated with the researcher via email or phone to establish a date, time, and method of interview. Each participant completed a single interview, ranging from 30 minutes to 75 minutes, depending on the level of detail provided by the participant. Interviews were conducted by phone or by Skype and recorded using an external, synchronous application (TapeaCallPRO) or the embedded recording function in Skype. All interview files were secured, downloaded, transcribed manually, and redacted to keep names, places, installations, military operations, and other sensitive information confidential. Audio files were destroyed pursuant to IRB policy and human subjects' protections guidelines.

Data Analysis

The interviews, or cases, were analyzed based on a three-part process: manual review and summative analysis of individual transcripts, computer-assisted coding of individual cases, and cross-case analysis. First, the researcher reviewed each transcript carefully, identifying any key or notable features or responses. A summary was produced for each individual case based on the manual review. Then, each transcript was input into HyperResearch, a qualitative analysis software application that allows for manual coding and computer-assisted analyses. Each case was coded individually. When participants' answers, even if different,

could be categorized similarly, the same code was applied for consistency. For example, participants were asked the following question: "On a scale of one to five, how would you rate yourself as being like a typical college student, if five is *exactly like a typical college student* and one is *not at all like a typical college student*?" The participants' answers, even when different, were coded as *Numeric Response to College Student Likeness* for cross-case comparisons.

Validity Measures

In qualitative research credibility (or truth value), transferability (or applicability), and confirmability (or neutrality) help to measure validity (Creswell, 2003; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sheperis et al., 2010; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Throughout this study broadly and during the interview phase particularly, several measures were put into place to support credibility, transferability, and confirmability of data and findings. Credibility, or the degree to which the researcher represents the participants' experiences authentically, was supported using member checking and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While the researcher made efforts to have each transcript checked and verified by the participants, some student veterans failed to make contact after receiving their transcripts. In the cases of the four transcripts without internal verification, the files were then subject to peer debriefing by the principal researcher and independently by a graduate student. This rendered the truth value, insofar as the participant intended it in the context of the interview itself, as satisfactory enough to include in the analysis.

Qualitative researchers support transferability potential by recruiting an acceptable sample size, saturating data accordingly, making available details about the data collection and analysis processes, and providing participant profiles (Sheperis et al., 2010; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Additionally, contextualizing a qualitative study's findings with published scholarship in the field and/or with comparable participant populations also generates opportunities for transferability. In addition to clearly articulating collection and analysis processes and providing participant snapshots (see **Figure 1**), the researcher also positions this study's findings within the context of similar work in the field (see "Discussions and Recommendations").

Achieving confirmability means not eliminating but reflecting on and taking steps to mitigate potential researcher bias during the analysis process. To ensure research subjects were familiar with the researcher's position, introductions to the researcher's background were disclosed in the survey, questionnaire, and interview data collection. During interviews, impromptu clarifying questions were asked to ensure the researcher gathered information and perceptions about the participants' experiences, leaving less room for researcher interpretation. To mitigate potential bias during the analyses, the researcher employed single case and cross-case analysis, ensuring the participants' experiences were represented as authentically as possible (Sheperis et al., 2010).

Name ¹	Branch of Service	Length of Service	Military Occupational Specialty (MOS)	Combat ² ; Saw Engagement ³	Major	Classification
Brendon	Army	15 years	Petroleum supply specialist; gunner; Scout; transportation manager	Y; Y	Biology with 7-12 teacher certification	Junior
Frank	Army	3 years	Combat engineer	Y; Y	Criminal justice	Junior
Laura	Air Force	14 years	Micro logistics	N; N/A	Business	Senior
Madilyn	Army	5 ½ years	Human resources	Y; N	Business Administration	Recently graduated; first year grad student
Manuel	Nat'l Guard	8 ½ years	Unknown	Y; P	Geology	Recently graduated
Nathan	Marine Corps	6 years	Military Police; embassy security	N; N/A	Mass Comm, Radio Broadcasting	Junior
Paul	Marine Corps	18 years	Infantry; instructor (expeditionary warfare)	Y; Y	Organizational Leadership	Senior
Robert	Air Force	8 years	Satellite communications technician	N; N/A	Electrical Engineering	Recently graduated
Stephen	Nat'l Guard	6 years	MP; broadcasting	N; N/A	Journalism	Senior
Victor	Nat'l Guard (now ROTC)	5 years	Unknown	N; N/A	Philosophy	Junior

¹ All participant names are pseudonyms
² Response options: yes (Y) or no (N)
³ Response options: yes (Y), no (N), prefer not to say (P), or N/A (when Combat = N)

Figure 1: Participant Profiles.

Findings

The findings reported here were generated from interviews with ten student veterans attending, or recently graduated from, four-year colleges and universities across the United States to answer the study’s research questions: First, how do student veterans report identifying themselves with typical military service members, with typical student veterans, and with typical college students? Second, how do student veterans’ identities impact their negotiation of or experiences with teaching and learning in higher education? Results are presented using three approaches: a participant snapshot accounting for variances in personal, service, and educational demographics; a set of descriptive statistics regarding participants’ self-reported group identification; and a thematic analysis of what emerged from the qualitative interview data.

Participant Snapshot

To glean transferability and applicability of the student veterans’ experiences reported here, a thorough understanding of the participants is necessary. Student veterans are as unique as any student population, and their experiences, self-reported connections to their identities, and their perceptions are individual and diverse. Though we may be able to draw useful conclusions about student veterans holistically, those working alongside and in support of student veterans must remember that individuality supersedes wide-sweeping generalizations. Service-related and institu-

tion-related demographics for the ten interviewees are summarized in **Figure 1**.

Gender

Of the 10, eight self-identify as men and two self-identify as women. Recent projections by the Department of Veterans Affairs (2017) have indicated women make up 9.4% of the total veteran population (p. vii). On the other hand, the SVA (2016)—the largest organization representing student veterans in the United States—reported that women make up about 27.31% of student veterans on college campuses from its 2016 census (p. 3). In representing 20% of this study’s sample size, the sample of women participants described in this study runs on par with both women veterans generally and women student veterans specifically.

Military Service

In terms of their military service, this study’s participants represent veterans of the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and National Guard. Their time in the military ranges from three years (medically separated) to 18 years, with an average service length of 8.9 years. All participants were enlisted personnel when they were in the military, though one participant, Victor, has gone on to participate in Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) in conjunction with his degree pursuits since separating from the National Guard. The participants’ Military Occupational Specialties (MOS)², the jobs they performed during their service, are also diverse, giving

a wider breadth of representative military experiences. To wit, their experiences with combat deployments and actual enemy engagement also vary. Half of the study's participants were deployed to a combat zone, and of those, three participants (Brendon, Frank, and Paul) experienced active enemy engagement during those deployments. Diversity in military expertise and combat experience when learning from student veterans is essential in ensuring student veterans' experiences, particularly the 63% of student veterans from the Post-9/11 eras, who are not represented as universally combat connected (Student Veterans of America [SVA], 2016, p. 37).

Student Characteristics

The student veterans participating in interviews for this study also represent a diversity in their degree program selections, including humanities, education, the sciences, technology, and business. More often than not, the degrees sought or earned by this study's participants were unaffiliated with and uninfluenced by their military occupational expertise. As this study sought to learn from the experiences of student veterans in major courses and upper-division coursework, the participants were all categorized as juniors (40%), seniors (30%), or recently graduated (30%) with baccalaureate degrees.

Self-Reported Group Identification

During the course of their interviews, the student veterans rated themselves as being "like a typical" military servicemember, student veteran, and college students. For consistency, the participants were asked to rate themselves on a scale of one to five, with five being "just" like a typical mem-

ber of that group and one being "not at all" like a typical member of that group. These quantitative ratings were used during the interview for two purposes: to establish consistency from the electronic questionnaires to the interview for each participant and to establish consistency in the rating system offered across each of the interview participants for comparison across cases. Participants who rated themselves a "one" in response to the questions were coded as having "low" attachment to that group identity, represented visually by the brown-filled cells in **Figure 2**.

Participants who rated themselves a "two" or "three" in response to the questions were coded as having "complex" attachments to that group identity, represented visually by the yellow-filled cells in **Figure 2**. Participants who rated themselves a "four" or a "five" in response to questions were coded as having "high" attachments to that group identity, represented visually by the green-filled cells in **Figure 2**.

Based on a snapshot view of the participants' responses, student veterans' self-reported connections to the military servicemember identity, the student veteran identity, and the college student identity appear diverse. In general, military servicemember (40%) drew the strongest feelings of identity likeness, superseding that of student veteran (30%). Yet, half the participants reported mixed or complex identity connections with typical military servicemembers. The participants' lowest feelings of affiliation are with the typical college student identity (50%). In total, eight of 10 student veterans who participated in interviews reported a complex identity attachment to at least one of the three groups. Thus, student veterans are more likely to show complex identity affiliations than they are to commit to clear like/unlike dichotomies. This finding is supported by the

Name ¹	Branch of Service	Length of Service	Combat ² ; Saw Engagement ³	Major	Classification	Mil ID	SV ID	CS ID
Paul	Marine Corps	18 years	Y; Y	Organizational Leadership	Senior	Green	Yellow	Brown
Brendon	Army	15 years	Y; Y	Biology with 7-12 teacher certification	Junior	Yellow	Yellow	Brown
Laura	Air Force	14 years	N; N/A	Business	Senior	Green	Green	Brown
Manuel	Nat'l Guard	8 ½ years	Y; P	Geology	Recently graduated	Yellow	Brown	Yellow
Robert	Air Force	8 years	N; N/A	Electrical Engineering	Recently graduated	Brown	Brown	Yellow
Nathan	Marine Corps	6 years	N; N/A	Mass Comm, Radio Broadcasting	Junior	Green	Green	Yellow
Stephen	Nat'l Guard	6 years	N; N/A	Journalism	Senior	Yellow	Brown	Green
Madilyn	Army	5 ½ years	Y; N	Business Administration	Recently graduated; first year grad student	Yellow	Yellow	Brown
Victor	Nat'l Guard (now ROTC)	5 years	N; N/A	Philosophy	Junior	Yellow	Brown	Yellow
Frank	Army	3 years	Y; Y	Criminal justice	Junior	Green	Green	Brown

¹ All participant names are pseudonyms
² Response options: yes (Y) or no (N)
³ Response options: yes (Y), no (N), prefer not to say (P), or N/A (when Combat = N)

Figure 2: Group Identification Snapshot by Length of Service.

thematic assessment of their self-reported experiences (see "Thematic Analysis").

Additional findings emerge when disaggregating these responses by some of the military—and student-related demographics—notably, length of service, division of service, combat experience, and student classification. Student veterans with longer lengths of service may feel less connected to the college student identity, as all three participants with service lengths of greater than 8.5 years reported low affiliation. National Guard members are less likely to feel a strong connection to a student veteran identity, as all three participants affiliated with the National Guard reported low attachment to this group identity. No other relevant findings could be drawn after a comparison to other branches of service. Student veterans with combat experience may feel less connected to the college student identity, as four of the five combat-experienced participants reported low attachment. While no clear conclusions emerged about the ways in which juniors and seniors might show particular group likenesses, recently graduated students showed no strong attachments to any of the three groups.

Thematic Analysis

After rating their identity affiliations quantitatively, participants were asked to expound upon the reasoning behind their choices. This information leads to a greater understanding of how student veterans, particularly those further along in their baccalaureate journeys, account for their own identities in relation to others. This study's findings reveal that many student veterans are acutely aware of the identity negotiations taking place as they move from the service through college and into post-college employment. Additionally, interview participants offered insight about particular aspects of veteranhood including gender and age, combat experience, and service length that generate a more comprehensive and complicated picture of how veterans conceptualize their veteran identity.

Military/Veteran Identity Attachments

In considering the participants' military and student veteran identity attachments, two divisions among them emerged: those who position their military and/or veteran identities as a defining part of their personal identities and those who do not. Additionally, the degree to which participants inculcated the military identity or student veteran identity as a core aspect of self may influence the circumstances under which they choose to disclose their veteran status.

Military Self as Core Self

Participants Frank, Laura, Nathan, and Paul all attached themselves highly to former military servicemembers, and, in all but Paul's case, likewise attached themselves highly to their student veteran identities. These four student veterans vary in personal and service demographics, but they all crystallized their military service as part of who they are as individuals. All four declared their military affiliations with certainty and pride, identifying themselves as

prior Air Force, Army, and Marine Corps service members. For example, Frank described his military identity with the telling response, "I'm just like one," and Nathan explained, "Once a Marine, always a Marine." Laura asserted the Air Force was "in [her] blood," something easily recognizable in both the workplace and in college. Additionally, all four of these participants focused on the strengths and contributions their military values and identities had on their success as college students. Self-discipline, focus, maturity, world experience, goal attainment, attention in class, and a refusal to fail were all cited as characteristics and values they derived from their military identities.

Their inculcation of the military identity as core to their own personal identities likewise transferred into their connection to the student veteran identity. That is, a strong association with former is often a strong association to the latter. The only exception to this was Paul; however, from his explanation, his only atypicality to other student veterans was accounted for in his length of service:

I'm a retiree and not just four [years] and out. I spent 18 plus years in the military, so I have a lot more maturity, but then again, that leaves me with a lot more inability to relate in the civilian world.

Importantly, Paul recognized the ways in which his military identity might also cause him difficulties in the civilian world and in higher education. His conclusions about the general incompatibility of a military- or veteran-centric identity with the civilian world was shared by Laura and Frank who both expressed some difficulty during their respective educations. For example, Frank made the following comment: "I think the only thing we have a hard time with is when we are being given instructions that say 'be creative.' No, 'creation' to us is more of, 'Give me the instructions and I will do it...the way you told me to and I will plug in what's required.'" Frank also said his willingness to engage in debate with others, especially his professors, caused some difficulties for him:

Going through the things I had to go through when you're deployed and the things that I've seen and the worlds that I've been in, my worldview is a lot more open... When a professor says something, and I totally disagree with them, I'm the first one to tell him.

Thus, the way Frank, Paul, Laura, and Nathan move in the world as prior military and student veterans, their identities shaped and driven by their military experiences, give them advantages as college students; on the other hand, they can also be the cause of some social and academic consternation even as they progress toward degree completion.

One Part of a Whole

More of the study's participants, six of the 10 were clear to articulate the ways in which their military selves had not become a defining identity for them. Brendon, Madilyn,

Manuel, Robert, Stephen, and Victor—again diverse in both their personal and military demographics—all highlighted their own identity complexity as externalized (i.e., not allowing their veteran status to color how others could perceive them) or internalized (i.e., not feeling distinctly military or veteran). For this group of participants, distinguishing between their attachments as former service members and their attachments to student veterans became more important.

When asked about the ways in which they were like or unlike typical military servicemembers, most of the participants referenced skill sets and traits they developed as a result of being in the military. Like those from the military core group of participants, these six student veterans also highlighted the self-discipline, motivation, time management, organization, and a sense of duty that the military ingrained in them as skills and traits that have benefitted them as college students.

Robert explained, "I kinda feel that coming out of [the military] and having the discipline and the sense of duty and this want to succeed that was kind of ingrained in me; it helped me transition into that program and make sure I could actually handle the work load that was involved with that." Yet, several in this group were clear to articulate their differences, particularly as they related their selves, their identities, and to those of servicemembers. Brendon, for example, remarked, "I don't necessarily separate myself from it; I just don't concern myself with it." Madilyn and Victor showed similar tendencies of deliberately acknowledging feelings of not belonging to the military (in Victor's case) or not wanting to "just" be military (in Madilyn's case).

This attuned sense of identity separation became more noticeable when this group of the participants discussed how they likened themselves to typical student veterans. In some cases, like Brendon and Manuel, this expressed itself as ambivalence, as a lack of concern for the way in which their student veteran status impacted how they navigated their institutional environments. While both admitted to using veterans' services on campus when necessary (often for benefits processing), "student veteran" acted less as an identity indicator and more as a student classification. Other student veterans, like Madilyn and Robert, deliberately avoided taking on the student veteran identity in a way they saw as limiting to their more robust identities. Madilyn:

I only did 5 and a half years, and there's a lot ingrained in me, especially as I was young when I joined. At the same time, I have made it a point to not let myself be narrowed to just "student veteran." I am more than that, so that's why I don't feel completely pigeon-holed into "I'm a student veteran, and that's who I am." Not to dis student veterans, but I feel like I'm more multifaceted than that.

Similarly, Robert remarked, "It's not a shame thing, it's not a pride thing; I just don't like to have my car marked." Importantly, both Madilyn and Robert are careful to clarify their

intentions not to disregard the value of their own military service or slight student veterans but, rather, that they possess complex identities that they believe would be deliberately disabling to their true selves. Victor points out this very concern—about having his identity marked for him—when he describes a social interaction with some civilian peers:

So, if I'm with a bunch of civilian friends, they will usually [say], "Oh that's [Victor]—don't mess with him, he's airborne" and stuff like that. So, sometimes they might joke—to me, it's a bit too much...And I think it makes me feel more like a legend and less like a person, which is irritating, because I feel like I'm less human than everyone else. I recently asked a girl out from my social group, and I think she...it took her a while to adjust to me not being as grand as I'd been played up. It's pretty irritating.

Therefore, one important finding emerging from these interviews is understanding the myriad ways student veterans interpret "student veteran" (e.g., as an identity, as a student classification, as a status) as well as the perceived personal limitations such an identity category might create, including on their ability to repatriate into the civilian world broadly and into college culture specifically.

Identity Attachment and Disclosure

An interesting pattern developed when examining how the participants' articulated their attachments to military and student veteran group identities relative to the circumstances under which they would disclose their military service or veteran status to others on campus. The four participants with military core identities expressed being more likely to disclose their veteran or military service experience willingly and, oftentimes, to advocate for themselves or for other veterans on campus. Paul and Frank both served with their student veterans' organizations on campus in order to improve campus awareness and understanding of student veteran needs and concerns. So, not only did they disclose their veteran statuses openly, they leveraged those identity categories as a way to help repair a campus where veterans might be, in Paul's words, "getting a bum deal at the university." Nathan expressed feeling compelled to disclose his military experience as a way to quickly articulate his capability as a student, to convince faculty to "cut through some of the...kid gloves." While Laura did not specifically address her choices when disclosing her veteran status, she did remark how she felt it was inevitable to avoid in class situations where the veterans were more clearly attentive and focused in class and, at the same time, not hesitant about censuring civilian students about "disrespectful" behaviors like phone use or distracted talking.

Conversely, the participants with less attachment to military servicemember or student veteran group identities exposed the unavoidable nature of disclosing their veteran or military affiliation status based on external pressures. For Victor, that was often when his civilian friends outted

him. For Manuel, it came as part of the requirement for processing his benefits information through the university. Four of the six (Brendon, Madilyn, Robert, and Stephen) discussed only rarely disclosing their veteran status; in all cases (as with their identity affiliations), this reluctance was not because of a lack of pride in their service but, rather, based on personal choices that supported a more multifaceted approach to their identities (with their military identities less salient in college settings) or were simply a matter of personal preference. For example, Robert explained, "[t]ypically, somebody would have to have asked," and Stephen said, "I'm the type of person that keeps that to myself for a little bit." The implications of identity attachment and disclosure to higher education personnel are discussed later.

Veterans Complicating Veteranhood

During conversations with the student veteran participants, half of them provided unsolicited remarks about self-generated conceptualizations about veteran identity that attend to greater nuance in how student veterans conceptualize veteranhood. In particular, four factors emerged as distinguishing features of veteranhood: combat experience, length of service, age, and gender. Frank, Madilyn, and Paul discussed the ways in which combat experience acts as markers of difference across veteran groups. For Frank and Paul, both Post-9/11 combat veterans who saw direct enemy engagement, combat experience changed how they attended to the shared experiences and camaraderie among veterans. Unexpectedly, both the engagement aspects of combat and the global perspectives of a combat deployment marked these differences. Frank explained:

I also believe there's a distinct difference between your typical military veteran—one that's never had to be deployed and had their whole career stay stateside versus one that has. I think there's a huge gap between a veteran and a combat veteran...Being in that kind of a situation, especially for me, very radically changed my life experience and my view about things like being in Iraq and seeing where they were living in these very crude mud huts sometimes and seeing their most precious possession might be a rug that was their family's or whatever to coming here and seeing people fight over who's got the bigger TV or the materialism of American society.

When worldview so often sets student veterans apart from their civilian peers, the type of world experience can also make a difference to student veterans. As a veteran who deployed to a combat zone but did not experience enemy engagement, Madilyn found herself wrestling with how she should identify herself:

You know, I was never in battle...I get some people and I tell them, an honest insecurity of mine is I was in ["X" country] for a year, but I was in ["X" province]. Our weapons were in an actual weapons room. We

didn't carry our weapons on us. It wasn't really battle. And somebody says, "But you were over there. Not everybody can hack it until you can be over there." And it helps, you know, the validation is welcome.

Hence, combat experience and the way in which combat itself is interpreted can shape veterans' understanding of and relationship with the veteran identity.

Additionally, length of service can be a factor of veteranhood too. For Paul, who took early retirement at 18 years, longevity in the military marks itself not just by the accolades and rank someone achieves having served that long but the mark that service leaves on the veteran. Paul's comments about his difficulty acculturating to civilian society have already been shared, but he also shared a bit about the difference between a junior enlisted Marine and a senior enlisted Marine (i.e., a Senior Non-Commissioned Officer or SNCO). In Paul's experience, junior enlisted personnel are taught to follow orders, relay simple commands, and work within a much smaller box of responsibility. For senior NCOs, pushing the boundaries, asking questions, and being a part of the decision-making (not just decision-following) structure also influences the kind of military identity a servicemember develops. This, in turn, impacts how student veterans might navigate the bureaucracy of colleges, since, in Paul's words, "[t]hey don't understand that sometimes you can question the college or you can ask them to produce the paperwork that supports a rule or policy." Service length can also inhibit veterans from claiming ownership over veteran status. When asked about his identification as a student veteran, Stephen articulated the continuous service rules and how, in most respects, he does not think he counts as a "veteran." At the same time, he admitted, "[t]he normal average person looks at you and says, 'You served, so you're a veteran.'" For some student veterans, the line of self-inclusion is clear but, for others, it is certainly less so.

Related to length of service, age also came up as one factor veterans use to separate themselves from civilians as well as how they might distinguish among each other. Interestingly, for veterans like Madilyn, age acted as an isolating factor from her fellow student veterans and from her civilian peers. Like some veterans, Madilyn did not immediately attend college upon her separation from service. So, when she did start college, she was "older than the average freshman that I was in class with, and I felt that difference." Brendon affirmed Madilyn's feelings, indicating he felt a bit in between—not young enough to be like the other students in his classes and labs but not old enough to connect with veterans who "wear their leftover clothes or gear even when they're not in—like hats or pants or boots or whatever" or "still pay attention to all the military news."

Finally, for one of the two women veterans in the interview portion of the study, gender was also an issue in navigating veteranhood. Madilyn was quick to point out that age was "more of a thing" than gender, which she said was only "every once in a while." She explained:

Every once in a while, you come across a pervy old man. He's not trying to be pervy; he just is. "You look too young and pretty to have been in the military, young lady." "Well thank you, sir, I did 5 years in the Army; I did a year in ['X' country]." "Well good for you." "I also did a year in ['X' country]." "I was in [same country]!" Ok, respect.

To navigate the occasional circumstances where her gender acted to exclude her from the assumption of her veteran status, Madilyn developed her own ways of affirming her veteran identity while connecting with other veterans through stories from service, installations, deployments, and shared experiences.

In the end, while civilians may denote veteran status as dichotomous with few, if any, categorical sticking points, several of the veterans in this study possess a much more nuanced and complex conceptualization of veteranhood, the importance of which is discussed in the final section.

Curating Veteran Identity

While all of the student veterans who shared their experiences and perceptions add value to the research, three of the participants in particular spent more time than others discussing the strategies by which they intentionally curate their veteran and college student identities. Two of these, Madilyn and Robert, are worth sharing in greater detail as they demonstrate an introspective assessment of their identity dimensions as well as intentionality in the choices that they made that reflected parts of their identities to others.

Madilyn

A 28-year-old Army veteran who served 5 and a half years in a human resources billet, Madilyn deployed to a combat zone and spent time overseas during her enlistment. After she left the military, she spent some time doing odd jobs and volunteering for veterans' organizations as she considered the next phase of her life. While working at one job, one of her bosses suggested her military skills "would be good for a business degree," so she went to college for business administration. At the time of the interview, Madilyn had just graduated with her bachelor's and was starting her first semester at the same institution for her M.B.A. When asked about her group identifications with military service-members, student veterans, and college students, Madilyn was noncommittal to all of them, ranking herself "three," "three," and "two" respectively. She explained:

I'm already very...self-aware, and I'm a self-analyst...I already like getting to know people; that's one of the reasons I thrived in the military, because I love getting to know people...Not one person is chemically identical to another—except identical twins—so why would I restrict myself like that? I don't like that in general. So, it just so happens where one area that gets covered is the military aspect...I think, in a way, just like my age sets me apart from normal college

students, my age sets me apart from other student veterans. A lot of them are still older than me, and a lot of them that I've come into contact have done 10, 12, 20 years rather than just five...When I was 18, I looked like a 12-year-old. [People would ask,] "How are you in the military? You look like you're playing dress up." I'm not. I'm here because I'm learning, and I'm trying to get job skills, and I'm trying to earn money, and I'm trying to be independent—take me seriously, damn it! [...] Now, I'll be talking to a student up front and find out that they're a veteran. And I'll be like, "Oh, I'm a veteran too," and they'll be like, "Oh, no way. You don't look like a veteran." And I'll be like, "Well neither do you."

Madilyn's age has been a characteristic of her un-belonging—from her time in the military, to her time as a student veteran, and even as a college student. In conjunction with her physical attributes as lacking the traditional signals of veteran status, her personality sets her apart as someone unwilling to limit herself to a particular set of experiences and, as a result, a particular core identity. Even more importantly, she is entirely comfortable with catching people off guard by preventing them from drawing assumptions about her.

Robert

A 31-year-old man, Robert served eight years in the US Air Force, primarily as a satellite communications technician. Like Madilyn, at the time of our interview, he has recently graduated from college with a degree in electrical engineering, had already obtained post-graduate employment in a career field related to his major, and had just received his acceptance into a prestigious graduate program to continue his studies. Within the Air Force structure, community college is expected during service, so Robert had earned his associate's degree focusing on his core courses while serving. Robert discussed the veteran culture on his campus:

You can see a lot of vets on campus; you know, the way that they walk, the way that they handle themselves, the way that they speak, and you get to talking to these people and it's information that gets shared back and forth just a mutual understanding, "Hey, we were both veterans." But, you know, if I was working with a 19-, 20-year-old sophomore or junior, it wasn't something I said, "Now, hey I was Air Force, so let's get to work." And the same thing with the faculty; that's one of the cool things about this campus: A lot of the faculty were in at one point in time—whether they be Air Force or Army. A lot of them were Academy graduates at one point, and a lot of them came out of the Academy, so it was always something they shared right off the bat. You know, I'm your professor, here's my syllabus, here's my background...I did this for twenty years, and you knew right off the bat that you could go into their office and have common ground with them, and you could kind of share that.

So, despite Robert's appreciation for having veterans within his college and degree program as a source of "mutual understanding," he himself did not show a strong connection to his military service or student veteran status as components of his identity. He "rarely" volunteered information about his prior service as a college student unless "it came up" or "someone would have had to have asked." More than other participants, Robert also openly connected to being a college student. He shared:

So, when I actually sit down with somebody and [they] ask, "Oh, what do you do?" I'm a student, and then I would kind of go into a little bit of detail that I was in the military for a few years and that. It's not a shame thing; it's not a pride thing. I just don't like to have my car marked.

Like Madilyn, Robert was clear about defining his identity boundaries, focusing them on the future version of himself—a college graduate, a professional in the engineering field, and now as a graduate student. While Madilyn leveraged her own un-belonging as a way to playfully disarm people, Robert leaned into his college experiences as a tool to help him move forward with the next part of his life.

On Belonging in College

This study also sought to understand how student veterans' self-reported identity attachments might impact their higher education experiences. One theme that emerged focused on aspects of belonging on the ways in which student veterans felt included with or excluded from typical college students or from the traditional college environment. This last theme articulates the different aspects of belonging that emerged.

Seven of the student veterans interviewed identified feelings of not being like typical college students. The first significant exclusionary factor reported was age (Brendon, Frank, Madilyn, and Paul). Additionally, both maturity (Manuel, Nathan, and Paul) as well as "world experience" (Brendon, Frank, and Laura)—which participants credited to their military background—were articulated as differences between them and typical college students. Finally, Frank and Laura both spoke to the ways in which their other adult duties, particularly work and parenting, also set them apart from identifying themselves with typical college students.

Throughout the course of the interviews, several points of interest emerged that spoke to how student veterans found belonging in their identities as college students and at their respective institutions. The opportunities to connect with other student veterans was mentioned most frequently by half of our participants. Brendon specifically described this as a "sense of family and belongingness." Another feeling of belonging came from Brendon, Robert, and Victor's beliefs that their campuses, faculty, or other students possessed an understanding of military culture. When one of Victor's civilian faculty started speaking for the military and looking to Victor for affirmation, he was quick to correct the

professor. In response, the other students in his class were "very supportive" and "commend[ed] me for my decision" to disagree. But belonging was not just limited to the ways the military culture might be brought into the participants' respective campus environments; being treated like an adult student also emerged as an important way for participants to feel included. Manuel explained, "I felt that the teachers understood that they didn't need to take care of [me],...that the people that were in the military were more wiser [*sic*] I guess than the typical college student." Finally, Manuel, Robert, and Stephen mentioned how they learned to feel a sense of belonging when they got into their major courses and programs, as the number of students grew smaller and faculty got to know them better. For Manuel, his choice of institution turned out to be a "good choice" because "[i]t was a really small group of people. There was only like three or four teachers in the whole department. We all knew each other by first name. I had their cell phone numbers." The connections some student veterans form as they work into their major fields of study helped generate some feelings of belonging.

Discussion, Limitations, and Implications

Discussion

By interviewing student veterans about their perceived connectedness to typical military servicemembers, student veterans, and college students, and by asking them to discuss their perceptions of sameness and difference in terms of their higher education experiences, this study was able to generate findings that add to research working at the intersections of veterans in college, the multidimensionality of identity, and institutional belonging. Data from these interviews support prior work that finds the identity negotiation of student veterans is more complex and multifaceted than we may think (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; ASHE, 2011; Phillips & Lincoln, 2017; Sullivan et al., 2019).

Student veterans in this study with a stronger connection to their military servicemember and student veteran groups expressed favorable feelings about the skills and values they gained from the military while also recognizing how the military shaped their personal selves. Consequently, some revealed that feeling the military was ingrained in them meant they would have a more difficult time adjusting to civilian culture, including college. Thus, comparisons of identity-attachment to service-related demographics could help identify student veterans who may experience greater difficulties connecting to their college student identities or adjusting to college. In particular, student veterans with a strong military core as part of their personal identities, those with combat experience, and veterans with longer lengths of military service may hesitate to connect to being college students. This is consistent with extant research in the field (ASHE, 2011; Atuel & Castro, 2018; Carne, 2011; Jones, 2013; Killam & Degges-White, 2018; Lostutter et al., 2020; Olsen et al., 2014; Smith & True, 2014). As Atuel and Castro (2018) explained:

Past military experience functions as a double-edged sword for veterans: it becomes the basis for defining who they are and who they are not in relation to their civilian peers. In the civilian environment, the 'warrior' identity heightens the cultural differences between veterans and civilians, and deters veterans' [sic] from fully reintegrating back into civilian communities. (p. 80)

The participants from this study who fell into one or more of these categories (e.g., high military or student veteran attachment, combat experience, and longer time in service) were also more likely to disclose their veteran status on campus because of external forces (e.g., benefits, disability support services) or to advocate for themselves or other veterans. The visibility of student veterans with these characteristics or experiences are likely to have contributed to the initial generation of Post-9/11 student veteran scholarship in higher education—research that is hyperfocused on a deficits-based approach about belonging, adjustment, and success (Hart & Thompson, 2013; Wilkes, 2017).

Other participants in the study shared a more ambivalent relationship with their military service and/or their status as student veterans. Participants who served in the National Guard reported feeling less like "real" veterans and, as a result, felt less like student veterans. Participants with more complex feelings about their identity affiliations also seemed more likely to be focusing on the next phases of their lives after graduation and into graduate programs or employment. This suggests these participants may already be inculcating future-leaning identity values as they move to the next phases of their lives. Seeing their educations as tools toward the next goal rather than as an experience that required a steep interpersonal investment has also been supported by previous research (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2020). These student veterans were also less likely to disclose their veteran status or military history, a finding consistent with other research with student veterans (Livingston et al., 2011). This finding was consistent with Smith and True (2014) who also noted "ambivalence about their military service is very common" (p. 156) in their population. As other studies have noted, student veterans sometimes make deliberate choices to downplay their veteranhood on campus. Livingston et al.'s (2011) results corroborated this point: "As a result of this, it was difficult to see student veterans because they often did not want to be seen" (p. 322). Participants in this study suggested masking their veteran identities is not out of embarrassment of or denial about their military service but rather an output of humility (i.e., not wanting to seek or receive preferential treatment), identity camouflage (i.e., to remove a potential obstacle from connecting with peers or faculty), or protection (i.e., to avoid self-disclosure and thwart unwanted interactions centering on their veteranhood or military service experiences).

A diversity of veteranhood also emerged during the study in interesting and relevant ways for the veterans studies

community. The research community has called for greater nuanced understanding of veterans (ASHE, 2011; Gann, 2012; Phillips & Lincoln, 2017), and this study's findings support that call by unveiling ways veterans themselves may pull apart the label to reveal greater striations. Among participants in this study, combat experience, length of service, age, and gender all revealed themselves as particular aspects of veteranhood these participants used to distinguish themselves from each other. Additionally, perceptions about their own veteranhood also had an impact on identity for some in the study. Three of the study participants discussed the multidimensionality of their identities, showing a keen awareness of how they negotiated particular facets of their identities, particularly their veteranhood, to avoid the assumptions of others. An awareness of multiple identities and identity reconciliation, as examined by previous research with veterans, can have an impact on the adjustment experiences of student veterans (ASHE, 2011; Bagby et al., 2015; Jones, 2013; Lostutter et al., 2020).

Finally, the student veterans sharing their perceptions and lived experiences in higher education in this study added to the qualitative research on student veteran adjustment and feelings of belonging as associated with their relationships with other students, faculty, staff, and the institutional culture as a whole. Recent work examining the relationship of identity attachment of student veterans by Lostutter et al. (2020) concluded that veteran students with stronger connections to their college student identities reported fewer psychiatric symptoms, such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety that could have negative effects on adjustment (p. 37). While this study did not assess participants for psychiatric risk factors, it did uncover social factors that can act as barriers to or conduits for belonging. Even student veterans with more complex relationships to the typical college student can find belonging in other ways, including an institutional environment showing evidence of military cultural competence, with faculty who recognize the strengths student veterans bring into the classroom, and through close connections forged with students and faculty in their major programs.

Limitations

While qualitative data generates rich descriptions and understandings about their participants' lives and experiences, one limitation is always a smaller sample size from which these findings are drawn. Additionally, while the sample was diverse in many ways, a greater attendance to racial and ethnic diversity could have been beneficial. While not reported directly, the student veterans in this study included white non-Hispanic, Hispanic, and multiracial participants. No findings presented here should be generalized as representative of a particular ethnic group or of minority veterans broadly. A limitation in the analysis and interpretation of participants' experiences comes with asking student veterans to compare themselves to a "typical" member of the three groups. For example, student veterans were

responsible for interpreting for themselves who and what a "typical" college student is: their behaviors, values, appearances, and habits of mind. Thus, every student veteran likely created a unique "typical" military servicemember, student veteran, and college student in their minds in determining how they would rate themselves comparatively. Thus, every response is slightly skewed by the inherent nature of their perceptions and assumptions of these groups. Despite this limitation, the importance in their perceptions of "typical" servicemembers, student veterans, and college students tells researchers something important too. How student veterans perceive their worlds and the people in it—as embodying generalized characteristics—as well as their positions in relation to those people helps scholars, educators, and administrators in higher education understand where perceptions may (or may not) represent reality. One final limitation is the lack of an instrument directly assessing the participants' adjustment to college. The findings reported here come directly from interviews, but inferences about predicting belonging to an institution is separate from belonging to a particular identity group. Young (2017) developed a specific instrument, Veteran Adjustment to College (VAC) scale that has early reliability and validity. The addition of the VAC with the identity group attachment instruments in future research would provide additional triangulation and support in correlating feelings of identity belonging to college adjustment.

Implications

The findings from the interview phase of this study offers implications for how veteran studies scholars, postsecondary institutions, and student veterans would benefit from better understanding how the variations of identity (re)orientations could impact student veterans' transitional experiences, senses of belonging, and adjustment needs.

If cultural incongruence has the potential to thwart student veterans' feelings of belonging to their institutions broadly and identifying as college students specifically, then one implication for practice is for postsecondary institutions to develop mechanisms for facilitating belonging that attend to social and emotional domains. One such implication includes helping student veterans reconceptualize the college student identity away from young, immature students who lack world experience and are individualistic. Rather, connecting student veterans with civilian adult learners who have strong college student identities and/or with motivated, high performing traditional-aged learners (particularly within their major fields of study) has the potential to promote new, diverse visions of the "typical" college student and dismantle the "us versus them" dichotomy prevalent in most of the qualitative research with student veterans.

Supporting student veterans' adjustment and belonging also means understanding their experiences at several points during their tenure at an institution. Colleges and universities would benefit from assessing their student veteran populations using instruments developed in the field and

designed for student veterans. For example, Lostutter et al.'s (2020) adaptation of Tropp and Wright's (2011) Inclusion of the Other in Self Scale, Holland et al.'s (2010) Integration of Stressful Life Experiences Scale (Sullivan et al., 2019), and Young's (2017) Veteran Adjustment to College Scale have all been used with student veterans to gather valuable information about the population's identity attachments, meaning-making, and college adjustment experiences. Adjustment is a process, and one's sense of belonging can change; therefore, institutions should also gather information from their student veterans at more than one point in time (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2020).

The findings from this study partially support Eakman et al.'s (2019) conclusions that "a sense of belonging is capable of fostering resilience among SSM/V [Student Service Member/Veteran] and can be established through the presence of supportive social relationships" (p. 1007). However, many student veterans view their degree pursuits as tools to aid them in the transition from military service to civilian employment (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2020). Thus, fostering opportunities that aid them in meeting post-education goals (e.g., career services, job seeking, résumé building, internships, fieldwork, etc.) may support feelings of institutional belonging in ways unique from students who may rely more heavily on social connectedness and university culture to develop belonging. Campus personnel working with student veterans in these areas should be trained in military cultural competence as a way to help offer support that comes from an informed place (Atuel & Castro, 2018; Messerschmitt-Coen, 2019).

Conclusion

Military students and student veterans will continue to be an important student population at colleges and universities for the foreseeable future. As a field, evidence is available to point key institutional leaders and faculty toward academic and social support systems that will aid in the adjustment experiences of these students—systems and services that might be less obvious in comparison to those for other student populations. In turn, the valuable contributions student veterans make in their classes, degree programs, and institutions should be recognized in meaningful ways. Continued research focused on understanding the nuances of veteran identity, the lasting and diverse impacts of military culture, and the forging of student veterans' sense of belonging on campuses will guide the next generation of valuable literature in the field.

Notes

¹ My use of *veteranness* is not to be confused with Keranen's (2014) definition of the same term used to describe "the discursive unity about veterans that is laden with a variety of unexamined veteran myths that have evolved over time" (4). Instead, *veteranness* here refers to the myriad, actualized personal and sociocultural aspects of veteran identity as veterans experience them in their own lives.

² Also called Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSC) and Navy Enlistment Classification (NEC) codes.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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