

ASSESSING STUDENT SUCCESS EFFORTS FOR MILITARY STUDENTS
IN A CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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By
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

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DEDICATION

While this journey has been long and arduous for the author, it pales in comparison to that of our men and women who have served in the United States military. For many generations, their efforts have helped protect our freedom. This study is dedicated to all those who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces – with special tribute to those who never got the opportunity to go back to school or to get a good job because they paid the ultimate price. May they rest in peace.

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Day after day, weekend after weekend, month after month, my family members each exhibited incredible patience throughout this long expedition. They became unintended passengers in my travels, endured and sacrificed a lot, and weathered all my storms. My immeasurable gratitude, indebtedness, and love to Terri, David, and Nat. And, finally – though they did not get to see the outcome of this quest – I want to thank my Mom and Dad ... for everything.

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ABSTRACT

Two million U.S. military veterans live in California, a number that is expected to increase as military personnel in the Afghanistan (OEF) and Iraq (OIF) conflicts complete their service. Statewide statistics indicate that scores of returning veterans will be attending California community colleges. Many colleges have attempted to address the influx of returning veterans by developing appropriate support services for them. The college participating in this research established such services and is considered a model program. This exploratory mixed methods study evaluated those services and programs and assessed their effect on student success. This study was guided by Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt's theoretical framework on student engagement and two research questions: (a) How do OEF/OIF student veterans at the participating college define "student success" and (b) To what extent and how do the OEF/OIF student veterans at the college attribute their success to the specialized veterans' programs and services provided by the college? The study consisted of a review of the college's veterans program, interviews of OEF/OIF military veterans at the school, and a survey of over 300 student veterans. The objective was to gain the veterans' perspectives of and satisfaction with the services provided. The findings indicated that the veterans' definition of success was based on grades, transfer opportunities, goal completion, and job obtainment. Additionally, most participants viewed the programs and services as contributing to their success. The findings will help college administrators to gain a more comprehensive understanding of student veterans' classroom needs and to model these programs and services as they attempt to meet student veterans' educational goals.

PRELUDE

This is a solemn occasion: the remembrance of a horrific event in American history, and the tenth anniversary of what we now refer to as 9/11. On a routine, peaceful day a decade ago, a sinister plan was developed and carried out by a group of rogue, hateful individuals acting on their own callous and venomous thoughts.

Four planes en-route to several strategic sites were hijacked and purposely crashed: two hit the World Trade Center in New York; a third crashed into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.; and a fourth, intended for another target in Washington, D.C., was commandeered by passengers of Flight 93 – demonstrating the resolve, fortitude, and bravery that often is associated with the American spirit. Because of their heroic actions, Flight 93 crashed into a field in Pennsylvania – killing everyone on board and averting what quite probably would have been an even more devastating tragedy.

We know today that the actions of that small group of terrorists were simply that, and not a plan devised on behalf of a people, a nation, or a religion. And, today – ten years later – we, as citizens of the United States of America and citizens of the world, are hopefully stronger and even more resolute because of the events that occurred on that routine September day in 2001. As a College and as a community, we have gathered today to honor those who died as a result of those tragic incidents.

Today, we pay respect and give tribute to those who fell on September 11th. Our hearts continue to be full of sorrow for the families and friends who endured such great loss on that fateful morning. We yearn for continued strength and courage for all Americans, as we face the challenges of our daily lives. And, we thank the dedicated and heroic military veterans who have worked and fought tirelessly and in great danger on behalf of our continued freedom.

There are many lessons to be learned from the events of 9/11. One I would encourage you to consider today is this: never take your family, friends, or loved ones for granted. Many of the individuals killed that day probably left the house thinking it was just another routine morning: some left while their partner or children were still asleep; others departed for planes without saying goodbye to friends or significant others. Many, many people never came home.

Students, faculty, and staff: as we gather here in this beautiful setting today, let us have a moment of silence to pay tribute and homage to the thousands of people who died on 9/11 and in its aftermath.

—Excerpt from remarks by Bob Kratochvil on 10th anniversary observance of 9/11 – September 11, 2011

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

September 11, 2001 changed the lives of almost everyone in the world. For many young men and women, the events of that terrible day changed their lives in a very personal and permanent way. That day was one that sparked their emotions, ignited their courage and patriotism, and fueled their drive to enlist in the United States military in support of a common good. The events of September 11th became the impetus for declaration of war on two countries: Afghanistan and Iraq.

More than 2.4 million Americans have served in Afghanistan (OEF – Operation Enduring Freedom) and Iraq (OIF – Operation Iraqi Freedom) since war commenced (Iraq-Afghanistan Veterans of America, 2012). Both the war in Afghanistan, declared on October 7, 2001, and the war in Iraq, which began on March 20, 2003, are now America’s longest wars – longer than the eight years of fighting in Vietnam.

According to data cited by The Orange County Register (Berg, August 21, 2011, p. 5), the human tolls of these wars have been profound:

- “More than 6,200 American troops have been killed.
- Over 45,000 U.S. military personnel have been wounded.
- Troops having been deployed more than once total 800,000.
- Sixty-percent of the soldiers saw dead bodies or human remains.
- More than three-quarters of the troops received incoming artillery, rocket, or mortar fire.
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is affecting 300,000 veterans.

- As many as 700,000 troops are expected to have PTSD after onset.
- An estimated 320,000 veterans of these wars have traumatic brain injury (TBI).
- Suicide took the lives of 1,100 OIF/OEF veterans between 2005 and 2009.
- As of 2009, more than 3,000 veterans sought Veterans Affairs homeless services.
- Of the 235,000 female troops who served in Afghanistan and Iraq, nineteen percent have been screened for military sexual trauma.”

Although there are far too many soldiers who did not return to American soil alive, hundreds of thousands of troops have or soon will be completing their military duty and will be resuming their civilian lives. Many of these veterans will be joining the ranks of students in colleges and universities. Nine out of ten enlisted personnel do not have a college degree, but do plan to go to college when they finish their military obligations (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Data suggest that, in the coming years, many men and women currently in the U.S. military will be enrolling in higher education institutions, specifically community colleges, due to provisions in Federal legislation (Post-9/11 GI Bill, 2008) and support programs like those outlined by the State of California’s Veterans Education Opportunities Partnership, or “Troops to College.”

The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 became operational on August 1, 2009. The benefits from the “New GI Bill” are more financially advantageous to military personnel than the benefits received under the

Montgomery GI Bill (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2008a). Changes in the bill provide financial assistance to military service members and veterans with at least ninety days of active duty since September 10, 2001. Eligible veterans and military personnel who study in postsecondary educational institutions can receive a stipend for housing and may have their entire tuition and fees paid (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2008b). National projections by the U.S. Department of Education (2009) indicate there will be a growing number of veterans returning home in the near future because of the end of the military conflict in Iraq and the imminent downsizing of troop engagement in Afghanistan, and that those returning veterans will be enrolling in college due to the positive effects of the New GI Bill.

In the United States, approximately 3.1% of all undergraduates in colleges and universities are student veterans (Radford & Wun, 2009). This number is expected to increase as the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down and the service men and women return to the U.S. to use the expanded benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010).

A college education has become an absolute necessity for veterans returning to civilian life, and – since most veterans are ineligible for direct admission to the University of California or the California State University systems – California community colleges will provide the majority of this education (Community College League of California, 2013). In March 2006, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger announced California's “Troops to College” initiative to provide active duty service members and veterans with educational opportunities and assistance from the state’s premier education segments and related agencies. The then governor specifically

targeted increased instructional opportunities to military personnel on active duty, in the National Guard, and the Reserves.

A principal focus of the “Troops to College” initiative is for the California Community Colleges to combine efforts with the University of California and California State University systems toward veterans’ services (California Community College Chancellor’s Office, n.d.c). Together, they partner with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the Labor and Workforce Development Agency, the Office of the Secretary of Education, and military branches within the state to provide active duty and eligible veterans’ information, enrollment guidance and assistance, and data about other programs offered by California’s public institutions of higher education (California Community College Chancellor’s Office, n.d.c). The purpose of this partnership is to inform military personnel, particularly those enrolling in public colleges and universities, of all the opportunities available to them. Today, with economic times being so tenuous and the unemployment rate so high, the mission of community colleges is critical to returning veterans obtaining degrees and training for job skills.

With an estimated 2 million veterans living in California, the state leads the Nation in the number of veteran residents (United States Census Bureau, 2013). This constitutes almost ten percent of the Nation’s population of 21.8 million veterans. This number is expected to increase significantly as more military personnel serving in Afghanistan and Iraq complete their service. Approximately 180,000 veterans of OEF/OIF reside in California and 30,000 veterans are returning to the state each year (California State Legislature, 2013). Of those veterans returning to studies in

postsecondary education, the majority enroll in a California community college. In 2010-11, more than 44,000 veterans utilized education benefits at a California community college and there are an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 active duty personnel enrolled annually at community colleges within California, not including dependents (California Community College Chancellor's Office, n.d.a).

In October 2011, President Obama announced that American engagement in war with Iraq would end by the close of the year, resulting in most – if not all – U.S. troops leaving Iraqi soil. Since the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, troop levels surged to 170,300 in late 2007; in October 2011, that number dropped to fewer than 50,000. After nine years, America's war with Iraq is over and the nearly 50,000 soldiers are joining those many thousand who have already withdrawn from the country. If the projections are correct, many of these men and women will be taking advantage of their educational benefits by enrolling in California community colleges (California Community College Chancellor's Office, n.d.a).

Problem Statement

Many colleges have attempted to address the issue of returning veterans by developing appropriate support services (Cook & Kim, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). The participating community college in this research study has developed support programs and services that are considered a model for other California colleges (B. Petersen, personal communication, March 2012).

Although it is difficult for colleges to respond to the myriad issues student veterans bring with them to the campus, colleges have tried to ease the transitions of these men and women and to help them as much as possible. Mezirow (2000)

discusses the Connected Knowing concepts as “meeting students where they are, drawing out their ideas, listening with care, and honoring process” (p. 95). These are very important concepts and principles when proposing a strategy that aims to assist student veterans as they transition into college life.

As community colleges continue to establish programs and services to respond to these veterans’ unique needs and to provide them with educational opportunities, an assessment is needed to determine how effective those programs and services are in achieving educational success. The determination should be derived from the student veterans themselves, as well as from institutional data.

This exploratory mixed methods study evaluates the participating California community college’s veterans program. It examines its programs and services and assesses whether the services provided have had an effect on the success of participating students – “success” as defined by the participating students, as well as compared to institutional benchmarks.

Purpose of the Study

Higher education institutions, in particular community colleges, are on the threshold of serving the largest addition of student veterans into their campuses since World War II. Many colleges have developed and operated programs and support services to help facilitate and ease the transition from soldier to student. More than half of the institutions participating in one study declared they had services and programs designed specifically for student veterans, and almost two-thirds of campuses had increased their support for students returning from the military since September 11, 2001 (Cook & Kim, 2009). These programs and services have taken

many forms, depending on the college campus and the students' expectations (Redden, 2009).

While campuses have established and operated specialized services for student veterans, most of the literature concentrates on the need for developing such programs (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Livingston, 2009). The study by Normandin (2010) further discusses the specific needs of veterans returning from the conflicts in Afghanistan (OEF) and Iraq (OIF). There is little evidence available in the literature, however, regarding the effectiveness of these programs and whether the programs and services are equipping the student veterans with skill-sets that make a difference in meeting their educational goals.

The purpose of this study is to add to the growing amount of literature regarding student veterans. Specifically, this research examines a specially-designed program for student veterans at a California community college and assesses the effectiveness of that program in relationship with student success. It provides candid viewpoints from OEF/OIF student veterans who received some of the services provided by the college, learns their perspectives regarding the benefits of those services, and evaluates whether or how the specialized programs and services led to their educational achievements.

Research Questions

The participating community college developed and operates what is considered a "model" program for student veterans. This exploratory mixed methods study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do OEF/OIF student veterans at the participating community college define “student success”?
2. To what extent and how do the OEF/OIF student veterans at the college attribute their success to the specialized veterans’ programs and services provided by the college?

The first part of the study describes the service model of the student veterans program at the participating institution. Because it is considered among the model programs in California, it is important to establish a foundation of the services provided to the student veterans at the college. In the second phase of the study, the researcher conducted interviews of OEF/OIF military veterans at the participating college to determine more comprehensively what their definition of “success” is and to evaluate whether – through the specialized veterans services – the community college has been successful in meeting those unique needs. Based on the results of the interviews, the third part of the study constructed and conducted a survey of the OEF/OIF military veteran students at the college gaining their perceptions regarding the services provided by the participating community college and the students’ satisfaction regarding those services in helping them meet their educational objectives.

Significance of the Study

Today, many colleges and universities are experiencing an influx of veterans returning from military service, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. The combination of California’s “Troops to College” project, begun by former Governor Schwarzenegger, and the “New GI Bill” is likely to see a formidable impact on the

numbers of veterans and military personnel attending California community colleges (California Community College Chancellor's Office, n.d.a).

It is projected that thousands of veterans will be returning home to civilian life (Radford, 2009). Based on state-wide statistics, a significant percentage of veterans will be enrolling in California community colleges (California Community College Chancellor's Office, n.d.a). With the December 2011 end of the war in Iraq and the downsizing of troops in Afghanistan, the time is at hand. The insights and perspectives these individuals bring with them are unique and provocative, certainly going beyond our typical civilian students' experiences. Pursuing an academic credential or vocational training in an institution of higher education is equally challenging. The results of this study will help community college leaders better understand and respond to the tremendous, unique impediments and needs of our returning military veterans.

The community college participating in this study has established a strong commitment to developing a student veterans program by assessing its level of campus support for veterans; advocating for additional staffing, financial and spatial resources; and examining the viability of public and private partnerships to increase service areas concerning veterans where needed. Because of the expected numbers of veterans returning to postsecondary education, some in the field have considered the services established at this institution as a model for other community colleges within the State of California (B. Petersen, personal communication, March 2012).

As such, a study of this sort is timely in determining whether data, including student interviews and a survey, demonstrate that the program leads to student

success, or – at the very least – supports the transitions to the classroom faced by returning veterans. This study will help college administrators to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the needs of student veterans in the classroom and to determine if the services and programs offered by the participating community college are assisting in meeting the students' educational goals.

Theoretical Framework

Guiding this study was the theoretical framework on student engagement put forth by Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005). Student engagement has been a focus of considerable research regarding student development and the ways that a student might succeed in college. Kuh et al. suggest that what students do during college has significant impact on their learning, retention, satisfaction, persistence, and achievement.

Further, Kuh et al. (2005) suggest that student engagement has two principal elements. The first is how much effort and time an individual puts into his or her studies and the other activities, experiences, and outcomes that contribute to student success. There are a variety of such activities, experiences, and outcomes for students in higher education. This study examines those specialized services and programs at the selected community college that have been developed specifically for veterans.

The second principal element of student engagement espoused by Kuh et al. (2005) is the method and prioritization of a college's distribution of personnel and resources in relationship to its organization of learning opportunities, programs, and services that lead to students' participation in and benefit from those services. In other words, how a college prioritizes and deploys its student support services has a direct

correlation and linkage to student success outcomes. This study evaluated the specialized services for student veterans at the participating college and assessed the connection of these services to student success.

Kuh et al. (2005) place significant responsibility on students themselves for their successes in college. Studying adequate numbers of hours, planning skills and methods, time management, and considerable effort are all individual practices and responsibilities necessary for students' acquisition of learning. Although the time needed by individual students in forming these habits in support of their learning outcomes may differ, there is a certain amount of personal dedication and commitment involved in achieving academic success.

While the learning process takes individual efforts as explained above, Kuh et al. (2005) posit that the experiences outside of the classroom play an integral part to student success. Involvement and participation in the campus experience – programs and activities, institutional environment, faculty interaction, student-to-student contact, participation in campus events – all are student engagement contributors.

These extra-curricular programs and services appear to add significant value to the student learning experience, contribute to the learning process, and often lead to better persistence and satisfaction. This study probes these suppositions as they relate to the student veterans program at the participation community college.

The community college program being studied was designed to provide enhanced support to military veteran students, with the presumption that such assistance will lead to student success. This study reviews that program and its services to determine if their objectives are being met, as perceived by participating

students, and will assess the student success of those students who benefitted from those programs and services.

Operational Definitions

Active duty. Considered full time active service in the Armed Forces of the U.S. military. Active duty participants in this study served during the Afghanistan and/or Iraq conflicts.

Armed Forces. Also referred to as armed services, include components of the U.S. military branches comprised of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and components thereof (U.S. Department of Defense, 2013). All student veterans participating in this study served in one or more of these military branches after September 11, 2001.

California Community Colleges. The largest system of higher education in the Nation, with 2.4 million students attending 112 colleges. The colleges provide workforce training, general education courses, developmental courses in English and math, certificate and degree programs, and preparation for transfer to four-year institutions. The participating college in this study is one of the California community colleges.

GI Bill. Also known as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, this legislation provided benefits to armed services veterans such as medical care and housing assistance. The bill entitled each veteran to schooling of one year, plus an additional month for every year served in the Armed Forces (Thelin, 2004).

Military branches. The components of the armed services, which include the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard.

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Refers to the U.S. military operations principally in Afghanistan, which commenced in October 2001 (Doubler & Listman, 2007).

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Refers to the U.S. military operations principally in Iraq, which began in March 2003 (Kapp, 2005).

Post-9/11 GI Bill. This legislation provides financial support for education and housing to military veterans who received honorable discharge from the armed services and have at least 90 days of aggregate service – or were discharged with a service-related disability – after 30 days since September 11, 2001 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). Each of the participating student veterans in this study is receiving Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). An anxiety problem that develops in some people after extremely traumatic events, such as combat, crime, an accident or natural disaster. People with PTSD may relive the event via intrusive memories, flashbacks and nightmares; avoid anything that reminds them of the trauma; and have anxious feelings they did not have before that are so intense their lives are disrupted (American Psychology Association, 2013). It is estimated that 10-18% of OEF/OIF troops are likely to have PTSD after they return to civilian life and they are at risk for other mental health problems (Litz & Schlenger, 2009)

Student veterans. Former armed services military members who are now students. In this study, the student veterans are enrolled at the participating California community college.

Student success. Various core indicators and outcomes have been identified as student success measures in higher education over the years. However, student success is determined by the goals and personal situations of individual students and, therefore, no single comprehensive definition or metric can be identified (Harrell & Holcroft, 2012). This research seeks to determine how student success is defined by the study's participating students.

Veterans certifying official. A college employee authorized by Veterans Affairs to certify student veteran enrollment so the student can receive GI Bill payments.

Scope and Considerations

There are several important areas of clarification to be pointed out regarding this case study. This research was conducted during a time when the nation's economic condition was challenging. The research did not take into consideration how many of the study's participating students enrolled due to the poor job market.

In addition, the sustained lack of funding provided to community colleges during this economic period resulted in limited resources for all students, which likely had an impact on the success of student veterans. Conversely, the study did not look at other societal, economic, and health related influences on student veterans' ability to achieve success at the college such as services from Veterans Affairs and other governmental agencies or civic associations, except as delineated by the student veterans in the interviews and survey answers.

This research of veterans' services and the effect on student success was limited to perceptions and attitudes of OEF/OIF veterans of the participating college.

Applying those findings to students enrolled in other higher education institutions, or even other community colleges, may not be prudent. Rather, the intent was to provide readers with information that may assist them in understanding whether such programs and services are helping meet students' educational outcomes.

Within that context, the study intentionally focused on student veterans returning from OEF and OIF tours of duty. Similarly, the study's small number of participants – although representing different branches of the military – was limited in scope. Therefore, the study cannot be considered representative of all student veterans in higher education institutions.

The programs and services studied, although considered a model within California community colleges, do not represent all such programs and services provided to student veterans in postsecondary education. Selecting the participating college was done because the researcher had access to the program staff, participating students, and institutional data. It must be noted that the researcher is a former administrator of the participating college. To eliminate researcher bias, data, interview questions and responses, and survey questions were peer-reviewed to ensure consistency between emerging findings and subsequent interpretations.

Assumptions

The programs and services designed by the college for returning veterans were developed by staff and administrators based on the assertions, perceptions, and attitudes of student veterans enrolled in the college in 2007. This study relied on current students' retrospective viewpoints and attitudes, which may or may not accurately portray generalized experiences. In the interviews conducted, as well as

from the answers provided in the survey instrument, the researcher assumed that participants were providing valid, truthful responses to inquiries.

Limitations and Delimitations

The research of veterans' services at the participating college is limited in its generalization to other community colleges and institutions of higher education. This exploratory mixed methods study and its findings are also limited to the interpretations of the researcher. The purpose of this study was not to generalize, but to provide insights that might inform the higher education community about successful efforts for military veterans transitioning to college.

Such qualitative research may have the potential for researcher bias. The use of multiple data sources and peer review helped guard against this conflict. However, it must be pointed out that the researcher is a previous administrator at the participating college and that potential bias was addressed through the University Institutional Review Board (UIRB) process.

This research is delimited to OEF/OIF veterans and may not be generalized to attitudes and perceptions of veterans in other military conflicts or engagements. Although the interviews were limited mostly to discussions about educational experiences and the effects college programs have had on their educational successes, their transitional experiences and recollections of their military tours of duty had certain impact on the subject matter.

Conclusion

Higher education and American military veterans have a long tradition of positive relationships. The combination of the recent U.S. military actions, the

educational support benefits provided by Federal legislation, the special impetus of California's Troops to College program, and the ending of the OEF/OIF conflicts suggest that many military veterans will be enrolling in community colleges – and particularly California community colleges – in the coming years.

Many colleges have developed programs that are responding to the needs of military veterans returning to school (Cook & Kim, 2009), even during a time when institutions have faced unprecedented budget challenges, reduced enrollment, and fewer personnel. Veterans' services support positions have been established on many campuses; orientation programs have been created; financial aid services now respond to specific military veterans' needs; veterans' resource centers have been built; student veteran organizations have been established; and fundraising for scholarship is more common (Redden, 2009). This study examined programs and services for contemporary student veterans offered at a California community college, and assessed their effectiveness in meeting the needs of student veterans of the institution.

Chapter II further discusses the literature regarding higher education's history in responding to military veterans' needs, and how student engagement programs have contributed to student success. The literature to date is limited to portrayals of the types of programs and services that postsecondary education institutions should consider establishing in efforts to meet these special needs. In support of this study, the literature includes research and evidence pertaining to the experiences military veterans bring back with them and the issues they must endure as they return to

community college classrooms. Many of these challenges are considered unique among students returning from conflict in war and returning to the classroom.

Other important components researched in the literature review, as it relates to this study, are the critical linkages between student engagement and student success. In particular, focus is given to the Kuh et al. (2005) studies on student engagement, which guided this study. The community college participating in this study designed programs and services to provide developmental support to military veteran students, with the presumption that such support will lead to student success. This study evaluated the program and services to determine if those objectives are being met, as perceived by participating students.

Chapter III provides insight into the structure of the study, its research approach and participant selection process, how data collection and analysis was conducted, and research challenges that occurred. Chapter IV explains the findings of the study related to the two research questions based on the methodology and its connection to the theoretical framework, which guided the research. Finally, Chapter V discusses the implications of the findings and provides recommendations for administrators in postsecondary institutions regarding the issue of veterans' services and their connection to student success.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In an effort to address the critical demand resulting from the increasing numbers of military veterans into California community colleges, many higher education institutions have enhanced their programs and services related to student veterans. Despite significant increases in the number of veterans and military personnel who will be attending postsecondary schools, studies suggest that schools may not have been prepared for this population's special needs and the rising tide of students emerging from these ranks.

Schools and universities have been establishing programs and services for veterans, but the outcomes data is negligible. Because no federal department collects data on enrollment and academic outcomes like graduation rates and retention, the national data on this issue is difficult to ascertain (Student Veterans of America, 2013).

This author's study will contribute to the paucity of data and research on the subject of student veterans' success. Using the participating college, the action research assesses the specialized programs and services provided by the college to student veterans. The study poses two research questions:

1. How do OEF/OIF student veterans define student success?
2. To what extent and how do the OEF/OIF student veterans attribute their success to the services and programs established for student veterans at the college?

These are important assessment questions in view of the tremendous numbers of military personnel who have and are expected to enter postsecondary education institutions – community colleges in particular – and the enhanced efforts and programs many have initiated in response to this increasing enrollment. It is timely to measure whether the services and programs are making a difference.

This chapter reviews a body of literature pertaining to the relationship between higher education and the military in American postsecondary education. It identifies the special needs of military veteran students and the unique issues and problems faced by returning OEF/OIF personnel into the classroom. The literature review also examines concepts of student success in higher education – including recent measurement tools in the State of California in particular – and specifically the influence of student engagement on student achievement.

The Heritage between Education and the Military

Education has always had a vital linkage to the American military and has served as a critical pathway for U.S. military veterans' return to civilian life. Dating back to colonial times, colleges were primary sites of access to and development of citizen-soldiers for military service (Neiberg, 2000). The relationship between higher education and the military was further forged with the passage of the 1862 Morrill Act, which established military training programs at land-grant institutions (Abrams, 1989; Neiberg, 2000).

One year prior to the U.S. entering World War I, Congress passed the 1916 National Defense Act (NDA) and higher education institutions assumed a leading role in training troops. The NDA created a trio of components of the U.S. military system

still used today: the active-duty forces, organized reserves, and the National Guard (Neiberg, 2000).

At the end of World War II – in an effort to mitigate economic and societal problems connected with the large number of discharging soldiers – the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the GI Bill, granted educational and other economic benefits to returning veterans. These student veterans entered higher education in record numbers, almost overwhelming the system. As a result, higher education was forced to change to meet the huge numbers of enrollees – something this study explores as it relates to OEF and OIF veterans. Many policy and program changes were implemented by colleges and universities enrolling World War II veterans.

Preparation for returning military personnel to postsecondary institutions is not unprecedented. Anticipating a surge of World War II veterans into colleges and universities, Washton (1945) suggested that counselors or advisors for veterans be appointed from ranks of professors who were themselves military veterans. He further suggested that instructors who teach veterans have “a sympathetic understanding of the soldier and the soldier’s experiences in the world” (p. 196).

This huge influx of students was managed reasonably through increasing class sizes, offering accelerated program schedules, providing more flexible admission processes, hiring additional faculty, offering academic credit for military experience, and accommodating family housing needs. Veterans, in return, proved to be responsible, mature, successful, and highly focused on their academic program (Olson, 1974).

The effects of the GI Bill on the social, political, and economic landscape of the United States were unparalleled. Hundreds of thousands of Americans, who otherwise would not have returned to school, completed undergraduate and graduate degrees. Along with the GIs who would have resumed their education without legislation, hundreds of thousands were added to the ranks of professionals: 450,000 engineers; 180,000 doctors, dentists, and nurses; 360,000 teachers; 150,000 scientists; 243,000 accountants; 107,000 attorneys; and 36,000 clergy. Although the benefits fell disproportionately to white males, the GI Bill clearly led to sustained post-war prosperity and was an impetus to the shift to the post-industrial age (Olson, 1974).

The Korean and Vietnam Wars, on the other hand, created somewhat different circumstances for student veterans. The GI Bill, for example, was available to Korean War veterans, but fewer numbers enrolled into college after discharge compared to World War II veterans (Olson, 1974). The Vietnam War brought with it significant anti-war activism, even anti-military activism, which resulted in returning students experiencing substantial negative public sentiment. Veterans felt unwelcome on college campuses and tried to maintain low profiles as students (Horan, 1990). Consequently, the numbers of veterans taking advantage of the postsecondary benefits were less than other conflicts. Compared to World War II veterans who comprised as much as half of the student enrollment in universities at the time, Vietnam veterans enrolled in college comprised only about ten percent of college enrollment in the early 1970's (Horan, 1990).

Although higher education and the U.S. military share a long history of preparing service members and educating veterans, current administrators and faculty

– although well-intentioned – probably have few or no firsthand experiences with military culture; since most World War II veterans are now retired or deceased, and subsequent wartime eras created opportunities for college men to obtain educational deferments, it is certainly likely that most faculty and administrators today have little or no military or wartime experience. If veterans are not well-represented among campus personnel, particularly if faculty and administrators have limited or no military background or wartime experience, the institutional efforts to assist student veterans and to facilitate a smooth transition into college may be hindered (Ackerman, DiRamio & Mitchell, 2009).

Special Needs of Military Veteran Students

A significant amount of literature on the subject of veterans returning to college portrays the special needs these men and women may bring with them to the classroom as a result of their difficult, life-altering experiences. The issues – many of which are physical and psychological in nature – are extremely personal, difficult to bear, and may not be understood by fellow students and even instructors (Hoge, Auchterlonie, & Milliken, 2006; Hosek, Kavanagh, & Miller, 2006; Stringer, 2007 September). Although they may have occurred years earlier and thousands of miles away, these past encounters and ordeals likely have an impact on the student veteran's ability to transition and succeed in college.

Adult learning may be described as an organized effort to assist learners who are old enough to be held responsible for their acts to acquire or enhance their understandings, skills, and dispositions (Mezirow, 2000). True educational leadership provides the necessary skills for those willing to transform, to make things happen,

and to develop that willingness and drive in those who do not otherwise have such inclination. This kind of educational leadership can happen on both the collective and individual levels: entire institutions and single faculty members have unique opportunities to make significant differences in the transformative learning process for military veterans. Campuses can create the organized effort Mezirow describes to make them adult learners.

For some adults, it is often only after a crisis that they develop the cognitive skills necessary to learn (Mezirow, 2000). Sometimes these experiences are created from life-changing events, which lead to resiliency, reasoning, and responsibility. Student veterans certainly have the life experiences, transitions, and crises necessary to be considered adult learners. Colleges have developed programs and services intended to provide student veterans with the necessary support to meet their needs and to respond to their transitional experiences.

Crises and transitions are a major part of life for all of us; but, perhaps no other group of individuals faces as many transitions as military personnel. A first major transition for anyone in military service is the initial call to active duty. Deployments themselves represent disruptive, life-altering transitions (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). These transitions continue with each assignment the soldier receives. Leaving military service, returning home, and entering college are all further transitions faced by the soldier turned student.

Schlossberg et al. (1995) defined the transitional process as “any event, or non-event, which results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 27). An earlier, separate work gives contributing value to this notion of transition

and the factors that impact how individuals respond to change. That study concluded that people develop coping mechanisms through which they evaluate the positive and negative parts of the transition, determining the available resources – the social support structure – in an effort to control transition and the stress it causes (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989).

Men and women formerly in military service, now students in a classroom, have to find yet another support structure to help them make the transition to school successful. The services provided by community colleges are an important part of that social support structure and Ackerman, DiRamio and Mitchell (2009) suggest it is critical that educational leaders – administrators, faculty, staff, and governing boards – do what is necessary to meet the needs of military veterans returning to the classroom.

Ackerman et al. (2009) suggest combat veterans are a student population with special needs who require support from both policymakers and program providers. They conclude the experience of war makes those who fight a special group within the general population. Motivations to join are different among service men and women. Their study found there is a relationship between combat experiences and transitions to college and that those experiences do influence other aspects of life, including going to college.

In their study, Ackerman et al. (2009) conducted interviews with former soldiers, now college students, who suggested their military experiences led significantly to their preparedness for college. One individual discussed how combat helped instill self-discipline, establishment of goals, and time management. Another

former military member described how combat was such a learning experience, a dramatic change in life. Yet another described the maturity one gains in the military and the life's lessons learned in tours of duty. On the other hand, an Army officer noted the killing and survival skills learned in the military had absolutely no applicability to the classroom. The most consistent theme cited, however, was the unremitting reminder of war these individuals had in their daily lives. While they were now at home, always on their minds were pals who were killed and left behind.

Most of the military veterans in the Ackerman et al. (2009) study described the transition into the classroom as difficult. Four major transitional problems were identified: 1) the bureaucracy of finding information about educational benefits, including financial assistance for tuition and books; 2) lack of full-service campus veterans offices and support services, including registration and other operations; 3) adjustment to the campus, being a student, coping, and other non-veteran students' behaviors, particularly immaturity of other students; and 4) institutional (faculty, staff and counselors) insensitivities toward or misunderstanding of them. Generally, an imbalance was identified between the structured life in the military and the loosely configured campus, where there was no chain of command for obtaining answers.

Ackerman et al. (2009) concluded several things were necessary at college campuses to respond to veterans' needs. First, colleges should develop policies to manage campus bureaucracies to not further complicate already stressful situations for veteran students. As a part of this approach, campuses need to maintain personal connections with those students who are re-deployed. Secondly – as with other specially-designed service programs – efforts should be made to create specific

responsibilities for veterans service officers at campuses, and those officers must become keenly aware of the needs of the students who constitute the veteran population (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Third, institutions have to develop and implement action plans that make available the personnel, policies, resources, and programs that reflect sensitivity to and understanding of veterans. And, fourth, there is a tremendous need for sharing best practices, exchanging ideas, and conducting research that provides colleges with essential information to promote the academic achievement of veterans who are students. Faculty can play a vital role in making the transition easier for military veterans, particularly in the latter two areas. These aspects of student engagement are key contributors to student success, and are outlined in a later section of this literature review.

Unique Issues and Problems of Student Veterans

Like the services of many special programs in community colleges, most of the programs and services offered to student veterans are designed to provide a positive impact for as many students as possible. But, even with the best of intentions, a college's business plan may not respond to all of the unique and pressing needs of veterans transitioning into the classroom. There are also many uncommon issues and problems that veterans returning to civilian life may bring. Female veterans, as an example, face unique and difficult challenges in what is traditionally a male-dominated military organization (Corbett, 2007), and sexual trauma has been identified as a problem in the treatment of female veterans (Street & Stratford, 2007). Colleges must be prepared to provide support to those who have confronted sexual harassment and assault under those circumstances. Faculty, staff, and administrators

must be given appropriate training to understand how to respond to students who have faced such situations and who may be carrying residual emotional issues into the classroom.

In addition, many veterans simply have trouble with the process of “meaning making,” i.e. understanding and rationalizing what they have seen and experienced in war. The change from accepting knowledge from officers’ authority to developing knowledge for one’s self based on individual learning and experiences is also a critical variable (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

There are even more challenges campuses may see in their student veterans, including mental health issues, alcoholism, anger, anxiety, and serious brain injury. The Rand Center for Military Health and Policy Research (2008) suggests one in every six military veterans who served in Afghanistan and Iraq suffers from symptoms of major depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. The same Rand study estimates alcohol dependency is also a significant problem among this population. Calhoun (2008) similarly estimates almost 15,000 military personnel who served in these conflicts have alcohol dependence.

These military veterans bring with them to school more than the typical illness and health issues. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a significant health issue for many military veterans after their return to civilian life. Colleges also will have to respond to students with brain injuries linked to PTSD. Recent data suggest that more than one in ten soldiers in the Iraq war had concussions or some other serious brain injury while serving (Hoge, McGurk, Thomas, Cox, Engel & Castro, 2008). Moreover, PTSD can become an issue after the soldier returns to school. Hoge et al.

(2008) also reported that soldiers who had suffered some sort of brain injury while in active duty were significantly more likely to develop PTSD three months after their return to civilian life than those who did not have a brain injury. To date, approximately 15% of soldiers serving in Iraq had either concussions or other such brain damage.

Suicide is another serious health crisis facing military veterans. Veterans Affairs' data shows that the suicide rate for males under 30 years of age who leave the military increased more than 25% over a two year period, and the rate was highest in 2009. According to similar studies, of the 30,000 suicides in the United States, one in five is committed by a military veteran. Many veterans will not seek help from established professional systems like Veterans Affairs (Rand Center for Military Health and Policy Research, 2008). In addition, Veterans Affairs' policy has no provision for ensuring that community mental health professionals have appropriate expertise to effectively treat veterans (Testimony by the Wounded Warrior Project in front of the Veterans Affairs Committee, 2009).

These are only examples of the many challenges community colleges face as they respond to the tremendous needs of returning military veterans. In response to the lack of services available within the "system," other conduits of assistance have been established by many higher education institutions. Counseling and advising roles at the colleges are integral to intervention efforts assisting these students.

In general, advising is an important role for faculty within community colleges. Counseling and advising are particularly important for military veterans and their transitional lives. An important study by Coll (2009) evaluated the role of

advisors to veterans in higher education. Among the results of Coll's study was determining that these students had life-altering experiences requiring physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual restoration. Arguably, the role of advisor is critical to the development of a student's academic success resulting from guidance and relationships from faculty or advising staff (Gordon, 2006).

Academic advising has had significant impact on the way students perceive their college experiences and, consequently, colleges infer that academic advising leads positively to student retention (Carstensen & Silberhorn, 1979; Glennen, 1976; Noel, 1976; Tinto, 2006). Coll (2009) suggested the adviser to the military veteran-turned-student must respond to unique, challenging issues most students do not bring with them, including post-traumatic stress disorder, cognitive impairments, substance abuse, complex physical injuries, combat anxiety, depression, and others. The author suggested institutions develop and provide the appropriate services to assist veterans and to be more culturally sensitive to their educational needs.

As the number of veterans enrolling in higher education institutions continues to rise, it becomes essential to evaluate the services and results of the programs developed to assist these men and women. Although there is data available on the direct influence faculty have on the achievement and successes of students, there is only scant inferential evidence that services provided by colleges have a positive impact on military veterans returning to the classroom. The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (2008) documented such services and programs provided to student veterans on campuses throughout the State of Minnesota, along with monthly service transactions for each month in 2007. The report provided a satisfaction index of

services provided to veterans. In the year examined, the report concluded that the program was successful based on evidence of the number of veterans' centers established within the period, the number of military family and personnel served, and the usage of the website established to gain access to services.

In preparing for the increase of veterans to its system, the University of California identified a need to collect data on student veterans (Zeszotarski, 2008). A study was undertaken from a 2007 cohort to compare first-year military California Community College transfers to non-military first-year California Community College transfers, first-year freshmen, and juniors who entered as freshmen. The study's most significant conclusion found existing transfer services may not meet the needs of military transfers because of background, demographics, opinions, and additional obligations created by the standards of the GI Bill. The University of California study also concluded military transfer students exhibited higher motivation and interaction with faculty, and displayed a grade point average decline similar to non-military transfer students.

Recent media reports have suggested that national student veteran drop-out rates are as high as 88% (Briggs, 2012; Wood, 2012), insinuating that student veterans as a group have poor retention rates. However, many organizations including Student Veterans of America (SVA) have questioned this statistic primarily because there is no current, national level database that collects and analyzes student veterans' enrollment and academic outcomes, such as retention and graduation rates. National data on student veterans is difficult to find, simply because no federal department has been tasked with the collection and analysis of data regarding student veterans or

their academic outcomes. Neither the original law that created the initial GI Bill program after World War II nor any of its later versions, including the Post-9/11 GI Bill, require the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to collect data on student veterans (Student Veterans of America, 2013). This is a significant issue for policy makers and stakeholders who rely on research to make informed decisions.

In response, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has initiated a major collaboration with the Student Veterans of America and the National Student Clearinghouse designed to track the success of student veterans on a national level. This database, which will include student veterans' academic achievement such as enrollment and program completion, will provide rich and quantifiable statistics to the subject of student success for student veterans (Student Veterans of America, 2013). It will also contribute to the resources for policy makers and college administrators in making informed, data-based decisions on veterans programs in postsecondary institutions.

Addressing Student Veterans' Needs in California Community Colleges

California's veteran population leads the nation with an estimated 2.2 million veterans living in the state. That number is expected to increase as more military personnel complete their service in Afghanistan and Iraq (California State Legislature, 2013). Because it is an affordable and accessible option, California community colleges will enroll a large number of these veterans (California Community College Chancellor's Office, n.d.a). Community colleges are a natural pathway for veterans who wish to advance their technical skills or further their education into four-year institutions.

Individual campuses can provide the instruction and learning experiences veterans need, but some veterans find the educational process somewhat challenging, are confused about the utilization of their educational benefits, and cannot find and access the support services they need (Ackerman et al., 2009). Although many community colleges are making significant attempts to meet the personal, social, and educational needs of returning veterans, there is an inconsistency in the level of support amongst the institutions. To provide more guidance to this issue, several initiatives have been initiated within the California Community College system.

The California Community College system is comprised of 112 campuses. Each of the campuses has a veterans education benefits certifying official, a position often located in the financial aid office. Individuals serving in this position help with the technical process of certifying eligibility for benefits in accordance with U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) requirements. Many colleges have recognized a need to expand their services to veterans because of the growing number of student veterans enrolling. Veterans coordinator positions have been established at many California community college campuses (California Community College Chancellor's Office, n.d.a).

In support of these coordinator positions, the System Office has organized a regional representation structure across the state to identify needs, exchange suggestions and ideas for programs, and to share best practices. To further enhance communication, the Chancellor's Office developed and maintains a system-wide email distribution list and redesigned a state-wide web page that provides information

about programs and services for veterans, as well as useful reference resources for student veterans.

Although each of the California community colleges provides some level of support to veterans, the Chancellor's Office has identified several who have distinguished themselves in creative and comprehensive services (California Community College Chancellor's Office, n.d.a). Butte College established a veterans resource center in 2008 and has been considered an exemplary veterans resource center in the state. Services provided by the center include academic support, counseling, and disabled student services. The center includes a lounge area with television, comfortable seating, internet access and movies, refreshments, free printing and copying. The center offers peer support, mentoring, and textbook exchange services. The Butte College veterans resource center staff also provides help to veterans in their daily lives by serving as liaisons connecting veterans with help on various issues, including health and mental health issues such as traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse.

Saddleback College created a program to serve veterans, active duty service members, and their families. The goal of its program is to help military members and their families transition from college orientation to commencement. Saddleback College's services include specialized veterans counseling, accommodations for veterans with disabilities, distance learning, in-state tuition waivers, child development center services, VA work-study/campus job opportunities, and access to the health care center.

The Sierra College Veterans Office and the Sierra College Veteran Student Alliance combined forces to create the Sierra College Veteran Help Center. The center includes space for student veterans where they can do homework, just relax, and socialize with other veterans. Among the services provided by the center are dissemination of information about GI Bill educational benefits, VA benefits, scholarships and emergency loans, financial aid, and employment opportunities. The center facilitates campus tours, provides tutoring and study group sessions, access to computers and specialized programs, and developed a mentoring program for new student veterans at the college.

A number of California community colleges also have provided events that are intended to increase awareness and provide insights about some of the issues facing veterans as they transition from military service to student life. These events are among many specialized transitional programs for community college student veterans. They bring together veterans as well as faculty, counselors, and support staff throughout the campus and encourage collaboration between veterans, campus constituencies, and local communities by providing yet another welcoming way for community colleges to show their support for returning veterans.

The California Community College Chancellor's Office also has recognized there is a deficiency of data about student veterans enrolled in its colleges. Its previous data collection measured the number of student veterans via a yearly report filed with financial aid offices. The report simply provided an unduplicated headcount of student veterans who certify receiving VA educational benefits each semester. However, the data have been limited to student veterans who receive educational

benefits from Veterans Affairs and do not reflect all active duty military and veterans enrolled in colleges. Student veterans who have not applied or are ineligible to receive VA education benefits are excluded.

The Chancellor's Office has addressed this issue by establishing two data elements in the California Community Colleges' online application/registration system, which will identify veterans, National Guard Reservists, active duty military, and dependents of each, including those not drawing VA education benefits. It is hoped this will provide more substantive data on student veterans in the community college system.

The California Community College system has provided leadership in several state-wide projects that will increase support for student veterans at its colleges. Several campuses have established veterans resource centers, places on campus where student veterans can associate with one another in an environment that is conducive their social and academic integration. Feedback to the Chancellor's Office by these colleges indicated having a veterans resource center providing meaningful support for students transitioning from military to student culture (California Community College Chancellor's Office, n.d.a) has positive educational benefits.

The Chancellor's Office received a grant from the Zellerbach Family Foundation in 2010 to help develop, test, and implement a training program for faculty and staff about the mental health needs of student veterans. The training objective was to increase awareness about the signs and symptoms of post-traumatic

stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and depression, so faculty and staff can recognize and respond to these conditions.

California's Troops to College program was started in 2006 to provide educational opportunities and assistance to active duty service members and veterans within the state's public higher education segments and related agencies. The program was intended to increase instructional opportunities for men and women on active duty, the National Guard and the reserves. The California Community College system joined Governor Schwarzenegger (State of California Governor's Office, 2006), along with the California State University and University of California systems, in partnering with other state and national agencies and state military branches to provide active duty service members and eligible veterans assistance, registration and enrollment guidance, and information and help about attending California's public higher education institutions.

The California Community College system also co-sponsors an annual job and resource event for veterans. The "Honor a Hero, Hire a Vet" event is led by the Chancellor's Office and coordinates local campus participation in regional job fairs held throughout the state. These events help inform student veterans about job opportunities as well as career technical classes and workforce training opportunities. All of these efforts within the California community college system focus attention on this issue of support services for student veterans with the intent to improve their success and to meet their educational objectives.

Concepts of Student Success in Higher Education

Throughout their history, higher education institutions have tried to create programs and services that help students ease their transition into the academic and social environments that exist in colleges and universities. These services and programs consist of orientations, student development, assessment, counseling, learning communities, and other support avenues designed to help students navigate their ways through uncharted territories leading to success in their educational endeavors.

The topic of student success has evolved over the years, just as there have been changes in the factors influencing colleges: student demographics, roles of faculty and student services professionals, state and national policies, socio-economic contexts, and institutions themselves. All are important aspects of understanding institutional effectiveness and its relationship to student success. As each of these influences has changed over the years, so has the definition of success.

With the increasing issue of accountability in postsecondary education today, student success has even greater implications. As accountability has become a more important mandate for colleges, student success has become a key indicator for accrediting agencies – and certain indicators are important variables to the subject of student success.

In 2012, the California Community Colleges Board of Governors approved a performance measurement system that will track student success at all 112 community colleges. The information available in the “Student Success Scorecard” will tell how well colleges are performing in the areas of remedial instruction,

retention of students, job training programs, and graduation and completion rates (California Community College Chancellor's Office, n.d.b). The data will be reported annually by gender, age and ethnicity.

Based on a state-wide task force recommendation (California Community College Student Success Task Force, 2012), the System defines success using the following metrics:

- “Percentage of community college students completing their educational goals.
- Percentage of community college students earning a certificate or degree, transferring, or achieving transfer-readiness.
- Number of students transferring to a four-year institution.
- Number of degrees and certificates earned.”

These measurements ultimately became the foundation of the California Community College's Student Success Scorecard.

In addition, the Task Force recognized the importance of monitoring intermediate measures of student progress, i.e. significant momentum points related to a likely possibility of improved success. Each time a student progresses beyond a momentum point, the likelihood of reaching his or her educational goal increases. The recognition of these momentum points led to the Task Force's recommendations aimed at improving completion rates. Some of these improvement measures include: successful course completion; successful completion of basic skills courses; successful completion of first collegiate level mathematics course; successful completion of first 15 semester units; and successful completion of first 30 semester

units. Data pertaining to each of these measures are updated annually and provided to each of the System's colleges.

Many other community colleges have developed core indicators of institutional effectiveness (Alfred, Ewell, Hudgins, & McClenney, 1999; American Association of Community Colleges, 1994; Harris, 1998). Examples are:

- *Student Goal Attainment*: To what extent are students attaining their final educational goal as indicated on their application and advising records?
- *Course Retention and Success*: At what rate do students complete the individual courses in which they enroll? At what rates are grades below C awarded in particular courses?
- *Success in Subsequent Coursework*: How successful are students in courses that are sequential especially in math, science, and English?
- *Fall-to-Fall Persistence*: At what rate do students continue their education one complete academic year to the next, in accordance with their educational goal?
- *Time to Degree*: How many semesters elapsed prior to degree attainment? What percentage of full-time students attempt and complete the average credit hour load per term?
- *Degree/Certificate Completion*: What number and percentage of students complete their chosen degree or certificate program?

- *Graduate School Enrollment and Employment*: At what level are students enrolling in graduate and professional school and attaining employment and advancement relevant to their degree or certificate program?
- *Transfer Rate and Success*: What percentage of students complete their educational goal by transferring to a 4-year institution? How does the success of transfer students compare to students that started at the institution?
- *Employer Assessment of Students*: How satisfied are employers with students' knowledge, qualities, and skills?
- *Academic Value Added*: What knowledge and skills have students acquired during their undergraduate experience?
- *Student Satisfaction*: How satisfied are students with access, instructional and student services, facilities, and campus life?
- *Student Professional Growth and Development*: What is the self-perceived personal growth, community involvement, and moral development of students completing their education at the institution?
- *Student Involvement*: To what extent are students participating in educationally purposeful activities?
- *Citizenship and Engagement*: To what extent are students acquiring habits of the mind and heart in college that will benefit them and society in the future?

The terms “retention” and “persistence” often are used somewhat interchangeably; however, the words are differentiated by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in this way: retention is used as an institutional measure, and persistence is a student measure. Institutions retain, students persist. Retention and attrition are also commonly linked together. Attrition is the number of students an institution loses as a result of decreased student retention.

Although retention figures are required to be submitted for federal and state reporting, the concept of retention and the appropriate tools for its measurement are somewhat ambiguous. Reporting within community colleges is particularly difficult because of turnover rates and varied student enrollments, including the fact that students may attend multiple institutions simultaneously. For community colleges, the NCES formula specifically excludes data related to students who are deceased, who are in the armed forces or foreign service, or who are on church missions (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Persistence is part of a broader, transitional process in the lives of students. Many students re-enroll for multiple semesters without issue, while others consider dropping out because of everyday problems life brings. Many factors can impact a student’s decision to drop out. Two important variables include academic and social integration (Bean, 1980; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980) and support systems (Nora, 2004), both of which will be examined in this study for their impact on continuation and academic achievement of military veterans who have been provided special support services at the participating institution.

Hagedorn (2005) suggests that retention comes in many different varieties. Perhaps the most typical definition is institutional retention, which is the measurement of the proportion of students who remain enrolled at the same institution from one year to the next. System retention, on the other hand, focuses on the individual student regardless of the campus at which that individual is enrolled. Retention of this type is truly student persistence, as it measures the student's continuation regardless of whether that occurs at the same college.

Two other types of retention identified by Hagedorn (2005) are retention within a discipline or major and retention within a course. A student who initially declares a major, but then changes, may be retained at the institution but not within the discipline. Similarly, an examination of students at the course level may conclude that certain courses are not being completed, but the student may persist at the institution.

Previous models of retention include that of Tinto (1975), who identified the importance of academic and social integration by students in predicting student retention. This suggests a linkage between student commitment and an institutional environment that supports student success. Bean (1990) further outlined the importance of integrating the student and the institution by concluding that student retention rates are positively influenced by the interaction between the college's students and the institution's characteristics.

More recently, Bean (2005) suggests retention can be viewed from four different perspectives: theoretical, something to be explained; policy, related to funding and access; institutional, focusing on students attending a single college; and

individual, identifying background characteristics, experiences, behaviors, and attitudes of students affecting retention. Bean also describes nine themes that potentially may affect attrition: students' background, money and finance, grades and academic performance, social factors, bureaucracy, external environment, psychological and attitudinal factors, institutional fit and commitment, and intentions. Many of these factors are at the core of the transition from military to civilian life, and the student's ability to survive and adapt to these issues will be an important part of understanding the contributions of the college's support program toward overcoming these obstacles.

Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2003) found that community colleges have hidden obstacles that cause problems for non-traditional students. A certain amount of know-how is required to navigate the system. The seven obstacles these students face, as identified by Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, are: bureaucracy, confusing choices, student-generated guidance, limited availability of counselors, bad advice from staff, slow reaction to costly mistakes, and poor handling of competing demands. As the first people to interact with students, the personnel in student services programs – where most veterans' programs and services are housed at postsecondary institutions – are in a unique position to identify emerging demographic trends, to interpret these trends to the college community, and to help the college design appropriate support services and interventions.

There is evidence that if an institution provides students with a support structure that integrates formal and informal instructional and social systems of the campus, then a student has a higher likelihood of success. This concept is consistent

with retention models posed by Terenzini, Lorang, & Pascarella (1981) and Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington (1986), suggesting there is a positive correlation between integration into social and academic systems of the college and the student's commitment to the institution. Similarly, Tinto (1993) and his retention model illustrate the extent to which academic and social integration and individual goals and commitments are aligned, and how those elements influence a student's decision to leave or stay at the institution.

The time and effort students put into their studies and other educational activities have a direct effect on what students gain from their college experience (Pascarella, 2001). This notion is called student engagement, a concept that includes many educational activities traditionally linked with learning. Examples include writing and reading, ensuring one is prepared for class, and associations with faculty members (Kuh, 2001). Many other activities are included in this concept of engagement, including problem solving assignments, community service projects, and collaboration with peers.

Clearly, involvement in educational activities matters. Multiple research studies have demonstrated students are more likely to persist if they have greater involvement and integration into college life (Astin, 1984; Mallette & Cabrera, 1991; Nora, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Other research has substantiated that involvement has a strong effect on learning (Astin, 1993; Ory & Braskamp, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). There is a significant relationship between enhanced involvement in college life, particularly academic life, and increased development of knowledge and intellectual capacity. This is especially true regarding student contact

with faculty, which is critical to student development (Astin, 1993; Endo & Harpell, 1982).

Research indicates students having more contact with faculty and peers exhibit higher levels of learning acquisition over their years in college (Endo & Harpell, 1982). Generally, the higher the level of a student's involvement, the better his or her chance is of learning. Similarly, the quality of student effort increases the likelihood of substantive learning (Kaufman & Creamer, 1991; Ory & Braskamp, 1988). The more effort and involvement in educational activities, the more likely student success will be achieved and retention will be attained.

Student Engagement and Its Influence on Student Success

A significant amount of research on student development and student success has concentrated on student engagement. The conceptual framework developed by Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) has guided this action research.

Key to the conclusions by Kuh et al. (2005) is that focused actions students take while in college have considerable impact on their learning, persistence, and success in school. Specifically, their theory on student engagement suggests the more time and effort students put forth in studying and learning experiences has direct benefits to their educational success. Success is a derivative of good organizational and time management skills, studying methods and duration, work habits, and integration into the academic environment of the institution. In addition, Kuh et al. indicate that the institutional resources and services made available to students also have a direct correlation to student achievement. Interventions that lead to students'

participation in and benefit from such services and extra-curricular learning activities also can influence student success.

Student engagement generally is considered to be an important factor in learning and personal development. Simply put, the more students study and practice subject material, the better the outcomes for learning and retaining it. Similarly, being engaged in learning provides added skill levels and insights that are key to living a fruitful and successful life after college. Among other factors, students who become involved in extra-curricular activities in college are leading lives that increase their capacity for personal development and lifelong learning (Shulman, 2002).

Astin (1985) suggests student success is directly related to the level of involvement the student has in the college experience. Moore and Upcraft (1990) refer to Tinto's work on retention and his model of freshman development and integration into the college environment and culture. Also important are a student's friends, groups, and the student culture at the institution (Gardner & Upcraft, 1989).

Community colleges must find ways to continuously adapt to their changing environments, to design systems to identify and meet emerging student needs, to improve processes, to measure the quality of services, and to then change how they do business. Student affairs practitioners often are considered the experts on students because they typically serve on the institution's front line. The major challenge for these experts is developing an understanding of how changing environmental characteristics shape both the students and the world in which they live, and then using this understanding to help students succeed in the community college. A secondary challenge involves helping faculty members understand, accept,

appreciate, and teach each wave of new students in ways that are respectful and effective (Martens, Lara, Cordova, & Harris, 1995).

The notion of student engagement as a pathway to collegiate success is supported by other theorists as well. In their research, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) identified a variety of student efforts and their involvement in the various offerings of the campus – academic, extracurricular, and interpersonal – as a critical component of student success. In their studies, they suggest, to promote student success at its highest caliber, colleges should create programs and services that make instructional, interpersonal, and extracurricular avenues to encourage student engagement.

Similarly, Chickering and Reisser (1993) concluded that student engagement and its association with student success included meaningful student-faculty interaction, learning that was collaborative, and campus environments that were inclusive, inviting, and interactive. Student engagement is linked to student success through relationships between faculty and students and the collaboration and inclusiveness created by the campus. High levels of student engagement are vital contributors to student success in higher education, particularly those factors that are related to educational attainment, persistence, student satisfaction, and dimensional learning. Additional research (Astin, 1993; Goodsell, Maher, & Tinto, 1992; Pike, 1993; Sorcinelli, 1991) supports the viewpoint that student success is a derivative of high degrees of student engagement.

Further studies' findings are consistent with the hypothesis that student engagement is an essential component of collegiate success. The study by Beal and Noel (1980), a joint project of ACT and the National Center for Higher Education

Management Systems (NCHEMS), concluded three specific action areas were important to retention: academic stimulation and assistance in support of academic results; personal future building in clarifying students' goals; and involvement experiences that provide student interaction and participation in extracurricular programs and services in college.

Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth (2004) included in their study of successful college retention practices, a recommendation to higher education institutions that the combination of academic and non-academic factors will lead to improved college retention. Habley and McClanahan (2004) concluded very similar findings in their study that institutional interventions outside of the classroom contributed significantly to student retention and degree completion.

The literature suggests there are multiple definitions related to student success, completion, persistence, and retention. An important component of this study was to understand how returning veterans view student success and to what extent programs and services like those offered by the participating college attribute to student veterans' perceptions of student success.

Demonstration of student success in community colleges has been demanded by legislative and accrediting bodies for many years. Many definitions of student success have been generated, some of which are quantifiable student achievement factors including transfer to four-year institutions, grade point averages, continuation rates from year-to-year and semester-to-semester, the amount of time leading to a degree, and graduation. There are many who consider attainment of a degree or certificate as the most significant measure of student success (Venezi, Callan, Finney,

Kirst, & Usdan, 2005). Still, at community colleges students are pursuing a variety of goals including earning associate's degrees, transfer to four-year institutions, enhancements to skill level and careers, and certificate completions (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2005; Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn, 2003). Student success can also be measured in conventional terms of progress toward degree, including results on standardized tests, college grades, and credit hours received.

There are success factors that are more difficult to measure, but still are important considerations to learning outcomes. Some of these include the satisfaction students have with the learning environment (Astin, 1993) and the comfort level a student has within the institutional environment and the feeling of belonging with peers (Tinto, 1993). Beyond these traditional measures of student success for which many institutions strive, there are other personal indicators of student success including increased critical thinking, better writing and speaking acumen, self-awareness and self-worth, increased confidence, and a positive sense of purpose (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Student engagement is another gauge of student success that has been identified in the last decade (Kuh, 2001, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Increased amounts of instructional and social integration will garner enhanced commitment to the institution and to graduation aspirations (Bean, 1983). Each of these studies suggests students' participation in active and collaborative learning is a key factor in determining whether they will survive and thrive.

In the ground-breaking report by Chickering and Gamson (1987), seven important student practices were highlighted as critical to student learning and the quality of educational experiences. They were: faculty-student relationships, inter-student cooperation, active learning, swift feedback, time management, setting high expectations, and recognition of diverse skill sets and methods of learning. In general terms, the more students utilized these sets of activities, the more they learned and persisted in college.

Student engagement involves dual efforts, by the student and by the institution. The time and effort students commit to studying and participating in educational activities is critical. The individual's investment in the learning process has a huge influence on successful learning (Alexander & Murphy, 1994). Similarly, the campus' organization of curriculum and its prioritization of resources and support services, which stimulate students' interests and participation in activities, can influence the achievement of success outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation (Kuh, 2001).

The interaction between peers is a particularly significant component of student engagement. The socialization on campus with faculty, students, and staff has a large impact on student success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Peer interaction by students can have a very positive effect on general academic development, learning acquisition, problem solving and analytical skills, and self-confidence (Kuh, 1993; 1995). Studies similarly suggest that student satisfaction with a college is an important aspect of student engagement. Such satisfaction indicates a student feels a sense of belonging and loyalty to an institution (Tinto, 1987), which has a significant

correlation with engagement, persistence, and academic achievement (Bean & Vesper, 1994; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987; Whitt, 1994).

Conclusion

The linkage between student development activities (student/faculty engagement, programs and services, interventions, bureaucratic channels, improved counseling and guidance) and the special demands of military veterans is a challenge colleges and universities are attempting to address. The programs and services established by the participating community college in this study were designed to address these critical needs. Through surveys and interviews of participants, this evaluative research assessed the college's effectiveness in meeting demands and achieving student success. As a result of this study, the researcher hopes to conclude whether the college's programs and services are in fact assisting these military veterans with the transition into the classroom and, if so, how the programs and services are contributing to achievement of student success.

In this exploratory mixed methods study, the student success indicators of these veterans returning from OEF/OIF military conflicts were examined. Student success will be presumed at the outset of this study to be linked to achievements in academic goals, acquisition of expected knowledge, skills and competencies, engagement in purposeful educational activities, general satisfaction in the learning experience, persistence, and attainment of goals. The interviews and survey instrument revealed the OEF/OIF student veterans' perceptions of student success and clarifies how the specialized programs and services have contributed to their

educational goals. In the subsequent chapter, the design and methodology of the study will be outlined.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Restatement of the Purpose

With the end of the war in Iraq and the drawdown of troops in Afghanistan, more than 2 million military men and women will be eligible to enroll in colleges after serving in the U.S. military (Cook & Kim, 2009). Many of these military personnel, soon to be called “veterans,” have endured serious and life-changing physical, emotional, and social scars that they will carry with them into civilian life (Rand Center for Military Health and Policy Research, 2008). These returning Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) military veterans, whose average age is 27.2 years (National Research Council, 2010), will be seeking job training and education to obtain the necessary skills to continue their lives as contributing members of society, and many of these veterans will be enrolling in California community colleges. In 2009, for example, more than 26,600 veterans utilized education benefits at a California community college (California Community College Chancellor’s Office, n.d.c).

At the federal level and in the State of California, legislation has enhanced the benefits for veterans who served after the events of September 11, 2001. These benefits are assisting returning military personnel, particularly OEF and OIF veterans, with financial and educational advantages – the effect of which is expected to bring thousands of veterans back into college classrooms. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2009, April), 90% of enlisted personnel plan to enroll into college when they complete their military service. California community colleges

anticipate enrolling a large percentage of those student veterans returning for postsecondary instruction. More than half of California veterans receiving GI educational benefits attend a community college (California Community College League, 2013).

Research Questions

Officials at the California community college selected for this study believe they have readied the institution for this influx of students, and that the college's veterans program set the foundation for what is already recognized by many as a model in California (B. Petersen, personal communication, 2012). The programs and services for veterans at this California community college are the subject of this case study.

Much of the literature on the subject of veterans returning to higher education discusses the transitioning process and the programs and services that should be established as more military veterans were expected to enroll in college. This study evaluated such a program – more than seven years after its inception – that was designed to help student veterans. Using the participating college as a benchmark, this study assessed the program and its impact on student success.

Two research questions guided this exploratory mixed methods study:

1. How do OEF/OIF student veterans at the participating community college define “student success”?
2. To what extent and how do the OEF/OIF student veterans at the college attribute their success to the specialized veterans' programs and services provided by the college?

Outline of the Study

This exploratory mixed methods research was conducted in three parts: The first part of the study (Part A) describes the operational plan of the student veterans program at the participating institution. Because it is considered among the model programs in California (B. Petersen, personal communication, 2012), it serves as the underpinning of this study. In the second phase of the study (Part B), the researcher conducts interviews of OEF/OIF military veterans at the participating college to determine more comprehensively what their definition of “success” is and to evaluate whether – through the specialized veterans services – the community college has been successful in meeting their educational objectives. In the third phase of the study (Part C), based on the results of the interviews, a survey was conducted of the OEF/OIF student veterans at the college gaining their perceptions regarding the services provided by the participating institution and the students’ satisfaction regarding those services in helping them meet their educational goals.

Research Design

Part A

The first part of the study includes a comprehensive review of the programs and services provided by the participating college. These programs and services serve as the foundation of the case study, which will evaluate whether a program such as this is leading to educational success. This part of the study provides an institutional context regarding establishment of the program and will outline the operational plan for the veterans’ services.

Part B

The second part of the study includes semi-structured interviews of student veterans at the participating college. These individuals were given an opportunity to describe – in their own words – the services and programs needed to ease returning veterans' transitions to college, and whether the services and programs established at the participating college have led to their educational success.

Part C

Based on the results of the interviews, a survey was developed and distributed electronically to all self-identified OEF and OIF student veterans enrolled at the participating college. The survey focused on their perspectives regarding services at the college and to what extent those services contributed to their educational success.

Site and Program Selection

The college selected for this study is one of 112 California community colleges. It is an institution with an enrollment of approximately 8,500 students and is located in northern California. The college is one of two separately accredited institutions within the same district, and serves three principal cities and several unincorporated communities within its service area.

The college provides university transfer classes, retraining classes for those in need of employment or career advancement, a first-time educational opportunity for many adults, and career and technical training for those entering the technical and para-professional work force. The institution is a public, two-year community college accredited by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. The study's author is a former

administrator of the college and has access to data from the institution. The request to conduct the study was approved by the president of the participating institution (Appendix A).

The California Community Colleges operate under the governance of the State Chancellor, the State Board of Governors appointed by the Governor, and local districts with their own locally elected governing boards. The California Community College's System Office and Board of Governors oversee the distribution of funds apportioned by the State Legislature for use by the Community Colleges. California's Community Colleges are organized into 72 community college districts. Each college within a district has a president or chancellor/superintendent, and each district has its own elected board of trustees, which apportions funds and governs the colleges within its district.

By law, the California Community Colleges shall admit any person who is a high school graduate or equivalent thereof, or who is eighteen years of age or older, and who can benefit from the instruction offered. Primary missions of the colleges are to offer academic and career-technical education at the lower division level. Another primary mission is to advance California's economic growth and global competitiveness through education, training, and services that contribute to continuous workforce improvement. Essential and important functions of the colleges include: basic skills instruction and, in conjunction with the school districts, instruction in English as a Second Language, adult non-credit instruction, and support services that help students succeed at the postsecondary level.

The program at this institution was selected for several reasons. Data and participants were readily available to the researcher because of the previous association the author has with the college. The program itself began more than seven years ago and is now considered among the model programs for veterans' services within the California Community College system (B. Petersen, personal communication, 2012).

Timeline of the Study

Following is the schedule and steps that were conducted in this research:

- August 2013 – A memorandum of understanding was obtained from the President of the participating community college as the site for this case study (Appendix A).
- August 2013 – Research proposal was presented to the dissertation committee for approval.
- October 2013 – Upon approval by the dissertation committee, the proposal was submitted to the University's Institutional Review Board.
- November 2013 – Program evaluation summary and analysis written.
- November 2013 – Student veterans at the college participating in the study were selected for interviews.
- November 2013 – Pilot testing and finalization of interview questions.
- December 2013 – Each interview participant requested to sign a consent form prior to being interviewed (Appendix B).
- December 2013 – Interviews of student veterans were conducted.

- May 2014 – Survey questions distributed to and collected from OEF/OIF student veterans at the institution.
- June 2014 – Final analysis of data collected, reviewed, analyzed, and summarized.
- July 2014 – Results of case study prepared, and Chapter IV and Chapter V of the dissertation report finalized.

Participant Selection

Eight student veterans attending the participating college were identified to be interviewed. The participants were students who had served or are still serving in OEF and OIF operations in the military. The student veterans were purposefully selected with consideration of age, gender, ethnicity, and representation from the various branches of the military. According to the National Research Council (2010), 89% of military personnel in the OEF/OIF conflicts were male; 11% were female. Two-thirds of the soldiers were white; 18.5% were African-American, and 11.7% were Hispanic. Consideration of the selection of the interviewees was intended to be consistent with these ratios. In addition, because the participating college considers its three-day orientation program to be such a critical component of its service to veterans, at least two individuals interviewed were expected to be among those who had participated in the orientation.

The interviews and discussions with the student veterans were intended to provide substantive feedback, which would lead to questions that could be posed to a broader group of student veterans. These questions elicited opinions and comments

about programs and services provided by the college, and whether improvements are needed in those areas.

The survey was intended to include approximately 20 questions; it was administered to all enrolled, self-identified military veterans (approximately 300) at the college. The survey questions are included in the appendix (Appendix J).

Data Collection

As a case study, the descriptive analysis is a key component of this research. Stake (1995) suggests that case studies may describe and understand a particular issue, thereby providing an interpretive approach with a strong qualitative emphasis. Examining the operational plan of the program and services for student veterans at this college is useful to understanding its “whys” and “hows,” and a clear delineation will become the framework of the interviews and survey instrument.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) are also advocates of case studies and their evaluative approach. They suggest that, by providing a complete evaluation of a program, one can garner total understanding of the activities as well as the program’s value within the context it operates. Case studies have these critical features: focus on a specific issue or program; in-depth understanding of a program; and data is typically collected in a variety of ways including observations, interviews, and the study of existing documentation.

Phenomenological research emphasizes how individuals react to or are affected by a particular experience or phenomenon from their own unique perspectives (Merriam, 2002). The interviews of student veterans were designed to learn those distinct perspectives regarding the programs and services offered by the

college and to determine how they impacted the students' educational goals. Merriam (2002) suggests that "interviewing is the primary method of data collection wherein one attempts to uncover the essence, the invariant structure, of the meaning of the experience" (p. 93).

The survey instrument was based on the input given by the interviewees. The survey provided a wider net of responses about the programs and services offered to student veterans at the college, and whether those services are contributing to success in meeting education goals. Braverman (1996) notes, "Surveys constitute one of the most important data collection tools available in evaluation" (p. 17).

Part A

A descriptive summary of the operational plan detailing the programs and services offered to student veterans at the college was written. The program evaluation structure helps clarify the intended program model, examines its implementation to determine how or if program goals and objectives are being met, and explores the degree to which student veterans' needs are being satisfied. The program evaluation protocol is outlined in Appendix C.

Part B

Prior to conducting the interviews, the questions were pilot tested. This trial testing assisted in determining if the questions were clear and understandable, were not leading, or in any way written so as to elicit a pre-determined response.

Individuals involved in the pilot testing were knowledgeable about the college and the program being evaluated, but were not participants in the study nor the programs and services being assessed. The pilot testing was conducted under the protocol outlined

in Appendix D. Once pilot testing determined the questions to be sound and reliable, the actual interviews ensued.

All of the interviews were conducted in a private room at the participating college, and were accomplished according to the interview protocol briefing (Appendix E). Initial questions asked in the interviews are included in Appendix F. Each session took between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted individually with the subjects. Data collection, including information obtained from the interviews, is being held confidential and within privacy protection protocols defined by the University Institutional Research Board (UIRB) and consistent with the parameters on the informed consent form. At the conclusion of the interviews, an interview debriefing was conducted (Appendix G). Each of the interviews was recorded individually, labeled accordingly, fully transcribed (see Data Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement in Appendix H), and analyzed for key statements, themes, and commonalities. The interviews were intended to help determine the key components of what these returning veterans perceive as the services and programs necessary to help them succeed in college.

Part C

The various issues and topics extracted from the interviews were incorporated into a survey that was distributed electronically to the student veterans enrolled at the participating college. Although there are more than 300 self-identified students with military backgrounds enrolled at the college, the number of OEF and OIF veterans (the subject of this study) is fewer. The survey included a series of questions based on the outcome of the interviews conducted in Part B. They were aimed at understanding

the needs of student veterans, how effectively the students perceive the college has been able to satisfy those needs, and whether the students consider the programs and services have contributed to their educational success.

The survey included Likert-scale type questions, which resulted in evaluations of the programs and services provided by the institution. In addition, open-ended questions allowed student veterans to make remarks about the programs and services that may not have been included in the survey. An online survey tool, *SurveyMonkey*, was utilized for collecting and compiling the survey results. Draft survey pilot testing and potential survey questions are included at the end of this report (Appendix I and J, respectively). At the outset of the electronic survey, each student acknowledged consent of participation prior to completing the survey instrument (Appendix K).

Data Analysis

This exploratory mixed methods study used as its framework the model programs and services for student veterans at the participating college. Chapter IV includes a descriptive summary of those programs and services. Chapter IV also provides a descriptive and comparative analysis leading to: 1) theoretical development of veterans' needs for college services and programs and 2) comparative evaluations among the OEF/OIF veteran interviewees on how the programs and services offered by the participating institution are (or are not) satisfying those needs. Finally, a general assessment by the OEF/OIF student veterans was gained as to the contributions the college's student veterans' programs and services have made to their educational success.

Resulting from the interviews was a series of questions that was distributed to the OEF and OIF student veterans at the participating college. Collected via an online tool, the survey's results provide perceptions of student satisfaction related to the institution's services for veterans. The Likert-scale ratings address questions aimed at understanding student veterans' needs and how effectively the college is satisfying those needs. The results of the survey are reported in Chapter IV, along with the researcher's evaluation of the findings supported by attributions collected through the interviews.

The data analyses have three separate components: summary evaluation of the operating plan for the program and services for student veterans, the review and procedures related to the student veteran interviews, and the process and procedures concerning the survey instrument conducted of the OEF/OIF student veterans at the college.

Descriptive Summary of Operating Plan

Consistent with the program evaluation protocol, the descriptive summary was prepared after reviewing documents, interviewing stakeholders and staff as needed, and performing a site visit. Since the program is more than seven years old, the interviews and site visit were critical steps because of any revisions and changes to the programs and services that may have occurred.

Beyond documents obtained regarding the operating plan and the programs offered at the college, field notes were written and catalogued. Once the descriptive summary and evaluation was written, the narrative was peer-reviewed by an

individual familiar with the program, but not affiliated with this study to ensure validity and reasonableness of the descriptive summary.

Student Veteran Interviews

The student veteran interviews were tape recorded, however, note-taking was an essential data source. Observation was a critical component to the researcher's analysis in this study and, therefore, field notes were a critical data source for the analysis. Along with the transcription of the interviews, the researcher's field notes capturing non-verbal processes were an important source for the data analysis. These notes, combined with the audio recording transcripts, helped document the research activities and insights about the collected data and emerging themes (Esterberg, 2002).

With the completion of the interviews, the transcriptions and field notes were reviewed for themes and annotations. Originally, the researcher intended to use Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software, but instead, the researcher determined that a more practical analysis of the interviews was best synthesized through an intense, redundant review of the recordings and line-by-line examination of the transcripts and field notes. Subsequently, another review of the transcripts and field notes was re-examined line by line, mindful of the initial themes. This part of the process is called focus coding (Esterberg, 2002) and continued until the process reached the point of saturation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), where no additional themes were identified.

Survey Instrument

Once survey data were collected from the respondents, the researcher's next step was to ensure that the data were complete and correct, assign names and codes to the data, and then analyze the results. Generally, the steps included reviewing the survey results to determine if the respondents completed the questionnaire fully. In online surveys in particular, respondents may skip a question inadvertently or intentionally. Similarly, a respondent's marking of the same number for each question may be an indication of an invalid set of answers. The completeness and validity of the survey responses needed to be verified.

The subsequent step was to edit and code the data results. Coding is the process of assigning numbers or character codes to responses of the survey. This coding process enabled tracking of themes and concepts that emerge from the study. Coding assisted in the analysis and sorting.

The next step in the analysis of the survey results was to perform basic statistical analysis of the results. Frequency distribution and means analyses were the expected statistical computations to be performed in this study because of the applicability of the Likert scale. The results of the open-ended questions were also coded to determine emerging themes.

Upon completion of the data analysis, a comprehensive case study report included: a descriptive summary of the history and current operations of the student veterans programs and services at the college; a report of the interview findings; results of the survey instrument; and a summary of the analysis of the study and conclusions. The findings were provided first to the researcher's dissertation faculty

advisor at California State University, Stanislaus. The study's author revised the report according to the advisor's recommendations after which he met with dissertation committee members to review the findings and seek out additional comments.

Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to strengthen the research's validity, reliability, and trustworthiness. Strategies were incorporated into each of the three study phases. Peer review and debriefing helped to ensure that any preconceptions or emotions were not becoming involved in the research. Obtaining different viewpoints about the findings and data from informed but uninvolved participants is a primary goal of peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using a peer reviewer provides a check on misdirected interpretations and provides a different perspective on the data results.

Although this research is not guaranteed to depict a total sense of reality, steps were taken to eliminate obvious mistakes and to more fully explain the results of the data. The strategy of member checking was also utilized. Finally, prolonged engagement was another ingredient contributing to the study's trustworthiness. Considerable length of time and effort involved in this study was recognized by those involved. Prolonged engagement led to a deeper level of fidelity by the researcher and built rapport and trust with the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Issues

Consent

All participants in this study were provided informed consent (Appendix B) and anonymity of identification by participation in this research effort. No names,

identification numbers, or other distinguishing criteria are being retained or printed in this research study. Participants were fully informed about the aspects of the study including their role, data collection procedures, researcher's role, and how the findings will be reported. Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations have been adhered to when accessing student information, but student participants were asked to complete demographic questionnaires as part of the study.

Individuals selected for interview were given the opportunity to withdraw from participation at any time. Had an interviewee indicated distress or emotional discomfort in the course of the interview, referrals had already been given for professional counseling staff familiar with veterans' issues. Interview participants were provided a list of phone numbers and locations where they could obtain assistance with distress or emotional discomfort should that have occurred during the interviews. Throughout the process, the researcher clearly outlined the informed consent and procedures of the study. Those interviewed signed an informed consent document (Appendix B).

Confidentiality

Anonymity of the participants was extremely important. Interviews were conducted privately and handled with discretion. In one case when a female student was to be interviewed, the researcher asked that another female be present to which the interviewee consented. Although the interviews were recorded, had an interviewee request confidentiality of specific responses or statements, the tape recorder would have been turned off momentarily until the individual consented to further tape recording. Documents and tape recordings were safeguarded in secure

areas; access was limited to the researcher and advisor if necessary. The participating college has not been identified in the study report, and pseudonyms of participants have been used to retain confidentiality (Appendix B).

Destruction of Data

All data resulting from this research will be shredded one year after approval of this study. Data collected have been housed on a secure server/location for one year after which the data will be deleted or destroyed. No known costs regarding this effort impacted the college, interviewees, or survey participants in this study. No publications, documents, distributions, or presentations of the findings from this study – including, but not limited to, the researcher’s dissertation – will reveal the identity of the participants who took part in this research.

Conclusion

This chapter explained the exploratory mixed methods design that examined the student success efforts for military veterans transitioning to a California community college. The study provides a comprehensive review of the programs and services provided by the participating college; conducts semi-structured interviews of OEF/OIF student veterans at the participating college to determine what services and programs for returning veterans are needed to ease this transition and whether the services and programs established at the participating college have led to success for these students. Furthermore, based on results and findings from the interviews, a survey focused on all OEF/OIF students at the college gained their perspectives regarding services at the campus and to what extent those services contributed to their educational success.

The research involved a descriptive summary of the college's programs and services, interviews of purposefully-selected student veterans, and a survey instrument. The case study institution was selected because of its model program, its accessibility to the researcher, and for its richness of data.

This research gained an understanding from students who have had the programs and services at the college available to them and who were able to provide personal viewpoints and perceptions in response to the research questions. The interviews and survey results provide administrators of higher education with additional data necessary to create interventions on behalf of students.

Chapter IV provides the case study background, a detailed outline of the programs and services that were developed over seven years ago by the participating college in support of student veterans. A profile of the interviewees is provided within privacy protection protocols defined by the University Institutional Research Board (UIRB) and consistent with the parameters on the informed consent form (Appendix B). Responses to research questions 1 and 2 are provided in narrative form. Responses to research question 3 include results from the survey instrument and are in narrative form as feasible. The open-ended comments are also included in the findings.

Chapter V provides further discussion, conclusions, recommendations, and suggestions for further research as applicable. Through this examination, it has been the researcher's intent to provide postsecondary leadership an assessment that may lead to necessary program modifications benefitting future students throughout the State of California.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This exploratory mixed methods study evaluated a program at a California community college, which was designed to assist student veterans' transition from the military and succeed in achieving their educational goals. Using the participating college as a yardstick for the types of services and programs available to student veterans, this study assessed the program and its impact on student success.

There were two research questions guiding this study: how do Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) student veterans at the participating community college define "student success," and to what extent and how do the OEF/OIF student veterans at the college attribute their success to the specialized veterans' programs and services provided by the college?

The research was conducted in three parts: the first part of the study (Part A) provided a descriptive analysis of the operational plan for the student veterans program at the participating institution. The second phase of the study (Part B) included interviews of OEF/OIF military veterans at the participating college in an effort to determine more comprehensively what these students' definition of "success" is, and to evaluate if and how the specialized veterans services provided by this college's programs have met successfully their educational objectives. Based on answers resulting from these interviews, the third phase of the study (Part C) surveyed the OEF/OIF student veterans at the college to obtain their perceptions about the services provided by the participating institution and the students' satisfaction regarding those services in helping them meet their educational goals.

Part A. The Programs and Services for Student Veterans at the College

Prior to 2007, the participating college in this study did not have a specialized program for veterans. And yet, in that year, there were two-hundred veterans enrolled at the college. The majority of the veterans certified at the time were enrolled on a full-time basis. From April 2004 to April 2007, the college experienced a 4.35% increase in those receiving GI benefits. By comparison, between April 2007 and April 2008, the college data indicated a 32% increase in those receiving such benefits. Regardless of this growing need, no campus funds had been earmarked specifically to meet veterans' requirements and the college's planning documents – master plan, educational plan, strategic plan – never addressed the veterans program as an area for future growth and development.

Up until that time, minimal services were provided by the campus financial aid office, which had identified a portion of a position to serve the veteran population of the college. At the time, 25% of a budgeted position referred to as a “veterans benefits specialist” provided information and assistance to eligible veterans or their dependents who were applying for and receiving veterans educational benefits. A critical function of the veterans benefits specialist position was to determine the appropriateness of classes for veterans' benefits, to certify enrollment each semester, to monitor enrollment and report changes in a timely manner, and to evaluate progress and report appropriately so veterans will receive their benefits. Many community colleges continue even today with this essential, but minimal service for veterans. The participating college ultimately designed programs and services in its business plan to meet the specific needs of student veterans.

The development of the strong commitment to programs for veterans at the college was triggered by efforts of an ad hoc, grass roots initiative. This initiative had as its primary goals: to assess the current level of campus support for veterans; to advocate for additional staffing, fiscal, and space needs as necessary; and to address the viability of developing community partnerships to increase service components where needed.

Developing Stages of the Veterans Program

In Spring 2007, the college formed a veterans task force to develop a plan for establishing a comprehensive service component for veterans. The task force was comprised of members from both the college and community, including: the dean of enrollment services; the veterans benefits specialist; a student veteran; a faculty member; representatives from the college foundation; and representatives from Blue Star Moms, local Military Families organization, and Operation Sam. The group met regularly to define goals, to assess progress, and to redirect objectives as appropriate.

For several years, the veterans initiative served in name only as the veterans program at the college. Subsequently, veterans' enrollment levels and support needs were identified and it became apparent that a campus commitment to sustainable resources was of paramount importance. Work by the initiative created a compelling case to establish a formal institutional program for veterans and, in turn, the college hoped to become the campus of choice for veterans returning to school after military service.

Several key initiatives were part of the participating college's strategy for ensuring adequate support services. The college's inquiry about the needs of its own

student veterans included many of the same suggestions formulated by Ackerman, DiRamio and Mitchell (2009). The institution attempted to meet student veterans “where they are” by proposing the following in its business plan:

1. Enhanced college awareness of veterans program development
 - Establish program mission to embrace a comprehensive approach to addressing veterans’ needs.
 - Update the Student Services Program Review and Campus Educational Master Plan to demonstrate the college’s commitment to a comprehensive veterans program.
 - Obtain approval for establishment of a veterans coordinator position.
2. Veterans outreach efforts to define service population
 - Update the admissions and registration process to reflect veterans’ questions.
 - Create an automated email reply system that informed veterans of college resources and support.
 - Develop online survey to identify veterans’ service and support needs.
 - Implement priority registration for veterans.
3. Improve veterans support services
 - Establish separate veterans office with specific hours.
 - Develop a website that includes campus information, eligibility criteria, and veterans resource links.
 - Establish a veterans student organization.

- Increase community outreach and campus activities, as well as in-service training to faculty and staff.
 - Collaborate with neighboring county/city affiliated veterans centers for readjustment counseling services.
 - Identify spatial requirements for veterans resource center.
4. Scholarship and financial considerations
- Establish an emergency book loan program for veterans as they wait the 6-8 weeks for initial GI Bill payments.
 - Create scholarship funds in support of veterans to supplement GI Bill or to provide benefits for those who are ineligible for GI benefits.
5. Outreach and materials development
- Develop information brochures that provide overviews of the college and community resources available to support veterans through their transition from military to college life.
 - Establish working partnerships with veterans-related services, such as Veterans Affairs, regional military camps, etc.
 - Community outreach and presentations to Rotary, Kiwanis, etc.
6. Veterans orientation
- Develop and conduct a three-day annual orientation specifically for veterans.
 - Conduct workshops and presentations on financial aid, counseling, DSPS, health services, community organizations, etc.

- Develop one-on-one orientation sessions with advisors.
- Create “Veterans helping veterans” sessions.

7. Fundraising and regional collaboration

- Work with college foundation on raising funds for the program.
- Submit state, federal, and local grant applications.
- Create fundraiser dinner or program on behalf of student veterans.
- Partner with community groups and service clubs for raising funds.
- Establish a program advisory group.
- Participate in regional and statewide advisory work groups.
- Participate in inter-segmental postsecondary veterans meetings.
- Develop relationships with local health agency providers.
- Collaborate with local, state and federal legislative offices for augmented services.

8. Develop student veterans organization

- Integrate student veterans into social and campus activities.
- Team building.
- Volunteer and community support.
- Commemoration of patriotic holidays, e.g. Memorial Day and Veterans Day.

Early Years of the Veterans Program

In 2008, the college president authorized funds for establishment of a full-time veterans coordinator position to assist the growing number of student veterans. An official veterans program commenced in Spring 2009 when the veterans coordinator

position began and program space was determined to ensure sustained and continuous momentum of the veterans' support services.

Before implementing the veterans program, a survey was administered to assess services already offered to veterans and to identify where areas of focus needed to be increased. The results of the online survey helped determine future program direction. In addition, there was an exhaustive review of available data and research from various community colleges, local, state and federal veterans' agencies, and feedback and collaborative work with community-based organizations – all helping to establish and enunciate the need for a comprehensive veterans program on the campus. To further promote the program and to increase services available, staff participated in many workshops and community events. Periodically, outreach tables were placed on campus to make student veterans familiar with the program and services available to them.

The initial program review suggested three components of the plan most critical to the programs' success would be: establishment of the veterans coordinator position; creation of a veterans "hub," where student veterans could study, relax, and network with other veterans; and an orientation program for new student veterans each Fall term.

The veterans program also did a significant amount of networking with community groups and veterans organizations. This provided opportunities to communicate information about the veterans at the college, while receiving input and suggestions about ways community groups could assist them. As a part of the outreach and information-sharing effort, the veterans program hosted and supported

events demonstrating the college's commitment to veterans. In addition, the program forged relationships with local, state and federal agencies and partnered with various private foundations and organizations that support veterans. The college made strong efforts to support the state's Troop to College efforts.

Data included in the college's 2011-12 program review revealed that, in the four-year period since the inception of the program, the number of veterans served by the institution had doubled from 99 in the program's infancy to more than 200. This increase was attributed primarily to the work and achievement established by the program in providing information, outreach to students, and creation of a welcoming environment to student veterans on campus. During the same period, data indicated that an increasing number of veterans at the institution were continuing students compared to first-time enrolled or transfer students. This was also viewed as a positive data component to the persistence efforts of the veterans program.

Similarly, data during the period showed an increase in full-time enrollment of student veterans. By Fall 2011, the number of full-time enrolled student veterans had risen from 26% to 49% of the campus veteran population. This increase is attributed mostly to changes in Veterans Affairs and federal regulations, which prevent veterans receiving maximum allowable Veterans Affairs (VA) educational benefits unless the student is enrolled in 12 units or more. In addition, an increase in student veteran enrollment resulted from downsizing of the military conflicts and limited job opportunities available to returning veterans. These two factors are primary indicators of the need for specialized services and programs for military veterans returning to community colleges.

Student data indicated that the program grew over the five-year period. The program appeared to have attracted new student veterans, and persistence between academic years improved. While the goals and objectives of the program included support needs of veterans' dependents and families, no data were available to reflect successes in those endeavors.

Data collection has been a challenging issue for the program. When the program began, institutional data on veterans were either weak or non-existent. Much of the information available was through self-reported data by veterans. As the veterans program became a recognized campus service, additional data elements were established by the college, many of which became required data fields on institutional forms.

The Campus' Veterans Program Now

The program currently is overseen by one coordinator who reports to the dean of enrollment services. For all these years, the coordinator was in a lower classification than counterparts in similar programs at the college, but recently, that disparity has been corrected via the reclassification process. In addition to the coordinator, the program has hired well-trained student assistants – predominantly student veterans – through the VA work-study program. These student assistants help with certifying VA benefits and supervising the veterans resource center; but student assistant help can be challenging because of the natural turnover rate of such employment. The veterans program has identified the need for additional permanent part-time assistance to the coordinator because of the increased number of students and volume of certifying activity.

During the Summer, the program offers a three-day orientation for new student veterans. This orientation has been ongoing since the inception of the program and offers information about various programs and services at the institution. It has been estimated that in excess of 100 student veterans have participated in the orientation workshops. Although much of the information provided has been consistent throughout the years the orientations have been provided, the program coordinator makes adjustments each year based on feedback provided by the participants.

The veterans resource center, or “Hub,” has been in operation for more than five years. Initially, it was housed in a building used jointly by it and the copy center. It has been identified by program staff and student veterans as a critical success component of the veterans program at the college. The ensuing interviews in Part B and the survey in Part C serve as evidence for these presumptions. The veterans resource center is dedicated space for veterans to relax, converse with one another, study, and receive tutoring assistance from one another. The center adjoins office space with the veterans coordinator who has sightline over activities taking place on site. As a part of the campus’ further facilities development, a different location for the veterans resource center recently has been identified. The campus leadership continues to show support for veterans’ needs and has expressed commitment to the future growth of the program.

The veterans program continues to work with community groups and external partners, who have contributed significant funds in support of the student veterans at the college. In addition, several military events each year are held at the college.

These honor the service of veterans in general, but also provide tribute to and recognition of the student veterans at the college. External fundraising continues to be a significant goal of the veterans program. It relies on such funding because, other than the one-time development costs of the veterans resource center, campus funding allocations in support of the veterans program are limited to those related to the veterans coordinator. No additional operating funds are provided.

The veterans program continues to respond to external mandates related to veterans, including pressures related to downsizing of the military, the weak economic job market, increasing numbers of veterans returning to higher education, and programmatic changes resulting from California's implementation of the Student Success and Support Program, the so-called "3SP," in community colleges.

In discussion with the veterans coordinator, going forward the campus has four programmatic objectives related to student veterans' services: increasing academic success rates through educational workshops designed to increase veterans' academic success requirements to ensure they maintain their VA benefits; develop essential data elements and tools to more accurately and consistently identify campus veterans and their needs; promote the campus veterans program as a model throughout the state; and, continue to provide a welcoming environment for student veterans that will make their transition to college easy and will enable them to be successful in achieving their educational goals.

Part B. Student Veterans Interviews

Research Methods Summary

The interviews of student veterans from the participating college captured distinct perspectives regarding the programs and services offered there for military veterans returning to higher education. It also contributed to an understanding of how students define student success, and whether specialized services for veterans assisted in meeting their educational goals.

Prior to conducting the interviews, the questions were pilot tested under the protocol identified in Appendix D, and several of the questions were modified slightly in an effort to make them clearer, more understandable, and unbiased. All of the interviews were conducted in a private location at the participating college and followed the interview protocol briefing (Appendix E). All data collected, including the recordings and transcriptions of interviews, were held confidential consistent within the parameters on the informed consent form as well as the privacy protection protocols defined by the University Institutional Research Board (UIRB). While interviewing the female participant, a female employee of the participating college was asked to be in the room to observe the questioning, to which the interviewee agreed.

An interview debriefing was conducted with each interview participant. Each of the interviews was recorded and labeled individually, fully transcribed within specified confidentiality protocols, and analyzed for key statements, themes and commonalities. In total, the interviews were 466 minutes in recorded length and 180

pages of transcribed text. The researcher produced approximately 30 pages of handwritten field notes.

Although qualitative data analysis software was intended for use, the researcher determined that a more practical analysis of the interviews was best synthesized through focus coding (Esterberg, 2002), an intense, redundant review of the recordings and line-by-line examination of the transcripts and field notes. The outcome of the interviews did determine key components of what these returning veterans perceive as the services and programs necessary to help them succeed in college, how student success is defined, and how the participating institution's veterans program contributed to their success.

In reviewing the audio recordings and written transcripts of the interviews, the study's author determined the best avenue for the reader to understand the veterans' perspectives is to allow the interviewees to tell their stories. The responses to the interview questions have been separated into five categories: Participant Profiles; Military Experiences Brought into the Classroom; Reasons for Returning to College; Defining Student Success; Impact of Campus Veterans' Services in Meeting Educational Goals. Each section provides the reader with comments and issues raised by the student veterans who were interviewed. The author completes this chapter section with thematic conclusions resulting from the interviews with the student veterans.

Participant Profiles

Eight student veterans participated in the interviews. They were purposefully selected for their participation in tours of duty in Iraq or Afghanistan, or a

combination thereof. An attempt was made to select individuals from a cross-section of military branches and tours of duty as well as consideration of gender, ethnicity and age in alignment with percentages of personnel who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. This proved not to be possible because of the demographics of the students enrolled at the participating college.

Although some similarities exist among the early experiences the eight students had prior to serving in the military, there are significant differences as well. Four of the veterans entered military service directly after completing high school. Two of the four enlisted at age 17, requiring their parents to certify agreement of their intentions to join the military. Two other veterans took only a few community college classes before deciding to enlist in the military. Another veteran completed two years of college prior to entering the military and the final veteran actually received a college degree and served a tour each in Iraq and Afghanistan as a reservist in the U.S. Army.

Motivation to join military service also was different among the interviewees. Some realized they really did not know why they enlisted. One simply said he wanted to “do it” and that he had close relatives who had served. Another student, 19 years of age when entering the service, said “there were things to see and I wanted to see what else there was.” Only the students who had enlisted as older adults suggested that the events of 9/11 were motivation for their entering the service. One younger veteran commented that he was “too young when 9/11 occurred” and that the event “had only minor significance to my joining the military.”

For the purpose of confidentiality, during the interviews and in these findings, the interviewees are not referred to by their real names. Instead of pseudonyms, for ease of labeling and tracking, each interviewee is named by number, “Veteran 1,” “Veteran 2,” and so on, through and including “Veteran 8.” The following is a brief, general profile of the student veterans interviewed.

Veteran 1 was 17 when he enlisted in the U.S. Army. Immediately after graduating from high school, and after getting his mother to sign a waiver, he was soon in basic training. He ultimately did a sixteen month tour in Iraq.

Also signing up for the military at age 17 immediately after finishing high school, Veteran 2 needed his parents to sign a waiver, which allowed him to enlist in the U.S. Marine Corps. Achieving the rank of corporal during his enlistment, he served in Afghanistan for seven months in 2009.

Veteran 3 graduated from high school and took several classes at the participating community college before enlisting at the age of 19 in the U.S. Army. Among other locations in the world, she served 16 months in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Veteran 4 enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps after trying to find a job and taking some college classes, in which he was unsuccessful. He attempted over 40 units, but only completed 10. He ultimately achieved the rank of sergeant, and served six months in Afghanistan.

The one interviewee having served in the U.S. Navy, Veteran 5 attended a four-year college for two years before entering the service. He served two tours of duty during 2006 through 2011 both in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Veteran 6 was another student interviewee who enlisted shortly after completing high school. At the age of 18, he became a U.S. Marine and ultimately was discharged as a corporal. He did two tours in Iraq, one in Baghdad and another in Diyala Province.

Veteran 7 served in the U.S. Army and is now a member of the U.S. Army Reserves. He spent six years in field artillery and then transferred into the reserves to join civil affairs. He graduated from a four-year university with a bachelor's degree prior to enlisting in the Army. Among other tours, he served in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Just shortly after graduating from high school at age 18, Veteran 8 joined the U.S. Army. Achieving the rank of sergeant, his tour was in Iraq for 13 months with only a single two-week period for "R & R," or rest and relaxation.

Military Experiences Brought into the Classroom

In responding to the questions about their military backgrounds, branches of service, and tours of duty, many profound stories were shared about the extremes of war, from monotony to mortality. According to the veterans themselves, these experiences are brought into the classroom and continue to have influence on their daily lives. Several of the interviewees reinforced many of the issues identified in the literature review regarding hardships faced by student veterans as they cope with their past experiences. And yet, talking about their experiences appeared to be helpful to them, one veteran describing it as "therapeutic":

We did a 16 month tour in Iraq. We had just gotten done with our 12 months and we had already started to pack up to go home and they decided to extend

us and send us to Baghdad, which was a pretty big morale destabilizer . . . Our primary mission, when I was deployed, was to do route clearance and Improvised Explosive Device (IED) disposal. A lot of times we were just out there driving around waiting to see something or waiting to blow something up or get blown up. (Veteran 1)

In response to a question regarding talking about his past experiences, the student veteran explained:

Oh, I'm totally fine. I find it therapeutic actually. The first day, the very first time we went outside the wires to go on patrol, a 500-pound suicide car bomber went off next to us. Minimal damage, some people got burns; but it was just, it kind of set the tone for our deployment. (Veteran 1)

The student veteran casually remarked, almost as an afterthought, that he was recommended for a Bronze Star for actions related to clearing a path for his squad.

With another squad member, he eliminated seven IEDs that day:

It's crazy. I was 18 at the time. I felt invincible. I can't imagine doing that again now. I look back and just think, 'How stupid was I? Just out there pretending like I wasn't going to get hit.' I guess that's kind of required for the job. (Veteran 1)

Asked about the emotions that emerged from seeing combat, the veteran depicted diverging attitudes:

There was one incident where a suicide bomb went off. It didn't go off on us. It went off a street over. It killed or injured like twenty civilians. We go over there and we start rendering first aid. I wasn't really fazed by it . . . Then I

saw a U.S. soldier walk by, and he had a laceration to his forehead and a lot of blood. My reaction was totally different. I felt nauseous. I was like, ‘Oh, my God!’ It was much more real. I don’t know if that’s just attributable to how we dehumanize our enemy, or what. It was interesting how differently I felt.

(Veteran 1)

Another veteran described the high alert and stress he was under:

We were part of one of the biggest troop surges they had in Afghanistan, part of the largest helicopter borne operations since Vietnam. Overnight they dropped close to 2,000 troops in an eight-hour period. We got into fire fights, and a lot of IEDs. (Veteran 2)

And then, almost apologetically, he describes two occasions when explosions occurred in situations that fortuitously something occurred to replace him:

We had two that hit in my squad, both times it was supposed to be me, but I got swapped out or missed the turn . . . First one, we were going to drive down to our new patrol base in Humvees. I was going to drive the first one, somebody was going to drive the second one, and everybody else was going to walk and patrol down there. But, 15 minutes before we left, they put me in the back Humvee. (Veteran 2)

The veteran went on to explain how an IED exploded near the first vehicle, the one initially he was to drive. The driver survived, but had facial injuries. In another situation, the student describes being on walking patrol on a trail when another soldier casually passed him and tripped a wired IED. In the first event he said:

It flipped the Humvee up, turned it and set it down. And the second one, it was a coffee can in a bunch of tall grass next to the trail. And they had bolts and all sorts of metal debris in there. It's kind of like a giant shotgun shell.

(Veteran 2)

In explaining long-term consequences of these experiences, he said:

I don't have any problems with it. I think about it every now and then, just kind of how lucky I was. But I consider myself very fortunate that I don't have any issues with that. Knowing that if I was the one who was supposed to get hit and they took the hit instead of me – and if they didn't make it – I think that would have caused a lot more problems for when I came home. But luckily, I don't have any of the issues that you see some veterans coming back with. (Veteran 2)

Descriptions of having to be on the ready were common throughout the interview session. One of the Marines, a “fire support man” part of artillery support, commented:

For about eight hours you'd be bored. Then for about 45 minutes straight, your heart's just pounding and you're trying to be fast and accurate at the same time making sure you make the right decisions. Then it would be quiet again for another few hours. Then something else might happen. [Soldiers] had been walking all day. They've been worrying about IEDs all day. The least I could do is work as hard as I could for that time. When I joined, they said that I would be a fire support man. I asked them what that was and my

drill instructor said, 'I don't know. You fight fires'. I didn't know what I was getting into. (Veteran 4)

The individual observations of horror in combat depended on the assignment. The female veteran was a specialist working in areas processing sensitive or classified information. As such, she commented that more often than not she was surrounded by many other soldiers. In addition, her assignments generally kept her away from enemy gunfire. On the other hand, the Marine assigned to fire support mentioned:

Within the 28 weeks, in the first 16 weeks I'd say, we lost 25 guys and 200 went home with anything from amputations to broken ankles. That was happening for a while. Then it kind of stopped, but that still kind of lives with you every day. (Veteran 4)

Asked if he believes it better to talk about these events, he went on to say:

I think so. It's better to talk about it than not talk about it. It'll eat you up. As I turned in an extra credit assignment for my political science class, I wrote about that. I finished it and I was just kind of crying and smiling when I finished it. It just felt good to write it because you know somebody else is going to read it. I think that it's good to get it out there. (Veteran 4)

Transitional experiences were described by many of the interviewees.

Movement from base to base – even country to country – is typical military life. The female veteran began explaining her tours almost like an itinerary planner:

Let's see. I started out in basic training in Missouri Tech School and Fort Huachuca in Arizona. I went to Fort Gordon, then ended up in Afghanistan for

a bit, came back to Georgia, ended up in Florida. I was in Georgia, Virginia, and Maine a little bit. I was in Jordan and Kuwait. (Veteran 3)

The subject of male domination in the military came up during that particular interview. She had some provocative comments consistent with public issues that have entered the media recently:

When I was in Afghanistan, Iraq, in Jordan and Kuwait we had to have battle buddies to go to the bathroom. There's a lot of rape actually that happens on bases, and in light of that, my commander ordered that two people go to the bathroom together. In Jordan it was so bad they had four people with me at all times to go to the bathroom. They gave me a 9 millimeter just to have on my person at all times. It was ridiculous. (Veteran 3)

After a brief moment, the woman soldier – now a civilian student – made a revealing and thoughtful comment about her military experience, which highlighted emotions that linger with her even today:

I ceased to be a female like a person, an individual. I was a zoo animal, something to be gawked at when I walked around . . . I felt like a rape totem pole for whatever reason just because of my size and shape. (Veteran 3)

In response to an inquiry about recent statistics about sexual assault in the military, she said, “Actually, male on male rape happens a lot more than you think. The fact that there's enough stuff that is reported is scary enough” (Veteran 3).

Beyond the descriptions of danger from IEDs, gunfire, and explosions the veterans each talked about the general stress of their jobs, particularly the state of alertness each had to have during the conflict. A veteran described it this way:

My main job was if something were to crash on the flight deck, we had to respond, so readiness was our main purpose. We did have a couple of incidents . . . they ended up crashing and dying. Just seeing stuff like that, it takes a toll on you mentally . . . (Veteran 5)

Another soldier mentioned similar circumstances:

A lot of times when we were going to villages and stuff like that, you're on high alert the entire time. That is definitely something that followed me after leaving the Marines. I hated going to the mall, to the movies, all that kind of stuff. Actually, coming to school here was a problem. When you're working with a group of 12 guys going through a tunnel or in a small village, you don't want people coming in between. It's almost like mother bear and her cubs; never go between them. Being in close proximity with so many people was always unsettling when I first got out. (Veteran 6)

Even the more secure areas during the conflict produced stress for the military personnel. Veteran 8 described it like this:

I was mainly in Intelligence, so I didn't have to go into traffic a lot. And, we really didn't have a lot of traffic come through our pod. They couldn't even bring trucks through and make them blow up or anything. I guess that's a good thing, being with Intelligence, because they don't really let traffic go through a lot. But still, there are mortars. They'll shoot from about two miles out, as close as they could get to us. Their aim wasn't that accurate, but people did get hurt outside of my sector. (Veteran 8)

The stresses of military conflict remain in civilian life for many student veterans:

Anytime I go to a restaurant, a movie theater, anytime I'm in a public building, I take a look around and see where the exits are. I have a hard time listening to fireworks. Even certain smells bother me. (Veteran 2)

Although each of the veterans came from different backgrounds and had a variety of military experiences, there is a commonality to their stories. The stresses, strains, and anxieties of the Afghanistan and Iraqi conflicts had significant impact on their military lives and those emotions and tensions continue in their civilian lives and their classroom experiences. The motivations and challenges of returning to college are explored in the subsequent sections.

Reasons for Returning to College

The veterans cited varying reasons for returning to college. For some, it was the next logical step of their transition; for some others, enrolling in college had a causal relationship with benefits provided by the G.I. Bill; and, for a few others still, enrolling in college was a continuation of something they started several years ago and were now going to try to finish.

A number of the veterans described themselves as being self-driven and stated that school was an important part of getting them to where they wanted to be. The educational benefits included in the G.I. Bill had a motivating effect for several. It appeared almost to be wasteful not to go to school since the benefits were available. And, even for some who had attempted college prior to their military service – but did

not do well before – the veterans described the importance of going back to school to obtain necessary training or certification for employment.

The female veteran had a particularly personal perspective about returning to college: “I was nineteen when I went into the service. It was time for a change. Now, I’m mentally in a better place and I think that I used to take a lot of things for granted” (Veteran 3).

Many of the problems and challenges facing veterans as they return to the classroom are identified in the literature review. The interviews with the veterans at the participating college substantiated several of these issues. Yet, the interviews also elicited several deep-seated viewpoints regarding the difficulties veterans face when returning to college. Perhaps the most consistent thread regarding this issue, however, is the students’ consensus that – because they are veterans – they can endure the challenges.

This last summer, I made a point of saying, ‘One of the bigger overall things the military teaches us is how to adapt and overcome.’ I would say it like this, ‘We’ve been through so much, and you’re telling me we can’t get past a couple immature kids?’ (Veteran 1)

While the students with whom the veterans are taking classes can sometimes be an issue, one veteran pointed out that at least initially it was hard to be in college because of something missing from his time in the military: “There’s a camaraderie there and a brotherhood that you would be extremely hard-pressed to find out in the civilian world. You always have a support group around you. Coming back and not having that is an issue” (Veteran 2).

The sensory experiences from military action return linger within of the student veterans. As an example, one noted:

Anytime I go out to a restaurant, movie theater, anytime I'm out in public or in a building, I take a look around and see where the exits are. And, I sit facing the door so I can see who comes in and out. (Veteran 2)

Having to deal with lower maturity levels of classmates was mentioned several times throughout the interviews, but one veteran had a little different notion about age. Veteran 3 pointed out that age difference made her feel "very, very old" and that coming back to college at such an older age compared to what she perceived as average made her feel a little reserved at first. She was very specific about her intolerance for immature behavior by younger, non-veteran students: "It's like high school year five. You have your teacher saying, 'Come on now. All right, settle down' " (Veteran 3).

Several student veterans identified faculty engagement as an important part of their educational experience. One veteran commented that it was important that teachers and administrators be given "an inside look" on what it is to be a veteran. He went on to explain that the transition for military personnel into academic life is a tremendous change and can be exacerbated by an instructor who does not understand that.

Because of his military experience, on the other hand, another veteran said he now had a somewhat different perspective on teachers than he had previously in school:

I think the biggest challenge, if you could consider it a challenge, is the whole change of feeling. Like I side with the teacher more now. When you see three-quarters of the class throwing a fit and basically harassing the teachers, you just think about how disrespectful these people are. I feel now it's different because I feel I respect the teachers because they're here to teach you.

(Veteran 4)

Similarly, the "general ignorance of students" to veterans was another common comment by some of the interviewees:

You can ask any veteran that comes to school, you have these naïve kids come up and ask you questions the second they see you. You mention you're a vet and the first question that comes out of their mouth, 'Did you kill anybody?' They don't understand that it's not something . . . you don't walk around bragging about. It's a very personal thing . . . and it does affect a lot of people.

(Veteran 6)

Yet, not all of the students shared the same sentiments about their classmates. When asked whether there were problems resulting from sitting in class with students without military experience, Veteran 8 commented: "I thought it would be, but not really. I guess just being settled. That could be a big challenge. I sat in a lot of classrooms in the military . . . so just being settled is the biggest challenge."

Another veteran pointed out that the challenge of returning to college may be more intrinsic:

The biggest challenge I would say is ego. A lot of us are older, a lot of us have literally been around the world and it's definitely a step back from being in the

military, going around the world, and now sitting in class. I have more in common with the professors than I do with a lot of the other classmates.

There's certainly a generational gap; I can relate to them [professors] more. I suspect they feel the same disdain for Miley Cyrus that I do. (Veteran 7)

Most of the veterans said they chose to return to this particular community college either because they had already taken some classes or received course credits from there, or were living near the college at the time they joined and returned from the military. One student, however, was lured to the participating college by words of a friend:

I took a year off when I returned from the military just to kind of unwind, decompress, and transition back. Then I worked with one of my best friends that I joined the Marines with ... he was a student here. I was thinking about going [to another college], but he told me about the veterans programs here, so I checked it out and really liked what they had to offer. (Veteran 2)

The interview questions then transitioned into the veterans' viewpoints of student success, their definitions and personal goals.

Defining Student Success

In the literature review, the California State Community College system (California Community College Student Success Task Force, 2012) defines success using the following metrics: percentage of community college students completing their educational goals; percentage of community college students earning a certificate or degree, transferring, or achieving transfer-readiness; number of students transferring to a four-year institution; number of degrees and certificates earned.

Other typical measurements (Alfred, Ewell, Hudgins, & McClenney, 1999; American Association of Community Colleges, 1994; Harris, 1998) of student success and institutional effectiveness include: student goal attainment; course retention and success; success in subsequent coursework; Fall-to-Fall persistence; time to degree; degree/certificate completion; graduate school enrollment and employment; transfer rate and success; employer assessment of students; academic value added; student satisfaction; student professional growth and development; student involvement; and citizenship and engagement. In the course of the interviews, the student veterans discussed student success and its definition.

Although the interview discussions led to definitions and descriptions consistent with those in the literature review, it was evident student success is a very personal issue based on the individual circumstances of each student. Most of the student veterans touched on many of the common elements of student success. The student veterans focused on five specific conclusions in this regard: educational goal attainment; achieving passing grades in classes; persisting step-by-step in meeting moving forward in their coursework; actually completing; and obtaining the necessary credentials to obtain a good job. One veteran said:

For me personally, I've always had a hard time in school, especially in classes I'm not a big fan of, or I don't really enjoy. So for me, student success is being able to pass my class with at least a C. I always try to be better, but as long as I pass it, I'm extremely happy with the class. (Veteran 2)

Another said, "Passing, because if you fail you wasted your money and your time. If you pass, you accomplish something. It means you took away at least 70% of

what the course materials offer, so you're a little smarter" (Veteran 3). Still another commented, "Completing things, I guess that's the biggest . . . that's how I would see success. Just completing it" (Veteran 8). And a fourth student veteran suggested, "It means doing well enough in the classes, usually at least a B average. Being able to do the class courses and understand what's going on and to accept my shortcomings" (Veteran 7).

One of the veterans suggested that student success would lead to a good job. Obtaining a good job was important to several of the veterans. Specifically, one veteran commented:

My goal is to get a better job. The goal is to get a degree with my certifications. My plan after the AA degree is to pursue a job again and see what's going on with that. If I find a job that's worthwhile, I could continue using my G.I. Bill towards what I really want to do. (Veteran 4)

In discussing the issue of length of time to completion, one of the veterans commented about the importance of deliberate, but reasoned approaches to the number of classes taken per semester: "I think student success is getting to the objective that you want as fast as you can. But, I feel like I can only handle three-quarter time. My plan may not be the fastest, but my success will be better" (Veteran 4).

Two student veterans had perspectives about student success that were more focused on support from family and friends:

Student success is a self-driven prospect. If I want to be successful in life, I have to get there. You can have counselors, peers, outside motivators such as

your parents, friends, grandparents who try to boost you along the way. But, that's going to take you only so far. (Veteran 5)

The second student added:

Initially, when I think of student success, I think of academic achievement. I think of being able to get As and Bs in my classes. But, if I really think about it, student success is really much more complex because I have to factor in my school life competing with my work life competing with my family life.

(Veteran 1)

He went on to talk about the importance in his life of family and friend support and that, without it, he would not be able to continue in school. Particularly important to him is the support by his wife. "My wife, she is undoubtedly my biggest supporter. She was a hand in the darkness keeping me calm at night when I was wiggling out from bad dreams, or whatever. I feel pretty lucky" (Veteran 1).

Grades, completion, achievement of goals, and continuation were all common attributes to the student success definitions shared by the student veterans. Significant to the story telling, however, were the significances expressed regarding family, friends, and connections to the veteran community. Structural support is a large part of the equation for student success for many of the veterans. This will be discussed later in the study as the veterans talk about the importance of camaraderie and togetherness, particularly as the interviewees spoke about the student veterans' resource center.

Impact of Campus Veterans Services in Meeting Educational Goals

The majority of the veterans were extremely complimentary and appreciative of the veterans services provided by the participating college. Most felt that their student success would not have been achieved otherwise. While suggesting the services and programs were very helpful, a few did not believe their personal student success was dependent upon the specialized veterans services. For those few, more important to the program and services provided for veterans was the personal drive and personal dedication by the students themselves.

Several key elements were cited by the interviewees as critical to the success of the veterans programs and services. The veterans coordinator and the dean were singled out as having prominent administrative leadership in developing the programs and being advocates for veterans at the college. One student commented:

I feel the veterans services definitely enhanced my academic life, my regular life. I probably could have done it without veterans services, but it would have been a hell of a lot harder. Socially for one; not being able to connect with students would have been a deterrent to my progress. Also, not having key people in place who are big advocates for veterans. . . . I feel like I wouldn't have kept coming back to this school if it wasn't for the two of them and people like them. (Veteran 1)

The dedicated coordinator role was often referred to as critical to student success. In addition, the orientation program for veterans was mentioned routinely for its role in establishing a foundation of understanding for veterans on services and programs offered by the college that would assist them in meeting their educational

goals. And, the veterans resource center was highlighted consistently for its significant importance for veterans as a gathering place for studying, tutoring, counseling, and camaraderie.

Speaking for other ex-military he knew at the college, a veteran explained how in general the college was supportive of veterans. “Some of these guys, they really just need a helping hand. Especially some of the guys who are really jacked up with PTSD. They’re like deer in the headlights” (Veteran 1). In addition, he spoke about the general attitude of faculty and staff who have caring approaches and are “here if you need me.” He went on to describe several programs and services at the college that really help veterans in navigating their course in college, in particular offices of admissions and records, financial aid, and counseling. Several veterans called out specific names of individuals who many of the student veterans routinely went to for assistance. Beyond the various student services departments and staff at the college, the book loan program for veterans was described as a positive benefit that was helpful. One veteran said the combination of all the services for veterans contributed to his social and psychological health.

Specifically acknowledged by most of the veterans was the coordinator of the veterans’ services office at the college. “[The coordinator] is there to help you. His office helps you sign up for classes, or anything like that. If you have problems with financial aid, or the VA, he is there to help with all that” (Veteran 2).

Another commented about the coordinator position and its effectiveness in assisting veterans with the bureaucracies they face both at school and in receiving military benefits:

I think that [the coordinator] helps a lot. He has few if no slip-ups. The results of his work are beneficial to veterans. It's nice having somebody that knows what's going on. I don't think the program would be as much of a success without him. (Veteran 4)

Another added, "Without him, I'm guessing there would be some deficiency. He is one of the most knowledgeable guys for veterans' services. He is constantly going out to do things that help veterans succeed" (Veteran 5). This was supported by another veteran who commented:

I know veterans who come here specifically because we have a veterans office and coordinator. Having someone who knows absolutely every single in and out of what the veterans benefits are speaks volumes about his dedication and how essential the position is. (Veteran 6)

Another student veteran chimed in saying that the coordinator was "wonderful, very understanding, helpful, and great at his job of supporting veterans" (Veteran 7).

A specific accolade was mentioned about the veterans annual orientation program the participating college offers. The orientation program has been in operation for several years and each three-day workshop provides a variety of information and services to incoming student veterans. Several of the student veterans referred to the program as a very significant event the college offers, which is instrumental in achieving student success:

It's when we talk to all the veterans at once, explain what the veterans resource center is, how to sign up for classes, basically how to transition back

into college life. We have other internal and external resources available too like the VA, VA hospital, financial aid office, counseling . . . it's a really big help. (Veteran 2)

He continued by expressing the importance of the veterans orientation program:

We go there and talk to all the veterans, explain to them what the veterans resource center is, what it has to offer, answer any questions they have, explain how to sign up for classes . . . basically how to transition back into college life. We have people from the VA, from groups helping veterans find jobs, a lot of different companies, a lot of campus departments . . . and just resources to help returning veterans. Generally, people don't like sitting in an auditorium listening to people, but when they finally get there, they're glad they came. (Veteran 2)

One of the veterans described the orientation as a "huge success" in providing a necessary foundation to military personnel returning to the college. "It's good because it's the first time all these veterans are in rooms with one another. You get the feeling 'I'm not alone here'" (Veteran 6).

It was clear hearing from the student veterans that camaraderie and socialization among peers was very important. This was identified multiple times in comments regarding the importance of the veterans resource center and the orientation program. About the orientation program, one of the veterans commented: "That was a big deal. [It] throws everybody into a room and says 'Look, you're all vets. Look around you.' After that you have identification with one another"

(Veteran 6).

While separately, a veteran noted one of the deliverables of the orientation that was of special significance to him:

I appreciated the rotation and participation of a lot of different organizations.

If you had to see the Employment Development Department, you could go there; if you wanted to talk to someone in counseling, you could go there . . . to financial aid and other offices, the same thing. (Veteran 4).

There was almost universal discussion about the importance of the veterans resource center the college had developed over the last several years. The center is a dedicated space for veterans to gather and socialize, to do homework, to receive tutoring assistance, and to obtain information from the adjoining office of the veterans coordinator. The center was said to be used “120% from the time it’s open to the time it’s closed” (Veteran 5).

The center was used extensively by all but one of the veterans interviewed.

One veteran described what the veterans resource center meant most to her:

I think the computer lab is a huge thing because I know that they’re being used a lot. The center is being used for the right thing – both academic and social use. I’m comfortable there. It’s a tight knit group; I’m surrounded by people that have the same level of respect, and it’s not too loud. (Veteran 3)

She went on to describe how extensively she utilized the center: “It’s really nice to have a facility that you can go to between classes. I spend so much time in the veterans resource center. I don’t really have time to go check on anything else”

(Veteran 3).

An aspect of the veterans resource center that was underscored by student veterans involved tutoring:

It's definitely huge that they have a facility. It's a place that I can go that I know I'm going to get studying done because everybody else there is studying. A lot of other vets will be there to tutor you. Everyone is just really helpful and pro graduation. (Veteran 3)

One talked about the veterans center's inspirational qualities: "It motivates me more when I know there is someplace to go. If I want to study or be with other students I know, you're welcome at the vet center" (Veteran 4).

There was an interesting contrast identified by two of the veterans during the interview, the difference between the veterans resource center and the campus library. "In the library, kids are hanging out. The library has become a big social outlet that's a little crazy in my opinion" (Veteran 6). Another veteran agreed: "The library is incredibly noisy. Study rooms are always occupied" (Veteran 7).

The final veteran interviewed, however, had a different opinion altogether about the veterans resource center and the library, "I hang out in the library a lot. I've only been here for one semester and haven't tried the resource center yet. Maybe it will be better, but so far the library has worked alright" (Veteran 8). Going on to explain that he had only been at the college for one semester, he commented that he had not yet gotten involved in many of the specialized services for veterans although he had received information and emails about them.

The strongest support for the veterans resource center and its impact on success was noted by Veteran 6:

Having that outlet where I can go and there's a bunch of different combat vets that understand what I've been through and understand what they've been through . . . that support for one another has been absolutely crucial. One day they had to close the center down for some reason. We felt like a bunch of homeless vets because that place was closed. Our home base was gone. The veterans' resource center has been just amazing for me. It's been the cornerstone of my success and development here. (Veteran 6)

The literature review identified many of the same programs and services for veterans that were expressed by those interviewed as having significant contributions to their success. It was not too surprising that many of those services received such high praise from the student veterans. Individual responses in several cases attributed educational success to the programs and services offered by the college:

A lot of my success hinges on how well the services have been provided here. If these services didn't exist, I'd be doing much more poorly in my schooling right now and I want to say I would feel much more alone. (Veteran 6)

And, Veteran 2 stated, "I don't know if I would have achieved my goals without these services. Honestly, it would have been extremely hard for me."

On the other hand, several respondents suggested their drive and personal motivations likely would have allowed them to meet their goals, but perhaps with additional effort. "I don't know if it's my ego saying that I could have done it without

the veterans' programs and services, but it certainly has made school a lot easier" (Veteran 7).

What was somewhat surprising, however, was the frequency of the student veterans' mention of priority registration as having essential importance to their success in meeting educational goals. A student who had already graduated from the college said, "Who knows, but I may not have graduated without priority registration. It was awesome in getting me the classes I needed. My goal was to graduate in 18 months, and I did" (Veteran 5). Another interviewee said that priority registration was perhaps the best of the benefits afforded student veterans. Still another, a recently enrolled student veteran who admitted not having too much interaction with the veterans' services and programs at the college, said that priority registration was the most important thing the college has offered him. One of the veterans commented this way:

Priority registration for veterans helps us to get the units we need. Because of the limited amount of time the GI Bill is in effect, it's like a race against the clock. We could waste our benefits if we can't get classes, and if you have to take fewer units, it may take longer to complete. Having priority registration is like the college saying, 'Thank you for your service.' (Veteran 5)

And when asked if additional services and programs for veterans were warranted, most had a difficult time concluding that more enhancements were needed. "I'm very humbled having been here," Veteran 6 commented. "I understand that other schools don't have as many services for veterans as we do here. I don't think there's anything else I could ask for that the school hasn't already provided."

Themes

Focus coding, a rigorous and repetitive analysis and synthesis of the interview texts, resulted in the identification of themes that surfaced from the stories told by the student veterans. Four major themes emerged from the interviews with the student veterans and those thematic issues will be the focus of the foregoing narrative.

Personal definitions of student success. While the literature review acknowledges multiple definitions and measurements of student success, the student veterans interviewed in this study limited the scope of their definitions to four major categories of meeting their educational objectives: passing grades in classes taken, continuing semester to semester, completing their respective degrees or certificates, and obtaining good jobs.

A couple of the interviewees suggested student success meant passing a class with grades of B or better, while at least one of the student veterans described success as simply passing a class. Several commented that completing a class and moving onto the next level of coursework was a good indicator of their success and that persistence, just being able to continue school, was significant. Most of the student veterans talked about being in college for the long haul, stating that – from where they came and the experiences they had – nothing but completing their coursework or obtaining a degree or certificate would be considered success. And, every one of the veterans discussed how success meant they would achieve what they set out to attain.

The transition to college brings past experiences from the military. While the interview questions specifically asked the student veterans to discuss their lives prior to and throughout their military years, it was clear from their respective stories

that the experiences they had in the military had long-lasting and overwhelming influences on their lives. These experiences clearly had very personal and continuing impacts on their lives and continued to have effects on their civilian lives as students.

The combat experiences in particular were stories that continued to weigh heavily in the student veterans' minds. It was clear that what happened in the wars were etched in their minds and that it was difficult for them to not think of the circumstances. Making those experiences even harder to deal with are the younger classmates and even instructors, who have no related experiences and who ask questions and make comments that are insensitive to the matter.

Many of the student veterans suggested that they brought emotions from the battlefield to the classroom and that the emotional and mental issues were sometimes hard to overcome. None of the student veterans admitted to having PTSD, alcoholism, or any other illness; nor were those questions asked of them. But, clearly each of the individuals had very life-changing experiences, all were ready to make something of their lives, and had little empathy for classmates or others who were insensitive to the journey from which they came.

The adjustment from military life to student is difficult, but the past experiences brought into the classroom by these ex-soldiers seemed to have provided a maturity, strength, and resolve that was inherent in each of the student veterans interviewed. And, as is evident by the profiles of these men and women, this drive and fortitude was something more than an indicator of age.

Specialized campus services and sensitivities toward veterans count. Each of the student veterans pointed out the importance of the specialized programs and

services offered to them by the college. Most of them described the services as essential to student success and meeting their educational goals. A few of the student veterans said that, although the specialized programs were helpful, they may have been able to make it on their own because of personal drive and commitment.

The major elements of the specialized offerings called out by the student veterans were the veterans office, the veterans coordinator, the veterans resource center, and the orientation workshop for veterans. Each of these components had significant influence on their student success. In addition, several other services were identified as very important to meeting their educational goals. These included admissions and records, counseling, and financial aid offices, as well as book loan services provided by the college to veterans.

Particularly interesting, however, was the singling out by many of the student veterans of priority registration as a very important service the college provides to veterans. This is not a frequent aspect of veteran-friendly services noted in the literature review, but was emphasized by the student veterans interviewed in this study as among the most prominent services available to veterans at the participating college.

None of the interviewees suggested that they merited or should be enabled in any way because of their military service. However, the interviewees expressed gratitude to and respect for the college in providing such services and programs to veterans and believed they made a positive difference in their lives.

Camaraderie, connectedness, and community. Extremely important to each of the veterans were the issues of camaraderie, connectedness, and community. The

support structure was indicated to be an essential component of their success. The camaraderie amongst the veterans – buddies and brothers/sisters, as they were often called – is a lynchpin for these students. Most of the veterans described how important it is as students to be able to congregate together and to “talk the talk” with one another. One explained it almost as if the veterans had their own language and that the experiences they shared gave them a shared understanding, a common ground. Having a place to talk about those experiences like the veterans’ resource center was said to be a safe haven for them, allowing them to be themselves, while offering a location to work hard toward their educational goals.

The student veterans collectively felt connected to the college. The services provided by the college, the staff and faculty, even the administration seemed supportive of them and provided them the necessary tools to be successful. In some cases, their fellow students were described as immature; but, as a whole the campus was recognized positively in its support of veterans.

In addition, the student veterans spoke about the community-at-large and the support they felt as veterans returning to college. The internal and external kinship and encouragement for veterans was often cited by the interviewees as contributing motivation and inspiration to meeting their educational goals.

The completed interviews having been categorized, synthesized, and analyzed, the researcher developed some different questions to be explored in the survey instrument that was intended to be administered to the veteran population of the participating college. The survey and its results are discussed in the next section.

Part C. Survey of Student Veterans

Following the interviews of selected student veterans, a survey instrument was distributed electronically to student veterans at the participating college. Some minor changes were made as a result of pilot testing and some questions were revised or added based on the outcome of the interviews conducted in Part B. The survey was intended to obtain a broader understanding of the issues and needs of student veterans, the effectiveness of the programs and services offered to veterans at the participating college, and whether the students believed the programs and services were satisfying their needs and contributing to their educational success.

The 20-question survey included both Likert-scale type questions and open-ended questions. *SurveyMonkey*, an online survey tool, was utilized for collecting and compiling the survey results. The data was analyzed for completeness and a review was made to verify and validate the survey responses. The researcher determined that the best approach to fully analyze the data was to perform basic statistical analyses of the data and to determine themes related to the open-ended questions. The resulting tables and narrative are a part of the subsequent analyses of this section of the study.

Summary of Survey Distribution

Information about the availability of the survey was distributed via an electronic mailing list of students identifying themselves as veterans at the participating college. The survey was developed using *SurveyMonkey*, an online public survey tool. The survey included 20 questions. The first eight questions were demographic and general information inquiries; the next two questions were questions seeking evaluative responses of services and programs offered for veterans

at the college based on Likert-scale ratings; and the final 10 questions were open-ended questions probing student veterans' input on definitions of student success and their opinions about the services and programs offered by the college.

The study's author developed the survey, but was dependent upon the college staff to communicate to the student veterans at the campus. An initial email distribution to 381 student veterans at the college was made and then three subsequent email messages were sent to remind the students about the survey. Of the 381 potential student respondents, 79 or 21% completed the questionnaire.

The survey initially was open for 10 days, but was extended when the number of respondents was determined to be too low. The distribution of two additional emails produced improved results. Just less than half of the total respondents completed the surveys in the time period after the initial due date. Email distribution was the only reasonable avenue for communication to the student veterans.

Data Analyses

Demographics of survey participants. The population of respondents to the survey is displayed on the following tables. Table 1 indicates demographic data of the student veterans who participated in the survey. Eighty-one percent of the respondents were male and 19% were female. More than 60% of the respondents were in the age group less than 32 years old. The majority of the participants, 31.65%, were in the age group 22-26. An unanticipated finding in the survey was that almost 18% of the respondents reported they were over 41 years of age.

The ethnicity data was not surprising in relationship to the demographics of the college. By a significant margin, the majority of the survey respondents were

white/Caucasian (70.51%). Almost 26% of the remaining students were in two ethnic groups, Hispanic/Latino (15.38%) and Black/African-American (10.26%).

Table 1

Demographic Data of Survey Respondents

	# of responses	%
Gender (<i>n</i> = 79)		
Male	64	81.01
Female	15	18.99
Age (<i>n</i> = 79)		
17–21	4	5.06
22–26	25	31.65
27–31	19	24.05
32–36	8	10.13
37–41	9	11.39
>41	14	17.72
Ethnicity (<i>n</i> = 78)		
American Indian or Alaskan Native	3	3.85
Asian or Pacific Islander	8	10.26
Black or African American	3	3.85
Hispanic or Latino	12	15.38
White/Caucasian	55	70.51
Multi-racial	5	6.41
Prefer not to answer	3	3.85

The demographic data was consistent with the enrollment population of the college and provided an adequate cross-section of age, gender, and ethnic distribution for the study. The representation of veterans over the age of 41 was not predicted; however, the broad diversity of participants was valuable to the overall study. There is a significant notation regarding this data. While the total number of respondents to this data element was 78, there were 89 responses in the ethnicity categories. This

suggests that, although one of the categories provided was “multi-racial,” several of the respondents chose more than one ethnicity in their answers.

Military experiences. Table 2 provides information about the respondents’ branches of service, the conflicts in which they participated, and the number of deployments each veteran experienced. There was not anything particularly surprising in the student distribution among military branches; however, five students skipped answering the question. Although the intent of this study was directed toward student veterans who had participated in the OEF and OIF conflicts, the survey instrument did not disaggregate the data collection of these services. Fifty-six of the 74 respondents to this question, or 75.68%, were deployed in those two conflicts. Thirty-four student veterans, or 45.95%, had active deployments in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and 22 students, or 29.74%, were deployed in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Veterans may have been deployed in both, but this was not a category of the survey.

Data points resulting from the survey that were particularly interesting were 6.76% of the respondents who identified themselves as participants in the Vietnam war, and a large number of individuals who grouped themselves in the “Other” category (36.49%). In the open-ended comments that followed, it appeared a majority of these ex-soldiers may not have been deployed into combat, but had provided military service either in the United States or other countries not in “harm’s way.”

This was evident as well in the data provided regarding the number of deployments each veteran experienced. Seventy-nine percent of the respondents reported they had been deployed either one or two times. More than 8% of those

Table 2

Military Experience of Survey Respondents

	# of responses	%
Branch of service (n = 74)		
Air Force	11	14.86
Army	23	31.08
Coast Guard	2	2.7
Marines	20	27.03
Navy	19	25.68
Conflicts deployed (n = 74)		
Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)	34	45.95
Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)	22	29.73
Operation New Dawn (OND)	4	5.41
Desert Storm	3	4.05
Grenada	0	0.00
Vietnam	5	6.76
Korean War	0	0.00
World War II	0	0.00
Other (please specify)	27	36.49
Number of deployments (n = 62)		
1	27	43.55
2	22	35.48
3	7	11.29
4	1	1.61
5	0	0.00
>5	5	8.06

responding answered that they had been deployed more than five times. However, 17 students skipped this question, perhaps in part because they had served, but never had been deployed into combat.

Educational experiences. The questions regarding attendance at the college illustrated a fairly equal distribution of longevity. It is notable, however, that more than 27% of the respondents stated they had attended the college for more than five

semesters. Six students did not answer this particular question. Table 3 provides the data related to attendance duration at the college and previous education experiences.

Table 3

Educational Experience of Survey Respondents

	# of responses	%
Length of attendance at this college ($n = 73$)		
1 semester	17	23.29
2 semesters	12	16.44
3 semesters	10	13.70
4 semesters	11	15.07
5 semesters	4	5.48
>5 semesters	20	27.40
Level of education prior to this college ($n = 70$)		
High School only	28	40.0
General Educational Development (GED equivalency certificate)	2	2.86
Transferred from another community college	21	30.0
Took some classes at four-year institution	6	8.57
Received certificate/degree before enrolling here	8	11.43
Received degree from four-year and certificate/degree here	7	10.0

Answers related to education prior to attendance at the participating college provided interesting results. Almost 43% of the respondents indicated they had attended high school only or had obtained GED certification. Thirty percent of the students stated they had transferred from another community college. Significant to the data collection is that another 30% answered that, prior to attending this college, they had taken classes at a four-year institution, received a degree/certificate, or received a degree from a four-year college. This is a valuable attribute to the study as

it provides opinions about the specialized services at this college from students with a good cross-section of higher education experiences.

Satisfaction with veterans' programs and services. Question 9 asked the student veterans about their overall satisfaction with the services and departments at the participating college. The results are included in Table 4. The mean score was calculated based on ratings of Excellent, 5; Good, 4; Average, 3; Fair, 2; and Poor, 1. Ratings included in "N/A" and "Have Not Used" were not included in the mean calculations.

Of the 17 departments identified in this component of the survey, nine were evaluated by at least 50% of the respondents as "Excellent or Good" in providing services to veterans. Five of the services/departments scored ratings of this caliber by a margin of 80% or more: Student Veterans Office, Admissions Office, Veterans Resource Center, Instruction, and Registration. Three of those five are specialized services for veterans (Student Veterans Office, Veterans Resource Center, and [Priority] Registration). The ratings for Admissions Office and Instruction are both interesting because they are more generalized services at the college.

Four other programmatic areas were evaluated as "Excellent/Good and Average" by a margin of approximately 75% or more: Class Availability, Adjusting to College, Counseling, and Academic Advising. Somewhat surprising were the results for Financial Aid. Although 53.62% rated the services as "Excellent/Good or Average", another 43.48% reported that the Financial Aid department's services were not used or didn't apply to them. This may be indicative of the financial aid information and liaison provided by the Student Veterans Office.

Table 4

Survey Respondents' Satisfaction With College Services and Departments as a Percentage

	# of responses	Excellent/ Good	Average	Fair/Poor	N/A or not used	<i>M</i>
Student Veterans Office	70	92.86	1.43	2.86	2.86	4.63
Admissions Office	70	87.14	10.0	0.00	2.86	4.41
Veterans Resource Center	71	81.69	7.04	1.41	9.86	4.58
Instruction	70	81.43	10.0	2.86	5.71	4.14
Registration	70	80.0	17.14	0.00	2.86	4.24
Class availability	70	61.43	21.43	11.42	5.71	3.92
Adjusting to college	68	58.82	19.12	8.82	13.24	3.86
Counseling	70	52.86	21.43	10.0	15.71	3.69
Academic advising	70	50.0	24.29	7.15	18.57	3.75
Financial Aid	69	42.03	11.59	2.90	43.48	4.10
Orientation	70	41.43	25.71	8.58	24.29	3.68
Tutoring	70	24.28	0.00	4.29	71.43	4.15
Student health services	70	22.86	1.43	0.00	75.71	4.47
Career services	69	15.95	1.45	2.90	79.71	3.93
Disabled services	70	15.72	2.86	0.00	81.43	4.46
Transfer services	70	14.29	4.29	2.86	78.57	3.93
Mental health services	70	8.57	1.43	1.43	88.57	4.13

Perhaps the most surprising survey response was the reported rating related to Orientation. A total of 41.43% of the students stated that the orientation program was “Excellent or Good”. Another 25.71% rated the program as “Average” and 24.29% stated they had not participated in the orientation program or that it did not apply to them. This is in contrast to the information obtained in the interviews with the eight student veterans. One possible conclusion to these results is that the general term “orientation” was used in the survey, rather than the program’s specific title at the college. This may have contributed to the outcome of the ratings.

Similarly interesting were the results indicating programs and services that were not applicable to students or were not used by them. Approximately three-quarters of the students participating in the survey stated they had not used or the programs/services did not apply to them in these departments: Tutoring, Student Health Services, Career Services, Disabled Services, Transfer Services, and Mental Health Services. These and the previous data points are each important for evaluation by colleges as they determine how best to assist our student veterans.

Overall satisfaction with the college. Another question asked student veterans to provide input regarding their overall satisfaction with key aspects of the college. The findings of these responses are included in Table 5.

Significant to this study are the top five results: Priority Registration, Welcoming to Veterans, Overall College Experience, the Veterans Coordinator Position, and Transition from Military to College Life each garnered positive ratings in “Excellent/Good” in excess of 75%. Their mean rating was over 4.

Table 5

Survey Respondents' Overall Satisfaction With Experiences at the College as a Percentage

	# of responses	Excellent/ Good	Average	Fair/ Poor	<i>M</i>
Priority registration	70	94.28	2.86	2.86	4.67
Welcoming to veterans	70	91.42	7.14	1.43	4.44
Overall college experience	69	89.85	10.14	0.00	4.29
Veterans Coordinator position	70	80.0	15.71	4.29	4.30
Transition from military to college life	70	75.71	15.71	8.57	4.01
Relationship with faculty	70	74.28	20.0	5.72	4.03
Community support	70	70.0	20.0	10.0	3.89
Relationship with staff	69	69.56	23.19	7.25	3.90
Interaction with students	70	67.14	24.29	8.57	3.94
Networking and supportive friends	70	64.29	24.29	11.43	3.73
College life experiences	70	61.43	35.71	2.86	3.84
Institutional assistance with VA bureaucracy	69	60.87	27.54	11.59	3.74
Relationship with administrators	70	58.57	22.86	18.57	3.59
Foundation/fundraising support	70	58.57	25.71	15.71	3.60

Somewhat surprisingly, the rating for Relationship with Faculty also achieved a mean score over 4 and a rating of 74.28% in the “Excellent/Good” category. This was compared to Relationship with Staff, which achieved a mean score of 3.9 and 69.56% “Excellent/Good” and Relationship with Administrators, which achieved a 3.59 mean score and 58.57% in the “Excellent/Good” category.

Community support was rated fairly well, but Foundation/Fundraising Support received the lowest rating in this part of the survey. On the other hand, the results related to Interaction with Students and College Life Experiences were consistent with the literature and comments in the interviews. Two areas inconsistent with the interviews, however, were the ratings related to Networking and Supportive Friends and Institutional Assistance with Veterans Affairs Bureaucracy. Both of the latter issues received only moderate support in the survey instrument, but more positive commentary in the interviews.

Questions 11 – 20 provided opportunities for open-ended responses to inquiries regarding the specialized programs and services at the college. The succeeding pages will report on the general thematic findings related to responses made by the student veterans and will include some of their reflective comments.

Definitions of success. This question generated 70 total answers; 9 individuals skipped answering the question. Five major themes encompassed the definitions of success tendered by the student veterans. The two most commonly stated definitions of success were “obtaining a degree and transfer” and “completing educational goals on a timely basis.” Many of the respondents referred to either or both of these objectives in their definition of success. A representative example is,

“Being able to transition from military life to college life and using all the experiences learned from the military to eventually graduate with a degree.” Another veteran stated:

Student success is part self-motivation. This college has created an easy path for me to obtain my associate’s degree as well as transfer to a four-year college. The priority the school gives veterans is a major part of my success.
(Survey respondent)

Three other ideas surfaced from the comments fairly frequently, generating the next highest amount of the responses. “Active engagement, confidence and self-worth,” “dedication, persistence and effort,” and “achieving good grades” were highlighted as key attributes to academic success. And, although not achieving as high volume of responses, another group of student veterans added that their definition of success was “successfully attaining a job or career” or simply “learning, getting the appropriate educational foundation.” As one student veteran put it, “Student success is defining personal goals then working hard to achieve those goals by utilizing and coordinating resources to get there.”

Educational goals established. Question 12 asked student veterans to describe the educational goals they had set for themselves. Sixty-eight students answered this question; 11 provided no answer to it. Approximately 90% of the answers were made in only two categories: “Transfer to a four-year college” and “obtain a degree.” More responses were made toward transfer, but earning a degree was very close behind in the frequency of answers.

Two additional responses were stated to a much lesser degree. A small number of respondents stated that their goal was to “obtain a certificate or a job” and yet another small group identified their educational goals as “learning and personal advancement.”

Progress in meeting goals. The level of progress in meeting educational goals was the focus of Question 13. Again, 68 individuals answered this particular question; 11 decided not to provide a response. The results were fairly equally distributed in four major responses: “Progress is slow,” “Progress in on track,” “Progress is very good,” and “My educational goal is accomplished.”

One student commented, “Slowly, but I am trying to grasp the college lifestyle to step forward toward my own personal goals.” Another stated, “Longer than anticipated, but I am progressing.” And, a comment made by another student veteran recognized the journey many military veterans face returning to school. “I started a bit behind the curve, as I’m sure many vets do, but I am progressing. I stumbled and dropped the ball this semester, which set me back a bit, but it’s just a bump in the road.”

Four individuals reported less positive results, and in fact, stated that things were not working out. “Terribly, but not the school’s fault,” a veteran stated. “Now that two deployments plus two overseas training missions have gotten in the way, I am about 7 years behind.” Another veteran’s comment epitomized the resilience of many student veterans. “It has been rocky, but I am more determined than ever.”

Success prior to participating in veterans’ services. The response rate for Question 14 was similar to the two previous questions. Sixty-eight persons provided

answers and 11 did not respond. Just less than half of the respondents stated they had attained educational success prior to participating in the specialized veterans services and programs at the college. A small number reported “probably not” or “hard to say,” while a dozen or so answered “no.”

The sentiments of two particular student veterans were indicative of several others. “The veterans’ services have definitely helped me on my journey, but I have not fully been dependent on them.” A second veteran commented, “I moved here solely after hearing about the quality of the veteran services from friends who I had served with. After initial hiccups, I’ve been able to make steady progress ever since.”

Programs and services helpful to meeting education goals. Question 15 resulted in a decline in the volume of responses. Only 61 individuals provided answers, while 18 persons skipped the question. Six prominent programs/services were highlighted by the student veterans, with three of them garnering mention the most frequently. “Priority Registration,” “Veterans Resource Center,” and “Veterans Coordinator/Office” were the most often cited services. A small number of veterans mentioned “Textbook Loans,” “the Transition from Military to Student,” and “Orientation.”

Student comments pertaining to programs and services included, “The study area for veterans, along with priority registration . . . being able to get first pick on classes that fill up fast.” Another veteran echoed the comment, “Priority registration has been the best for me to get whatever class I need. And, the veterans coordinator has been essential in making sure everything goes smoothly for us. I couldn’t be more thankful for that.” A third reiterated the others, “Priority registration is arguably the

biggest benefit. And, the veterans coordinator has been instrumental in helping me with many issues.”

Programs and services not helpful in meeting educational goals. Similar to the preceding responses, Question 16 had only 61 respondents, with 18 participants choosing not to answer the question. While most of the respondents replied “None” – that there was no program and service at the college that did not in some way help in meeting their educational goals – some survey participants did highlight a small number of issues. Counseling, Financial Aid, Mental Health Services were highlighted as areas in need of improvement. In addition, a veteran suggested a need for the institution to recognize military training for college credits. Another voiced a complaint about the college’s interpretation of his state residency status after being discharged. And, another student veteran objected to prices in the bookstore and cafeteria.

How programs and services contributed to meeting educational goals. A further decline was realized in the number of responses to Question 17, which asked student veterans to describe ways the specialized programs and services contributed to meeting their educational goals. Fifty-five participants answered the question and 24 passed.

Below are some of the comments in response to this question:

- “Allowed me to meet with many other veterans”
- “Provided a supportive environment”
- “Loaned me textbooks”

- “Provided tutoring”
- “Priority registration got me the classes I needed”
- “Helped set goals and pointed me in the right direction”
- “Guided me”
- “Made things less stressful”
- “Kept me on track”
- “Helped me understand my benefits”
- “Made the VA process easier”
- “Helped me get out quicker”

Goal achievement without the veterans’ services. When asked to what extent the student veterans could have achieved their educational goals without the specialized programs and services offered at the College, 56 students answered and 23 omitted responses. By far, the majority of respondents to Question 18 stated they could have met their goals, but it would have been more difficult. An equal number said it likely would have taken longer for them to achieve their goals. “I probably could have figured it out, but it would have been harder and more discouraging.” Ten students acknowledged they could have achieved their educational goals without the college’s veterans program. “With self-determination, anything is possible.” A very small number suggested that without the programs and services they might not have persisted. “I believe it would have been stressful for me and I would have dropped out.”

What the college can do better to meet educational goals. There was an increase in the participation rates in Question 19. A total of 61 students answered this question and 18 decided not to answer. Approximately one-quarter of the respondents said there was nothing the college could do better in meeting their educational goals. But, there were a series of answers very illuminating about improvements that could be made. One comment suggested that the college needed to be more welcoming and introduce more outreach. It was stated that additional information needed to be conveyed regarding the services available to veterans at the college.

In addition, several students stated that more financial assistance was needed for veterans. Several others said specialized counseling could be enhanced. Career placement, better access to classes, and expansion of the veterans resource center were also identified as needing improvement. And, one veteran commented that a necessary improvement was “one-on-one time” with veterans. An interesting remark by one student veteran suggested the need for better information for “older” veterans, a data element that was recognized as significant in the demographics statistics.

Final additional comments from the student veterans. The final question on the 20-question survey provided an opportunity for the student veterans to make concluding remarks about the specialized programs and services and how they may or may not have contributed to their educational success. Thirty-four participants declined to answer and 45 provided responses to this particular question.

Statements included positive references to staff and the friendly, welcoming environment of the college. Students expressed appreciation for the support they were provided and noted that the veteran services at the college provides opportunities for

veterans to study and to talk with one another. Many applauded the efforts of the veterans coordinator and recognized the importance of the veterans resource center as being instrumental to student success.

Some criticisms were voiced as well. One veteran identified the need for more mental health and housing services; another suggested that better outreach and marketing of the veterans services was necessary; and one asserted that a “veterans program is small consideration for what military members sacrifice.”

Several of the student veterans were extremely thankful for the veterans services and programs at the college. “I’m grateful for the help they’ve provided.” Another said, “Thanks to them. They helped me a lot.” A veteran linked the services to his personal accomplishments by saying, “The veterans program has been very instrumental to my success so far.” And, yet another summed up the support and encouragement realized from the veterans’ programs and services this way, “The key I have seen is having someone truly invested in the success of veterans. That is what this college provides.”

Quality of Research

The researcher took several steps to ensure that the collected data were reliable and trustworthy. Strategies were incorporated into each of the three study phases. The researcher used peer review and debriefing in analyzing the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which guaranteed a check on misdirected interpretations and gave the researcher different perspectives on the data results. Prolonged engagement also contributed to the study’s trustworthiness. Considerable length of time and effort involved in this study was recognized by those involved. Prolonged engagement led

to a good rapport and development of trust between the researcher and the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

All participants in this study were provided informed consent (Appendix B) and anonymity of identification by participation in this research effort. Anonymity of the participants has been a high priority throughout this study and its findings. No names, identification numbers, or other distinguishing criteria have been retained or intentionally printed in this research study. Participants were fully informed about the aspects of the study including their role, data collection procedures, researcher's role, and how the findings are being reported. Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations were adhered to when accessing student information, but participants were asked to complete demographic questionnaires voluntarily as part of the study.

Conclusion

Chapter IV provided an analysis of the programs and services offered for student veterans at the participating community college. The data collection included interviews of eight enrolled student veterans and an online survey instrument completed by student veterans registered at the participating college.

The chapter also described the data collection process and the results of the interviews with selected comments. Thematic conclusions were developed based on the interviews related to the student veterans' viewpoints regarding the effectiveness of the programs and services in meeting their educational objectives. And, resulting data were presented regarding the contributions to student success that emerged from the survey instrument.

Based on the program review, selected interviews, and a survey of enrolled student veterans at the participating community college, these assessments generally hold true. The specialized programs and services appear to be making a positive difference in helping student veterans be successful in meeting their educational goals. In Chapter V, the researcher will interpret the findings in relation to the research questions that guided this study. An analysis of the results and limitations of this exploratory mixed methods study will be presented, and recommendations for future research will be proposed. In addition, the author will provide some personal reflections regarding this subject and the research conducted.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

Today in the United States, student veterans in colleges and universities comprise over 3% of the enrollment (Radford & Wun, 2009) and this number continues to increase as a result of the concluding conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). Almost ten percent of the U.S. population of 21.8 million veterans is living in California (United States Census Bureau, 2013) and, correspondingly, this number is expected to grow as military troops returning from Afghanistan and Iraq complete their service. Of those returning to postsecondary education, a majority of those in California will be enrolling in community colleges (Community College League of California, 2013).

Many colleges have made attempts to develop appropriate services in support of returning veterans (Cook & Kim, 2009; Rumann & Harrick, 2009). The participating college in this study developed such programs and services as early as 2007. The existing literature concentrates on the need for such programs (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Livingston, 2009), but to date little evidence from the literature is available regarding assessments about the effectiveness of specialized services for student veterans. This study adds to the growing literature about such specialized programs and services for military personnel returning to college.

While the population of student veterans in colleges and universities includes military personnel who served in prior conflicts and military engagements, the researcher attempted to focus the study on student veterans who had been involved in

the two largest military conflicts since September 11, 2001. Therefore, the study attempted to concentrate on student veterans who had tours of duty in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

The specific research questions explored were:

1. How do OEF/OIF student veterans at the participating college define “student success?”
2. To what extent and how do the OEF/OIF student veterans at the college attribute their success to the specialized veterans’ programs and services provided by the college?

This exploratory mixed methods study evaluated the participating California community college’s veterans program and examined its programs and services to determine whether they had a positive effect on the success of participating students – “success” as defined by the students themselves. It obtained candid viewpoints from OEF/OIF student veterans who received some of the services provided by the college, learned their perspectives regarding the benefits of those services, and led to an understanding of how the specialized programs and services contributed to their educational achievements.

As a starting point to the research, the author conducted an extensive literature review, which provided important background related to the study. This review of literature included an understanding of the legacy between the U.S. education system and the military; special needs of student veterans and the unique challenges and problems they face resulting from transitions to trauma; how various other California community colleges have addressed the needs of student veterans; in depth

exploration of the concepts of “student success” in higher education; and the influences of student engagement on student success.

The research design consisted of three separate components. The first part of the study described the specialized programs and services at the participating college from inception to today. The research then conducted interviews of selected student veterans in the second part of the study in an attempt to learn their definitions of student success and their evaluations of the specialized programs and services in meeting their individual education goals. And, subsequently, the third part of the study conducted a more comprehensive survey of the college’s student veterans regarding their perceptions on whether the specialized services and programs assisted in meeting their educational objectives

This qualitative study was guided by the theoretical framework on student engagement posited by Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt (2005), which suggests two principal premises: 1) student success is improved in relation to time and effort a student puts into studies or other significant activities, and similarly 2) student success can be improved based on the higher education institution’s relationship to deployment and prioritization of personnel and resources and its organization of learning opportunities leading to student participation in them.

Discussion of the Findings

Institutional Perspective

Consistent with the theoretical structure that framed the study, the review of the institution’s program for veterans found that the participating college had prioritized veterans’ services as a vital component of student engagement at the

institution. The services for veterans were acknowledged by faculty, staff, and administrators alike as critical to the mission of the college. The president of the college recognized veterans as a student group that needed specialized services, and the commitment of resources was very important to the program's future success.

An important component of the business plan developed by the institution in response to veterans' services was community engagement and involvement.

Throughout the years since the veterans program was first conceived, a purposeful inclusion by external community groups and veterans' support agencies was a key aspect of the support for veterans generated by the college. This external support is integral to the sustainability of the program. The general buy-in from internal and external constituencies plays an essential role in the success and continuity of the veterans program at the college.

In the infancy of the veterans program, the college established a coordinator position that was the key liaison between student veterans of the college and Veterans Affairs. This coordinator became not only the certifying official at the college, but a confidante and friend of the student veterans. This "brotherly" relationship created by this position appears to be a critical path of success for the student veterans at the college. Almost universal support through the interviews and the survey indicated that this position – or at least this individual – is responsible for much of the student success stated by the student veterans participating in this study.

On the other hand, only recently did the institution take action to increase the level of the veterans coordinator position to a level consistent with other coordinator roles at the college. The author's observation is that this inconsistency is not

indicative of any evaluative judgment regarding the veterans program, but rather is more likely symbolic of the slow, bureaucratic nature of personnel classification processes in public institutions, particularly in higher education.

As years progressed, the institution modified and expanded the services for veterans in response to expressed needs of the student veterans. Most notable in the program review's continuous improvements were enhancements to the orientation and augmentations to the veterans resource center. These changes were planned and deliberate advancements in the veterans' services at the college.

Student Veterans' Perspectives

Student veterans' perspectives were garnered from two separate components of the research design: interviews with eight students enrolled at the college who had served in OEF/OIF conflicts and surveys among enrolled students at the institution. Overall, both studies resulted in very positive support for the specialized services provided to veterans and indicated generally that those programs and services contributed to meeting their educational goals.

While "regular" ongoing services of the college were noted very positively, such as the admissions office and financial aid, the areas considered by the veterans as most significant to their student success were the veterans office, the veterans resource center, and unpredictably, the overall area of instruction. This latter subject area became highlighted both in the interviews and the survey instrument. Student veterans at this college receive registration prioritization, i.e. prioritized selection of classes based on their designation as veterans. This proved to be one of the most important "services" to veterans as labeled by those interviewed and surveyed.

As cited above, the veterans coordinator position is highly regarded among the veterans as critical to their meeting educational goals. And, the veterans resource center is quite simply the quintessence of the services these student veterans attest to their educational success. A vast majority of the student veterans described the veterans resource center as a place they could study, talk, or just hang out. Having this dedicated space available to veterans was for some essential to educational success. It allowed them to be with other veterans – individuals with shared experiences – while moving forward as students and bettering themselves.

The interviews and survey results both validated the college's program review. The student veterans interviewed, as well as the majority of those surveyed, had very positive comments regarding the institutional support the campus has provided military veterans returning to the classroom. This is consistent with the conceptual framework regarding improved success obtained as a result of the institution's prioritization and alignment of resources in support of student success.

The definition of student success was very personal and based on the individual circumstances of each student. Although their definitions were consistent with those found in the literature review, the student veterans identified five thematic elements: attainment of educational goals; obtaining passing grades in classes; simply persisting methodically and deliberately in class work; "completing"; and achieving required credentials to get a good job.

The students interviewed and those who participated in the survey sustained the other premise put forth by Kuh et al. that student success can be measured in relation to the amount of time and effort a student puts into educational activities.

Almost all of the students participating in the study suggested that hard work on their part was the scaffolding of their success, and that the specialized programs and services provided by the college for veterans were important tools that help them build on their success.

Recommendations on Current Practice

Universities and colleges, in particular community colleges, are on the verge of enrolling the largest number of student veterans at their institutions since World War II. Many campuses have developed programs and support services to facilitate the transition from military to civilian life. Since September 11, 2001 almost two-thirds of campuses in one study indicated they had increased support for student veterans (Cook & Kim, 2009). This researcher's study proved timely in demonstrating that such specialized services and programs do lead to student success and provide significant, meaningful support for student veterans' transitions into the classroom.

The community college participating in this study has established a strong commitment to developing a student veterans program by assessing its level of campus support for veterans; advocating for additional staffing, financial and spatial resources; and examining the viability of public and private partnerships to increase service areas concerning veterans where needed. To some it is considered one of the model programs for student veterans in the California Community College system.

Responding to the various challenges and issues student veterans bring with them into the classroom is difficult for community college administrators. This study derived information from the student veterans themselves regarding the effects of the

specialized services for veterans at this particular California community college. And, it determined that most, if not all, of the specialized services generally were viewed positively in helping the student veterans meet or exceed their educational goals. Many of the students indicated that their success was attributed to the services provided for veterans; however, the majority of the students interviewed or surveyed suggested that could have been successful without the specialized services, but it would have been more difficult or would have taken much longer to achieve their educational goals.

The results of this study will help college administrators to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the needs of student veterans in the classroom and to provide evidence regarding certain services and programs offered by the participating community college that are contributing to meeting students' educational goals.

Need for Further Research

Clearly, this study is limited in its generalizations because it singles out the student veterans at one California community college. The study's conclusions are available to higher education administrators as a way to inform them regarding the successful efforts for student veterans at one particular community college.

Additional studies comparing multiple colleges and the services provided to student veterans would be beneficial.

The study intentionally focused on student veterans returning from OEF and OIF tours of duty. While this research was intended to be limited OEF/OIF student veterans, the survey instrument included the viewpoints of military personnel who had served in other conflicts. Similarly, the study's small number of participants –

although representing different branches of the military – is limited in scope. As a consequence, these results cannot be viewed as a generalization of all student veterans. Further, more detailed research and of larger magnitude may be necessary to determine if services and programs of these kind can be more generally accepted as successful in other institutions.

As pointed out earlier in the study, this research did not examine other societal, economic, and health related influences on student veterans' ability to achieve success at the college such as services from Veterans Affairs and other governmental agencies or civic associations, except as outlined by the student veterans in their interview answers and survey responses. The study's intent was to provide educational leaders with information that may help understand if such programs and services are helping meet students' educational goals. A more robust examination of the effect of military experiences may be prudent.

In addition, further research regarding the sustainability of programs and services like those offered at this participating college would be encouraged. Although the data supports such dedicated programs in response to the increasing numbers of student veterans enrolling in colleges and universities, further research regarding longer term enrollment projections related to the veteran population is needed. While data suggest the need for such programs within the coming decade, additional studies are necessary to determine how long into the future the increased enrollment trends for student veterans is expected. Similarly, like the success of this program for student veterans, higher educational institutions are evaluating the sustainability of successful learning communities that focus on special student

groups. As a matter of public policy, educational leaders should evaluate programs similar to the subject of this study to determine if the model of such services and support systems can be made available more broadly at our higher educational institutions – in an effort to meet student success for all students.

Conclusion

Several observations come to mind as this exploratory mixed methods study concludes. The prelude of this report includes remarks about the horrific event of September 11, 2001, which was the impetus for the United States entering into the OEF and OIF conflicts. That catastrophic event ignited incredible patriotism throughout the nation and the resulting military engagements initiated many of the improvements in GI benefits that U.S. soldiers receive today. And yet, only a handful of those interviewed in this study or respondents to the survey indicated that 9/11 was the catalyst of their enlistment into the military. In fact, most of the veterans interviewed indicated they were so young when 9/11 occurred that the event had little or no effect on their decision to enlist. This was an unexpected variable to the researcher.

Similarly unexpected were the results of the literature review. Considerable numbers of articles, periodicals, monographs, and other references were available related to the need for programs and services for student veterans. The numbers of expected student veterans was significant, projections established the need for expanded services in colleges, and publications highlighted the types of programs that would be beneficial to military personnel returning to college. Limited, and almost

non-existent, were literary citations related to the assessment of any such programs and services. This omission was the inspiration for this research.

Not so surprising to the researcher were the results of the interviews and the survey responses regarding the services and programs provided by the college for veterans. Specifically, the veterans coordinator and the veterans resource center were two of the programs that were expected to gain high marks for their support of student success. The student veterans' definitions of student success were typical and anticipated: moving forward, getting good grades, completing, and either transferring to a four-year institution or getting a good job.

Unexpected, however, was the identification of priority registration as being integral to the student veterans' educational achievements. Almost all of the student veterans interviewed, and many respondents to the survey, mentioned priority registration – being able to enroll in desired classes necessary to move forward to completion – as very important to student success.

Finally, perhaps as much as anything else, it was the student veterans themselves who were inspiring and uplifting. The interviewees were courteous, engaging, and forthright. Each provided significant insights regarding military experiences, challenges and issues they faced, and contributed to an understanding of student success and what was important to their meeting individual educational goals. Similarly, the survey respondents provided valuable information about the programs and services that were helpful to them in meeting educational objectives and how the participating college had contributed to their academic success.

It is this researcher's conclusion that OEF/OIF student veterans at this participating college – and perhaps many other student veterans as well – define “student success” as achieving their goals with good grades, being persistent from term to term in a timely basis, and completing their objectives by either transferring to a four-year institution or getting a good job. And further, OEF/OIF student veterans at this college attribute much of their success – or ease and time to that success – to its specialized veterans' programs and services.

Almost every student veteran expressed considerable appreciation for the programs and services the college offered them. It was quite obvious that the veterans who participated in this study were thankful for the benefits they receive and for the support this particular college provides to student veterans. It is with deep humility, pride, and gratitude that this researcher suggests it is the least we can do.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN
RESEARCHER AND PARTICIPATING COLLEGE

This agreement acknowledges research being conducted regarding a program within your institution. The researcher is performing a study on Student Success Efforts for Military Veterans Transitioning to a California Community College. His research is a case study of a college program that has been developed for student veterans and will evaluate the programs and services' effect on student achievement.

The researcher is requesting access to selected students from your institution for personal interviews and a survey instrument as well as institutional data as identified. By separate documentation, informed consent forms with those students being interviewed will be submitted for signature by the participants and FERPA regulations will be followed. This memorandum is to make the institution aware of the ongoing research and to consent to providing data as requested.

[Signature on file with dissertation author]
Bob Kratochvil, Doctoral Student

September 5, 2013
Date

[Signature on file with dissertation author]
Interim President, Participating College

September 5, 2013
Date

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study that will take place in Fall 2013. This form outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your requested involvement and participation. Research for a doctoral dissertation is being conducted by Bob Kratochvil, a student at California State University, Stanislaus. The study is probing the services and programs for student veterans provided by the participating college and the effects of those programs and services on student success outcomes and educational achievement. Specifically, the two research questions are: 1) How do OEF/OIF student veterans at the participating college define “student success,” and 2) to what extent and how do the OEF/OIF student veterans at the college attribute their success to the specialized veterans’ programs and services provided by the college?

Your participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time until completion of the dissertation. Participation will include an audio-taped interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes with follow-up questions as needed. Mr. Kratochvil will have access to a secured file in which all transcripts, recordings, and field notes will be housed. The results of this study may be published and reported to educational bodies, but your identity will remain confidential as will the name of the participating college. There are no known risks to you for your participation in this study. It is possible that you will not benefit directly from this study. All publications, public distributions, findings, audio recordings, and data will be protected from inappropriate disclosure under the law. In addition, all research protocols involving human subjects will be reviewed and approved by the CSU Stanislaus Institutional Review Board to assure compliance with all regulations and applicable laws.

There is no cost to you beyond the time and effort required to complete the procedures described above. Again, your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you become distressed or experience emotional discomfort in the course of the interview, the researcher will provide you with referrals to professional counseling staff familiar with veterans’ issues. The researcher will provide you with names, phone numbers, and locations of these counseling services.

If you decide to participate to this study, please indicate this decision by filling out the bottom portion of this form and returning it to me. If you have any questions regarding your rights and participation as a research subject, please contact me, Bob Kratochvil, or my faculty sponsor, Dr. Jim Riggs. You may also email CSU Stanislaus Institutional Review Board at IRBAdmin@csustan.edu or call (209) 667-3747.

Participant’s signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher’s signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX C

PROGRAM EVALUATION PROTOCOL

Case studies are characterized by three main elements: 1) a focus on a particular issue or program; 2) the interest and desire to understand the issue or program in great depth; and 3) collecting data in a variety of useful ways (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004).

Three fundamental approaches will be used to collecting the necessary information about the program being evaluated:

- Documents associated with the program and its development will be obtained and fully digested in order to describe the program's establishment, goals, and objectives correctly.
- Interviews with stakeholders, program staff, and those responsible for developing the program will be conducted as appropriate.
- As necessary, personal observation and a site visit to the college program will be made.

Once the descriptive summary and evaluation is written, the narrative will be peer-reviewed by an individual(s) familiar with the program, but not affiliated with this study to ensure validity and reasonableness of the descriptive summary.

APPENDIX D

PILOT TESTING INSTRUMENT FOR STUDENT

VETERANS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Testing Subjects: 2-3 individuals

Expected Duration: 45 minutes

Purpose of the Exercise: I am conducting a research project as part of a doctoral dissertation. A component of the study includes several survey questions regarding programs and services for student veterans and their impact on student achievement and educational goals. An important element of this questionnaire is to determine whether the questions are clearly understandable and are not leading in any way.

Your responses to this test phase will not be recorded or reported in any way, but will assist in ensuring that the design of the survey instrument is reliable. Your willingness to assist in this effort is very much appreciated, and please feel comfortable in providing feedback to me regarding your understanding and perceptions about these research questions.

Following are the specific steps of this pilot test process:

1. You will be provided a copy of the set of questions.
2. Please note the amount of time allotted to answer all the questions.
3. Once you have completed reading the questions, respond to each question in three ways:

Column A. Understandable: Was the question “understandable?” Did you have to read the question more than once to understand what it was asking? Was the meaning of the question clear and straightforward? *Circle yes or no.*

Column B. Only one response: Was the question written in such a way that you could have answered it several different ways? For example, could you have said BOTH “always” and “never?”). *Circle yes or no.*

Column C. Unbiased: In your opinion, was the question balanced and fair? If so, circle *yes*. If you thought the question was partial and written in such a way that you felt you were being led to an already determined response choice, circle *no*.

For any questions you answered “no,” please explain why you responded this way in the Comments box in Column D.

	COLUMN A		COLUMN B		COLUMN C		COLUMN D	
Question	Understandable?		Only one response?		Unbiased?		Comments	
1	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		
2	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		
3	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		
4	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		
5	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		
6	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		
7	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		
8	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		
9	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		
10	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		
11	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		
12	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		
13	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		
14	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		

Format adopted from Sample Protocol for Pilot Testing Survey Items by Gloria Rogers, ABET, Inc.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL BRIEFING

Thank you for participating in my research on programs and services for student veterans. I want to remind you that the purpose of this study is twofold: First, it is attempting to determine how OEF/OIF student veterans at this college define “student success” and secondly, to what extent and how OEF/OIF student veterans at this college attribute their success to the specialized veterans’ programs and services provided by the college.

During the recorded interview, I will be asking you questions about student success and how you define that issue. Further, I will ask you questions about the programs and services offered by this college for student veterans and how or to what degree those programs and services assisted you in meeting your educational goals. Your answers may prompt further questions all centered on student success achievement for student veterans.

This interview is intended to provide a better understanding on this issue from your perspective and I appreciate your time and assistance in learning more about the subject. If you are uncomfortable at any time during the interview, want to go to another question or even discontinue participation, please so inform me.

Your identity in this research will remain confidential. I request that you not share with others your responses to my questions so that the integrity of the research may be retained. In addition, I request that you agree to answering follow-up questions should they be necessary, and to review your transcribed answers at a later date.

Before I begin recording the interview, do you have any questions?

[Interview commences]

APPENDIX F

STUDENT PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was your educational experience and highest educational level prior to the military?
2. Please provide some background regarding your military service including branch, rank, where you served, how many tours, and your experiences.
3. What were the circumstances that made you consider returning/enrolling in college?
4. What are the most significant problems facing a military person returning to college?
5. Why did you pursue this particular college?
6. How do you define “student success”?
7. What goals did you set for yourself when you enrolled in college? At this college? How are you progressing?
8. Had you tried to meet those goals before participating in the Veterans’ services here?
9. Have you made connections with other programs/services offered by the college? If so, please identify and explain if they contributed to meeting your educational goals.
10. What programs and services for veterans at this college have been helpful to you?
11. What programs and services for veterans at this college have not been helpful to you?
12. In what ways did the programs and services for veterans at this college contribute to your meeting your educational goals?
13. Do you think you could have achieved your educational goals without the veterans programs and services here?
14. What could the veterans programs and services do better to help you meet your educational goals?

15. Recalling that this study is centering on the definition of “student success” for OEF/OIF student veterans and their success may be attributed to the specialized programs and services provided by the college, is there any additional information you would like to add?

APPENDIX G

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL DEBRIEFING

Thank you for sharing your insights on this important issue.

Is there any further information you would like to share that would inform this research?

Do you have any question about this study?

If you have any questions later, would like to provide additional information, or otherwise contact me about this research please contact me by phone or email.

Again, thank you very much for participating in this research and for your time. It is greatly appreciated.

APPENDIX H

DATA TRANSCRIPTIONIST CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

This agreement is between Bob Kratochvil, researcher, and [Name of transcriber].

This agreement establishes the research being conducted by Bob Kratochvil and the transcription services being requested. It acknowledges that contained in this research is confidential information about the study and its participants.

I hereby understand that I will be exposed to such confidential information and events of participants and that, in providing transcription services, at no time will I reveal or discuss any of the information to which I am privy.

Further, I will not retain copies of the electronic or paper documents produced and agree to provide all such electronic and paper documents to Mr. Kratochvil.

I understand that breach of the above agreement could result in personal or professional harm to the researcher and the research participants for which I could be held legally responsible.

Transcriptionist's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX I

PILOT TESTING INSTRUMENT FOR STUDENT VETERANS SURVEY

Testing Subjects: 2-3 individuals

Expected Duration: 45 minutes

Purpose of the Exercise: I am conducting a research project as part of a doctoral dissertation. A component of the study includes several survey questions regarding programs and services for student veterans and their impact on student achievement and educational goals. An important element of this questionnaire is to determine whether the questions are clearly understandable and are not leading in any way.

Your responses to this test phase will not be recorded or reported in any way, but will assist in ensuring that the design of the survey instrument is reliable. Your willingness to assist in this effort is very much appreciated, and please feel comfortable in providing feedback to me regarding your understanding and perceptions about these research questions.

Following are the specific steps of this pilot test process:

1. You will be provided a copy of the set of questions.
2. Please note the amount of time allotted to answer all the questions.
3. Once you have completed reading the questions, respond to each question in three ways:

Column A. Understandable: Was the question “understandable?” Did you have to read the question more than once to understand what it was asking? Was the meaning of the question clear and straightforward? *Circle yes or no.*

Column B. Only one response: Was the question written in such a way that you could have answered it several different ways? For example, could you have said BOTH “always” and “never?”). *Circle yes or no.*

Column C. Unbiased: In your opinion, was the question balanced and fair? If so, circle *yes*. If you thought the question was partial and written in such a way that you felt you were being led to an already determined response choice, circle *no*.

For any questions you answered “no,” please explain why you responded this way in the Comments box in Column D.

COLUMN A COLUMN B COLUMN C COLUMN D

Question	Understandable?	Only one response?	Unbiased?	Comments
1a	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
1b	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
1c	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
1d	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
1e	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
1f	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
1g	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
1h	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
1i	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
1j	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
1k	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
1l	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	

	COLUMN A	COLUMN B	COLUMN C	COLUMN D
Question	Understandable?	Only one response?	Unbiased?	Comments
2h	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
2i	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
2j	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
2k	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
2l	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
3	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
4	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
5	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
6	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
7	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
8	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
9	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	
10	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	

Format adopted from Sample Protocol for Pilot Testing Survey Items by Gloria Rogers, ABET, Inc.

APPENDIX J

STUDENT VETERANS SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Please indicate your overall satisfaction with the following services/departments at your institution: (Excellent, 1; Good, 2; Average, 3; Fair, 4; Poor, 5)
 - a. Student Veterans Office
 - b. Admissions Office
 - c. Registration Process
 - d. Financial Aid Office
 - e. Disabled Services Office
 - f. Student Health Services
 - g. Instruction
 - h. Academic Advising
 - i. Counseling
 - j. Tutoring
 - k. Career Services
 - l. Transfer Services
 - m. Class Availability
 - n. Orientation
 - o. Adjusting to College
 - p. Mental Health Services
 - q. Veterans Resource Center

2. Overall, what was your satisfaction with your institution in these areas: (Same rating scale)
 - a. Transition from military to college life
 - b. Welcoming to veterans
 - c. Interaction with other students
 - d. Networking and supportive friends
 - e. Relationship with faculty
 - f. Relationship with staff
 - g. Relationship with administrators
 - h. Registration prioritization
 - i. Community support
 - j. LMC Foundation support
 - k. Veterans Coordinator position
 - l. College life experience

- m. Institutional assistance with VA bureaucracy
 - n. Overall experience with the college as a veteran
3. Recalling that this study is centering on the definition of “student success” for OEF/OIF student veterans and their success may be attributed to the specialized programs and services provided by the college, how do you define “student success”?
 4. What educational goals (certificate, degree, transfer, etc.) did you set for yourself when you enrolled at this college?
 5. How are you progressing in meeting those goals?
 6. Had you tried to meet those goals before participating in the Veterans’ services here?
 7. What programs and services for veterans at this college have been helpful to you in meeting your educational goals?
 8. What programs and services for veterans at this college have not been helpful to you?
 9. In what ways did the programs and services for veterans at this college contribute to your meeting your educational goals?
 10. To what extent could you have achieved your educational goals without the veterans’ programs and services here?
 11. What could the veterans programs and services do better to help you meet your educational goals?
 12. Do you have other comments to add regarding how or if the specialized programs and services for veterans at this college may have contributed to your “student success”?

APPENDIX K

SURVEY PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant:

You are being asked to participate in a research project that is being done to fulfill requirements for a Doctoral degree in Educational Leadership at CSU Stanislaus. We hope to understand more clearly the effects of veterans' services on meeting your educational goals. If you decide to volunteer for this study, you will be asked to answer questions regarding the veterans' services at your campus. These questions will be asked of you in an electronic survey. The survey should take about 10 minutes to complete. All OEF/OIF student veterans at your college will be surveyed. The results of this study will be used to understand the relationship to veterans' services to student success.

There are no known risks to you for your participation in this study. It is possible that you will not benefit directly by participating in this study. The information collected will be protected from all inappropriate disclosure under the law including FERPA regulations. All data will be maintained for a period of one year from the completion of the study and subsequently will be destroyed by the researcher. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

There is no known cost to you beyond the time and effort required to complete the procedure(s) described above. Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate in this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. You may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

If you agree to participate, please continue to the electronic survey. Completion of the survey indicates your willingness to participate. If you wish to revisit this consent form at any time during the survey, please click the link provided. If you have any questions about this research project, please contact me, Bob Kratochvil, or my faculty sponsor, Dr. Jim Riggs. If you have any questions regarding your rights and participation as a research subject, please contact Campus Compliance, California State University, Stanislaus at 209-667-3747.