8-2024

Understanding the Acculturation Experiences of Post-9/11 Student Veterans in the Higher Education Culture Of Civilian Postsecondary Educational Institutions

Jansen Sheridan Legreid
University of Northern Colorado

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

UNDERSTANDING THE ACCULTURATION EXPERIENCES OF POST-9/11
STUDENT VETERANS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION CULTURE OF
CIVILIAN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Jansen Sheridan Legreid

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education

August 2024

This Dissertation by: Jansen Sheridan Legreid

Entitled: *Understanding the Acculturation Experiences of Post-9/11 Student Veterans in the Higher Education Culture of Civilian Postsecondary Educational Institutions*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education, Program of Counseling Psychology.

Accepted by the Doctoral Committee

_____

Lu Tian, Ph.D., Co-Research Advisor

_____

Jeffrey Rings, Ph.D., Co-Research Advisor

_____

Angela Vaughan, Ph.D., Committee Member

_____

Thomas Dunn, Ph.D., Faculty Representative

Date of Dissertation Defense: 06/06/2024

Accepted by the Graduate School

_____

Jeri-Anne Lyons, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School
Associate Vice President for Research

ABSTRACT

Legreid, Jansen. *Understanding the Acculturation Experiences of Post-9/11 Student Veterans in the Higher Education Culture of Civilian Postsecondary Educational Institutions.* Published Doctoral Dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2024.

The purpose of this study was to describe the essence of the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as they navigated within the dominant higher education culture of civilian postsecondary educational institutions (PEIs). Specifically, this study aimed to conceptualize the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans by simultaneously identifying the components of their military cultural identity that they decided to maintain or abandon in PEI settings as well as which components of the dominant higher education culture that they decided to adopt or reject. This study answered the following research questions:

Q1   What are the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as they navigate within the dominant higher education culture of civilian postsecondary educational institutions?

    Q1a   Which, if any, aspects of their military cultural identities do post-9/11 student veterans choose to maintain or abandon during their acculturation processes within the dominant higher education culture of civilian postsecondary educational institutions?

    Q1b   Which, if any, aspects of the dominant higher education culture do post-9/11 student veterans choose to adopt or reject during their acculturation processes within civilian postsecondary educational institutions?

Individual virtual interviews were conducted with 11 post-9/11 student veteran participants to better understand their PEI acculturation experiences. Findings revealed PEI acculturation stress related to a loss of stability, loss of identity, and the navigation of new higher educational cultural norms. The predominant acculturation strategy used by these participants was separation as stabilization, followed by marginalization and integration. Military cultural values tended to

be retained subconsciously until they conflicted with higher educational cultural values. Military values that were perceived as inhibitive to educational goals were abandoned, while few higher education values were adopted due to their perceived limited broader utility. This study affirmed the appropriateness of conceptualizing student veteran experiences through an acculturation framework and contrasted with assumptions of reintegration difficulties stemming solely from military identity. Findings also suggest a reconceptualization is needed regarding how university communities understand this minority population's distinct cultural transition into the higher education culture of PEIs.

Keywords: student veterans, post-9/11, acculturation, higher education, phenomenology

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ability to execute a study that will be a valuable contribution to the existing body of student veteran literature.

Lastly and most importantly, I would like to thank God the Father Almighty for giving His only begotten son, Jesus Christ, for the evangelical salvation of this world. By His hand I have endeavored to serve His will and I am forever grateful for the guidance I have received throughout my life, particularly during my educational pursuits. And though I am underserving of His love, blessings, and grace, I strive to embody the Word through my actions and ensure His will is done. Through Him and Him alone all is possible, and I thank God with all my heart for the opportunities that have been bestowed upon me and for the endless love of those whom He had chosen to surround me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Beside the field of potato rows,
Sumey sees an alarm clock
taped to a two-liter bottle.
We create a perimeter, back up the trucks,
flatten the potatoes under tires.

The Explosive Ordnance Disposal team
isn't sure; when they're not sure,
they blow it up.

"Why don't you walk over there", Spoon says,
"and get yourself a Purple Heart".

Spoon is awarded the Purple Heart in June
when shrapnel misses his head,
but the bricks that hide the bomb
knock him unconscious.

When the shell detonates beside our truck,
the sound is too loud to hear; the wind wraps us
with shrapnel, bricks, smoke;
the ballistic windshield shatters; glass on
Kenson's cheek- blood smeared like lipstick.

For three hours we clear the neighborhood
because of a black plastic bag.
The staff sergeant in the bomb suit
orders everyone to back the fuck up even further.
In the bag he finds six ripe tomatoes.

We avoid trash, disturbed soil, animal carcasses.
We arrest men who dig beside the road.
We hate the ground.

Outside the city: rocks stacked
like children's building blocks.

Sergeant Kenson won't wait for the EOD.
"It's nothing", he yells, and no one can stop him
when he starts to walk;
even LT tries to restrain him, but he walks.

And all four of us in the truck shout,
but it's no use. When he lifts his leg
to kick the pile,
we look down.
We close our eyes.

- Hugh Martin, *Ways of Looking at an IED, 2012*

On the morning of September 11, 2001, 19 militant extremists aligning with the

Afghanistan-based terrorist organization al Qaeda hijacked four commercial airplanes and

commenced a series of suicide attacks across the United States (U.S.). The four planes used in

the attacks targeted (a) the World Trade Center complex in New York City, (b) the Pentagon in

Arlington, Virginia, and (c) Washington, D.C., killed 2,977 people, injured an additional 8,900

persons, and caused the greatest loss of life on American soil since Pearl Harbor (Borch, 2003).

On September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush initiated the Global War on Terror (GWOT)

as a response to these terrorist attacks. He then launched the first U.S. military strikes against al Qaeda bases of operation on October 7, 2001. The GWOT eventually evolved into an umbrella term for combat operations that focused on disrupting, combatting, and dismantling al Qaeda and affiliated terrorist organization operations throughout the Middle East, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA], 2021c). As the conflicts progressed, the term GWOT was largely replaced by the moniker post-9/11 to better encapsulate the nature of its operations and has only recently been discontinued (Novelly, 2022).

Post-9/11 Service Members

Profile of Post-9/11 Operations

Post-9/11 combat operations primarily were composed of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation New Dawn (OND), and Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS). Throughout the 20-year conflict, more than two million service members were deployed for active duty in Iraq and Afghanistan (Baiocchi, 2013; Institute of Medicine [IoM], 2010) with 98,000 troops being the largest number of U.S. service members stationed in any one country (Garamone, 2021). While previous U.S. military conflicts (e.g., World War II, The Korean War, The Vietnam War) had involved as many, if not significantly more, total deployed service members throughout their operations, the post-9/11 cohort has been unique in that a significantly greater proportion of service members within this cohort have had to personally experience the burdens of combat operations (IoM, 2013). The deactivation of the U.S. conscription system in 1973 following the conclusion of operations in Vietnam required the U.S. military to rely solely on an all-volunteer force of service members as it could no longer fill its ranks with draftees. However, unlike previous conflict generations following this deactivation (e.g., The Persian Gulf Wars), post-9/11 operations needed to function with fewer and fewer

service members. The total number of U.S. service members has declined continuously in the last 30 years from approximately 2.1 million in 1990 during Operation Desert Storm, to 1.4 million at the time of the 9/11 attacks, and currently to 1.3 million following the conclusion of Afghanistan combat operations (U.S. Department of Defense [DoD], 2020; Pew Research Center [PRC], 2019a). These decreases resulted in fewer service members being available for a greater number of operations during what came to be the longest conflict in U.S. history (VA, 2021a). As such, post-9/11 service members arguably encountered unique deployment experiences with significant impacts on their mental health.

Unique Factors of Post-9/11 Experiences

Service Member Deployments

Given the duration of the Iraq and Afghanistan combat operations and the limited number of personnel available during them would be expected that the military experiences of these post-9/11 service members would significantly differ from those who had served in previous U.S. conflicts. The most noticeable difference, when compared to service members of previous conflicts, is that post-9/11 service members, on average, were significantly more likely to be deployed (Baiocchi, 2013; IoM, 2010; PRC, 2019a), to experience significantly longer deployments (Baiocchi, 2013; Lippa et al., 2015), and to be deployed multiple times (Baiocchi, 2013; Interian et al., 2014; McGuire et al., 2016). The post-9/11 combat operations required more than 3.5 million deployments which, given the total number of U.S. service members available for deployment, resulted in multiple deployments for nearly half of all those who were deployed (IoM, 2013). The Army bore the brunt of these deployment burdens as soldiers represented more than half of the total U.S. deployed personnel, with approximately a quarter of these troops experiencing three or more years of cumulative deployment (Baiocchi, 2013). The

Marine Corps also experienced a significant burden as nearly half of all Marines experienced multiple deployments, with an average deployment length of eight months (IoM, 2013). In all, U.S. post-9/11 service members who had been deployed multiple times across all branches experienced an average cumulative deployment length of approximately 17 months (IoM, 2013). While military deployments by themselves can be disruptive and highly stressful (McGlinchey et al., 2017), these post-9/11 deployments were particularly distressing due to the nature of the experiences that were encountered by service members while deployed.

Traumatic Experiences During Deployment

While deployed in post-9/11 operations, U.S. service members were significantly more likely to experience combat and traumatic experiences than those of previous conflicts (Hoge et al., 2004; IoM, 2010; PRC, 2019b; Renshaw, 2010). More than half of all deployed post-9/11 service members served in a combat zone with approximately half of those individuals having had an emotionally traumatic or distressing experience (PRC, 2019b). This was a stark contrast compared to the experiences of U.S. service members who had served in previous conflicts, as fewer than a third of members within those cohorts had served in a combat zone, and only a quarter of them had reported having had an emotionally traumatic or distressing combat-related experience (PRC, 2019b).

Of the post-9/11 service members who had experienced combat, a significant proportion reported having direct experiences of life threatening and traumatic encounters (IoM, 2010). The Army and the Marine Corps again bore the brunt of these experiences as soldiers and Marines were most likely to report (a) being attacked or ambushed; (b) receiving incoming artillery, rocket, or mortar fire; (c) shooting or directing fire at the enemy; (d) seeing dead bodies or human remains; (e) seeing someone seriously injured or killed; and (f) seeing ill or injured

women or children whom they were ultimately unable to help (Hoge et al., 2004). Any one of these experiences can be traumatic, though post-9/11 Marines were particularly impacted by traumatic experiences as more than 90% of these troops were exposed to multiple types of death and dying (Hoge et al., 2004). Additionally, a staggering 97% of Marines reporting being shot at by enemy combatants (Hoge et al., 2004). It is important to note that while these particular deployment experiences were not unique to post-9/11 service members as death and dying arguably are part of warfare, appreciating the proportion of service members who reported these experiences is critical in recognizing the unique service experiences of the post-9/11 cohort. Furthermore, one also must consider the nature of the post-9/11 combat operations in conjunction with the occurrence of traumatic experiences to truly grasp the uniqueness of post-9/11 service member experiences.

Nature of Post-9/11 Combat Operations

One of the defining features of the post-9/11 combat operations was the proliferation of improvised explosive devices (IED) used by enemy adversaries (Senate Hearing 112-738, 2012; Yee et al., 2022). Nearly 12,000 IEDs were detonated in the last decade of the post-9/11 operations alone, resulting in nearly half of the total number of people killed or injured during these conflicts (Overton, 2020). The usage of IEDs embodied the nature of the post-9/11 combat experiences because the deadly threats posed by these weapons were sudden, unpredictable, and diffused (The Monitor, 2011). The components used by IEDs were readily available; they could be manufactured by anyone with basic training and shipped across international borders. Furthermore, IEDs could be concealed anywhere and then be detonated by anyone (Senate Hearing 112-738). While the use of hidden explosives and guerilla warfare have been encountered by U.S. military personnel in our previous conflicts (e.g., The Vietnam War), the

prevalence with which these devices were used in the post-9/11 operations was unsurpassed (Boot, 2013). Additionally, the increased usage of common civilian technology (e.g., cellphones) as detonator switches both increased the distance from which these devices could be detonated and increased the difficulty in identifying the trigger person (Miller, 2006). This meant that post-9/11 service members were significantly more likely to experience increased uncertainty and ambiguity to potential threats during their combat deployments, as an attack could occur at any moment from anywhere by anyone (Koenig et al., 2019).

This aspect of post-9/11 combat operations was further compounded by the increased willingness of adversaries to use traditionally protected identities (e.g., children, women, elderly) to initiate these attacks (Koenig et al., 2019; Warner & Matfess, 2017). These tactics often resulted in either post-9/11 service members needing to decide whether to neutralize an ununiformed individual with a protected identity or experience hesitation preceding a potential IED detonation that injures or kills civilians or their fellow service members (Warner & Matfess, 2017). This type of decision, one that is characterized by ambiguity and holds extreme stakes for incorrect actions, was shared by many post-9/11 service members who experienced combat and was unique to post-9/11 combat operations (Koenig et al., 2019). Unfortunately, it is possible that post-9/11 service members may have encountered this type of decision several times over due to multiple long deployments (Myers, 2021).

One final, unique factor that contributed to the difficult nature of post-9/11 combat operations was that the dwell time between service member deployments continuously decreased throughout the conflict (IoM, 2013). Dwell time procedures (i.e., periods of time at home between deployments) were initiated in 2007 following reports indicating that the multiple post-9/11 deployments had significantly and negatively impacted service members' mental health

(MacGregor et al., 2012). These reports also indicated that dwell time procedures had decreased service member suicide risk and had provided the justification needed for incorporating dwell time protocols (MacGregor et al., 2012). The initial dwell time was set at 12 months between deployments but was soon increased to 24 months in 2011 (MacGregor et al., 2012). This increase was in response to the stressors of the post-9/11 combat operations with hopes that it would further reduce negative mental health outcomes (IoM, 2013). However, due to the troop demands of the post-9/11 combat operations, dwell times decreased continuously throughout the conflict to an average of 21 months for all service branches and to an all-time low for the Marine Corps specifically at 15 months (IoM, 2013). Having decreased time to reorient themselves following the exposure to such traumatic experiences, as well as then having further decreased time to prepare for the potential exposure to new such experiences, likely would increase a service member's vulnerability to exacerbated negative mental health outcomes (MacGregor et al., 2012). This arguably would make it significantly more difficult for them to recover later on upon once having permanently returned to a civilian setting.

Therefore, it is prudent to examine the mental health, reintegration outcomes, and the military cultural identities of post-9/11 service members given the unique nature of their military experiences during the post-9/11 combat operations. By increasing our understanding of these factors, we may be able to better address the treatment concerns that are unique to this particular group as they transition out of the military back into civilian environments. Additionally, this knowledge can provide insights about how the military cultural identities of post-9/11 service members are shaped and how they impact on their mental health. This would therefore have significant clinical implications as they transition into non-military settings.

Mental Health and Reintegration Outcomes

One of the primary benefits that has resulted from recognizing the unique characteristics of the post-9/11 combat operations has been the increased awareness about the mental health concerns of post-9/11 service members. This increased awareness has prompted decades of research that has helped us to better understand the prevalence as well as the severity of the mental health challenges that they have experienced (Baker et al., 2009; Hoge & Warner, 2014). Through this research, we better understand that because of the nature of their service, post-9/11 service members have an increased risk of developing several unique mental health disorders (Pedersen et al., 2020; Trivedi et al., 2015). When compared to veterans from previous conflicts, post-9/11 veterans are significantly more likely to receive diagnoses for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Hoge & Warner, 2014; Reger et al., 2008), depression (Baker et al., 2009; Trivedi et al., 2015), and substance use disorder (SUD; Pedersen et al., 2020; Schuler et al., 2022). Additionally, the existing body of research also has identified post-9/11 veterans as being at an increased risk for experiencing marital and familial stressors (McGuire et al., 2016), chronic pain and other physical ailments (Sellinger, 2022; Waszak & Holmes, 2017; Yee et al., 2022), and suicidal ideation (Corson et al., 2013; Maguen et al., 2012; Pirelli & Jeglic, 2009).

A key component of the extant post-9/11 veteran research has been the recognition of these unique mental health concerns and the role that veteran reintegration periods (i.e., the period of time between a veteran discharging from military service and reentering civilian settings) may have on any subsequent impairments stemming from these concerns (Ghosh et al., 2021). Reintegration periods historically have been of particular interest in the literature as the conceptualization of veteran mental health impairments as reintegration challenges may help to better explain how certain veterans experience worsening mental health outcomes following their

military service than do others (Sayer et al., 2010; 2014). Therefore, it makes sense that the extant veteran literature primarily has focused on reintegration challenges as a way to conceptualize veteran mental health concerns (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Ghosh et al., 2021) as just the identification of stressors and barriers that they immediately encounter upon reentry into civilian settings may help to reduce the veteran's perceived difficulties following discharge. Because of this, reintegration challenges historically have been used to explain any observed discrepancies between the reported veteran mental health concerns and their respective outcome data (e.g., academic aptitude, employment status, socioeconomic status; Ghosh et al., 2021).

Assessment tools, such as the Military to Civilian Questionnaire (M2C-Q; Sayer et al., 2011), have been developed to identify perceived barriers to reintegration with civilian settings so that specific interventions that may help veterans to better overcome these barriers can be identified (Sayer et al., 2011). There have been several factors associated with increased reintegration challenges among post-9/11 veterans, including the stark contrast that they tend to feel between military and civilian life (Mahoney et al., 2021; Sayer et al., 2014), their perceived difficulties in relating to and confiding with civilians after discharging from the military (McCaslin et al., 2021; Sayer et al., 2010; Sayer et al., 2014), and their feeling decreased senses of purpose and direction after their careers in the military (Mahoney et al., 2021; Orazem et al., 2017).

While veterans of previous conflicts have received similar diagnoses and have endorsed similar stressors, post-9/11 veterans are unique in that a significantly greater proportion of its cohort has reported negative physical, mental, and relational outcomes following discharge compared to prior service member cohorts (Hoge et al., 2004; Kaplan & McFarland, 2012; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2012). In addition to

recognizing the prevalence of mental health concerns of post-9/11 veterans, the existing body of research also has described how this cohort has repeatedly reported difficulties reintegrating with civilian settings following military discharge (Demers, 2011; Sayer et al., 2014). The ultimate goal then of identifying these barriers would be to approach the transition period through a more systemic framework; to identify and reduce systemic points of friction that impair veteran reintegration; and to elicit perceptions of increased reintegration with the cascading effect of improved perceptions of mental health, well-being, and decreased negative mental health symptom severity. However, there have been some discrepancies within the research regarding the primary factors that may be driving these post-military outcomes and whether reintegration challenges adequately conceptualize the experiences of most veterans (Ghosh et al., 2021). As such, it is necessary that we further examine whether the mental health concerns and the post-military outcomes that are experienced by post-9/11 veterans are indeed reintegration challenges or can be better explained by other factors and stressors within civilian settings following their military discharge. This distinction could have significant clinical implications as their military experiences might be more readily perceived as unique strengths rather than obstacles to their reintegration.

A systemic framework refers to the concept that people operate within a complex series of intersecting systems (e.g., work, school, family, neighborhood) and that changes in one system can impact all other systems (Bensberg, 2021). The systemic framework can help to develop more effective community-based interventions given the intention that addressing barriers in one system (e.g., increasing the amount of handicap accessible entrances) can improve the perceptions of well-being in other systems (e.g., feelings of autonomy; D'Aniello et al., 2017; Mirza et al., 2008). While the identification of systemic barriers to reintegration into

civilian settings has been valuable to many veterans (Kinney et al., 2019; Klaw et al., 2021), again there have been disagreements within the extant literature that suggest that conceptualizing this particular transition period through more of a systemic framework may not adequately address the concerns of most post-9/11 veterans (McCaslin et al., 2021; Meca et al., 2020; Orazem et al., 2017; Weiss & Coll, 2011). These disagreements are best illustrated by the application of superficial community-based interventions (e.g., increase in veteran-specific resources) rather than the addressing of root causes (e.g., decreased sense of belongingness; Drum et al., 2017; Weiss & Coll, 2011). Instead, we may need to further pursue the burgeoning research that promotes the importance of military cultural identities among post-9/11 veterans and their value within civilian settings (Hall, 2011; Meyer et al., 2016) as this direction may better serve the needs and concerns for the majority of this population.

Placing a greater emphasis on the military cultural identities of post-9/11 veterans not only may be prudent, but also may be necessary as post-9/11 veterans continue to die by suicide at a significantly higher rate than other U.S. demographics (Bullman & Schneiderman, 2021). On average, 16 to 18 U.S. veterans die by suicide each day, with veterans accounting for approximately 20% of annual U.S. suicide deaths (VA, 2021b). Veterans who have reported experiences of increased suicidal ideation and who have attempted suicide tend to report feelings of increased alienation and othering from those around them, increased isolation, and increased hopelessness (Goodwill & Zhou, 2020; Pease et al., 2015; Snir et al., 2017). These deaths by suicide have persisted despite the now decades of research dedicated to the identification of unique factors related to post-9/11 service (Castro & Kintzle, 2014) and the identification of the reintegration and treatment barriers experienced by post-9/11 service members (Hoffmire et al., 2015). This has also been a particularly alarming concern as the overall U.S. veteran population

has been decreasing since 2001 in conjunction with the shrinking size of the all-volunteer

military (VA, 2018). It is important to note, then, that the decreasing veteran population may

help to explain the rising veteran suicide rate from 12.6 per 100,000 in 2001 to 31.6 per 100,000

in 2019 as individual deaths by suicide would result in a higher overall suicide rate within a

smaller population of surviving veterans (VA, 2021b). Therefore, it could be reasoned that as

veterans from previous conflicts have aged and passed away due to natural causes, post-9/11

veterans consequently have represented a greater proportion of surviving veterans and,

consequently, a greater proportion of veterans who have died by suicide (VA, 2018, 2021). This

means that we may want to look to amend our current approaches for working with post-9/11

veterans and consider additional factors of distress within civilian settings if we hope to continue

our efforts in reducing the veteran suicide rate.

These data therefore suggest two possible outcomes from the current research related to

the concerns and well-being of post-9/11 veterans. On the one hand, it may suggest that the

current direction of research related to post-9/11 veterans has been ineffective as this population

now is representing a greater proportion of veterans dying by suicide. On the other hand, it

otherwise may suggest that the interventions proposed by the existing literature have, in fact,

helped to decrease the overall veteran deaths by suicide, but perhaps not enough to thwart the

reality that a significant number of veterans still are dying by suicide every day. We would

expect to see a negative linear relationship between the increased proportion of post-9/11

veterans and the total U.S. veteran suicide rate if the current interventions were adequately

addressing the concerns of this specific cohort. Unfortunately, we cannot definitively confirm

whether this relationship is occurring as the current veteran suicide statistics (VA, 2021b) do not

differentiate suicide rates by conflict period. As such, we only can make inferences about the

rising suicide rate of post-9/11 veterans given the overall veteran suicide rate and the proportion of post-9/11 veterans among the overall veteran population.

Regardless of what we may or may not know in this regard, neither outcome is acceptable as any veteran death by suicide is a tragedy and, even with the best possible outcome, there are still 16 to 18 veterans dying by suicide per day. Of course, it would be inappropriate to assume that every veteran death by suicide was due to reintegration challenges. It is important to note, though, that the previously mentioned factors that most often are associated with increased suicidal ideation among veterans also are factors that are common among post-9/11 veterans who have experienced reintegration challenges within civilian settings (Pease et al., 2015; Sayer et al., 2010). As such, there is a need for further research on veteran transition experiences that goes well beyond the approaches already attempted. By expanding upon the existing literature, we may be able to help to reduce the rate of post-9/11 veteran suicide deaths as addressing additional factors that may be associated with their reintegration challenges may, by proxy, help to reduce the prevalence and severity of suicidal ideation among post-9/11 veterans.

As previously mentioned, one potential avenue that may help to further address the underlying factors that contribute to suicidal ideation and suicide attempts among our veterans is to continue the burgeoning body of literature that has placed a greater emphasis on the military cultural identity of post-9/11 veterans (Koenig et al., 2014; McCormick et al., 2019; Meca et al., 2020; Meyer et al., 2016). Such literature has drawn increased attention to the negative outcomes associated with instances of insufficient cultural competency amongst civilians when interacting with a veteran's military cultural identities (e.g., feeling misunderstood, alienated, and isolated) and how these factors may significantly account for the transition difficulties that are being experienced by post-9/11 veterans (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Borsari et al., 2017; Demers,

2011). The hope, therefore, would be that expanding upon of this research and examining the military cultural identities of post-9/11 veterans during their transition from the military into civilian settings will build upon the existing treatment literature and better address the factors associated with increased suicidal ideation among post-9/11 veterans. Consequently, we need to examine the transition experiences of post-9/11 veterans in the civilian settings that they as a cohort are most likely to encounter in which their military cultural identities are most likely to be salient. One such setting that accurately meets these criteria for post-9/11 veterans, and therefore a setting that we must consider when examining the transition experiences of post-9/11 veterans, is within civilian postsecondary educational institutions (PEIs).

Cultural Identity, Higher Education, and Veteran Experiences

The U.S. military has a long and storied relationship with civilian PEIs (e.g., universities, colleges, trade schools) as veterans have pursued higher education following their military service for well over a century (Abrams, 1989). However, it only was after World War II that student veterans started to represent a significant proportion of the student body within PEIs (Geiger, 2015). Since then, the number of veterans pursuing higher education has steadily increased following each subsequent conflict, with the post-9/11 cohort having the greatest proportion of its veterans deciding to pursue educational opportunities within PEIs (Student Veterans of American [SVA], 2017; VA, 2016). These locations historically have been where many post-9/11 student veterans have reported feeling an increased saliency of their military cultural identities due to this identity being highly distinct and noticeable when compared to the cultural identities of their civilian peers (Ghosh et al., 2021; SVA, 2019). This may be due in part to the fact that student veterans who are pursuing higher education at PEIs tend to significantly differ from their civilian, traditional student peers in several noticeable ways. For example,

student veterans (a) tend to be significantly older, (b) are significantly more likely to have families and careers, (c) are significantly more likely to commute rather than reside on campus, and (e) are significantly more likely to display icons or symbols related to their military service all in comparison to traditional civilian students (Legreid & Betters-Bubon, 2020; SVA, 2017, 2021). Additionally, student veterans are significantly more likely to report closeness with their professors and PEI administration due to perceived similarities (e.g., age, career status, life experiences) when compared to their civilian peers (Kim & Cole, 2013). These noticeable differences and perceptions may help to explain their decreased campus and extracurricular involvement as student veterans tend to be significantly more likely to perceive themselves as dissimilar from their civilian peers (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Mahoney et al., 2021).

Research examining the experiences of student veterans within civilian PEIs typically have yielded results indicating increased perceptions of alienation and social isolation from their peers, which in turn have been used to explain the academic difficulties experienced by this population (Borsari et al., 2017; Drum et al., 2017; Kim & Cole, 2013). In addition to these factors, other considerations have been presented to help further explain the academic difficulties that student veterans tend to experience. Examples of these considerations include the insufficient availability of veteran-specific campus resources (Borsari et al., 2017; Kinney et al., 2019; Klaw et al., 2021), the decreased help-seeking attitudes of student veterans (Aikins et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2021), and the symptom severity of a student veteran's medical and psychiatric concerns (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Fredman et al., 2018; Norman et al., 2015). These studies undoubtedly have been beneficial in illustrating several of the unique stressors that student veterans may experience during their time within PEIs and in promoting treatment options that attempt to address these concerns (Dodson et al., 2019; Smith-Osborne, 2012).

However, there have been discrepancies within the extant literature that suggest that the experiences of academic difficulties and reintegration challenges may be more associated with a more specific, acutely distressed subset of the student veteran population and that the majority of actually student veterans do not experience such significant impairments (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Institute for Veterans and Military Families [IVMF], 2017). As such, the continued emphasis of these themes may inadequately address the needs of most student veterans and inaccurately represent their PEI experiences. Because of this, we must pursue research as well that better aligns with the concerns that are presented by most student veterans (e.g., acculturation challenges, conflicts associated with their military cultural identities; Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Ghosh et al., 2021) so that we may form a more accurate understanding of the PEI experiences of all student veterans. In doing so, we may be able to build upon the benefits of the previous literature and further improve the well-being of student veterans during their PEI pursuits.

The need for more accurately understanding and representing the PEI experiences of student veterans is evident as this population is expected to grow continually as more post-9/11 veterans pursue educational opportunities following their military service (Veterans Benefits Administration [VBA], 2022). Without this more accurate knowledge, there is a risk that non-veterans within PEIs may continue to misunderstand the experiences and needs of most student veterans, which ultimately could perpetuate the perceptions among student veterans that their civilian peers do not understand them and further drive their feelings of isolation. Unfortunately, already we have seen this cycle occur within the extant literature examining student veteran PEI experiences. In these studies, student veteran experiences within PEIs have tended to be predominantly characterized by the juxtaposition between the contrasting cultures of military and

academic life (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Mahoney et al., 2021). While this contrast in cultures certainly is real and has repeatedly been described by student veterans (Mahoney et al., 2021; McCaslin et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2016), its overemphasis within the literature appears to have generated the perception among non-veterans that most student veterans will experience negative PEI outcomes because of their military experiences and that their military cultural values are impediments that they must overcome in order to achieve a more successful reintegration into civilian settings (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; IVMF, 2017; Wilson et al., 2021).

Again, while it is possible that a subset of the student veteran population may report negative PEI experiences, there still appears to be significant discrepancies between the current direction of research on student veterans with the observed outcome statistics of this population (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; SVA, 2017). Specifically, the extant research appears to suggest that most post-9/11 student veterans are significantly more likely than their traditional civilian peers to report poorer mental health, to experience poor interpersonal interactions with their peers, and to fail to thrive within their new academic environment (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Thomas et al., 2018; Vogt et al., 2022).

While this literature base may accurately describe the experiences for a subset of the student veteran population, the observed outcomes for most post-9/11 student veterans actually appears to suggest that mental health challenges may not be their primary concern after all (Bonar & Domenici, 2011); rather, most distress that they experience may be better attributed to other factors (Ghosh et al., 2021). This is best observed by the academic outcomes of post-9/11 student veterans, which indicate that this population instead tends to surpass their civilian peers in several measures of academic achievement (Kim & Cole, 2013; SVA, 2017). For example,

most student veterans tend to fair exceptionally well in the job market following their graduation from PEIs, with many civilian employers choosing to hire veterans in part specifically due to their military cultural values (SVA, 2019). As such, the direction of research that focuses on poor PEI experiences therefore is unjust for the majority of student veterans who do not experience these difficulties within PEIs as it may distort the perceptions of non-veterans toward student veterans and lead to inaccurately low expectations for their academic performance. Additionally, these expectations also may lead non-veterans to inaccurately perceive the military cultural identities of student veterans as impediments within PEIs which may divert treatment and resource opportunities from the actual needs of most student veterans. Because of this, we instead need to further the research on their PEI experiences by gaining a better understanding of the military cultural identities of post-9/11 student veterans within the culture of civilian higher education; conceptualizing their concerns more as acculturation challenges, rather than reintegration challenges, may lead to a more accurate representation of their PEI experiences in the literature.

The discrepancies between the academic outcome data for student veterans and the extant research reporting deleterious factors that impair student veteran academic performance appear to have obfuscated the reality of post-9/11 student veteran PEI experiences. Instead of celebrating the fact that most student veterans appear to function quite well in PEIs due to the various strengths and values that they hold from their military cultural identities (IVMF, 2017; SVA, 2017; SVA, 2019), it seems that student veteran experiences instead have been homogenized to create the misperception that they are all wounded warriors who require outside assistance to succeed (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Ghosh et al., 2021). Through this homogenization, the adaptive military experiences for most student veterans (e.g., earning

college credits while actively serving, creative problem solving) are at risk of being minimized in lieu of trauma histories, psychological damage resulting from military service, and incongruence between one's military cultural values and the daily life of civilian academia (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Legreid & Betters-Bubon, 2020).

Additionally, the portrayal of the student veteran population as monolithic also may diminish the previous research that has attempted to acknowledge the resiliency of student veterans during the several cultural transitions that this population typically has completed since enlistment to military discharge and later enrollment in PEIs (Vacchi et al., 2017). Because of this, research focusing on student veterans is at risk of conceptualizing this population entirely as broken individuals who must overcome the negative consequences of their military service in order to succeed in their academic pursuits (Bonar & Domenici, 2011). Instead, we need to acknowledge the saliency of their military cultural values and how the perceived strengths of this cultural identity may more positively impact the acculturation strategies that they may use within PEIs. This hopefully would reduce the discrepancies between the reported experiences of student veterans and their academic outcomes as well as establish more of a foundation that would provide a more accurate representation of their PEI experiences.

Instead, it is critical that research building upon the existing student veteran literature works to remedy these incongruencies by recognizing the alignment with, and salience of, military cultural identities among student veterans. It also is critical that this research aims to recognize the series of acculturation processes that are undertaken by student veterans as they transition from the dominant military culture to civilian culture, and then to civilian higher education culture. Acculturation, by definition, recognizes that there are cultural identities, norms, and traditions that an individual decides either to abandon or to maintain when

transitioning from a dominant cultural identity into a minority cultural identity within a dominant culture (Berry et al., 1997). It therefore is perplexing that there has been a plethora of research acknowledging that military, veteran, and student veteran cultures all have unique cultural identities (Eichler et al., 2021; Ghosh et al., 2021; Hall-Clark et al., 2019), that civilian higher education culture has a unique cultural identity (Craig, 2004; Geiger, 2015; Tiemey & Lanford, 2018), and that student veterans may experience several challenges upon entering civilian PEIs (Borsari et al., 2017; Mahoney et al., 2021), yet there remains a paucity of research connecting these themes to specifically recognize these experiences as an acculturation process.

One potential way to conceptualize the acculturation process of student post-9/11 student veterans is by using Berry's Model of Acculturation (Berry et al., 1997). This acculturation model posits that the interaction between one's preexisting cultural identities and the predominant culture around them will prompt two critical issues that will influence how they choose to navigate within the predominant culture (Berry et al., 1997). Berry's Model of Acculturation will be explained in further detail in Chapter II, though it offers an alternative approach to conceptualizing the PEI concerns of most post-9/11 student veterans and may better explain their outcome discrepancies. Therefore, we must first examine the aspects of military cultural identities that post-9/11 student veterans consider to be necessary to retain as they transition into the more dominant civilian higher education culture of PEIs. In doing so, we may develop a clearer understanding of their perceived strengths from this cultural identity and then hopefully be able to better identify which aspects of the civilian higher education culture they then decide to adopt as well. Combined, we may better understand the overall acculturation processes of post-9/11 student veterans within PEIs. This ultimately should allow us to better understand the most common cause of distress that is presented by student veterans in PEI

counseling centers as well as better meet the ongoing needs of most post-9/11 student veterans (Ghosh et al., 2021).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to describe the essence of the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as they navigate within the dominant higher education culture of civilian PEIs. Specifically, this study aims to conceptualize the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans by simultaneously identifying the components of their military cultural identity that they decide to maintain or abandon in PEI settings as well as which components of the dominant higher education culture that they decide to adopt or reject. Given that the current body of student veteran literature has not specifically examined the experiences of student veterans in PEIs through the lens of acculturation, this study will be exploratory in nature. It will utilize transcendental phenomenological methodology so that a shared understanding about the perceived importance of cultural identity components during the acculturation processes within this population and setting may be ascertained. This study aims to provide a foundation of work that illustrates the importance and need for acknowledging the individual military cultural identity components during the PEI acculturation processes of post-9/11 student veterans. In doing so, any future attempts to remedy academic impairments may be approached through a more culturally informed lens of acculturation processes and ideally better align with the reported concerns of most student veterans. Combined, this study aims to better describe post-9/11 student veteran transitional experiences within civilian higher education culture so that we have a more accurate understanding of post-9/11 student veteran PEI experiences that are more congruent with their academic outcomes. This increased understanding ultimately should have significant clinical implications as understanding the perceived importance of cultural values

during this acculturation process will inform approaches that are used to more accurately treat student veterans who are struggling with their own PEI acculturation challenges.

Study Rationale

In late 2021, the American Psychological Association (APA) released its long-awaited *Guidelines for psychological practice with military service members, veterans, and their families*. These guidelines were the result of nearly 15 years of APA and certain federal task forces attempting to identify the behavioral health needs of our service members and veterans and how to approach treatment with them more effectively (Johnson et al., 2007; Meyer et al., 2016). In these guidelines, the APA emphasized that addressing the mental health needs of service members, military veterans, and their families is a national priority. Additionally, the APA also codified within their professional practice guidelines the need for practitioners to better understand military culture; how it intersects with other individual cultural identities; and how military cultural identity can affect one's perception of self, their surroundings, and environmental transitions (APA, 2021).

However, while these guidelines do better align with the APA's *Multicultural guidelines* (APA, 2017) which specifically highlight the care considerations for other minority identities that are held by service members and veterans (e.g., according to sex, race, gender, sexual, physical ability, etc.), the APA still has not yet offered specific cultural guidelines for working with student veterans. This again highlights the gaps in our current understanding about student veterans as we have yet to more fully recognize this population as a distinct subset of veteran culture that is deserving of its own culturally informed care guidelines within civilian higher education culture. Because of these gaps, administrators and helping professionals within PEIs must rely on the established body of literature to inform treatments, policies, and interventions

for student veterans, even though the literature has not more definitely established an understanding of the student veteran acculturation process. In doing so, PEI administrators and helping professionals risk the perpetuation of approaches that benefit just a select subset of the student veteran population rather than more adequately addressing the needs of a much large and far more representative group of student veterans.

If we do not alter our current course in student veteran research and continue to misunderstand their acculturation strategies and processes within PEIs, we risk further minimizing their perceived strengths, resilience, and adaptive values as they are linked to their military cultural identities, as the current underlying assumption in the literature has been that reintegration barriers must be remedied if student veterans are to succeed (Mobley et al., 2019). Additionally, this course may inadvertently continue to disempower student veterans due to the amalgamation of their PEI experiences under an umbrella cultural identity that does not adequately represent the more positive academic outcomes among most student veterans (Hammond, 2017; SVA, 2017; Vacchi & Berger, 2013). If this trend were to continue, the adaptive military culture values of student veterans (e.g., ingenuity and resourcefulness in overcoming obstacles) may be undervalued and might further stall the examination of how these values more positively impact their unique acculturation processes. If we instead focus our research on acculturation processes, we may be able to more accurately understand the PEI experiences of student veterans and establish a body of literature that arguably is much more congruent with their observed academic outcome data.

Counseling psychology is uniquely qualified to remedy the oversights of such previous research and to further the burgeoning body of research examining the military cultural identity of student veterans during their PEI acculturation process. There are several areas of

corresponding strength in the field of counseling psychology, such as its willingness to approach concerns through a more strengths-based orientation, its promotion of self-efficacy, its emphasis on the importance of interpersonal relationships, and its consideration of multicultural aspects of one's individuality as vital aspects for more optimal human functioning (Frazier et al., 2006; Kaczmarek, 2006). Each of these areas of strength addresses the oversights in the extant literature and can help to further our understanding of the individual military cultural identities and PEI acculturation processes of post-9/11 student veterans. Furthermore, counseling psychology consistently has demonstrated an increased willingness to utilize qualitative methods to better understand the essence of individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This is critical as qualitative research methods (e.g., phenomenology, case study) facilitate the exploration of phenomena of interest even when there are small populations or a dearth of observations (Crotty, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This strength is absolutely necessary as we do not have a sufficient body of student veteran literature that more accurately reflects their experiences in a way that is congruent with their academic outcome data. We also do not yet have a body of literature that specifically addresses the acculturation processes and challenges of student veterans within civilian higher education culture, which means that we currently cannot establish a clearer understanding about the nature of the most common concern currently being presented by student veterans within PEI counseling centers, that being acculturation challenges (Ghosh et al., 2021).

As such, we finally must initiate research that examines the acculturation processes of post-9/11 student veterans within civilian higher education culture so that we can build upon the existing body of student veteran literature. In doing so, we can further the research in a direction that is more congruent with the real-world concerns of most student veterans and address a

critical factor of student veteran PEI experiences that may better explain their current academic outcomes. Ideally, this new direction will better address the concerns that most post-9/11 student veterans report in PEIs, might decrease their perceptions of alienation and experiences of social isolation, and could decrease the prevalence of negative mental health outcomes.

Research Questions

The following research questions will be explored in this study:

Q1   What are the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as they navigate within the dominant higher education culture of civilian postsecondary educational institutions?

Q1a   Which, if any, aspects of their military cultural identities do post-9/11 student veterans choose to maintain or abandon during their acculturation processes within the dominant higher education culture of civilian postsecondary educational institutions?

Q1b   Which, if any, aspects of the dominant higher education culture do post-9/11 student veterans choose to adopt or reject during their acculturation processes within civilian postsecondary educational institutions?

Delimitations

For the purposes of this study, participants will need to identify as post-9/11 veterans who currently are attending a civilian PEI full-time and who endorse alignment with a military cultural identity. Given that the current body of literature is incongruent with the academic outcome data of student veterans and has not yet begun to significantly address the presenting concerns for most student veterans (Ghosh et al., 2021), we first must establish foundational literature that examines the acculturation experiences among the most prevalent student veteran cohort currently attending PEIs. This again will lead to positive clinical outcomes as the treatment approaches used within PEIs would be more congruent with the experiences of most student veterans. As such, the post-9/11 veteran cohort has pursued educational opportunities at civilian PEIs at a greater rate than veterans of any previous conflict period (IVMF, 2017) and

would therefore be prudent to focus solely on the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans. In doing so, our ability to identify shared experiences and meaning within this population during a phenomenological study are maximized.

This study also will be restricted to examining the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans who had served in Afghanistan operations (OEF, OFS) as these operations were the most recently completed post-9/11 operations and thus have the greatest likelihood of including student veterans who have discharged from the military within the past five years. This discharge timeframe of five years will be used to mitigate the possibility of a significant gap between military discharge and PEI enrollment that may diminish the saliency of an individual's military cultural identity within their PEI acculturation process. This should increase this study's ability to elicit thick descriptions of post-9/11 student veteran acculturation experiences as the increased saliency of a student veteran's military cultural identity should provide more robust and detailed accounts of their experiences within civilian PEIs. Unfortunately, this limitation also may decrease the generalizability to the PEI experiences of student veterans who served in earlier post-9/11 operations (e.g., OIF, OND).

This study will be further restricted to assessing for the acculturation experiences of undergraduate student veterans who discharged as enlisted personnel. Because the military requires a bachelor's degree to receive an officer's commission (Military on Source, 2021), it is unlikely that student veterans who discharged as officers would enroll in PEIs for the first time and report similar acculturation experiences as would student veterans who initially enter into the culture of civilian higher education. Similarly, this study will exclude graduate student veterans as graduate students already have been exposed to higher education culture prior to their graduate studies, and this exposure may promote different acculturation experiences as compared

to undergraduate student veterans. Again, this is done to maximize the potential commonalities between student veterans and to increase this study's ability to derive shared meanings from post-9/11 student veteran PEI experiences.

Lastly, this study will be restricted to examining only the acculturation experiences that specifically relate to the student veteran's military cultural identity (i.e., aspects maintained or abandoned) and the dominant civilian higher education culture (i.e., aspects adopted or rejected). This is done because the current body of literature indicates that military culture is the most salient cultural identity among recently discharged veterans and student veterans (McCaslin et al., 2021; Orazem et al., 2017). Again, the aim of this study is to identify the shared, common understanding of the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans within civilian PEIs. Because of this, it again would be prudent during a phenomenological study to examine the most salient cultural identity among student veterans within the PEI culture so that there is an optimal chance of identifying the shared experiences within this population. Of course, student veterans endorse several salient and valued intersecting cultural identities (Eichler et al., 2021) that likely would impact their acculturation experiences. However, given the dearth of research that specifically examines the acculturation experiences of student veterans within PEIs, it first is necessary to establish an initial base of research with the most salient shared cultural identity, as the examination of additional identities may decrease this study's ability to identify a robust enough shared understanding within this group. While the hope would be that future research may be able to illustrate the impact of a student veteran's intersecting cultural identities throughout their PEI acculturation process, this study unfortunately must restrict this examination to the most salient shared identity.

Terminology Definitions

To more fully comprehend the background information and minutiae of this research topic, the following list constitutes the key terminology that will be used throughout this dissertation. The following terms may provide additional context that will assist in better understanding military culture, civilian higher education culture, and acculturation processes as well as describe core principles and methodology that will be discussed in later chapters.

Academic Outcomes: The objective measures of overall academic achievement by students that are based on multiple assessment results (Nair et al., 2021). These measures include grade point average (GPA), program completion rates, current enrollment rates, program attrition rates, and time to obtain a degree (SVA, 2017).

Acculturation: The continuous, first-hand interactions of groups of individuals who have different cultures that result in either the subsequent changes in either of the original cultures, in both cultures, or in the psychology of the individual (Berry & Sam, 1997).

Acculturation Strategies: The four categories within Berry's Model of Acculturation that align with the actions that an individual may enact to resolve acculturation stress (Berry, 1992). Each category attempts to resolve two major acculturation issues: (a) cultural maintenance (i.e., maintaining or abandoning previously held cultural characteristics) and (b) contact and participation (i.e., adopting or rejecting cultural characteristics of the dominant culture). The acculturation strategies are distinguished by the degree to which an individual chooses to maintain their previous cultural identities as well as the degree to which they adopt and participate in the dominant cultural identity (Berry, 1970). The four acculturation strategies are:

Integration: Integration occurs when an individual demonstrates significant cultural adaptation with the more dominant culture while also demonstrating the significant maintenance of their heritage cultural identity.

Assimilation: Assimilation occurs when an individual demonstrates significant cultural adaptation with the more dominant culture without maintaining their heritage cultural identity.

Separation: Separation occurs when an individual demonstrates the significant maintenance of their heritage cultural identity without adopting any of the cultural characteristics from the more dominant culture.

Marginalization: Marginalization occurs when an individual does not adopt any of the cultural characteristics from the more dominant culture and does not maintain their heritage cultural identity.

Culture: The values, perspectives, norms, and practices that are shared within a specific population or community (Koenig et al., 2014).

Cultural Identity: The identification with, or sense of belonging to, a particular group based on various cultural categories (Chen, 2014). Cultural identity tends to be dynamic and is constructed and maintained through the process of sharing collective cultural knowledge (Chen, 2014).

Higher Education Culture: A broad encapsulation of the shared beliefs, norms, behaviors, and values that are typically found within civilian postsecondary educational institutions. These values and beliefs tend to reflect the classically liberal ideals of unstructured and independent choices that direct the individual pursuit of scholarly research and learning (Abrams, 1989; Craig, 2004; Geiger, 2015). Examples of traditions and behaviors within higher

education culture include the specific ceremonies, regalia, and speech that are observed during graduation commencement events.

Intersectionality: The concept that individuals are multidimensional who belong to multiple cultures and that each of these cultural identities may consist of multiple intersecting layers (Kort, 2019). Examples of these intersecting layers include, but are not limited to, race, gender, sex, sexual orientation, ability status, ethnicity, and religion.

Military Culture: A broad encapsulation of the shared beliefs, norms, behaviors, and values that typically are found within the military institution (Wilson, 2008). These values and beliefs tend to reflect a collectivist readiness to use war to achieve mission success and can include the subservience of self to the institution's mission, the strict adherence to rigid hierarchical structures, and the perpetuation of readiness to achieve mission objectives (Hall, 2011; Wilson, 2008).

Postsecondary Educational Institution: Any civilian university or college within the U.S. These institutions may be publicly funded by municipal, state, or federal entities, or privately funded as a nonprofit organization that may not receive any assistance from state and federal governments.

Post-9/11 Veteran: Any individual who has served in the U.S. Armed Forces since September 11, 2001.

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF): The post-9/11 combat operation in or near Afghanistan that lasted from October 7, 2001, to December 28, 2014. The objective of OEF was to disrupt, combat, and destroy al Qaeda and affiliated terrorist organization operations (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2020).

Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS): The post-9/11 combat operation in or near Afghanistan that lasted from January 1, 2015, to August 20, 2021. The objective of OFS was to train, advise, and assist the Afghan Security Institutions and Afghan National Defense and Security Forces to build their long-term sustainability in protecting and stabilizing the Afghanistan government from terrorist organizations (CRS, 2020).

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF): The post-9/11 combat operation in or around Iraq that lasted from March 20, 2003, to December 15, 2011. The objective of OIF was to remove the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq and destroy its ability to use weapons of mass destruction or make them available to terrorist organizations (CRS, 2020; VA, 2021c).

Operation New Dawn (OND): The post-9/11 combat operation in or around Iraq that lasted from September 1, 2010, to December 15, 2011. The objective of OND was to train, advise, and assist the Iraqi Security Forces and conduct partnered counterterrorism operations in an effort to build their long-term sustainability in protecting and stabilizing the Iraqi government from terrorist organizations (CRS, 2020).

Student Veteran: A military veteran who currently is enrolled as a student in a civilian PEI. For the purposes of this study, the term student veteran refers to post-9/11 veterans who currently are pursuing educational opportunities following their discharge from the military.

Transcendental Phenomenology: A specific approach to qualitative research methodology that aims to identify an unadulterated and shared meaning or understanding of a phenomenon within a population by suspending and transcending our preconceived ideas about the phenomenon (i.e., epoche; Giorgi et al., 2017; Moustakas, 2010).

Summary

In this chapter, a summary of the post-9/11 military combat operations, the mental health and reintegration concerns of post-9/11 veterans, and the nature of post-9/11 veteran involvement within civilian PEIs was provided. This chapter explored the discrepancies between the previously identified experiences of student veterans in PEIs and the observed academic outcome data for this population. An overview of acculturation processes was presented to highlight the paucity of research that examines these experiences among student veterans and how this paucity may prompt negative clinical outcomes for this population when they seek mental health treatment. The rationale and the research questions for this study were presented and described how the counseling psychology field may remedy the discrepancy between the reported postsecondary educational experiences of student veterans and their academic outcomes. Finally, a list of terminology definitions was provided to offer greater context about the phenomena being investigated so that greater meaning may be understood from its findings.

Next, Chapter II will provide a review of the student veteran literature and in-depth descriptions of military culture and civilian higher education culture. This chapter will describe the acculturation model that will be used to conceptualize the PEI experiences of student veterans (Berry's Model of Acculturation).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

I will always place the mission first, I will never accept defeat, I will never quit, and I will never leave a fallen comrade.

- United States Army, *Warrior Ethos*, *2011*

Overview

The withdrawal of United States (U.S.) military forces from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 concluded the longest continuous sequence of combat operations in U.S. history (VA, 2021a). The al Qaeda-led terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent international Global War on Terror (GWOT) initiative created a distinct series of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan that lasted nearly two decades. Post-9/11 combat operations traditionally have been grouped within Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation New Dawn (OND) for engagements within Iraq and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS) for engagements within Afghanistan (VA, 2021c). OIF/OEF/OND/OFS created a unique cohort of more than 4.2 million veterans (VA, 2018); nearly three million of these post-9/11 veterans entered postsecondary educational institutions (PEIs) following their discharge from military service (Institute for Veterans and Military Families [IVMF], 2017).

The previous decades of research examining the experiences of student veterans have produced a greater understanding about the unique stressors that they may experience when returning to civilian settings (Borsari et al., 2017; Mahoney et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2019; Meca et al., 2020). Consequently, these findings also have prompted the development of several

treatment considerations and interventions that have benefitted the subset of the student veteran population who are most negatively impacted by these stressors (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Hall, 2011; Norman et al., 2015). However, the descriptions of student veteran experiences by the extant literature appear to conflict with the academic outcome data for the majority of members within this population (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; SVA, 2017, 2019). Additionally, these studies have failed to examine the acculturation processes of student veterans as they enter into the dominant higher education culture of civilian PEIs, which has negatively impacted our understanding about the most common concern presented by post-9/11 student veterans within college counseling centers (Ghosh et al., 2021). Combined, there is a need to better understand the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans so that we can expand upon the existing literature and better describe the PEI experiences of the majority of student veterans. In doing so, we will be able to better incorporate the military cultural identities of student veterans when treating their acculturation concerns while simultaneously identifying factors within civilian higher education culture that post-9/11 student veterans perceive as beneficial in their transition processes.

The purpose of this study is to describe the essence of the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as they navigated within the dominant higher education culture of civilian PEIs. Specifically, this study aims to conceptualize the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans by simultaneously identifying the components of their military cultural identity that they decide to maintain or abandon in PEI settings as well as which components of the dominant higher education culture that they decide to adopt or reject.

The current body of literature consistently has demonstrated that military culture, veteran culture, and student veteran culture each are distinct cultural identities (Meyer et al., 2016; Weiss

& Coll, 2011), and that student veterans experience academic challenges when the intersectionality of these identities somehow contrast with the dominant higher education culture of civilian PEIs (Borsari et al., 2017). Additionally, the extant research also has identified several values within each of these cultural identities that either may foster or inhibit the academic success of student veterans (Kim & Cole, 2013; Pietrzak et al., 2010). However, this study aims to examine the potential retention of military cultural values among post-9/11 student veterans within the higher education culture of civilian PEIs through the lens of acculturation. This will provide greater insight about the various acculturation strategies that post-9/11 student veterans tend to utilize while navigating within the dominant civilian higher education culture. However, one first must reflect upon military culture more broadly to better understand its own cultural values and the factors that student veterans choose to retain or to abandon following their exposure to dominant cultures. In doing so, we then can better understand the strategies that they use to alleviate acculturation stress when integrating into the academic settings of civilian PEIs.

Military Culture

Culture commonly can be defined as the shared values, perspectives, and practices within a specific population or community (Koenig et al., 2014). Individuals typically align with several cultural identities throughout their lifetimes with the saliency and perceived importance of their specific identities often fluctuating according to setting, current events, and individual life experiences and dispositions (Amiot et al., 2017; Sussman, 2002). One's cultural identities may be demonstrated explicitly by their more outward expressions of ceremonies, rituals, attire, dialect, and behaviors, or instead may be expressed more implicitly by their more internally held values, beliefs, and perspectives that influence their worldview (Birukou et al., 2013).

Military culture is unique in that the structure in which it resides contains immense racial, cultural, socioeconomic, religious, and ethnic diversity within its personnel, yet it also very much retains a shared and unifying cultural identity in its own right (Hall, 2011). Military culture, just as any culture, changes and adapts over time in response to the experiences, expectations, and challenges of its members. It also includes a vast array of subcultures within the culture at large (Redmond et al., 2015). However, one first must consider the military as an institution and then the institutional effects on the cultural identities of its members to more fully understand the core cultural values of the modern military. Only then can meaning be gleaned from the individual experiences of service members within military culture and the factors that contribute to the retention or abandonment of certain cultural values following its members' discharge from service.

Military Culture as an Institution

The genesis of the modern military structure is a relatively recent invention in human history as the proliferation of large, permanent standing professional armies did not occur until the late 15th century (Mears, 1969). Militaries throughout the world prior to this period were composed of militias, mercenaries, or conscripts that were levied during times of need by the respective governing powers. Historical analyses of military structure and the military as a distinct entity have identified the centralization of governing power and the burgeoning concept of a unified nation state as the primary factors that tend to facilitate the creation of standing professional armies (Mears, 1969; Wilson, 2008). These factors have played a critical role in the establishment of the military as an institution because decentralized states throughout history and modern day generally have had similarly decentralized armed forces. Militaries within these decentralized states tend to be more loosely organized (e.g., rebel militias); often lack clear

institutional identities or missions; and typically are more aligned with regional, tribal, or ethnic identities rather than holding a more distinct military cultural identity (Mears, 1969). Because of this, the development of a centralized state, the military as an institution, and the formation of a military culture are inherently linked as the ability for the state to sustain its military over prolonged periods of time is paramount to the military's institutional development and definition of its mission (Wilson, 2008).

Therefore, an institution can be best defined as an established, significant, and recognized organization, practice, or relationship within a society or culture (Wilson, 2008). The establishment of the military as an institution and subsequently as a distinct cultural identity requires its formation as a significant, legitimate, and recognized aspect of a centralized state and culture. By this definition, the degree to which a military's influence on the cultural identity of a member may vary as the perceived importance and legitimacy of the military within that society can fluctuate between states and cultures.

Wilson (2008) explored this particular phenomenon in his historical analysis of the military as an institution and its role in the birth of military culture. His analysis examined military doctrine, military history, and sociopolitical events involving the military throughout the world from the 15th century to modern day in an effort to identify the core characteristics of militarization (capacity to wage war), militarism (mental and cultural willingness to wage war), and the creation of military culture within the military as an institution. He asserted that following the centralization of a state and its legitimization of the military, a military's mission (e.g., national defense) was the strongest factor in the establishment of a more unified and cohesive identity. As previously stated, militaries tend to be highly diverse and fragmented, with individuals as members who express different and possibly contradictory beliefs and behaviors

(Redmond et al., 2015). Because of this, the mission provides the military institution with a common purpose that justifies its existence; legitimizes its access and claims to societal resources; and establishes the self-worth, rewards, and privileges to be bestowed upon its serving members (Goldich, 2011; Wilson, 2008).

Missions often are plural and multifaceted with several clear tasks or objectives, although subsidiary tasks may be derived from said missions and may become ambiguous depending on the strength and whims of the state with which the military is connected (Goldich, 2011; Wilson, 2008). Consequently, militaries that have a strong institutional presence within a society also must have a strong established mission, as the strength and cohesiveness of the military institution tends to determine the degree to which its personnel think and act in ways that distinguish themselves from other members of that society (Goldich, 2011; Wilson, 2008). As such, it can be reasoned that societies with the strongest and most clearly defined military institutions also likely would foster the most distinct and salient military cultural identities. It is important to note, though, that militaries with a strong institutional presence cannot insulate themselves entirely from their surrounding societies. The analysis conducted by Wilson (2008) further elaborated upon this concept by examining the impact of inducting new recruits into its culture. Every military around the world has been comprised of service members who enter military service with varying social and cultural backgrounds and experiences, and most service members maintain ties throughout their service with their family members and other civilians who may have little to no connection to the military (Rossetto, 2013). Because of this, Wilson (2008) detailed how every institution must maintain a social basis with the outside society and its culture as a means to recruit new members (e.g., substitution of existing military members, expansion of member population) and to induct them into the military culture.

Therefore, it is necessary for the military as an institution to maintain a cultural identity that is distinct enough to establish its mission and its legitimacy as a unique institution within the centralized state's society, yet also remain connected to the society's cultural values in order to facilitate the recruitment and replenishment of its ranks. Traditionally this has manifested as opportunities for its inductees following their military service to receive explicit benefits, prestige, or social elevation in the surrounding society that previously might have been inaccessible to them or to receive implicit gratification (e.g., pride) from their alignment with a society's ideal (patriotism; Goldich, 2011; Hall, 2011). Because of this, Wilson (2008) suggested that military culture must, to some degree, reflect the cultural values and ideals of the surrounding society to provide alluring opportunities for recruitment. Conversely, Wilson (2008) also suggested that military culture also may incorporate components that directly contrast with the surrounding society's culture and provide a means of escape from that society for potential inductees.

Combined, military institutions must provide adequate incentives to induct recruits into its culture and then for recruits to follow the established norms within said culture. Wilson (2008) concluded that service members who had been inducted into military culture were more likely to follow established cultural norms if the military in which they served was institutionally distinct and cohesive. Goldich (2011) expanded upon this point by describing how the saliency and distinctiveness of the U.S. military institution rose enormously after World War II, which could explain the strong sense of culture shared among its service members. The return of millions of service members was the largest amount ever seen in U.S. history and solidified in the public consciousness the concept of a large, permanent military institution (Goldich, 2011).

Consequently, this concept has been reinforced continuously by the U.S. government for decades as between 3.1% to 11.3% of its annual gross domestic product (GDP) has been allocated to the military, equating to approximately $650 billion to $2.36 trillion annually (Goldich, 2011; U.S. Department of Defense [DoD], 2019). Such significant allocation of national resources indicate that the U.S. military is a clear, distinct, and cohesive institution, one that consequently would foster a strong culture that is distinct from the U.S. culture at large. However, it is important to note that while it is necessary for a military institution to maintain ties with the society's cultural values to meet its institutional needs, it is impossible to entirely differentiate every component of military culture from its surrounding society's culture. This again is due to the institution's connections to the centralized state and to the individual cultural identities of its service members. Given these qualifiers, it still is necessary to examine the core cultural values of the U.S. military institution so that we can better understand the more downstream values that tend to be retained by student veterans following their military service.

Core Miliary Cultural Values

At its fundamental core, some of the most important values of military culture that appear to distinguish it from other institutional cultures are: (a) its readiness to use war to achieve mission success, (b) the acceptance of killing, and (c) the toleration of war preparations to meet its objectives (Wilson, 2008). Altogether these three values are a unique characteristic of military culture given the special relationship between the military institution and the centralized state within which it resides (Dunivin, 1994; Wilson, 2008). Through this relationship, service members within the military institution receive sanctions from the state to break cultural taboos that implicitly inhibit or explicitly prohibit surrounding society members from killing (Dunivin, 1994). As such, the state then can legitimize the mission of the military institution via the

ideology of a just war and may, in turn, legitimize the breaking of surrounding cultural taboos within military culture itself (Butler, 2012; Pattison, 2011).

While this is a possibility for certain military institutions, it is not the normal expectation for all militaries. Most modern professional military institutions temper these sanctions with institutional codes (e.g., rules of engagement, creeds, ethos) that better align with the cultural values of its service members and of the surrounding society (Dunivin, 1994; Wilson, 2008). In doing so, the military institution aims to prevent the status of its service members from being undermined by the social stigma of killing within the moral and theological norms of the surrounding culture as well as intends to legitimize its mission by clearly defining admissible targets and behaviors (Butler, 2012; Pattison, 2011). These are particularly important considerations for the military's personnel as each service member eventually must return to the surrounding culture following their military service. As such, the hope is that prospective service members would not fear reprisal when returning to the surrounding culture due to the core values of the military institution as this, compounded with the inherent nature of military operations, likely would greatly deter the recruitment of new personnel.

The nature of the military's core mission (e.g., warfare) is inherently hazardous with the potential occurrence for grave bodily harm and the death of some of its service members. Inefficiency, mistakes, and incompetent oversight within the military institution may prompt catastrophic consequences for its service members and for their ability to accomplish mission objectives. Because of this, military culture tends to value collectivism and interdependence with an emphasis on the reconceptualization of self from that of an individual to a more collective whole with a shared mission (Hall-Clark et al., 2019; Meyer et al., 2016). This reconceptualization is critical for military operations as momentary hesitations at the individual

level can result in widespread losses at the collective level (Weiss & Coll, 2011). The reconceptualization of the self, induction into military culture, and socialization into the collective whole traditionally has occurred via certain rituals designed to remove more individual characteristics (e.g., shaving of its members' heads, issuing standardized attire) and other rites of passage (e.g., basic training, boot camp, swearing in ceremonies) that help to standardize the experiences of its service members (Hall-Clark et al., 2019; Redmond et al., 2015). Additionally, inductees often experience cultural immersion during these processes which exposes them to the shared codes, language, behaviors, and norms of the collective (Meyer et al., 2016; SAMHSA, 2010; Weiss & Coll, 2011). Combined, these processes help to deconstruct individual civilian cultural identities and then replace (but not eliminate) these identities with a new salient military cultural identity (Meyer et al., 2016). This is ultimately a critical and necessary component in the overall accomplishment of the military's mission.

Given the nature of a military's mission, the adherence to its doctrine, commands, and norms by its service members is essential for the completion of its objectives. Because of this, key military cultural values tend to include organizational structure, discipline, the subservience of self to the collective, and trust in the collective (Hall, 2011; Hall-Clark et al., 2019). Organizational structure within the military is demonstrated by hierarchical (linear) social relationships that are vertical and authoritarian in nature (Hall-Clark et al., 2019; Weiss & Coll, 2011). This adherence to a hierarchy tends to establish a more rigid and ordered command structure that is delineated by rank (seniors and subordinates) as well as cultural expectations for acceptable behaviors and traits for service members according to specific rank (Hall, 2011).

While the military institution is not unique in its usage of such a hierarchical command structure with seniors and subordinates, it is unique in that its service members are bound by

military-specific law (e.g., Uniform Code of Military Justice [UCMJ]) that in many ways differs from the laws of the surrounding civilian society (Redmond et al., 2015). Through the UCMJ, violations of organizational structure within military culture often are met with severe punishments. Additionally, the UCMJ codifies the hierarchy as well as discipline by giving certain service members (seniors) authority over other service members (subordinates). It is through this discipline that individual service members must sacrifice individual goals and self for the collective, as senior service members must issue lawful orders that subordinate service members then must execute. However, subordinate service members must trust in the lawfulness of their superiors and in the mission of the collective to willingly execute orders that may result in significant harm or death to themselves or to others (Redmond et al., 2015). Combined, the cultural values of organizational structure, discipline, subservience of self to the collective, and trust in the collective establish within military culture a chain of command whereby each individual service member is a link in the chain. These cultural values are fundamental within military culture because the breaking of any of these values at any level would result in the breaking of the chain and thus foster disarray within the entire military institution (Wilson, 2008).

Cultural values within the military institution also tend to include expectations and ideals for its individual service members, as these individual values ultimately stand to benefit the collective's mission. As previously mentioned, the military institution is highly reliant on the interdependency of its service members and the myriad of occupations it supports. Because of this, diligence, accountability, resilience, and continuous self-improvement all are highly valued within military culture (Hall-Clark et al., 2019; McCormick et al., 2019; Meyer et al., 2016; Redmond et al., 2015). The careful attention to detail within all aspects of military duty (e.g.,

vehicle maintenance, navigation, patrolling for threats, logistics management) are highly

enforced since negligence in one's obligations, even when the stakes for such negligence are

relatively low, may result in the detriment of the collective (Hall-Clark et al., 2019).

Additionally, any lapses in the performance of individual service members that have resulted in

the detriment of the collective must be identified so that appropriate actions may be taken to

remedy the situation. As such, accountability is strongly valued within military culture because it

attempts to ensure that all members within the military institution are efficiently functioning in

their roles while also reinforcing the core value of subservience of self to the collective (Goldich,

2011; Hall, 2011). This reinforcement is a key component of accountability because the

admission of individual performance lapses and the subservience of individual traits (e.g., pride)

to the performance of the institution signifies to the collective the individual's dedication to the

mission, the well-being of the institution, and the safety of their fellow service members (Wilson,

2008). This reinforcement then tends to prompt additional positive reactions from other service

members such as increased trust, camaraderie, and cohesiveness (Meyer et al., 2016).

Maintaining service member performance may be challenging though as the military

institution's missions may require actions in some of the most difficult and inhospitable settings

imaginable. Military operations may involve limited resources and logistical support, isolation,

physical exertion, and exposure to harsh or hazardous environments (Hall, 2011). Additionally,

the military's mission may require action at a moment's notice and thus necessitate service

member preparedness and availability 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with the potential for

previously authorized leave to be revoked (Redmond et al., 2015). These occupational conditions

require service members to demonstrate substantial flexibility and resilience (e.g., stoicism) in

the face of adversity, as their performance within these conditions may have significant effects

on the mission outcome (Weiss & Coll, 2011). Resilience also may be required within combat roles during situations where individual emotions (e.g., grief, fear, rage) must be subverted for the sake of mission progress (Pietrzak et al., 2010).

This combination of diligence, accountability, and resilience tend to foster a mindset within military culture of perpetual preparedness for the next challenge or disaster (Hall, 2011). Continuous self-improvement therefore tends to be valued within military culture as these actions demonstrate more of a preparedness mindset and desire to overcome any future challenges (Hall, 2011; SAMHSA, 2010; Weiss & Coll, 2011). Continuous self-improvement within the military traditionally occurs via repeated training exercises (e.g., occupation-specific, combat, medical), physical fitness, and skill specialization (Redmond et al., 2015). These activities allow service members to demonstrate a readiness to meet and hopefully overcome any potential challenges to the military's mission as well as demonstrate their commitment to both the mission and to their fellow service members. It should be noted though that these opportunities for self-improvement may be compulsory and involuntarily attended (e.g., parade formations, physical fitness standards). In these situations, such opportunities for self-improvement would be considered as activities that serve the needs of the military institution rather than those of the individual, or as situations where other core military values (e.g., discipline, organizational structure) are reinforced. It is important to note though that the frequency and intensity of these compulsory activities typically differ by service branch (Smith, 2022). As such, it is necessary to further examine the differences in military culture and its values between service branches to avoid the conceptualization of the U.S. military and its culture as monolithic.

Differences Within Military Culture

Cultural Differences According to Service Branch

As previously stated, military culture is similar to most cultures in that it is not

monolithic and also in that it contains a significant amount of diversity and subcultures. This is

most evident between the military's service branches as every branch of the U.S. Armed Forces

has different stated missions and core values that align with their respective designated roles in

the overall mission of the U.S. military (Redmond et al., 2015; Figure 1). Since each branch of

the military has unique mission objectives and differ in their individual core values, individual

service branches account for a significant source of variation within U.S. military culture.

Consequently, these differences may either expand upon or diverge from the core cultural values

of the military at large (Redmond et al., 2015).

Figure 1

Missions and core values of the branches of the U.S. Armed Forces. Adapted from Redmond et

al. (2015).

Branch	Founded	Service member Name	Mission	Core Values
Army	June 14, 1775	Soldier	Fight and win our Nation's war by providing prompt, sustained land dominance across the full range of military operations and spectrum of conflict in support of combatant commanders.	Loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage.
Marine Corps	November 10, 1775	Marine	Train, organize, and equip Marines for offensive amphibious employment and as a force in readiness.	Honor, courage, and commitment.

Figure 1, continued

Branch	Founded	Service member Name	Mission	Core Values
Navy	April 30, 1798	Sailor	Maintain, train, and equip combat-ready Naval forces capable of winning wars, deterring aggression, and maintaining freedom of the seas.	Honor, courage, and commitment.
Air Force	September 18, 1947	Airman	Fly, fight, and win… in air, space, and cyberspace.	Integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do.
Space Force	December 20, 2019	Guardian	Organizing, training, and equipping Guardians to conduct global space operations that enhance the way our joint and coalition forces fight, while also offering decision makers military options to achieve national objectives.	Organizational agility, innovation, and boldness.
Coast Guard	August 4, 1790	Coast Guardsman	Safeguard the Nation's maritime interests.	Honor, respect, and devotion to duty.
National Guard	December 13, 1636	Guardsman	Providing trained units to the states, territories, and the District of Columbia and keeping itself equipped to protect life and liberty.	Loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage.

These differences tend to occur naturally in response to increases in the size and complexity of the military institution as well as due to the adoption of new technologies (Mears, 1969). Interestingly though, the development of core cultural value differences between service branches within the larger military appear to resemble those of military institutions and of the

centralized states within which they reside (Wilson, 2008). Each branch, in its development as a unique institution within the larger military institution itself, must establish a specific and cohesive identity that is distinct enough to justify and legitimize its existence as well as its claim to resources and influence (Goldich, 2011; Wilson, 2008). Consequently, these distinctions in values often align with the stated missions and roles of the service branch and are reflected by the creeds, codes, and ethos that are espoused by that branch's service members (e.g., Army's Warrior Creed; SAMHSA, 2010).

Similar patterns of differences in cultural values can be observed between the different types of services conducted across the branches of the U.S. military. For example, active-duty service members tend to demonstrate differences in their military cultural identity when compared to National Guardsmen and reservists (Meyer et al., 2016). This is evident by the fact that active-duty personnel are full-time service members who focus solely on their military occupational duties whereas National Guardsmen and reservists may be called upon for active duty, but otherwise do not typically engage in military activities full-time (Molina & Morse, 2015). Therefore, National Guardsmen and reservists tend to have a distinct and unique relationship with military culture as these personnel must balance both military and civilian occupational responsibilities simultaneously, which means that they also must simultaneously navigate military and civilian cultural identities as well (Redmond et al., 2015).

The delineation in Guardsmen and reservist occupational duties compared to active-duty service members are further blurred given that Guardsmen may be tasked with responding to both state and federal emergency situations (Molina & Morse, 2015). This means that the military cultural identity among National Guardsmen and reservists may be more diffuse when compared to active-duty personnel as their part-time status within civilian occupations inherently

could mean greater connectivity and affiliation with members outside of the military institution. The absence of full-time immersion within military culture in turn may promote differences in the saliency of their military cultural identity as there may be fewer encounters with induction rituals and rites of passage that ultimately would decrease their commitment to the military institution's mission (Dolan et al., 2022; Redmond et al., 2015).

National Guardsmen, reservists, and non-active-duty military veterans therefore will be excluded from the current study as this study attempts to better understand the acculturation strategies utilized by student veterans as they navigate from a dominant military culture to a minority student veteran identity within the dominant civilian higher education culture. This is because the acculturation strategies utilized ultimately will be defined by which characteristics student veterans choose to retain or abandon from their previous military cultural identity and which characteristics they choose to adopt or reject from the civilian higher education culture. Therefore, it is prudent to examine the acculturation strategies that are utilized by student veterans who have endorsed holding the most robust military cultural identities rather than service members who may have simultaneously cultivated military and civilian cultural identities during their service. This will ensure that this study has the greatest chance of identifying a shared meaning about the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as the complete immersion into military culture during active-duty service will have a significantly stronger impact on the saliency of subsequent military cultural identities rather than non-active-duty service (Hesse, 1998; Redmond et al., 2015). In this vein, we also must consider how other intersecting cultural identities of service members may impact their military cultural identity saliency following their discharge.

Intersectionality of Cultural Identities Among
Service Members

As previously stated, the military institution and its culture are far from monolithic due to the diverse composition of its service members' cultural identities. Previous research has demonstrated that upon induction to military culture, a service member's established cultural identities will have a profound impact on their military experiences and perceptions about their military service (Eichler et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2016). This therefore would have a significant downstream impact on the saliency of one's military cultural identity as a veteran may be less inclined to exhibit a military cultural identity due to its association with more negative experiences and perceptions (Dolan et al., 2022). Additionally, service members who enter the military for career advancement or who see their service as a means-to-an-end (e.g., funding for education, employment opportunity) tend to maintain a stronger orientation with their already established cultural identities or to their military occupational identity rather than to the military cultural identity itself (Redmond et al., 2015). Because of this, it is critical to acknowledge the intersecting of service member cultural identities within military culture as these intersections likely may influence the service member's own perceptions about military cultural values and about which aspects of military culture they choose ultimately to retain or to abandon following their service.

Intersectionality refers to the combined premise that individuals are multifaceted, that they belong to several cultures throughout their lives, and that these cultures can impart specific cultural identities that vary in saliency yet ultimately intersect and interact with each other (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). This suggests that individuals may associate themselves with the same culture but also maintain different experiences within that culture (McCall, 2009). Additionally, they may differ in their own definitions about that cultural identity due to the intersectionality of their

other individual cultural identities (McCall, 2009). Intersecting identities traditionally have included sex, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), physical ability, religion, and sexual orientation, but any cultural identity could be considered an intersecting identity (Eichler et al., 2021, Hajjar, 2014). Therefore, the examination of intersecting identities may be helpful not only in illuminating the overall alignment service members may have with military culture, but also how these intersecting identities may impact the saliency of their military cultural identities. If one's service member identities do not align with the values of military culture, it is possible that they may be considered to be an outsider from the collective; they may experience alienation and isolation from other service members; or they may experience explicit hazing, harassment, and discrimination due to their differences (Eichler et al., 2021; Keats, 2010; Meade, 2020). These situations then may prompt a service member to have a strong negative reaction to the military institution, to military culture, and in regard to their military experiences, ultimately decreasing their likelihood of retaining a military cultural identity following their service (Dolan et al., 2022).

Examinations of military cultural norms and core values historically have underlined strong cultural ideals based on classically masculine traits (e.g., emotional restraint, aggression, toughness; Keats, 2010) and physical ability (e.g., strength, agility, endurance; Griffin & Stein, 2015). These traits typically have been adaptive for the military institution given its stated missions and, in most early military circumstances, they were necessary to dominate an enemy combatant as well as to accomplish objectives (Goldich, 2011; Mears, 1969; Wilson, 2008). However, the exponential expansion of a large professional army that incorporates service members from a highly diverse nation such the U.S., in conjunction with technological advancements that decrease the reliance on physical ability, produce cultural points of

contention. These points of contention typically relate to institutional inertia and the veneration of tradition that may limit the military's ability to adapt to the increasingly multicultural composition of the modern military culture (Wilson, 2008).

Institutional policies within the military historically have harmed service members with minority cultural identities as the codification of discrimination within military law helped to maintain the status quo and to legitimize discriminatory behaviors of individual service members (Eichler et al., 2021). Pronounced examples within the U.S. military include: racial segregation until July 26, 1948 following the signing of Executive Order 9981; the prohibition of service members with minority sexual orientations until December 22, 2010 with the signing of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act (2010); and the prohibition of women from serving in combat roles until January 1, 2016 (Moore, 2020). Minority service members who were negatively impacted by these policies as well as current service members who still experience remnants of these policies (e.g., due to pervasive bias, military sexual trauma [MST]) are less likely to recall positive military experiences or to endorse a salient military cultural identity following their service (Meade, 2020; Meyer et al., 2016). Conversely, service members who already endorse intersecting cultural identities (e.g., regional, military family lineage) that happen to align with the military's cultural values may be more likely to positively perceive their military experiences and to endorse a more salient military cultural identity (Wilson, 2008). As such, it is possible that these service members may endorse increased saliency of their military cultural identities (Dolan et al., 2022) and more pronounced acculturation experiences as they transition into PEIs. However, as of now this remains unexplored.

Therefore, we also must further examine the established literature describing the PEI experiences of student veterans as the sole examination of their intersecting identities may elicit

excessive variability in our understanding of their military cultural identities within civilian higher education culture. Such variability could have a more deleterious effect on this exploratory study as the paucity of research examining this phenomenon within PEIs would further limit our ability to identify a shared meaning of their acculturation experiences. By augmenting our understanding of military culture with our current understanding of student veteran PEI experiences, we then can transcend the individual differences of student veteran military, cultural, and academic experiences as well as better identify the shared experiences of this phenomenon for the majority of this population (Giorgi et al., 2017). By identifying the shared meaning of this phenomenon we ultimately can better understand the PEI experiences of most student veterans. This in turn will help us better address whatever discrepancies that are observed between the extant literature and the student veteran academic outcome data.

Student Veteran Experiences

Post-9/11 veterans are a unique cohort as they have pursued college education at a significantly higher rate than any veteran cohort before them (Borsari et al., 2017; VA, 2016). To date, more than 2.9 million post-9/11 veterans have pursued higher education following their military service (IVMF, 2017) with nearly one million student veterans currently attending PEIs (Holian & Adam, 2020; VA, 2022). State and federal veteran education benefits such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the Montgomery GI Bill, and the Colorado National Guard Tuition Assistance (CONG) program have allocated over $100 billion toward veteran educational pursuits (SVA, 2019). To date, these educational benefits have fully funded over 450,000 postsecondary degrees and certificates (SVA, 2017). With the funding potential for an additional 100,000 additional degrees per year (SVA, 2017), this trend suggests an optimistic future for the educational

opportunities of post-9/11 student veterans and for student veterans of any subsequent conflict period.

However, post-9/11 veterans continue to represent a relatively small minority of the total student body of civilian PEIs, despite their increased pursuit of educational opportunities. Post-9/11 veterans account for only 4.5% of undergraduate and 5% of graduate students in the U.S. (Holian & Adam, 2020). In addition to holding a minority status on campus, student veterans, when compared to their civilian student peers, also tend to be significantly older (SVA 2017; 2019), significantly more likely to be married (IVMF, 2017), significantly more likely to have children (IVMF, 2017), significantly more likely to maintain full or part-time employment (IVMF, 2017; SVA, 2019), significantly more likely to have a disability (e.g., physical and/or mobility disability, traumatic brain injury [TBI]; Baker et al., 2009; VA, 2018), and significantly more likely to have a mental health diagnosis (e.g., posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD], depression, substance use disorder [SUD]; Ghosh et al., 2021; Hoge & Warner, 2014; Schuler et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2018; Trivedi et al., 2015). These dissimilarities from their civilian student peers can present unique stressors and opportunities for student veterans as their perceptions of, and experiences with, civilian students and PEI faculty can be as diverse as their individual cultural identities. However, we first must review the history of student veterans within civilian PEIs so that we may better understand the context of their PEI experiences.

History of Student Veterans in Higher Education

The U.S. military and its veterans have a long and storied relationship with civilian PEIs, but it was only recently that military and civilian education cultures converged in a more meaningful way (Abrams, 1989; Kennedy & Neilson, 2002). To better understand the reasons for this convergence, we first must acknowledge that higher education always has been valued by

the military (Kennedy & Neilson, 2002; Sookermany, 2017). Education historically has been

viewed as critical to military operations as it has allowed military leaders to better prepare for

war (e.g., strategy, communication skills), to learn from previous military leaders (e.g., military

history, philosophy), and to develop strategies and technology for future conflicts (e.g.,

fieldcraft, maneuvers, mathematics, engineering; Kennedy & Neilson, 2002). However, these

educational opportunities were sequestered for most service members to U.S. military academies

(e.g., West Point, Naval Academy) throughout most of the 19th century (Kennedy & Neilson,

2002). The material taught during this period was military-specific and seldom overlapped with

civilian settings as the purposes were to prepare future leaders for warfare and to instill the

cultural values of the U.S. military institution into its members (Kennedy & Neilson, 2002).

This type of education contrasted with the material taught at the colonial and early

American civilian PEIs as these early institutions (e.g., Harvard, Yale, College of Philadelphia)

placed a greater emphasis on Enlightenment ideals and Classical curriculum (Geiger, 2015).

With an emphasis on Newtonian physics, moral philosophy, and Classical language (i.e., Latin,

Greek), it was in these early stages of PEIs that we can start to see the divergence between

civilian and military cultures in higher education. Military education emphasized the values of

the military institution (e.g., preparedness for warfare, commitment to the mission) whereas

civilian PEIs instead tended to emphasize the values of the civilian society (e.g., refinement,

enlightenment; Abrams, 1989; Geiger, 2015). This divergence may have been due mainly to the

fact that the goals of each institution were similar (e.g., the development of young American

men); however, their respective desired outcomes differed significantly (e.g., military officers vs.

gentleman and politicians; Geiger, 2015). Of course, certain cultural values within each type of

education have evolved over time, which have impacted their desired outcomes for students

(Craig, 2004; Geiger, 2015). But at their core, their respective missions and principal values have remained stable so as to create two types of education whose cultures are highly distinct from each other (Geiger, 2015; Kennedy & Neilson, 2002). Additionally, it should be stated that while these types of education diverged and fostered separate cultural values, the educational opportunities for both institutions throughout most of their histories were largely inaccessible to most laymen, let alone women and minority identities, given their emphases on societal status and access to financial means (Geiger, 2015).

This pattern of education remained relatively distinct throughout the 18th and 19th centuries as most U.S. service members chose careers in the military whereas most civilian graduates preferred more financially lucrative careers such as industrialists, scientists, and politicians (Geiger, 2015; Kennedy & Neilson, 2002). Of course, there were occasional overlaps as some veterans pursued higher education after their military service and some civilian graduates entered into military careers (Abrams, 1989; Kennedy & Neilson, 2002). However, those individuals were the exception at the time, not the norm, as most Americans perceived civilian PEIs as serving a niche population and as less important in society than was the military institution (Geiger, 2015). Because of this, most service members tended to pursue military careers or transitioned into government roles rather than to pursue higher education following their military service (Geiger, 2015; Kennedy & Neilson, 2002). It only was with the passing of the Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862 and its requirement that civilian PEIs offer military training as part of its curriculum that we saw a significant number of U.S. service members and veterans then choose to pursue educational opportunities at civilian institutions (Abrams, 1989). With that act, the higher education cultures of the military and civilian academia started to converge and initiate acculturation experiences for student veterans. Consequently, we can see

how these cultures converged in the mid-20th century to form our current understanding of student veteran experiences within civilian PEIs.

World War II became a critical turning point in the perceptions of civilian PEIs for both the American public and veterans. The sheer scale of the American war effort, bolstered by the Second War Powers Act, led to the temporary adoption of aspects from military culture for tens of millions of civilians as their businesses were requisitioned by the government to produce emergency defense materials. This process resulted in civilian PEIs becoming epicenters for military technology development, even leading to several technological advancements including rocket propulsion, radar, and atomic power (Abrams, 1989). The net result of this requisition process was that a significant proportion of military personnel were stationed and collaborated with civilian scientists, engineers, and academics in PEIs throughout the war, significantly increasing the amount of contact between these two institutions (Abrams, 1989, Geiger, 2015). In doing so, the perceived legitimacy and value of civilian PEIs among civilians and veterans rose exponentially following the war, helping to establish civilian higher education as a distinct and valued institution (Geiger, 2015). PEI enrollment increased continuously throughout the 20th century following these developments, with student veterans comprising a growing proportion of the student body thanks to their wartime experiences as well as the enactment of new veteran education benefits (e.g., The Montgomery GI Bill; Abrams, 1989; Geiger, 2015).

The relationship between the U.S. military and civilian PEIs since has become nearly inseparable as the DoD funds nearly two-thirds of all university research (Abrams, 1989; DoD, 2022), while PEIs support Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) campus programs that are intended to replenish the military's supply of officers. Through this mutual relationship and a greater societal emphasis on higher education in the U.S. (Geiger, 2015), more student veterans

are attending civilian PEIs than ever before (SVA, 2017). Fortunately, this increase in student

veterans also has brought along an increased awareness about the distinctiveness of their military

cultural identities (Klaw et al., 2021; Meca et al., 2020; Orazem et al., 2017). This effort to better

understand student veterans, their reintegration experiences, and the unique stressors that they

may experience in PEIs following their military service have led to extensive treatment

approaches and campus policies (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Norman

et al., 2015). However, there appears to be significant discrepancies between the ways in which

student veteran experiences are presented within research versus their actual academic outcomes

(SVA, 2017, 2019). As such, we first must acknowledge and understand these discrepancies so

that we may progress in our research and ultimately better understand the PEI experiences of

most student veterans.

Discrepancies in Student Veteran Research

To date, there has been no shortage of literature describing the academic and social

difficulties of student veterans as they transition from military service, reintegrate into civilian

settings, and enter into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs (Bonar & Domenici, 2011;

Klaw et al., 2021). Student veteran experiences have historically been defined in the literature by

mental health struggles and suicidality (Drum et al., 2017; Pease et al., 2015; Thomas et al.,

2018), physical disability or impairment (Griffin & Stein, 2015), isolation from their peers

(Drum et al., 2017; Kim & Cole, 2013), dangerous behaviors or disposition to harm (Bryan &

Bryan, 2014; Pease et al., 2015; Schreger & Kimble, 2017), and reluctance to seek mental health

assistance (Aikins et al., 2020; Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Ghosh et al., 2021; Wilson et al.,

2021). While each of these concerns is worthy of attention given the significant distress that they

can cause for student veterans, they nevertheless do not appear to as prominently impact or deter

as many of their lives as the literature tends to suggest (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Ghosh et al., 2021). As such, we must review how these concerns have been presented in the literature so that we can better understand how their descriptions of student veterans compare to their actual experiences.

Depression and suicidal ideation among student veterans have been research topics of concern for the better part of a decade (Drum et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2018). One possible explanation for this is that depression and suicidal thoughts and behaviors are highly correlated (Drum et al., 2017), so if these factors can be addressed, then it may also help to decrease the overall suicide rate among student veterans. Additionally, there may have been an increased emphasis on these concerns because depression and suicidal ideation both also are highly correlated with PTSD (DeBeer et al., 2014; Renshaw, 2011). Consequently, there has been a particular interest in the mental health of post-9/11 student veterans since this cohort has demonstrated an increased risk for developing PTSD when compared to veterans from previous conflicts (Hoge & Warner, 2014; Trivedi et al., 2015). Therefore, there may be an assumption in the research that post-9/11 student veterans are at an increased risk of developing PTSD and consequently would be at an increased risk for developing depression and suicidal ideation.

However, estimates about the prevalence and severity of depression and suicidal ideation among this population have varied widely throughout the research (Corson et al., 2013; Pease et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2018). An example of this variation can be illustrated by Corson et al. (2013), who found that about one-third (32.9%) of post-9/11 veterans experienced suicidal ideation, as well as Thomas et al. (2018), who found that nearly half (44%) of post-9/11 student veterans experienced depression. Similar studies (e.g., Bryan & Bryan, 2014; Norman et al., 2015) consistently have identified post-9/11 student veterans as having a significantly elevated

risk for suicide, with some estimates suggesting that they are four to five times more likely to experience depression than is the U.S. civilian population (SAMHSA, 2021; Thomas et al., 2018). When compounded by reports that post-9/11 student veterans also were at a greater risk of experiencing physical health challenges (Griffin & Stein, 2015; Norman et al., 2015), it can be understood how an influx of research related to these concerns could have occurred.

However, these findings nevertheless conflict with other studies such as Pease et al. (2015), who found from a national sample of 3,290 college students that there was no significant difference in the experiences of depression and suicidal ideation between post-9/11 student veterans and their civilian student peers. Interestingly, the researchers instead found that civilian students, not student veterans, demonstrated a significantly increased risk for nonsuicidal self-injury (Pease et al., 2015). Additionally, reports on the prevalence of mental health concerns from national agencies (e.g., VA, National Institute of Mental Health) have indicated that student veterans appear to be more likely to experience depression than U.S. civilians (SAMHSA, 2021; VA, 2021b). However, the reported prevalence rate of depression for student veterans, when compared to that of U.S. civilians, appears to be closer to double (15% vs. 8.4%) rather than the quadruple and quintuple rates that also have been reported in the literature (44%; Inoue et al., 2022; SAMHSA, 2021; Thomas et al., 2018). As such, there have been significant discrepancies in the student veteran literature about the actual risk of negative mental health outcomes and how much of an impact these factors have in their PEI experiences. The net result of these discrepancies has been a combination of findings that have produced positive clinical considerations (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Ghosh et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2016) as well as findings that may not have adequately captured the experiences of this population (Borsari et al.,

2017). Subsequently, these studies also may have prompted the development of interventions with questionable efficacy (Borsari et al., 2017).

As a whole, this literature base has helped to illuminate some of the unique challenges often experienced by student veterans on civilian PEIs as a proportion of this population does in fact struggle with the aforementioned concerns. It also has benefited this population by illustrating how student veterans are a distinct and unique cultural identity within higher education culture (Ghosh et al., 2021). Additionally, this literature base has prompted PEI policy to recognize this distinct cultural identity in its policies, to enact initiatives to address student veteran stressors, and to approach student veteran attrition differently from their civilian counterparts (Kim & Cole, 2013; Vacchi et al., 2017). Unfortunately, while this literature has greatly benefited a subset of the student veteran population, it again appears to insufficiently represent the PEI experiences of this population as a whole (SVA, 2017, 2019). Consequently, this means that we still have much to learn about student veteran culture as our current understandings about this population may not adequately represent the experiences for most of its members (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Kim & Cole, 2013).

Borsari et al. (2017) performed a meta-analysis of student veteran literature in an attempt to determine how well the services that have been born from this literature aligned with the actual concerns of this population. The researchers found that the efficacy of these services remained largely unknown despite nearly 150 studies on the subject (Borsari et al., 2017). The inability to determine the effectiveness of services appeared to be due in part to inconsistent measures and definitions of student veteran concerns, small or undefined sample sizes, and an abundance of grey literature (i.e., non-peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, dissertations, organizational reports, and commentaries; Borsari et al., 2017). Combined, the researchers

indicated that while there is a need for research addressing student veteran concerns, there does not appear to be a unified definition of student veteran experiences and therefore no unified method by which to approach these concerns (Borsari et al., 2017). Consequently, the perceived urgency of these concerns may have fostered the abundance of grey literature (e.g., direct publication, decreased scrutiny during publication) so that care could be developed almost immediately for these concerns. This in turn may have unintentionally obfuscated our understanding about the actual concerns of student veterans and how best to treat them.

The reality instead is that student veterans as a whole appear to perform remarkably well in civilian PEIs and exceed the performance of their civilian peers in multiple measures of academic aptitude (IVMF, 2017; Kim & Cole, 2013; SVA, 2019). Since 2009, the National Veteran Education Success Tracker (NVEST) Project has continuously collected academic data from post-9/11 student veterans to quantitatively measure their overall academic success and to calculate how many degrees and certificates the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits have produced (SVA, 2017). NVEST, along with the work of other organizations that examine student veteran academic outcomes (e.g., National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA]), has demonstrated that student veterans graduate from PEIs at a rate that is similar to the national average (54% vs. 53%; NASPA, 2013; SVA, 2017, 2019).

While the graduation data from NVEST and NASPA suggest positive outcomes among student veterans, the scope of their academic outcomes are better understood when examining several metrics of their performance. Student veterans also graduate from PEIs at a significantly higher rate than do other adult/nontraditional students (54% vs. 39.2%; IVMF, 2017). Student veterans also tend to achieve significantly higher GPAs than do their civilian counterparts (3.34 vs. 2.94; IVMF, 2017; SVA, 2019). Further, student veterans also experience lower rates of

attrition than the national average (28.4% vs. 32.9%; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022; SVA, 2017). Additionally, NVEST has demonstrated that the student veteran gains that they make at PEIs tend to persist following graduation as those who graduated tend to experience significantly lower rates of unemployment (2.6% vs. 3.9%) and earn on average between $17,000 and $29,000 more annually than do their civilian counterparts (SVA, 2019). Beyond academic and occupational performance, the majority of student veterans also tend to express a general sense of well-being as nearly 70% do not report any diagnosable mental health condition, TBI, or physical disability (Bonar & Domenici, 2011). Granted, there always is the chance that student veterans may underreport these conditions (Green et al., 2017; Johnson & Agius, 2018), but such a large discrepancy still would point to the fact that the majority of student veterans do not experience impairments from these types of conditions.

These findings starkly contrast with the prevailing perceptions of student veteran PEI experiences in the extant literature (Bonar & Domenici, 2011) and greatly challenge any distorted or misleading views about their experiences and culture. Therefore, it should be repeatedly emphasized that while the student veteran population may experience greater rates of mental and physical health conditions when compared to the general civilian student population (Griffin & Stein, 2015; Pease et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2018), these conditions may not be the defining experiences and salient identities of most student veterans who attend civilian PEIs (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Ghosh et al., 2021). As such, it would be prudent to consider the student veterans who have experienced TBIs, physical injury and disability, and severe mental health concerns as a distinct subgroup of the student veteran culture, particularly when examining their salient cultural identities, because the intersectionality of these identities may result in distinctly unique experiences and perceptions for those student veterans while attending

civilian PEIs. Although the experiences of these intersecting identities are important and wholly worthy of further exploration, we first must address the prevailing discrepancies in the extant research by better understanding the PEI experiences of most student veterans. In doing so, we can better address the real-world consequences and clinical implications of having their experiences and military cultural identities insufficiently represented.

The conflictual findings about student veteran PEI experiences within the extant literature can provide insight about the reported interactions that student veterans have with their civilian peers and faculty. The majority of student veterans do not perceive their PEIs' faculty or civilian peers to be very understanding of their unique experiences nor particularly aware of the challenges that they may face from having such a distinct and differing salient cultural identity (IVMF, 2017). Subsequently, student veterans do tend to describe fewer positive interactions with other people in PEIs despite exhibiting an increased amount of adaptive academic traits compared to their civilian peers (Borsari et al., 2017). Kim and Cole (2013) examined these experiences further by analyzing the annual self-report results of student veterans in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and compared these responses to those of their civilian peers. Kim and Cole (2013) found that student veterans were significantly more likely than their civilian peers: (a) to dedicate more time preparing for class, (b) to discuss grades and assignments with their professors, (c) to report a positive relationship with their faculty members, and (d) to feel supported by PEI administration. While these findings suggest adaptive traits and attitudes among student veterans that would promote their well-being in the classroom, the actual interactions that were reported in the NSSE by student veterans instead suggest contrary classroom experiences.

Kim and Cole (2013) also found that student veterans were significantly less likely than their civilian peers to report (a) experiences of friendly and supportive relationships with other students, (b) perceptions that their work with others was effective, and (c) participation in campus events and experiential learning opportunities outside of class (Kim & Cole, 2013). These findings suggest that most student veterans do not report satisfying interactions in their daily PEI experiences which may be due in part to inadequate understandings about what it means to be a student veteran with a minority military cultural identity (Mahoney et al., 2021; Meca et al., 2020). It is important to note, though, that these differences were more pronounced with age as older student veterans (age 25 and above) reported even fewer positive relationships, decreased engagement on campus, and decreased perceptions of support and effective collaboration with their civilian peers than younger student veterans (Kim & Cole, 2013). It also is important to note that even though student veterans were more likely to feel supported by PEI administration than did civilian students, the majority of student veterans still felt unsupported by their PEI administration (54%; Kim & Cole, 2013).

Again, it is possible that these reports are driven by an inadequate understanding about the prevailing experiences and military cultural identities of student veterans, which may lead non-veterans to inadvertently express subtle forms of bias (microaggressions) during their interactions with student veterans (Ong & Burrow, 2017; Tyner, 2019). Consequently, older student veterans may be more sensitive to these microaggressions and may report fewer positive PEI interactions as the saliency of their cultural identities tend to increase with age (Weiss & Lang, 2009). As such, there is a strong reason to believe that the extant literature has not adequately examined the essence of PEI experiences for most student veterans as their positive academic outcome data continue to conflict with their negative reported PEI interactions. These

discrepancies may be due in part to the existing literature inadequately examining the role that student veteran military cultural identities have in these civilian settings as well as student veteran concerns typically being framed as reintegration challenges rather than acculturation stressors. As such, a critical component of the overall PEI experience for student veterans (e.g., the perceived strengths that they have from holding a military cultural identity) has not been adequately explored and likely is having a negative impact on their daily interactions with non-veterans. Because of this, it is prudent to review how the conceptualization of student veteran concerns as reintegration challenges may be inappropriate for the majority of this population and how acculturation stressors may be a more apt framework for conceptualization.

Reintegration vs. Acculturation Models

As previously mentioned, the extant literature historically has focused on the stark contrast between military and civilian life (Mahoney et al., 2021; Sayer et al., 2014) and how veterans have struggled to find purpose outside of the military (Mahoney et al., 2021; Orazem et al., 2017). In the context of PEIs, this has tended to manifest as depictions of student veterans failing to thrive given their inability to reintegrate into civilian settings and to compensate for the perceived differences in civilian higher education culture (e.g., structure; Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Borsari et al., 2017; Orazem et al., 2017; Sayer et al., 2014). One concern with these depictions and the conceptualization of student veteran concerns as reintegration challenges is that it operates from a deficiency model. A deficiency model supposes that the experiences of reintegration challenges means that there are deficiencies either in the environment that one is entering into (e.g., structural barriers) or deficiencies in the individual's ability to cope in the new environment (Schmid, 1991). This naturally would encourage researchers to identify these

deficiencies so that they can attempt to be alleviated, reduce the experiences of distress, and promote successful reintegration.

The concern though is that this framework also may incline researchers to consider aspects of a student veteran's previous culture or environment as impediments that must be overcome so that they can better cope with and reintegrate into the new environment (Elnitsky et al., 2017; Garcia, 2017). With this view, interventions that are administered to reduce deficiencies and to foster reintegration may inadvertently minimize the student veteran's strengths and self-efficacy to thrive on their own (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Rattray et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2021). For example, a student veteran may be told by a PEI administrator or clinician that their distress is due to cognitive rigidity on their part and their inability to transition from the highly structured culture of the military to the less structured culture of civilian higher education. Consequently, mindfulness and acceptance interventions may be provided to alleviate their coping deficiencies and their ability to adjust more effectively to their reintegration needs. Alternatively, the administrator or clinician instead could have acknowledged the military cultural identity of the student veteran as a strength and asset in treatment by recognizing that the previous structure helped them to keep their team informed and safe during operations. Through an acculturation lens instead, it may be more evident that the student veteran's distress would be based on themselves and their peers struggling with poor assignment instructions and that their distress was born out of concern for their team rather than their own rigid and structured mindset.

The consistent failure to recognize the military cultural identities of student veterans and the adaptive qualities from their military experiences means that we cannot understand how these factors may influence their acculturation processes as they transition into the dominant culture of civilian higher education. Without this knowledge, PEI faculty and clinicians may be less

inclined to view military cultural values as strengths that could assist, rather than hinder, the student veteran's transition process. In doing so, student veterans also may be more inclined to feel lost and alienated during their transitions as the experiences that they feel proud about and may perceive as significant milestones in their lives are overlooked, ignored, or undervalued (Ghosh et al., 2021; Legreid & Betters-Bubon, 2020; Mahoney et al., 2021). Because of this, any model used to conceptualize the distress and concerns for most student veterans must incorporate their military cultural identities as failing to do so would minimize the potential strengths that they have garnered from these identities (Hall, 2011; Meyer et al., 2016; Weiss & Coll, 2011). Therefore, we must consider the existing models that already have been used to conceptualize student veteran experiences so that we can better determine whether acculturation models are the most capable in incorporating military cultural components and in encapsulating the PEI experiences of student veterans.

Models of Student Veteran Experiences

Several theoretical models have been developed to better conceptualize and explain student veteran experiences, student veteran identity development, and student veteran successes or challenges while integrating into higher education culture (Vacchi et al., 2017). Hammond's (2016) Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model (CVCIM) posited that student veterans experience three distinct cultural identity transitions (soldier, civilian, student) from the time that they discharge from the military to their enrollment and graduation from civilian PEIs (Hammond, 2016). Specifically, this model considered how the perceptions of others, one's perceptions of self, one's connection to other veterans, and one's inferred perception of self would impact their core identity and cultural identity expression in PEIs (Hammond, 2016; Vacchi et al., 2017). This meant that student veterans may be simultaneously negotiating

multiple identity roles (e.g., veteran, civilian, peer) during their daily PEI experiences as the contextual perceptions can vary by environmental and interpersonal factors. For example, individuals who knew the student veteran prior to their military service may be more inclined to perceive them with civilian qualities even after seeing their military service. Because of this, the student veteran may be more inclined to perceive themselves with more civilian traits when interacting with these individuals unless there is a cue (e.g., conversation topic) that is related to their military service, in which case they may perceive themselves more as a veteran. Consequently, this meant that the identity formation of student veterans appeared to be fluid and nonlinear as well as dependent on their lived experiences (Vacchi et al., 2017).

The CVCIM attempted to rectify the historical blind spots of higher education scholars by accounting for military and veteran identities and that the challenges that often are faced by student veterans, as well as the strategies that they often use for academic success, were distinct because of these identities (Vacchi et al., 2017). Hammond (2016) proposed that student veterans must simultaneously navigate these identities during their daily college experiences and that because of this one's transition from a salient military cultural identity to a student veteran identity may be highly dependent on their experiences in civilian PEIs and their navigation within higher education culture (Hammond, 2016). For example, a student veteran's military and veteran cultural identities may not be as salient to them if they do not perceive themselves as significantly differing from their civilian peers and if the PEI faculty does not treat them differently. However, they may experience greater saliency (e.g., awareness of demographic or ideological differences) if they are othered and alienated from their PEI peers due to the differences in their identities. Because of this, Hammond (2016) suggested that the degree to which a student veteran can navigate through challenges and conflicts within a PEI is dependent

on how they are perceived by others and themselves in these settings as this would have a significant impact on the overall saliency of these identities (Hammond, 2016). As such, the CVCIM has helped illustrate the fluid nature of student veteran identity formation and how both civilian and veteran peers can shape these processes for better or worse.

Unfortunately, the CVCIM still is insufficient in the conceptualization of student veteran PEI concerns as it primarily focuses on perceptions and how these perceptions can shape the military cultural identities of student veterans (Vacchi et al., 2017). The CVCIM does not specifically focus on the cultural values of these identities, nor does it examine the impact that the surrounding dominant culture and its values have on the saliency of student veteran identities. This ultimately means that the CVCIM does not adequately acknowledge the strengths that are associated with cultural identities, thus failing to fully explain both how and why a student veteran might adopt aspects of a dominant culture that they have never encountered before. Because of this, we must explore for a different model of student veteran experiences that goes beyond the saliency of student veteran cultural identities and instead accounts for other factors that also may influence their PEI experiences.

There are multiple factors that could create significant challenges for post-9/11 student veterans in their post-military identity formation (e.g., organizational structure, peer interactions, role changes), but acculturation struggles appear to be the most influential factor for them (Ghosh et al., 2021). Ghosh et al. (2021) best illustrated this point in their review of university and college counseling center utilization by student veterans. The researchers found that student veterans are more likely to access mental health services through their PEIs' health centers than any other behavioral health center (e.g., VA, community counseling center). Additionally, the researchers found that acculturation struggles, not complaints related to trauma, substance use, or

diagnosable psychological or physical conditions, were the most common presenting concern that they reported (Ghosh et al., 2021). This suggests that most student veterans perceive their PEI challenges as issues related to transitioning into a new culture with existing cultural identities rather than overcoming adversities from their past. Furthermore, the insufficiencies of the CVCIM (Vacchi et al., 2017) illustrate how there is a clear and critical need to better understand how the dominant culture within PEIs may affect the saliency and expression of student veteran cultural identities.

Combined, there is a need to examine the acculturation process of student veterans as they navigate through the dominant civilian higher education culture. This is because the acculturation framework both matches the presenting concerns of most student veterans while simultaneously addressing the shortcomings of other conceptual frameworks (e.g., deficiency model, CVCIM). Therefore, this process may be foundational in the identity formation of student veterans as they transition from service member to veteran to student veteran by working to better understand the acculturation strategies that may influence the solidification of these salient identities (Vacchi et al., 2017). By further understanding the acculturation strategies of student veterans, we may be able to increase the incorporation of more culturally informed treatment approaches that tap into the perceived strengths of student veteran identities during the acculturation process. We therefore must better understand what acculturation is and how it shapes the PEI experiences of post-9/11 student veterans.

Acculturation

Acculturation can refer to the continuous, first-hand interaction of groups of individuals who have different cultures that result either in the subsequent changes in either of the original cultures, in both cultures, or in the psychology of the individual (Berry & Sam, 1997). In this

context, acculturation would refer to the continuous interactions of student veterans within higher education culture that result either in individual changes in their military cultural identity, the accommodation and adoption of military cultural values within higher education culture, or a combination of both.

As previously mentioned, there have been several models that have attempted to conceptualize and explain the identity formation of student veterans within the context of PEIs (Vacchi et al., 2017). However, there remains a paucity of research examining the experiences and identity formation of student veterans through the lens of acculturation. Because of this, the current study intends to better understand the experiences of student veterans within higher education culture by examining the acculturation strategies that they have used, as well as the acculturation process in general, as they navigate through the cultural values of their salient identities to form their new student veteran identity.

Berry's Model of Acculturation

Berry's Model of Acculturation (BMA) may provide an effective framework for understanding the acculturation process of student veterans as it conceptualizes acculturation as the process of either retaining or abandoning values from previous cultural identities as well as either adopting or rejecting values from new cultural surroundings (Berry et al., 1997). Additionally, the BMA may help to expand upon the previous literature regarding student veteran cultural identity formation as it is one of the most empirically supported models of acculturation and since it consistently has demonstrated validity in application with the acculturation processes of other minority populations (Berry & Sam, 1997). Previous research already has identified that student veterans maintain various aspects of their military cultural identity that differ from their civilian peers (Koenig et al., 2014; Meyer et al., 2016; Weiss &

Coll, 2011), but it has yet to identify how these values are retained or abandoned while in a dominant higher education culture.

Berry (1992) posited that the primary factors that contribute to acculturation and changes either in an individual or in a culture occur via two major issues that must be resolved. The BMA proposes that these issues arise while differing cultural identities are continuously interacting with each other, are causing distress (acculturation stress), and thus must be resolved by groups and individuals during their daily encounters with each other. These issues are described by two broad categories. The first category is cultural maintenance, which constitutes the degree to which cultural identities and characteristics are considered important to the individual and thus are maintained. The second category is contact and participation; it constitutes the degree to which individuals become involved in other cultural groups or remain primarily amongst themselves (Berry, 1970). The simultaneous consideration of these central issues creates the conceptual framework of the BMA as illustrated by four acculturation strategies on attitudinal dimensions that are represented by bipolar arrows (Figure A; Berry & Sam, 1997).

Figure A

Berry's Model of Acculturation
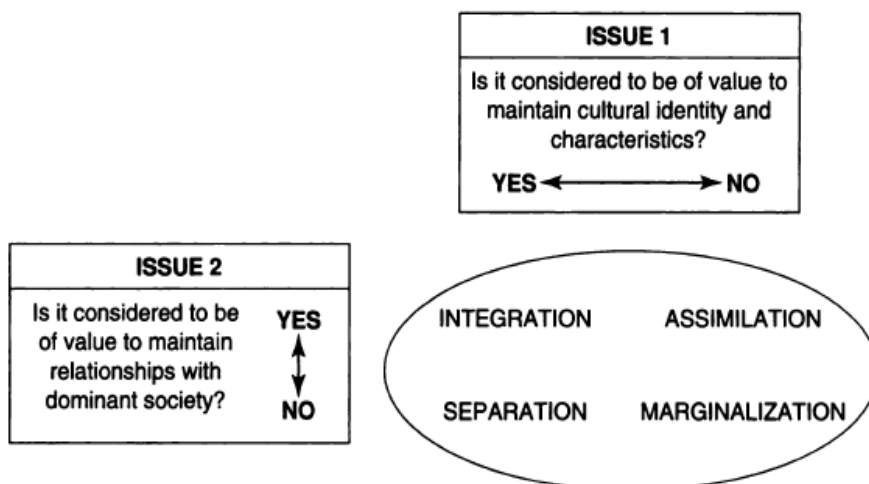
The BMA attitudinal dimensions can be considered as how much the individual wishes to retain aspects of their original cultural identity and characteristics (i.e., Issue 1), and how much the individual wishes to participate in and adopt aspects of the new host culture (i.e., Issue 2). First, assimilation occurs when an individual does not wish to maintain their original cultural identity and instead seeks to adopt and continue daily interactions with those belonging to other cultures. Separation, by contrast, is at the opposite end of the Issue 2 spectrum. It occurs when an individual from a non-dominant culture places value on their original culture and then rejects interactions with individuals from the dominant culture as well as the adoption of their values. Segregation would occur if this strategy was employed by an individual of the dominant culture toward individuals of a non-dominant culture. Integration occurs when, to some degree, an individual wishes to maintain their cultural integrity while at the same time wishing to participate in other cultures. Lastly, marginalization occurs when there is little possibility or interest from the individual in maintaining their cultural identity or values while also having little interest in, or is excluded from, having relationships with other cultures (Berry & Sam, 1997).

The attitudes that an individual may have about these four dimensions and the actual behaviors that are exhibited by them altogether constitute one's acculturation strategy (Berry et al., 1989). The attitudes that one has about these four alternatives may vary according to their age, developmental stage, context, their previous experiences with the alternative acculturation strategies, the saliency of their cultural identities, and the specific values that are held by their culture itself. The BMA can be applied to multiple cultural identities as it has been empirically supported among various minority cultural identities living in majority cultures, including immigrant populations (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Berry & Kim, 1988), refugees (Doná, 1993; Doná & Berry, 1994), and indigenous people (Berry et al., 1986; Sinha et al., 1992). Taken altogether,

these findings suggest that psychological acculturation and the acculturation strategy that one utilizes can be influenced by numerous group-level factors in both the society of the individual's origin and the society of where they establish settlement, as well as the interaction between these societies (Berry & Sam, 1997).

Berry (1990) has utilized this model to better understand the acculturation processes of several different cultural identities, though it has yet to be applied to the PEI acculturation processes of student veterans. If research examining student veteran experiences continues to overlook the acculturation processes of this population, it will fail to acknowledge that student veteran culture is a unique cultural identity within civilian higher education culture and further ignore the possible acculturation stress that is experienced by student veterans. Additionally, the most prevalent concern that student veterans seek mental health treatment for is related to acculturation stress (Ghosh et al., 2021). Therefore, the failure to examine student veteran experiences through the lens of acculturation could ignore this concern and risk the undervaluing of military cultural identity strengths in PEI and clinical settings. Thus, there is a profound need to conceptualize student veteran acculturation experiences within higher education culture through the lens of the BMA as its use will provide a foundation for better understanding the PEI experiences of most post-9/11 student veterans. Combined, we may be able to portray their experiences more accurately, reduce the discrepancies between their PEI experiences and their academic outcomes, and increase congruence between clinical practices and their acculturation experiences.

Summary

To date, there has been an abundance of research examining student veterans, the military cultural values that they endorse, and the potential difficulties that they experience upon entry

into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. However, there still appears vast discrepancies between the depictions of typical student veteran experiences within the literature and the academic outcome data of student veterans. The majority of studies examining the experiences of student veterans do not seem to adequately illustrate the academic successes that are experienced by this population, the absence of physical and psychological concerns for the majority of student veterans, and the adaptive military cultural identity traits that assist them during their transitions into PEIs. Additionally, the existing literature has continued to repeat the same cultural values within military culture without first explaining how the military institution can create a distinct cultural identity within a civilian society. Consequently, the literature has consistently missed opportunities to better explain how the strength of this institution may affect the subsequent strength of the military cultural identity amongst its members following service discharge. Therefore, we need to expand upon the extant literature and examine the acculturation processes of post-9/11 student veterans as presently this untapped direction appears to be most congruent with the real-world concerns that are expressed by most post-9/11 student veterans.

This chapter provided a comprehensive review of the literature regarding the formation of the military as a distinct institution, the cultural identity imparted by its presence as an institution, student veteran experiences within the higher education culture of civilian PEIs, and models that conceptualize identity formation and acculturation processes. This chapter intended to better explain the relationship between the saliency of a student veteran's military cultural identity and the strength of the military as an institution by providing a foundational background of the military within surrounding societal contexts and the impact of diverse identity intersectionality on individual perceptions of military experiences and the retention of military cultural values following discharge. Subsequently, this chapter also intended to illustrate how

poor military and student veteran cultural competency within PEIs may contribute to more adverse student veteran experiences than population-wide deficits in comparison to their civilian counterparts. Lastly, this chapter examined existing models used to conceptualize the cultural identity formation of student veterans within higher education culture and identified current gaps in the literature examining this process through the lens of acculturation. The BMA was reviewed at length; it was described how it could be applied to the student veteran population as they navigate through the dominant higher education culture of civilian PEIs.

Chapter III will elaborate on these next steps by detailing how the current study will be conducted. It will provide detailed explanations about the methodology and theoretical framework that will be used to better illustrate how participants will be recruited, how data will be collected and analyzed, and how the interpretations formed from these data ultimately will attempt to answer the proposed research questions. Chapter III also will provide a comprehensive summary of how the study will be conducted.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Natural objects must be experienced before any theorizing about them can occur.
- Edmund Husserl, *Husserl: Shorter works*, *1981*

Present Study

The purpose of this study was to describe the essence of the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as they navigated within the dominant higher education culture of civilian postsecondary educational institutions (PEIs). Specifically, this study aimed to conceptualize the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans by simultaneously identifying the components of their military cultural identity that they decided to maintain or abandon in PEI settings as well as which components of the dominant higher education culture that they decided to adopt or reject. The present study utilized a transcendental phenomenological perspective to address the following research questions:

Q1   What are the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as they navigate within the dominant higher education culture of civilian postsecondary educational institutions?

    Q1a   Which, if any, aspects of their military cultural identities do post-9/11 student veterans choose to maintain or abandon during their acculturation processes within the dominant higher education culture of civilian postsecondary educational institutions?

    Q1b   Which, if any, aspects of the dominant higher education culture do post-9/11 student veterans choose to adopt or reject during their acculturation processes within civilian postsecondary educational institutions?

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks refer to the concepts and theories (e.g., theoretical orientation) that are relevant to the phenomenon of interest and that are essential when conducting research

as they provide researchers both with structure and direction as they construct meaning from

their data (i.e., epistemology; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 2010). The

theoretical framework of a study guides the development of its research questions and the

selection of research methods that will help to foster knowledge and understanding about the

phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 2010). By grounding a study with a theoretical orientation,

a researcher can draw upon the extant literature and knowledge about the phenomenon of interest

so that the approaches that they use are empirically based (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). The

theoretical framework, when combined with the methodology of a study, provide the foundation

necessary to determine why a particular phenomenon should be studied, how it should be

studied, and what needs to occur during the study so that meaning about that phenomenon can be

gleaned from these data (Hood, 2013; Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 2010). The following

section will provide an in-depth description of the theoretical framework that was used in the

present study.

Constructivist Epistemology

The epistemology of a study refers to the philosophical underpinnings of the theoretical

perspective; it is important because it provides the basis for understanding what knowledge is

and how it is acquired (Crotty, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The present study used

constructivist epistemology as the foundation for its phenomenological theory. Constructivist

epistemology posits that reality is socially constructed and that there are multiple realities (e.g.,

interpretations) of an event rather than a single, observable reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

More specifically, it assumes that all knowledge and the meaningful reality it creates is

contingent upon the practices that are constructed in and out of the interactions between humans

and the world and that they are developed and transmitted within an essentially social context

(Crotty, 1998). This is a marked departure from positivism, which assumes that reality is observable, stable, and measurable, because it instead suggests that there are no objective experiences beyond their interpretations (Crotty, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Consequently, constructivist epistemology is well suited for interpretive (e.g., qualitative) research as its core assumption is that we know only what is experienced and that individuals *construct* knowledge from these experiences rather than finding it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The purpose of constructivist epistemology is to describe, understand, and interpret the multiple realities of individual events that are bound by the contexts in which they are experienced (Crotty, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). Through this lens, constructivist epistemology emphasizes that (a) humans are active participants in the world with some degree of free will; (b) humans actively create meaning from their lived experiences so that they can feel a sense of order in their lives; (c) the meaning that individuals derive from their experiences tend to be self-referential, which fosters a distinct sense of self and identity that is separate from the world; (d) individuals organize and make sense of their experiences via language and shared social constructs (e.g., storytelling); and (e) life is dynamic, with humans experiencing gradual changes throughout their lives via self-reflection and their relationships with others (Crotty, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Combined, these points suppose that individuals create new meanings from their experiences as they develop, that self-reflection unfolds new dimensions of their experiences which would otherwise be inaccessible, and that these processes ultimately create their subjective reality (Mahoney, 2003; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). Constructivist epistemology therefore readily lends itself to working to better understand the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as it assumes that the knowledge about this

phenomenon is constructed by those who experience it. With this knowledge, we were able to better understand the subjective realities of student veterans and how meaning was constructed from their acculturation experiences within the more dominant higher education culture of civilian PEIs. But it was not enough to simply consider how individuals constructed meaning; we also had to consider how researchers constructed a shared meaning from the collective experiences of student veterans.

Methodology

Methodology refers to the methods, principles, and procedures that are used by the researcher to answer the study's research questions (Hood, 2013). The methodology of a study can be a toolbox of methods that the researcher may elect to use, or it also can be the strategy for how the study's findings can be generalized to the population at large (Valsiner, 2017). The methodology of a study tends to be informed by the theoretical framework as the methods selected by the researcher need to be congruent with how they conceptualize the acquisition of knowledge (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). The following section will provide an in-depth description of the methodology that was used in the present study.

Qualitative Methodology

The present study utilized qualitative methodology as the goals of this study were to describe the subjective PEI experiences of post-9/11 student veterans rather than the collection of objective and quantifiable measurements (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the world which aims to make sense of phenomena by using terms that are congruent with those who experience them (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Birks, 2014). Subsequently, the approaches used within qualitative research tend to be interpretive, descriptive, and contextual as these naturalistic

approaches tend to promote greater understanding about the underlying meaning of human experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because of this, the methods and design used in qualitative studies are contingent upon the study's research questions as the approaches used must be congruent with the experiences and contexts of the population of interest (Mills & Birks, 2014).

Subjectivity is at the core of qualitative methodology (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017) and aligns well with research questions that are derived from a constructivist framework (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Birks, 2014). Qualitative research therefore relies upon individuals who report similar identities or experiences as the methods employed aim to express a shared and coherent point of view given the subjective perspectives across the population of interest (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). Consequently, qualitative research posits that the knowledge that is derived from this shared point of view can fundamentally change the world because it is grounded by genuine and natural data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There are several qualitative research designs that can elicit this type of knowledge (e.g., ethnography, narrative, grounded theory; Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, given the nature of the research questions in the present study and the desire to identify a more shared meaning and understanding of the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans in civilian PEIs, a phenomenological design had to be used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Birks, 2014).

Research Design

Transcendental Phenomenological Theory

The present study followed a phenomenological design with a specific emphasis on the principals of transcendental phenomenological theory. Phenomenology broadly defined is the combination of the Greek words *phainomenon* (to show itself, to appear) and *logos* (thought,

principle, or speech), which translate literally to the study of things as they appear, or "To the things themselves" (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 2010, p. 28). Phenomenology therefore is the study of phenomena or, more specifically, the experience of structures in our world as they appear in our consciousness (Langdridge, 2007). Phenomenology as we know it today traces its roots to the 19th and 20th centuries with Edmund Husserl, who posited that all individuals could know to be true is that which appears before them in conscious awareness–that our perception of the reality of an object is dependent on a subject and the context in which the object is perceived (Moustakas, 2010).

From this perspective, the meaning and knowledge that we gain from our experiences are heavily influenced by our consciousness and by our perceptions about what we perceive (Moustakas, 2010). Consequently, this would mean that our experiences are both the starting points of investigation and the building blocks of knowledge that we need to understand the essence of phenomena (Giorgi et al., 2017; Moustakas, 2010). Phenomenology therefore believes that the truest way that we can gain knowledge about a phenomenon and to understand its essence is to describe the encounters of individuals who have experienced it (Giorgi et al., 2017; Langdridge, 2007). The goal therefore is to gather various perspectives from several individuals who have directly experienced the phenomenon to reveal as many details about the phenomenon as is possible (Moustakas, 2010). As such, it was necessary for post-9/11student veterans to describe their military cultural experiences in the more dominant civilian higher education culture if we were to better understand the essence of their PEI acculturation experiences.

To acquire this information, phenomenological research designs utilize either unstructured or semi-structured data collection methods (e.g., interviews) from a collection of individuals with shared experiences of the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

These methods were most readily apparent in the dialogue of detailed interviews with a representative sample of individuals from the population of interest because this dialogue had a better chance of illuminating multiple perspectives about their shared experiences with the phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). The primary goal of these interviews was to gain knowledge and understanding by eliciting rich, detailed descriptions from those who have firsthand experience with the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). Once the information was acquired, inductive logic was used to facilitate the emergence of contextual descriptions which then can inform new hypotheses and make generalizable predictions to the population at large (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These were the broad steps of phenomenological research design, but additional steps needed to be taken in the present study given the current disagreements in the student veteran literature (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Ghosh et al., 2021). Because of this, a transcendental phenomenological approach needed to be utilized so that a fresher perspective elicited descriptions that were more representative of the actual PEI acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans.

Transcendental phenomenological theory was developed by Husserl later in his career to establish a purer form of phenomenology (Moustakas, 2010). Transcendental phenomenological theory fundamentally believes that knowledge is gained by our understanding about the essence of experiences as they appear in our transcended consciousness (Giorgi et al., 2017; Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 2010). In other words, Husserl was adamant that the sole description of experiences was insufficient in the pursuit of knowledge and our understanding about the essences of phenomena (Moustakas, 2010). Instead, the researcher also must be intentional while experiencing the descriptions of others' experiences with the phenomenon while simultaneously transcending their own preconceived understanding about the phenomenon so that they can

approach these descriptions of the phenomenon as if it were the first time that they ever had heard of the phenomenon (Erciyes, 2015; Giorgi et al., 2017; Langdridge, 2007).

The first step then to better understanding the essence of a given phenomenon with this theory was to recognize the inextricable relationship between what is experienced (noema) and the way in which it is experienced (noesis). The relationship between the noema and the noesis created intentionality and was the internal experience of being conscious of something (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 2010). Researchers then must uncover and distinguish an object or structure so that they can understand it for what it is in their consciousness (noema) and examine the ways in which the object or structure could be perceived so that it ultimately becomes self-evident (noesis; Moustakas, 2010). For example, the appearance of a tree is distinct from its background; however, it also must be viewed by several people from different angles, distances, and times while also considering the context in which the tree appears so that it is self-evident as a tree. Through this process we can know from the descriptions of people who have experienced the object that the object is a tree and so that we therefore can derive meaning and understanding about its essence as a tree. A researcher therefore must be intentional when encountering descriptions of experiences with a particular phenomenon by recognizing that the combined perceptions and experiences that individuals may have with the phenomenon help to distinguish said phenomenon and make it self-evident so that its essence is better understood (Moustakas, 2010). However, the researcher also had to take additional steps to manage their own conscious experiences and reactions to others' descriptions as well as their previous knowledge about the phenomenon.

The second step to better understanding the essence of a particular phenomenon was to suspend and transcend one's own previous knowledge, expectations, and judgments about the

phenomenon itself. The process of transcending one's extant knowledge about the phenomenon was characterized by the epoche and means to refrain from judgment as well as to abstain from the ordinary way of perceiving an object (Moustakas, 2010; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). As previously mentioned, the epoche is a critical step in transcendental phenomenological theory as it assists the researcher to more naively approach experiences with the phenomenon so that they then can perceive the phenomenon with a fresh consciousness (Langdridge, 2007; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). The epoche simultaneously brackets the researcher's perceptions and reactions about others' descriptions of their experiences with the phenomenon and suspends their judgments, expectations, and previous knowledge about the phenomenon so that they can obtain a purer perception of said phenomenon (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 2010; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). In doing so, the researcher ultimately transcended the presuppositions about the phenomenon so that they can more accurately describe and understand its essence (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 2010).

The final step to better understanding the essence of a particular phenomenon was to engage in what is known as phenomenological reduction. This process was a continuation of the epoche and was characterized by three key elements: description, horizontalization, and verification (Langdridge, 2007). Once the epoche was achieved (e.g., sufficient bracketing of preconceptions), the researcher then needed to describe the total experience of consciousness in as much detail as possible so that they could more adequately reflect the experiences and perceptions about the phenomenon at hand (Langdridge, 2007; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). In this step, the task was to simply describe the general features of the phenomenon and to exclude those facets that are not directly within the conscious experience (Langdridge, 2007). Accurately describing the phenomenon required the continuous review of, and reflection about,

the disclosed descriptions (e.g., transcripts) because phenomenological reduction attempts to describe the phenomenon exactly as it appears to the individual (Moustakas, 2010). Because of this, every detail had to be treated with equal value (i.e., horizontalization) regardless of how mundane it may have appeared, as no single perception should be privileged when describing the experiences of the phenomenon (Langdridge, 2007). The researcher then repeated this process several times to uncover new layers of meaning inherent in the phenomenon being perceived (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 2010). Lastly, the tentative hypotheses about the meaning of the phenomenon were checked with the original descriptions to verify the extent to which they were congruent with the context of the experiences (Langdridge, 2007). The completion of these processes then allowed the researcher to synthesize the disclosures into a more complete textual description of the experiences, one that aimed to adequately capture the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 2010).

Researcher Positionality

Positionality refered to the inherent bias within the researcher's reflections about their place and purpose in the context of the study and how their perspectives may have inadvertently influenced the collection and analysis of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Birks, 2014). As previously stated, transcendental phenomenology required the researcher to reflect upon their own preconceptions, biases, and judgments about the phenomenon in question so that they could bracket their expectations and achieve the epoche. To do this, the researcher first had to be aware of these considerations as well as how they may have impacted their intentionality and reactions during disclosures about experiences with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 2010). As such, I too had to consider my own personal stance and preconceptions about the phenomenon post-9/11 PEI acculturation experiences as well as my role as a researcher. In doing so, I hoped to more

effectively identify the areas that required bracketing so that I could have achieved the epoche and minimized the potential for biases in the collection and analysis of this study's data.

Researcher Self-Reflection

Personal reflection and introspection are vital components of the qualitative research process and will be necessary for achieving the epoche. Because the phenomenon of post-9/11 student veteran PEI acculturation processes are comprised of several components, I also had to reflect upon multiple domains related to my own personal experiences with this population as well as my own preconceptions about this specific phenomenon. In doing so, I aimed to adequately identify the potential areas that for me required particular attention when bracketing so that I could approach these data and their subsequent analyses with a more open mind and produce a fresher perspective on the phenomenon than I might have done otherwise.

The first consideration that I had to make regarded my identity as a civilian who consistently had interacted with both the veteran and student veteran populations as an ally and an advocate, yet never as a peer. I am not a veteran and have never served in the military in any capacity; however, I have been incredibly fortunate throughout my educational and professional careers to have had the opportunity to form very meaningful and enduring relationships with several of our nation's veterans. I have been touched by their experiences of both pride and hardships during their military careers and how those experiences have significantly shaped their military cultural identities following their service. However, again during these times I always have been a cultural outsider who was welcomed in by them to observe glimpses of their culture despite never having personally experienced it myself.

As an undergraduate, I served as the Vice President of my university's Student Veteran Organization (SVO) due to my previous relationships with student veterans on campus. I had

encountered several post-9/11 student veterans who were experiencing difficulties in navigating their transitions from the military to the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. They often told me about their interactions with PEI staff members who had exhibited gross ignorance and misunderstandings about military culture as well as about what it meant to them to be student veterans. For example, one student veteran once recounted their first day in one course where their instructor's icebreaker question ("What was the largest thing you have ever killed?") made them feel compelled to verbally disclose their traumas from their overseas service to the entire class. They described how they had felt utterly dumbfounded by the tone-deaf nature of the question as well as then feeling entirely isolated from their civilian classmates who had readily responded with far less consequential disclosures (e.g., a spider, an ant). These types of stories were frequently shared in the SVO; it was entirely common to hear student veterans explain how they could enter a classroom for the first time and immediately feel as if they had more in common with those students who held other minority and marginalized identities than with the majority of their civilian peers. The student veterans described how their personal identities may have significantly differed from these students (e.g., race, ethnicity, immigration status, gender); however, that they felt more emotionally connected to them because of how isolated and marginalized they too had felt from their other civilian peers.

I initially had joined the SVO at the request of some student veteran friends who I had made through a few other student organizations. I agreed to join because I wanted to spend more time with them, the SVO's events sounded interesting to me, and I was interested in hopefully making even more friends as a result. I thoroughly enjoyed my time in the SVO because I absolutely did make some very meaningful friendships with several other student veterans. In the process I also grew increasingly frustrated and alarmed about the frequency with which the

above types of stories that they shared occurred throughout their lives. Additionally, I could not help but to notice that the SVO's mission was to foster interactions and build relationships between student veterans, civilian students, and PEI faculty; however, I consistently was the only civilian who ever appeared in the SVO office and attended any of its events. Moreover, I was even further alarmed by how many of my civilian peers did not even know that our PEI had an SVO, with several even being surprised to learn that there were student veterans who attended our PEI at all!

Hearing these harrowing stories motivated me to run for the Vice President position because I believed that my work as a civilian, in collaboration with our student veteran President, could better represent the SVO's mission. In doing so, I hoped to model to other civilian students that they too could find belongingness in the SVO. Additionally, I intended to demonstrate to the student veterans that it was possible to form a veteran-civilian student coalition that could advocate for them in enacting meaningful change in the PEI. As the Vice President, I encountered for the first time the real-world consequences of military cultural incompetence and marginalization and how these factors could so deeply negatively impact the student veteran population. As such, the stories that these student veterans told me planted the initial seed for my research interests and continually motivates me to advocate for this population.

The aforementioned research interest seed first appeared for me in my master's program. Later on in a master's thesis (Legreid & Betters-Bubon, 2020), I received rich and detailed descriptions from post-9/11 student veterans about their daily PEI experiences and the various difficulties that they experienced as non-traditional students who had to delicately balance familial, academic, occupational, and existential concerns. I learned from my participants about the challenges that they had experienced in juggling their job obligations with their

responsibilities as a spouse and a parent so that they then simultaneously could focus on their coursework and financially support their families. I also learned from my participants about the sense of ambivalence that they had felt as student veterans by believing that their education would benefit their families in the future, yet also fearing that they were missing out on their own children's childhoods because of their coursework. Their descriptions also included experiences of where my participants had felt isolated and marginalized from their civilian peers and PEI staff which I considered to be a good future direction at the time. This overall experience provided me with a much greater sense of what it means to be a student veteran. It helped me to better understand that student veteran PEI experiences do not occur in a vacuum and that each student veteran enters PEI settings with a host of personal expectations and values. It also helped me to better understand that these personal expectations and values then will affect their experiences with the higher education culture of PEIs to differing degrees and likely will depend much on their own personal needs outside of academics. Ultimately, I felt even more motivated to advocate for the student veteran population as these experiences highlighted how not adequately understanding student veteran concerns and their military cultural identities could add substantial and unnecessary burdens on top of their existing stressors.

Now as a clinician, I since have counseled dozens of post-9/11 veterans and student veterans who have described a wide array of difficulties that they each have had in finding a sense of purpose and connection outside of the military. Despite these experiences, I never have personally experienced the transitional process from the military back into civilian society, let alone the transition into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. Personally, I do not know what it means to experience the acculturation processes of a military population that has such a distinct cultural identity. Furthermore, I do not have a pronounced experience with the

acculturation phenomenon in general. Aside from the acculturation process of moving from one regional U.S. culture to another regional U.S. culture, my personal identities as a white, heterosexual, Christian, cisgender male have precluded me from most acculturation processes and struggles given their statuses as more dominant identities in U.S. culture. These reflections therefore signaled to me that I had to humble myself throughout the research process, bracketed my previous experiences with this population, and transcended my preconceptions about the acculturation processes of post-9/11 student veterans since personally I have never experienced this phenomenon myself.

My collective experiences as an SVO Vice President, a researcher, and a clinician ultimately had primed me to perceive the PEI acculturation processes of student veterans as an arduous and trying period for them. My repeated exposure to student veteran PEI difficulties had predisposed me to believe that civilians typically will make them feel isolated and marginalized once they enter into PEI settings and that there then will be few onsite resources that could understand their military cultural identities and assist them with their transitions. Additionally, these experiences had biased my perceptions about the student veteran population and their acculturation experiences to the point where it had been in greater alignment with the extant literature. I had recognized that some of my motivation had been fueled by a sense of urgency and a fear that a significant proportion of student veterans would be greatly negatively impacted if their PEI experiences were not better understood as acculturation experiences. This sense of urgency could be better understood in the context of the subsequent considerations, though for now it was important for me to recognize that my preconceptions about this phenomenon had been formed by the most extreme, negative, and memorable student veteran descriptions that I had heard.

Combined, I recognized that these biases that I held had been created by my personal experiences and the existing literature (e.g., Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Thomas et al., 2018) to create the automatic preconceptions that student veteran PEI acculturation experiences were predominantly negative in nature and tended to cause a significant degree of stress in their lives. I also recognized that my preconceptions were directly at odds with the student veteran academic outcome data (SVA, 2017, 2019) and were instead in greater alignment with the perceptions of student veteran experiences that I had previously critiqued. Therefore, it was even more important that I aimed to achieve the epoche and transcended my preconceptions about the PEI acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans given that my personal perceptions about the phenomenon may have been based on anecdotal or less than accurate evidence and thus stood to negatively skew my interpretations. By doing so I aimed to suspend any role as an expert and instead approached the phenomenon more as a learner who was curious and eager about encountering this phenomenon for the first time.

A second consideration that I had to make was in recognizing that my previous experiences with members of this population and their acculturation processes were based on the experiences of student veterans who were acutely distressed and were actively seeking help at the time. Because of this, my experiences with this population and this phenomenon disproportionately reflected acculturation challenges and distress compared to adaptation and resilience. I was far less likely to encounter individuals in my various roles who actively endorsed well-being and readjustment because each of my roles was related to a resource that was meant to aid student veterans who were experiencing such immense distress. As such, it could be reasoned that individuals who were not experiencing distress were less likely to seek out the kinds of resources and services that I was providing, meaning that I was far less likely to

hear more adaptive descriptions of their acculturation experiences. Furthermore, and as previously stated, the student veteran literature predominantly addressed distress and dysfunction within this population, which appeared to be incongruent with the observed outcomes for most student veterans (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; SVA, 2017). Because of this, I recognized that my personal experiences with, and knowledge about, student veterans juxtaposed with the previous assertions of the present study, mainly that most student veterans actually adjusted well to PEI settings. As such, it was prudent for me to further explore this juxtaposition and how the biases that stemmed from it could be more effectively managed in the present study.

A phenomenological researcher had to be a learner, especially when they were examining descriptions about a phenomenon that they had not personally experienced themselves (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 2010). Part of being a learner then was to learn about the gaps and mistakes that others previously have made as well as recognizing and learning from the prior mistakes that they too personally have made. During my reflections on my own previous research and while formulating the present study, I realized that I had not adequately grasped the significance of the student veteran academic outcome data. Previously I had learned about this information during my master's research, but I realized that I had not fully accommodated its scope and its significance because it had contrasted so sharply with the near decade of knowledge that I already had acquired from the student veteran literature base. More importantly, these reflections made me realize at that time that I had not adequately recognized and bracketed my biases that were based on this literature. Instead, I had approached my interviews with an openness to adaptive participant descriptions; however, I ultimately maintained an underlying expectation that they mostly would describe negative PEI experiences.

As a learner, I had recognized that my expectations at the time were based on consensus bias from the literature and that this bias predisposed me to consider adaptive student veteran transition experiences as the exception rather than the norm. Additionally, I realized that I had experienced confirmation bias during my earlier interactions with student veterans as their negative experiences in fact were congruent with the extant literature. These realizations led me to feel a bit embarrassed and ashamed in retrospect because on some level I felt that my previous research and the insights that I had made while conducting it had contributed to this decreased overall understanding that we collectively had about student veteran PEI experiences. I believed that the descriptions that they shared with me were accurate and did provide valuable context about the student veteran PEI experience. However, upon further reflection, I felt that my follow-up questions and the interpretations that they spawned were negatively biased and elicited descriptions of exaggerated distress. This meant that a major component of the research process for me with this present study was to learn from my previous experiences so I could challenge my preconceptions about post-9/11 student veteran PEI experiences.

Through this process, I was better able to identify the previously described discrepancies in the student veteran literature that had a reciprocal effect on helping me to better reflect on how I could have conducted my previous research more effectively. In doing so, I had diligently worked to deconstruct and rebuild my perceptions about the majority of post-9/11 student veteran PEI experiences so that they felt more congruent with their academic outcome data. This process ultimately helped me to feel far more confident about the goals of the present study because they were based on a much more balanced and data-informed approach than was my previous research.

Combined, I had a much greater recognition now about how I had been conditioned to perceive student veteran PEI experiences more readily as negative. This recognition was one of the main factors that prompted me to choose a transcendental phenomenological research design because I now more fully understand that I had to transcend my previous understanding and perceptions about post-9/11 student veteran PEI experiences if I was to more accurately capture their actual PEI acculturation experiences. Consequently, it was imperative that I continued to bracket these expectations and preconceptions while formulating the study's research questions, interview protocol, and then while conducting interviews as they otherwise risked perpetuating and negatively skewing these data I had collected. Additionally, it was critical that I achieved the epoche so that I could transcend my previous preconceptions about the current concerns of post-9/11 student veterans which had been informed by the extant literature. In doing so, I believe that I was better able to obtain and maintain a fresh perspective on their acculturation processes in PEIs and gained a better understanding about the essence of their military cultural identities within civilian higher education culture.

The final consideration that I felt I had to make was in recognizing that I was highly passionate about our nation's veterans and that I firmly believed in the identification and the installation of resources that would further promote the well-being of this population. I had been surrounded by veterans who I cared deeply about throughout my entire life, being my grandparents, uncles, cousins, friends, classmates, and coworkers. Because of this, I had maintained a belief from an early age that it was entirely unjust for us as a nation to expect our service members to willingly risk sacrificing everything in their lives for our rights and protection if we then were unwilling to wholeheartedly reciprocate these efforts and not do whatever it takes to support their well-being and care as veterans. I recognized that this early

belief was strongly influenced by popular media portrayals of veterans returning to civilian settings (e.g., being told that they acted differently, not fitting into civilian life) as well as by the personal beliefs of others that had been instilled in me (e.g., by parents, relatives, teachers). Given my age and the period in which these beliefs came to me, it became evident that my personal beliefs had been highly influenced by civilian perceptions of Vietnam War veterans and that these were strongly skewed more toward negative expectations given the negative perceptions surrounding that particular conflict. This belief was one of the main reasons why I had been so interested in the student veteran population, in how to optimize their transition experiences, and ultimately in serving those who have served our country.

That being said, as a learner I also recognized that this passion and belief historically had biased me toward assuming that these transitions had not been optimized and that there must have been something that desperately needed to be fixed. Again, it was critical for me to bracket this passion and to try to transcend these previous preconceptions about student veteran experiences because they otherwise could have predisposed me to activism rather than simply accepting their acculturation experiences as they were for the first time. If I was unable to achieve the epoche and transcend these preconceptions, I may have inadvertently biased the data analysis due to a sensitivity to experiences that promoted actionable findings rather than textural descriptions of the acculturation process.

Each of these considerations had to be accounted for throughout the present study as it would have been easy to drift from the role of the learner and be drawn to information that stoked my passion for student veterans. Because of this, several steps and techniques had to be utilized during the course of this study to aid in bracketing and achieving the epoche. These

techniques will be described in further detail later in the Methods section, but first I will describe

what my role was a researcher and how I perceived myself throughout the study.

Researcher Role

My role in the present study was that of the primary researcher. Qualitative research

posits that the researcher is the primary instrument for collecting, analyzing, and describing data

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Birks, 2014). Therefore, as the primary researcher I

influenced the decisions that were be made during the study, including but not limited to how

participants were recruited, which questions were included in the interview protocol, which

follow-up questions were asked during each interview, and how common themes were identified

during the data analysis. Because of this, it was imperative that I strove for the epoche so that my

biases were bracketed, so that my presuppositions about this population were transcended, and so

that I was better able to approach the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans

from as an unbiased perspective as is possible. Furthermore, as the primary researcher it was

critical that I pursued consistent communication with my Doctoral Research Adviser and

Committee as well as maintained an accurate audit trail to ensure greater accountability and

objectivity throughout the study.

Additionally, I was obliged to take every step possible to reasonably mitigate risk and to

ensure that my participants were not harmed. These steps included, but were not limited to, (a)

securing approval from the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) Institutional Review Board

(IRB); (b) protecting the confidentiality of my participants, their disclosures, and the study data;

(c) preserving the autonomy of my participants throughout the recruitment, data collection, and

verification processes; and (d) ensuring that the descriptions based on the findings of the study

accurately represent the reported experiences of my participants. These steps were achieved by

adhering to the American Psychological Association's (APA) *Ethical principles of psychologists and codes of conduct* (APA, 2017) and the appropriate usage of qualitative methods (e.g., triangulation, member checking) to ensure trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Birks, 2014).

Methods

Participants

Participant selection occurred via non-probability sampling utilizing a purposive and snowball recruitment strategy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Birks, 2014). Participants were intentionally chosen based on their shared characteristics that reflect their experiences with the phenomenon of interest (i.e., student veteran acculturation experiences within civilian PEIs) and defined the parameters of the study population (Etikan et al., 2016). A national recruitment strategy was implemented by recruiting participants from civilian PEIs throughout the U.S. given that data collection will occur virtually. PEIs that had a specific veterans services office were selected for recruitment as every student veteran needed to interact with these offices upon enrollment, thus making them an ideal initial point of contact for that PEI's student veteran population. Additionally, these offices allowed this study's recruitment media to be disseminated among its students (e.g., PEI's student veteran listserv) which provided greater reach than individually contacting student veterans.

To facilitate this process, I personally reached out to these offices to inquire about whether I could share the recruitment media with their student veterans (Appendix B). PEI veterans services offices were contacted in batches of 30 given the relatively small maximum sample size of this study (i.e., batch size is double the maximum sample size). PEIs included in these batches were selected in a way that maximizes the number of potential student veterans

that can be reached (e.g., total state veteran population, total size of PEI undergraduate student body). The order in which I contacted the PEI veterans services offices within a single batch was randomly determined so that the respective student veterans of each PEI had an equal probability of their veterans services office being contacted. Each PEI veterans services office within a single batch was assigned a numerical value that corresponds to their alphabetical order within the batch (i.e., 1 to 30) and I then selected a number within that batch using a random number generator. Once the respective PEI veterans services office had been selected and contacted, I then removed said office from the batch and revalued the remaining offices within the batch so that I could select the next office to contact using the aforementioned procedure. This process was repeated until all PEI veterans services offices within the batch had been contacted or the study's maximum sample size had been obtained.

By using this approach, the opportunity to recruit the maximum ideal sample size with a single batch was maximized as this sample could be achieved with a single student veteran per PEI even if there was only a 50% PEI veterans services office response rate. Additionally, the risk of being inundated by potential participants and having to excessively turn down interested student veterans was minimized by limiting the number of PEIs that will be contacted per batch. It is important to note though that it was possible that multiple participants may be recruited from a single PEI, in which case eligible participants were selected on a first come-first serve basis. In the event that the maximum sample size had achieved, any subsequent student veterans would have been rejected and would have been provided a national mental health resource list (Appendix G). When the maximum sample size had not been achieved in a single batch, additional batches had been contacted using the aforementioned PEI criteria and contact attempts

would have been ceased if the maximum sample size was achieved, the list of U.S. PEIs was exhausted, or the study was terminated.

If the respective offices consented to this request, participants were recruited through print and virtual media (i.e., call for research participants; Appendix C) that used a QR code to direct prospective participants to a questionnaire that verified their eligibility (Appendix E) and allowed them to consent to participate in the study (Appendix D). This media was available either as print media within the respective PEI's veterans services office or virtually disseminated by their student veteran listserv. The inclusion criteria for the present study were that individuals (a) must be currently enrolled as a fulltime undergraduate student at a PEI whose courses are predominantly instructed and attended in-person in the U.S.; (b) must have served as an active-duty enlisted personnel within either the U.S. Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, or Space Force prior to their enrollment at a PEI; (c) must have served in OIF, OND, OEF and/or OFS; (d) must have deployed overseas at least once; (e) discharged from military service within the last five years; and (f) are not currently serving as an enlisted personnel and/or commissioned officer within any aforementioned branch of the U.S. military while enrolled as a student veteran.

Phenomenology posited that there was no single best method for determining the total number of participants that would have been needed for a study as the purpose of this research design instead was to reach saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). Saturation was the point of redundancy in data collection and occurs when the continued collection of data does not produce any new information or insights about the phenomenon of interest (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Unfortunately, it was impossible to definitively establish a priori figures for the total number of participants who will be needed to reach saturation, as each

saturation point is dependent on the phenomenon of interest, the population of interest, and the context in which the phenomenon occurs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Despite these realities of phenomenological research, Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended a general estimate of between five and 25 participants to reach saturation, though this number again is contingent on the various factors listed above.

However, the present study did not attempt to reach saturation due to the present dearth of literature examining the acculturation processes of post-9/11 student veterans in addition to the exploratory nature of this study. This dearth meant that qualitative researchers had not yet attempted to examine this phenomenon with this population, which means that there truly were no previous indicators about when saturation may be achieved. Additionally, this dearth necessitated that the present study's research questions be intentionally broad so that the chances of establishing a sufficient sample of post-9/11 student veterans who endorse a shared experience of acculturation in the higher education culture of civilian PEIs were maximized. As such, these broad research questions focusing on an understudied phenomenon as well as the exploratory nature of the present study made it impossible to determine whether saturation would occur with only a few participants, would require a large number of participants, or whether it even could be achieved at all. Saturation therefore was not a goal of the present study so that any chance of erroneous claims that saturation was achieved were minimized and so that the trustworthiness of the findings could be retained.

The present study instead followed the recommendations of Creswell and Poth (2018) and pursued an ideal sample size of 15 participants as 15 was the mean of the recommended phenomenological sample size range of five to 25 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, previous qualitative dissertations and studies that examined phenomena in the

veteran and student veteran populations (e.g., Hall et al., 2020; Mahoney et al., 2021; Steeves, 2019) had reported total sample sizes of between 11 and 13 participants. Therefore, it could be reasoned that the present study may have required additional participants to achieve more of a shared understanding about the PEI acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans given the understudied nature of this phenomenon (Ghosh et al., 2021). Given these considerations, the present study aimed to recruit between 13 and 15 participants but would intentionally restrict recruitment to a maximum of 15 participants given its exploratory nature and the uncertainty about whether saturation even could be achieved with a larger sample size. The present study therefore planned to terminate recruitment prior to 15 participants if saturation happened to occur and was self-evident. However, the present study planned to intentionally terminate recruitment if saturation had not occurred with 15 participants as the exploratory nature of this study made it uncertain whether saturation could even occur with more than 15 participants.

It is important to note that the proposed sample size of 15 was an ideal and maximum sample size, and that the present study was unable to recruit this total number of participants (e.g., lack of population interest, PEI recruitment restrictions, technological issues, finite duration of study). Due to this inability to recruit the ideal and maximum sample size, the present study (a) strongly emphasizes the exploratory nature of the study, (b) emphasizes the fact that the present study did not aim to reach saturation, (c) explains the limitations in the generalizability of the findings, and (d) offers recommendations about how saturation may be achieved in future research.

Setting

The present study occurred virtually and included participants from several in-person public and private PEIs in rural and urban settings throughout the United States. These PEIs

included, but were not limited to, colleges (two-year program) and universities (four-year program). The primary researcher and interviewer was a Ph.D. candidate at one of Colorado's universities and participants were eligible undergraduate student veterans who were currently enrolled at these in-person PEIs at the time of their interviews. One-on-one interviews occurred virtually via Zoom starting in the Fall 2022 semester through the Fall 2023 semester.

Data Collection

Call for Participants

Recruitment followed IRB approval (Appendix A) and began with a call for research participants (Appendix C). This call was distributed to PEI veteran service offices, SVOs, and campus counseling centers throughout the United States as well as via email server lists (e.g., The Rocky Mountain Coalition for Veteran Support Services; rockymtnvets@lists.colostate.edu). I contacted prospective PEI resources (Appendix B) prior to the call for research participants to inquire about the feasibility of distributing print study materials and whether the call for research participants could be distributed via email server lists. These advertisements aimed to reach student veterans who were and who were not actively seeking assistance, which helped to reduce volunteer bias. In each of these cases, interested student veterans were provided with a brief description of the present study, the study's contact information (i.e., primary researcher's university email address), and a QR code that directed them to the study's informed consent (Appendix D) and eligibility questionnaire (Appendix E). Interested student veterans therefore had the opportunity to receive the informed consent document and complete the eligibility questionnaire or contact the primary researcher directly to receive a hyperlink to these documents. Both the QR code and the hyperlink led interested student veterans to a Qualtrics survey page, which will be described in the next section.

Informed Consent

The QR code and the hyperlink led interested student veterans to the informed consent document (Appendix D) to participate in the present study. The informed consent document contained (a) the primary researcher's contact information (i.e., university email address, phone number), (b) information about the present study, (c) eligibility requirements, (d) details about any potential risks and benefits of participating in the study, (e) information about U.S. Standard Form 86 (SF 86) and how their participation in the present study may impact their candidacy for any government security positions, and (f) details about the ways in which their identifiable information will remain confidential as well as how the study data will be secured. Interested student veterans who wished to participate in the present study indicated their informed consent by selecting "Yes, I consent to participate" at the bottom of this Qualtrics page. Any student veteran who declined to participate in the present study indicated their decision by selecting "No, I do not consent to participate" at the bottom of the Qualtrics page and was redirected to a debriefing page that consisted of the purpose of the study and a list of national mental health resources (Appendix G).

Participants who consented to participate were directed to a second Qualtrics page, the eligibility questionnaire (Appendix E), which inquired about their demographic information and military history to determine their eligibility. This eligibility questionnaire inquired about the participant's branch of service, the dates and locations in which the participant served, combat operations (if any) in which the participant served, their occupation within the military, their military discharge status, the highest rank that they had achieved by the time of discharge, and whether or not they currently were serving in any branch of the U.S. military. Additionally, the eligibility questionnaire inquired about whether they were enrolled at a civilian PEI and the type

of PEI in which they were enrolled (e.g., university, college, trade school). This military and academic information was collected to confirm both participant eligibility and to provide the necessary context to each of the experiences that were reported. Lastly, the eligibility questionnaire inquired about the participants' demographics by collecting information about their age, gender, race, and state of residence at the time of their interview.

At the end of the eligibility questionnaire, eligible participants were asked to provide their contact information (i.e., email address, phone number) so that they then could be contacted by the primary researcher to coordinate and schedule an individual interview. If participants were determined to be ineligible, I notified them that they were not eligible to participate in the present study. Participants received a message in the debriefing page at the end of the Qualtrics survey thanking them for their interest, time, and responses.

Individual Interviews

Eligible participants identified a mutually beneficial time that they were available for an individual interview and received an individualized Zoom link for their virtual interview. I provided participants with a digital copy of the informed consent document prior to the interview for their review and individual records. I also discussed any questions or concerns that were expressed by the participants prior to initiating the interview to ensure that they fully understood the ramifications of their participation in this study.

Participants were informed of limitations to confidentiality during the informed consent process. Participants were notified that I must breach their confidentiality if the participants (a) revealed the intent to kill themselves; (b) revealed the intent to harm or kill others; (c) disclosed cases of suspected child, elderly, or at-risk-adult abuse or neglect; or (d) disclosed cases of suspected threats to national security. Additionally, confidentiality may have needed to be

breached if the present study's records ever became subject to a court order. Participants also were informed that confidentiality may have needed to be breached if the participant planned to apply for a federal position requiring a security clearance, or was currently serving in a federal position with a security clearance, and was subject to the requirements of SF 86 Section 21. I requested that all participants kept any information shared within the context of the study confidential given the above listed exceptions and the scope of the law.

Participants chose their preferred pseudonym prior to starting their interview recording, at which point I only referred to them by their pseudonyms in the recordings to preserve their confidentiality. Interviews were conducted following an interview protocol (Appendix F) in a semi-structured manner by utilizing a list of predetermined interview questions. Additional follow-up interview questions were asked for clarification or to elicit additional depth of responses. The duration of each interview was anticipated to be approximately one hour, though the time that each individual interview lasted ranged from 28 to 98 minutes, with a mean of 57.5 minutes ($SD = 21.22$ minutes). Participants had the opportunity to discuss their interview experiences during the debriefing process at the end of their interview.

Virtual interviews were video recorded and then transcribed by professional and automatic transcription services (e.g., Temi.com). Interview transcriptions were then emailed to the respective participant in addition to the themes that had emerged from their interviews as part of the member check process so that participants had the opportunity to examine the evidence that I used to formulate these themes.

Snowball Sampling

Snowball sampling was encouraged following each individual interview by requesting that each participant forward the call for participants email and Qualtrics link to any friends,

family members, colleagues, peers, and community members whom they believed may be eligible and interested in participating in this study. This technique identified potentially eligible individuals whom the primary researcher had otherwise been unable to contact directly (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, these individuals may have been more inclined to participate in the present study if it was recommended by a known associate and reduced the researcher's potential recruitment and selection biases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Birks, 2014). There was no penalty for participants who did not wish to engage in snowball sampling procedures and no incentive if they did.

Confidentiality and Data Storage

A digital file of each interview was downloaded to a password-protected folder on my personal laptop to which only I had access. The password-protected folders also contained the records with any identifiable participant information (e.g., participant names, email addresses, phone numbers, Qualtrics survey responses, etc.). Each interview was downloaded into a separate folder under the pseudonym of each veteran's choosing and contained any corresponding identifiable information. All data were de-identified (e.g., assigning pseudonyms prior to interviews, using pseudonyms exclusively throughout interviews) prior to transcribing and conducting member checks as well as in the dissemination of the study's findings so that the confidentiality of participant responses was preserved. All data, files, and recordings will be retained for a minimum of three years in accordance with federal guidelines (45 CFR 46) and then destroyed.

Compensation

Participants were not directly compensated for their participation in this study. However, their participation elicited indirect financial compensation in the form of a nominal donation

made to a charitable nonprofit organization that focused exclusively on the needs and well-being

of post-9/11 veterans (e.g., the Yellow Ribbon Fund). This form of compensation aimed to

resonate with the values that historically had been associated with military cultural identities

(e.g., comradery, service to the collective) and to help increase participants' confidence in the

purpose of this study. The completion of each individual interview elicited a donation of $10.

The completion of a member check elicited each additional donation of $10 and thus resulted in

a maximum possible donation sum of $20 per participant. I sent a lump sum donation to the

charitable nonprofit organization at the conclusion of the data collection and member check

processes so that an accurate sum was calculated. These donations occurred when participants

complete their interviews and member checks in their entirety; incomplete interviews and

member checks were not included in the final donation calculation as the responses made by

these participants were considered incomplete, and thus were excluded from the data analysis.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Analysis

The present study utilized Moustakas's (2010) descriptive transcendental

phenomenological approach to analyze the qualitative data. This was a three-phase approach to

data analysis that consisted of (a) phenomenological reduction, (b) imaginative variation, and (c)

synthesis of meanings and essences (Moustakas, 2010). Each phase and their purpose in the data

analysis will be described in further detail below.

The first phase of Moustakas's (2010) descriptive transcendental phenomenological

approach was phenomenological reduction. This phase considered each experience in its

singularity so that the phenomenon of interest was perceived and described in its totality and

then so that a textual description of the essence of the phenomenon in question could be derived

(Moustakas, 2010). Phenomenological reduction involved four steps: (a) bracketing, (b) horizontalization, (c) clustering meaningful statements into themes, and (d) organizing meaningful statements and themes into a textual description (Moustakas, 2010). As was described earlier on in this chapter, bracketing occurred while achieving the epoche and persisted throughout the data analysis process as researcher biases could exist at any stage of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bracketing occurred by reading the transcripts multiple times and by maintaining a self-reflection journal to monitor my thoughts, reactions, and biases. Horizontalization then occurred when each statement within the interview transcript was given equal value and importance and then was pruned of any irrelevant and redundant information. The remaining data then were selected as the statements that were considered to be the most meaningful in describing the phenomenon (Moustakas, 2010), which were referred to as horizons.

These horizons then were clustered into meaningful and relevant themes. This process was completed by color coordinating the horizons into prospective themes in a spreadsheet. The primary researcher gradually sorted these initial groups to formulate subgroups that provide additional explanations about the overall groupings. These groups then were revisited and redone from scratch with a fresh perspective to determine whether the initial groupings needed to be revised, consolidated, or expanded. This process was repeated as many times as was necessary for the themes and subthemes to consistently reemerge; these themes and subthemes were considered to be trustworthy once they had reemerged after several grouping cycles. These clustered themes then were synthesized into a coherent textual description of the phenomenon of post-9/11 student veteran PEI acculturation experiences. In doing so, the textual descriptions answered the "what" questions about this phenomenon by describing what it was like and what it

meant to be a student veteran who had undergone acculturation into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs (Moustakas, 2010).

The second phase of Moustakas's (2010) descriptive transcendental phenomenological approach was known as imaginative variation. This phase was meant to grasp the structural essences of the experience by presenting a picture of the conditions (e.g., contexts) that precipitated the experience and connected with it (Moustakas, 2010). To accomplish this, the primary researcher (a) had to imagine all possible "hows" of the phenomenon, (b) had to recognize the underlying framework that might account for the occurrence of the phenomenon, (c) had to consider the contexts in which the phenomenon occurred, and (d) had to use examples of data to develop structural descriptions (Moustakas, 2010).

I accomplished this phase by reviewing the structural descriptions of these data to determine how and under which conditions the phenomenon of acculturation into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs occurred among post-9/11 student veterans. Specifically, I reviewed the transcripts and repeatedly and imaginatively altered the described experiences (e.g., considering whether the descriptions still would have occurred following alternative antecedents) during the reviews so that the descriptions could be investigated from various perspectives. I completed this process with each interview and then repeated this process for as many times as was needed to consistently identify the structural conditions that made the phenomenon of student veteran acculturation into higher education culture self-evident. This helped me to better identify the specific structures that were evident within the descriptions and assisted me in the formation of representative structural descriptions. Additionally, this process helped me to better determine whether the experiences described by these post-9/11 student veterans truly reflected

their PEI acculturation experiences or whether they instead reflected experiences with a separate phenomenon (Moustakas, 2010).

The final phase of Moustakas's (2010) descriptive transcendental phenomenological approach was referred to as the synthesis of meaning and essences. The goal of this phase was to synthesize the textual and structural descriptions that had been identified in the previous phases into a more coherent description of the essence of the phenomenon at hand (Moustakas, 2010). This was accomplished by integrating the textual and structural descriptions that were identified in the previous phases to create a more comprehensive and representative description of the shared acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans in the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. Specifically, I reviewed the descriptions about what had occurred during the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as they entered into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs and how the PEI structures and contexts might have helped to facilitate their PEI acculturation experiences. Combined, I hoped to better understand what it meant to be a post-9/11 student veteran who had experienced acculturation into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs because I was able to describe what occurs during this phenomenon and how these experiences then were related specifically to acculturation and not to other phenomena. In doing so, the present study aimed to capture the quintessential essence of this phenomenon so that a greater understanding about this phenomenon and about those who experience it could be ascertained.

Member Check

A member check was the final procedure in qualitative research. It occurred after the data analysis and once the comprehensive themes had been identified so that participants then could be invited to review the themes that emerged during their semi-structured interviews (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Birks, 2014). In doing so, they then had the opportunity to assess the extent to which their themes accurately represent their experiences with the phenomenon of acculturation into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Birks, 2014; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). A member check first was addressed during the informed consent process and then discussed further during the individual interviews to determine whether or not the participant was interested in participating in this process after the initial data analysis has been completed. The participants then received an email at the end of the data collection which requested that they review and verify the transcript and the themes that had emerged from their interview. Each participant was given a week to respond to the email, and any participant who did not respond to the email after the week was considered to be uninterested in participating in the member check process.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was the validation method in qualitative research and refers to both the quality and the credibility of a study's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, there were four criteria that established the trustworthiness of this study: confirmability, dependability, credibility, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These criteria are considered the best practices for qualitative research and are emphasized as necessary components for establishing the credibility and validity of findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Birks, 2014; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017).

Confirmability referred to the neutrality of the findings; it is similar to the concept of objectivity that is found in quantitative research designs (Connelly, 2016). For the purposes of the present study, confirmability was assessed through the audit trail. Audit trails allowed for the tracking of any research activities which included, but are not limited to, protocol deviations,

data management, and researcher observations (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). As such, audit trails increased researcher accountability since outside observers could identify specific areas where the researcher's neutrality could have lapsed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This process aided in the identification and remediation of any potentially unforeseen biases that I had and thus further ensured my neutrality.

Dependability focused on making the research process clear and traceable; it was similar to the concept of reliability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017). The concept of dependability focused on the question of the extent to which a different researcher could follow the procedures of the present study and likely reach similar outcomes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The present study established dependability again by utilizing an audit trail, which provided clear documentation and transparency about the entire research process as it unfolded. Through this documentation, outside observers should be able to identify how various study procedures were performed, why they were performed as such, and what exactly they would need in order for them to be performed again.

Credibility referred to the truthfulness of a study and its findings; it was similar to the concept of internal validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Polit & Beck, 2014). Credibility could be described as a measure of how well the study accurately captured reality or whether it instead captured the biases of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Given that researcher bias could negatively impact the credibility of a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), the present study primarily utilized triangulation to ensure that the accuracy of participant perspectives was retained and that researcher biases were minimized. Triangulation involved several methods including (a) using multiple sources of data, or (b) using multiple theories to confirm emerging findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). The present study

established credibility by collecting data from several sources (i.e., triangulation) including the eligibility questionnaire, the individual interviews, and the member checks. Reflexivity (i.e., examining for researchers' biases and attitudes) also was important processes for establishing credibility as they provided multiple researcher perspectives and the potential use of individual researcher theories with which to confirm the study's findings (Alley et al., 2015). Combined, these processes aimed to help minimize potential researcher biases and to assist the study in more accurately capturing the reality of the phenomenon of post-9/11 student veteran PEI acculturation experiences.

Lastly, transferability involved the degree of generalizability of the results to a larger population; it was similar to the concept of external validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transferability was increased by providing thick descriptions as the increased depth in details better captured the nuances of an individual's experiences with the phenomenon of interest and thus increased their applicability to members of the larger population (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Future researchers then could use said descriptions to evaluate the findings and to explore if they were applicable for other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, transferability was increased by recruiting a larger and increasingly diverse sample (e.g., across multiple service branches, racial/cultural identities, ages, and gender/sexual orientations; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In doing so, this study was more likely to capture a variety of experiences that illustrated the multiplicity of perspectives on the phenomenon in question while simultaneously identifying a shared experience with the phenomenon itself (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As such, the present study used thick descriptions from a diverse sample of post-9/11 student veterans by providing clear construct definitions, participant quotes, and the semi-structured interview method to gather additional information as is needed. These methods greatly helped to ensure that the multiplicity

of perspectives was preserved, and that this study's findings were more applicable to the post-9/11 student veteran population at large.

Ethical Considerations

The UNC IRB reviewed the present study prior to the commencement of any research activities to ensured that all study procedures were conducted in an ethical manner. An initial primary ethical consideration was to ensure that every participant received a copy of the informed consent document (Appendix D) and that they then were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and any potential risks and benefits of participating in the present study. I addressed this consideration by reviewing the informed consent document with participants before we began their interviews, even though they already had reviewed and agreed to this document's terms as part of the earlier Qualtrics survey. I performed this review so that the autonomy of the participants was preserved by providing them with the opportunity to ask any additional questions that they may have had about the informed consent process and then also to give them the opportunity to rescind their consent if they actually no longer wished to participate. Additionally, I emphasized to the participants that they still had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any point and that they also may decline to participate in the member check without any penalty whatsoever. In doing so, I aimed to ensure that their participation all throughout the study was voluntary and informed.

A second ethical consideration for this study was the preservation of participant confidentiality. The present study inquired about and collected potentially personal and sensitive information about each participant. Because of this, it was critical that participant confidentiality was preserved so that such related risks for participation were minimized. I addressed this consideration by employing pseudonyms to protect the identities of my participants and any data,

notes, or recordings that were associated with their participation. All files that contained any identifiable information were secured in the manner that previously was described in the Data Security section of this chapter. Additionally, I emphasized to the participants the distinction between confidentiality and anonymity and that I was not able to ensure their anonymity given that I as the primary researcher had access to their identifiable information throughout the study. In doing so, I aimed to ensure that any participants again were informed about the nature of their participation and of the limitations of their confidentiality.

A final ethical consideration for this study regarded the general nature of qualitative research and the role that researchers play in its methodology. Because qualitative research views the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Birks, 2014), the researcher must build a safe and trusting environment so that their participants are more comfortable in sharing their personal experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Consequently, I had to be aware of my own dual roles as both a researcher and as a counseling psychology doctoral student so that I could best maintain my researcher role rather than delving more into a counselor role. I addressed this consideration by being mindful and intentional of the various probing questions that I used during the semi-structured interviews. I approached these interviews as a researcher (e.g., a learner) who aimed to gain a fresh perspective on the phenomenon of post-9/11 student veteran PEI acculturation experiences rather than more deeply and repeatedly probing into more emotional topics in a way that was more akin to a counseling session. In doing so, I hoped to avoid the blurring of these roles and to ensure that my participants were interacting with me in a manner that is more consistent with the expectations set forth in the study's informed consent document. However, I encouraged additional mental

health care and provided participants with local mental health resources if they requested these services or if the need for these services was strongly indicated during their interview.

Summary

In this chapter, the intentionality, theoretical framework, methodology, and design of the present study all were described in detail. Constructivist theory was explained as the epistemological foundation for this study and how qualitative methods would be most appropriate for use in attending to answer the current research questions. Additionally, transcendental phenomenological theory was explained as the study design and how an understanding about the phenomenon of PEI acculturation among post-9/11 student veterans was derived from these participants' conscious, firsthand descriptions of their PEI acculturation experiences (Moustakas, 2010). The procedures for study recruitment, data collection, and data analysis each were described in detail and how the present study established trustworthiness to best ensure the credibility of its findings.

Next, Chapter IV will describe the findings of the present study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

I miss the clowns. I don't miss the circus.

- Jimmy

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to describe the essence of the acculturation experiences of

post-9/11 student veterans as they navigated within the dominant higher education culture of

civilian PEIs. Specifically, this study aimed to conceptualize the acculturation experiences of

post-9/11 student veterans by simultaneously identifying the components of their military

cultural identity that they decided to maintain or abandon in PEI settings as well as which

components of the dominant higher education culture that they decided to adopt or reject. A total

of 11 post-9/11 student veteran participants ultimately were recruited and interviewed for this

qualitative phenomenological study. The demographic information for these 11 participants will

be discussed later in this chapter.

The following research questions informed this qualitative study:

Q1   What are the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as
they navigate within the dominant higher education culture of civilian
postsecondary educational institutions?

     Q1a   Which, if any, aspects of their military cultural identities do post-9/11
student veterans choose to maintain or abandon during their acculturation
processes within the dominant higher education culture of civilian
postsecondary educational institutions?

     Q1b   Which, if any, aspects of the dominant higher education culture do post-
9/11 student veterans choose to adopt or reject during their acculturation
processes within civilian postsecondary educational institutions?

This chapter contains the results of the present study. First, a demographic description of all 11 student veteran participants will be provided to contextualize the stories that they provided. Second, each of these 11 participants will be introduced and a summary of their individual interviews will be provided. Lastly, the clustered themes that emerged during the data analysis will be presented to describe the firsthand accounts of these participants as they experienced the phenomenon of PEI acculturation among post-9/11 student veterans.

Participant Sample

A total of 180 civilian PEIs were contacted during the recruitment phase (see Ch. 3), which netted a total of 44 student veterans who initially expressed interest in participation. Of these student veterans, 22 did not meet full eligibility criteria (14 did not participate in any post-9/11 combat operations, five discharged from the military more than five years ago, one did not serve on active duty during their military service, one did not serve as an enlisted personnel, and one reported a part-time enrollment status), eight partially completed the eligibility questionnaire but did not provide sufficient information for me to fully determine their study eligibility, one did not provide accurate contact information, and two met inclusion criteria but did not respond to scheduling attempts.

That resulted in a total of 11 student veterans who met the study criteria and participated. All participants (a) were currently enrolled as fulltime undergraduate students at a PEI whose courses are predominantly instructed and attended in-person in the U.S.; (b) had served as an active-duty enlisted personnel within either the U.S. Army, Marine Corps, Navy, or Air Force prior to their enrollment at a PEI; (c) had served in at least one post-9/11 combat operation (e.g., Operation Iraqi Freedom [OIF], Operation New Dawn [OND], Operation Enduring Freedom [OEF], Operation Freedom's Sentinel [OFS]); (d) had at least one overseas deployment; (e) had

discharged from military service within the last five years; and (f) were not currently serving as an enlisted personnel and/or commissioned officers within any aforementioned branch of the U.S. military while enrolled as a student veteran.

Participant ages ranged from 24 to 40 years of age, with a mean of 32.27 years of age (*SD* = 5.09 years). Eight of these participants identified their sex as male and three participants identified as female. Ten of these participants identified their race as White/Caucasian and one participant declined to describe his race in both their eligibility questionnaire and during their individual interview, though he expressed alignment with minority racial identities during the individual interview (e.g., "And here I am in the middle of America with a 98% white school in academia. So I walked into a hornet's nest, I guess"). The length of time that these participants had served in the U.S. military ranged from three years to 21 years, with a mean of nine years (*SD* = 5.04 years). The number of overseas deployments reported ranged from one to six, with a mean of 2.36 deployments (*SD* = 1.57 deployments) and a mode of one deployment. The average length of each overseas deployment ranged from three months to 12 months, with a mean of 8.09 months (*SD* = 3.24 months). Lastly, the number of semesters that they had completed at a PEI at the time of the individual interview ranged from 0 semesters (i.e., currently completing their first semester at a PEI) to seven semesters, with a mean of 3.09 semesters completed (*SD* = 2.7 semesters completed).

Table 1 provides further demographic information for all participants, including their state of residence, branch of the U.S. military that they had served in, whether they had engaged in any inactive service during their military career (e.g., National Guard, Reserves), their highest rank achieved during the military, whether they had experienced any direct combat while in the military, whether they had been wounded while in the military, the highest level of education

they had received prior to their current PEI enrollment, and whether they had completed any college-level courses while serving in the U.S. military.

It is important to note that certain specific demographic information that was collected in the eligibility questionnaires has been intentionally omitted from the table and the within-case analyses. This information includes each participant's date of discharge from the military, each participant's occupation/occupations while serving in the military, the specific post-9/11 combat operation/operations that they engaged in, the specific locations that they were deployed to while completing their overseas deployment/deployments, and their current PEI. This decision to remove said info was made after the individual interviews were completed when it became apparent that several participants had served either in highly specialized occupations or identifiable roles while in the military or were currently attending small PEIs with specialized degree programs containing very few student veterans. While this demographic information provided greater depth and context to the PEI acculturation experiences of these participants, it ultimately was decided to intentionally omit this information to further protect the confidentiality of these participants given that the totality of this information may increase their risk of being identified by their peers or former colleagues in the military.

Table 1

Participants' Demographics (n = 11)

Participant*	Age	Sex	Race	Branch	Years of Service	Service Component	Highest Rank	Number of Deployments	Average Deployment Length (Months)
Alice	31	F	W	Air Force	12	Active-duty	E-6	3	4
Allen	40	M	W	Navy	21	Active-duty	E-8	4	7
Chase	27	M	W	Air Force	4	Active-duty	E-5	1	8
Jay	33	M	W	Marine Corps	11	Active-duty, Reserve	E-5	3	7
Jeff	33	M	W	Army	9	Active-duty, Reserve	E-5	1	5
Jimmy	25	M	W	Army	7.5	Active-duty	E-5	1	9
John	32	M	W	Air Force	10	Active-duty, Reserve	E-6	6	3
Lance	39	M	Declined	Army, Marine Corps	11	Active-duty, National Guard	E-4	2	12
Louise	24	F	W	Army	5.5	Active-duty	E-5	2	12
Mike	39	M	W	Air Force	3	Active-duty, National Guard	E-5	2	10
Tori	32	F	W	Army	5	Active-duty	E-5	1	12

*Pseudonyms

Table 1, continued

Participants' Demographics (n = 11)

Participant*	Combat Exposure	Wounded	PEI State	Highest Level of Education Achieved	Number of Semesters Completed at PEI	Completed College-Level Courses in the Military
Alice	No	No	NC	Associate's Degree	6	Yes
Allen	Yes	No	MD	High School/GED	2	Yes
Chase	No	No	IN	High School/GED	1	Yes
Jay	Yes	No	IN	High School/GED	5	No
Jeff	No	No	NC	High School/GED	0	Yes
Jimmy	Yes	Yes	CO	Associate's Degree	0	Yes
John	No	Yes	MI	High School/GED	1	Yes
Lance	Yes	Yes	IN	Master's Degree	5	Yes
Louise	Yes	No	WI	High School/GED	1	Yes
Mike	Yes	Yes	UT	High School/GED	6	Yes
Tori	No	Yes	SD	High School/GED	7	Yes

*Pseudonyms

Recruitment was terminated following the 11th interview as the present study was unable to recruit its ideal and maximum sample size of 15 participants following repeated and unsuccessful attempts to reinitiate contact with previously supportive PEI faculty and support staff (e.g., student veteran organizations [SVOs], student veteran liaisons) and PEI recruitment restrictions (e.g., PEI recruitment limited to studies conducted exclusively within their campus). Because of this, it is important to reiterate that the initially proposed recruitment range of 13 to 15 participants was an ideal goal, yet it was not definitive as the present study is exploratory given the understudied nature of this phenomenon (Ghosh et al., 2021). Furthermore, the present study did not aim to reach saturation given this exploratory nature and the uncertainty about ever reaching saturation given the breadth of the research questions. As such, the following findings will provide a greater understanding about the acculturation processes of post-9/11 student veterans while attending civilian PEIs; however, it will be important to recognize the limitations in their generalizability to the entire post-9/11 student veteran population as saturation could not be achieved in the present study.

Within-Case Analyses

This section will introduce each of the 11 participants in alphabetical order according to their chosen pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. These participants chose pseudonyms prior to data collection, and I chose to maintain these pseudonyms in order to preserve the authenticity of each participant's experiences as each pseudonym was selected at will when each individual was given the opportunity to choose. Because of this, it can be reasoned that each pseudonym held a certain significance to each participant which could not be known by me, yet may have assisted them in more fully describing their PEI acculturation experiences. As such, each participant's pseudonym was preserved and is presented as they had chosen at the time of

their individual interview despite the risk of decreased clarity between participant experiences. A summary of each participant's interview is included to provide additional information about the experiences that each one reported during the data collection process.

Alice

Alice (she/her/her's) is a 31-year-old White, female veteran who had completed six semesters at her current PEI located in North Carolina as of her interview. Alice served in the Air Force for 12 years, during which time she was deployed overseas three times, with each deployment lasting approximately four months. During her time in the military, Alice reached the rank of Technical Sergeant (E-6); she denied any exposure to combat. She decided to discharge from the military to pursue higher education rather than re-enlist and serve another overseas deployment. Alice did not serve in any inactive components (e.g., National Guard, Reserve) following the completion of her active-duty service, though she did complete some college-level courses while serving. Alice participated in the member check process and verified the accuracy of the content and themes that were derived from her interview.

Alice presented on time for her interview; she was casually dressed and appropriately groomed. She appeared to be engaged throughout the interview as she maintained a squared and open posture with consistent eye contact toward her camera. Additionally, she seemed to be friendly, cooperative, and generally pleasant during the interview as she tended to maintain a half-smile while speaking, joked, and laughed at times to amplify points of absurdity. Alice was expressive in her responses as her eyebrows lifted and her eyes widened when she described certain experiences that she enjoyed. Additionally, she tended to use hand gestures and gesticulate to accentuate her points, particularly when measuring the rhythm of her response (e.g., chopping down when describing lists or routines, broad sweeps to her left or right when

describing generalities). Conversely, she tended to furrow her brows or narrow her eyes when she described experiences of frustration or dissatisfaction and then would punctuate these points by shaking her head or tilting her head downwards with a brief sarcastic expression (e.g., eyes looking up, single eyebrow cocked, half-smile). The combination of Alice's expressions and gestures gave the impression that she was open about her experiences and genuine in her responses as there were little to no indications of affective restriction on her part. Additionally, these expressions and gestures of hers gave an overall light and airy feel to her interview, as if she was casually describing her transition experiences to a friend.

Alice described her transition from the military into higher education as one of practicality and convenience. She stated that she had chosen her current PEI because her husband had been medically discharged from the military, she planned to separate from the Air Force, and they had family in North Carolina. Thus, she decided to enroll at her PEI since it was the nearest one to their family and would entail the simplest transition for them at the time that they needed to move. Since enrolling at her PEI, Alice stated that her veteran status has been highly visible and salient since she is, "one of two undergraduates that are veterans" in her program. However, she described herself as having an "older sister" relationship with her peers as, "a lot of the undergrads see [her] as a bigger sister to them." Consequently, she laughed when she described how she once amazed her peers by openly asking for help when she did not understand an assignment:

> I am not afraid to ask any and all sorts of questions, which throws off some undergrads that I'm quite the vocal one… Oh my gosh. Yeah, it's been a whirlwind. Like, "[Alice], you're so brave. Go talk to that person. I think they're in the class." Like, you can talk to them too. It's okay, you are capable <laugh>.

Alice also stated that she had not expected to find herself in this "older sister" role and that it sometimes has led to uncomfortable conversations with her peers. Specifically, she said:

> A lot of undergrads will not ask me about my [military] experience. I've had one or two that are just, like, "Oh, you're in the military. How many people have you killed?" Oh, okay, great bedside manner <laugh>. All right man, we're not gonna engage in that kind of [thing], you need to gimme a couple drinks before we do that. Oh, wait, you're not legal [drinking age]. So no, that's not happening <laugh>.

Of note, Alice described how this "older sister" role and these interactions were not her initial PEI experiences as she was "able to blend in" due to "all [her] piercings" and hairstyle. However, given her age and identity as one of two veterans in her program, people eventually learned about her veteran status. "The cat's outta the bag now, so I don't really think I can blend in that much anymore."

Alice expressed having difficulties describing her experiences and opinions as a student veteran to her civilian peers and professors due to her fears that they would overgeneralize her beliefs to all veteran and military populations. For example, "I am afraid that if I say something that I'm gonna [be] the voice of the military, which just like, this is my, this is [Alice], this is Alice's personal perspective." This has meant that Alice tends to be reluctant to openly discuss her opinions at her PEI and instead is more mission oriented, as she is "just not composed enough to come across in a coherent and concise manner without rambling on and getting emotional" when discussing emotionally charged topics that she feels deeply about. One specific example was described as such:

> There's been a couple of case studies where there was one where the professor was analyzing AI and it was an ethics class, and it was AI in conjunction with the military and drone strikes, which that was very personal to me. And that has been the only class where I have had an actual physical reaction, where I had to walk outta the class and then I broke down. Which, yeah, I'm trying to get ahold of that.

For Alice, her presentation during these types of statements contrasted significantly with the ways that she presented in the interview, which suggested that she may have felt more comfortable speaking candidly and openly about her experiences given the confidentiality

associated with her responses. Throughout the interview, Alice repeatedly described having negative experiences with her civilian peers due to her difficulties navigating the cultural norms of higher education culture and how those experiences made her reluctant to speak more openly at her PEI. Alice made several comments about how her civilian peers did not offer her the "principle of charity" when her comments and behaviors conflicted with higher education norms and that these interactions made her feel ostracized and distanced from her peers. Alice described how these interactions were most noticeable when discussing political topics, as she said, "If you have a differing opinion [from them], they come at you with pitchforks. It's really no holds barred." During these interactions, she had "been roasted for [saying the politically incorrect word]" and that she did not believe her civilian peers had expressed understanding for her adjustment to the norms of higher education culture. She said, "I apologize. This is not natural for me. I'm working on it. And then they're like, 'Oh, well, you're military. So that makes sense.' Well done, there's a stereotype [about me]." Consequently, Alice described a general feeling of disconnection from her civilian peers which had made her transition into higher education culture more difficult than she had anticipated.

Despite these feelings of disconnection, Alice described her overall PEI experiences as "refreshing and different" and repeatedly expressed appreciation for her PEI's student veteran transition programs in helping her to transition into higher education culture. As such, it appears that Alice has been generally appreciative of her interactions at her PEI, yet she is trying to find a middle ground in which she can more authentically describe her experiences as a student veteran without the risk of aligning with military stereotypes or having her opinions misconstrued as being representative for others with military identities.

Allen

Allen (he/him/his) is a 40-year-old White, male veteran who had completed two semesters at his current PEI located in Maryland as of his interview. He served in the Navy for 21 years during which time he was deployed overseas four times, with each deployment lasting approximately seven months apiece. During his time in the military, Allen reached the rank of Senior Chief Petty Officer (E-8); he reported that he had been exposed to combat. He decided to pursue higher education following his retirement from the military. Allen did not serve in any inactive components (e.g., National Guard, Reserve) following the completion of his active-duty service, though he did complete a few college-level courses while serving. Allen did not participate in the member check process despite his initial expression of interest in doing so.

Allen presented on time for his interview and was casually dressed and appropriately groomed. He appeared to be engaged throughout the interview as he maintained a squared and open posture with consistent eye contact toward his camera. Additionally, he seemed to be serious during the interview as he tended to narrow his eyes, furrow his eyebrows, and he seldom smiled. Allen appeared to be relatively constricted in his expressions aside from his tendency to cock his head from side to side while speaking to emphasize specific words. This tendency generally contrasted with his other body movement as his shoulders and upper torso often remained stationary. When these movements were combined with the blurred background effect that he used during his interview, it gave his facial expressions an unreal quality as there would be slight movement blurs when he cocked his head, making his face look more like an oil painting. His responses were prompt and complete with his occasional inclusion of details about his personal life outside of his PEI experiences, which gave me the impression that he was generally mission-oriented in his answers, but also willing to offer glimpses of his personal life

to contextualize his responses. An example of this was when he was describing how certain concepts that he had learned in the military may spill over into his everyday life:

> My wife always says that I'm "senior chiefing" her, like I'm trying to kind of take charge of things that I probably just need to let play out. Whether it's with our children or homework, or other things.

This pattern of responses was fairly consistent throughout Allen's interview, with him responding promptly when asked a question, providing sufficient information in his response, but without deviating widely from the overall topic.

Allen's facial expressions and pattern of responses gave me the overall impression that the way I phrased and asked each interview question was critical as questions that aligned with the overall goal of the study may have prompted him to provide extensive details about his PEI experiences, while questions that may have deviated from that goal may have been met with vagueness or generalities. Because of this, I found myself experiencing increased internal pressure to ask follow-up questions when Allen included more generalities in his responses. However, I also felt increased tension when recognizing this pressure as I did not want to deviate too far from the interview protocol with follow-up questions. As such, I recognized how this pattern may be representative of how Allen navigates within PEI spaces when interacting with others he is not fully acquainted with, therefore providing a greater sense of genuineness to his responses.

Allen described his transition into higher education as a continuation of his previous education that he had received while in the military. He stated that, "[he] wanted something that was more technical" following his retirement from the military, as he had already received a bachelor's degree and a master's degree while serving in active duty. Specifically, he said:

> The other things I had done while on active duty [was] my undergrad was in information technology management, and I had an MBA. So I wanted something that was a little bit

different than those, something that I would enjoy doing. So, you know, when I was a kid I learned HTML and JavaScript and made websites, and when I joined the Navy [I] kind of had to put that off for a really long time.

As such, Allen described his pursuit of higher education as a means to rekindle a previous passion. However, he also described his coursework at his current PEI as more difficult than his previous coursework. Allen reported several factors that contributed to the difficulty of his current coursework, which included the increased rigors of his current PEI's academic standards and the specificity of his current major. However, he stated that the predominant difficulties that he experiences at his current PEI stem more from his need to juggle his responsibilities as a husband and a father along with those as a student. Allen specifically described this difficulty and how it contrasts with his previous PEI experiences as follows:

> You have to figure out how to make it work. Whereas I think previous to this, I could just sort of BS my way through some papers… I wish I had known it was gonna be actually difficult… So that first month was, you know, I had a newborn. It wasn't really a normal necessarily [*sic*] day, I was just sort of exhausted for a month straight and then I started school… and so a lot of times, you know, I might block three hours during my son's nap. I said, this is what I'm gonna work on class aggressively for those three hours. And then there's some days he just doesn't wanna nap. So I have to change the plans and, you know, that can be frustrating and stressful.

As such, Allen explained that he occasionally feels like he has been experiencing higher education culture for the first time now that he has retired and is pursuing his degree full-time. He said, "I haven't experienced too much of it, even when I was, to be honest, when I was doing my master's, I never felt like, 'oh, I'm doing higher education.'" Because of this, Allen stated that he has continued to notice the increased salience of his acculturation stress, which has reinforced his perceptions that he had transitioned into higher education culture for the first time while attending his current PEI.

Allen described feeling internal tension while interacting with his civilian peers when transitioning into his PEI. In general, he reported how he preferred to suppress his veteran

identity during his interactions with his peers as its expression was unconducive to his academic goals. He said, "I don't really bring [my veteran identity] up a lot. If I'm talking to a neighbor or something, it's not necessarily something that comes up. Whereas previously that was the center of everything I was doing." However, he also described how his veteran identity was most noticeable to others during groupwork and how he was able to manage his extensive workload. He said, "I think I've had some people ask me, you know, like usually the first one done with a lot of things. So like, 'How do you, you know, we have so much work, like what do you do?'" Following these interactions, Allen reported experiences of internal tension about how much of a leadership role he should take when trying to assist his peers and whether his being a leader during these interactions would be perceived by others as overbearing. He described this tension as such:

> I just kind of try to share things without sounding too professorial about it. You know, the military side of it, more just like front loading techniques and just some of the different things that I do that help, that are directly coming from my experiences in the military… I think in some group projects, you know, I'm pretty careful about it. Like, don't go into this group project and just take it over. Be a little bit respectful, be a little more standoffish, a little quieter, and, you know, kind of let some of the other personalities drive it. 'Cause I don't want to, I don't know that I don't want the former E-8 in me to be just coming out and sort of giving the military maybe a bad name. You know, playing into any kind of military stereotypes that someone may have.

Aside from this tension and his coursework, Allen stated that his transition into his PEI has, "been pretty seamless." Of note, he also described how he has already experienced a mental toll from his coursework and that, "[he] cannot wait to be done and move on and not have that kind of burden each week of knowing that I have assignments that are due. I'm a lifelong learner, but this might be the final run for me in terms of higher education." As such, Allen appears to have pursued additional higher education following his retirement from the military so that he

could pursue a degree in a topic that he was passionate about, but will look forward to practicing this topic outside of the stress, obligations, and routines of his PEI.

Chase

Chase (he/him/his) is a 27-year-old White, male veteran who had completed one semester at his current PEI located in Indiana as of his interview. Chase served in the Air Force for four years, during which time he was deployed overseas once with the deployment lasting approximately eight months. During his time in the military, he reached the rank of Staff Sergeant (E-5); he denied any exposure to combat. He decided to discharge from the military to pursue additional higher education so that he could retrain for a new career. Chase did not serve in any inactive components (e.g., National Guard, Reserve) following the completion of his active-duty service, though he did complete a few college-level courses while serving. Chase did not participate in the member check process despite his initial expression of interest in doing so.

Chase presented on time for his interview and was casually dressed and appropriately groomed. He appeared to be engaged throughout the interview as he maintained a squared and open posture while leaning forward on his desk with consistent eye contact toward his camera. Additionally, he seemed to be friendly and cooperative during the interview as he tended to maintain a half-smile while speaking, at times joking, and laughing about his experiences. Chase also tended to use hand gestures to accentuate certain words and phrases (e.g., broad sweeping motions, tapping on desk) which, when combined with his facial expressions (e.g., half smile, cocked eyebrow, head tilt), gave me an informal impression which to some might have been construed as cocky. His responses were complete, informal, and occasionally drifted into storytelling, which gave me the impression as if he was catching up with a friend about recent events in his life. Because of this, I found it relatively easy and relaxing to interact with Chase as

I could ask a single interview question and he would provide rich and extensive responses without any additional guidance. Of note, Chase tended to rotate his head back and forth gradually and horizontally while speaking as if he were scanning his surroundings; his gaze would briefly return to the center and toward his camera after each scan had been completed.

Chase described his transition into higher education as both a continuation of the previous education that he had received while in the military and as an opportunity to retrain for a career field that he was more passionate about. He stated that, "I got [his bachelor's degree] two months after I separated, so I never used GI Bill for it," and that he wanted to go back to school because, "I worked as a software engineer for a couple years… and the tech world wasn't really doing it for me. I didn't get much satisfaction out of that career." As such, Chase described his pursuit of higher education as a way of bettering himself and as a resource for him to obtain a career that was more meaningful to him. For example, he said:

> A couple of years of that I wasn't loving tech… But ultimately, you know, I feel whenever I was looking around at, you know, whether it's politicians or people that are high up in companies or high in administrative positions, you always saw a lot of [people with my degree]… I was born in '95, so the Recession was a critical era of my life. So flexibility in the market was always something that's been important to me, and so I saw [my degree] as a good route for obtaining that while also bringing some financial stability in the meantime.

Because of these life experiences, Chase stated that he is highly invested in the coursework at his current PEI as his first attempt at higher education prior to enlisting in the military "didn't go great for [him]." He said, "I just wasn't focused on school at that point in my life," and that he had completed online coursework while in the military to achieve a career that he had not enjoyed. Consequently, Chase described the progress that he has made in his coursework as follows:

> It's something that as a kid was foreign to me, and this is where I sound arrogant, but I don't mean it this way. But it's something like a career that almost reshapes the family

name in a sense. You know, my dad and mother both broke their, what's it called when you break the system or whatever? They were raised in poverty and horrible areas and stuff, and they did what they could to get my brothers and I just up a bit from that. So to kind of get to skip a generation is what it feels like. Like I probably should have been the engineer and then it should have been my kid that, you know, went a step further.

As such, Chase proudly described his military and PEI experiences throughout his interview as he perceived these experiences as necessary opportunities for the betterment of himself and his future family.

Chase described feeling a shared sense of purpose and comradery when interacting with his civilian peers as he transitioned into his current PEI. He described how "[my PEI] always to me felt really accepting and that even though there were kind of those differences, it never felt like people disliked each other." He noted that he was initially drawn to his current PEI because, "my admissions fellow was a Navy veteran, too" and that his admissions fellow had been stationed where Chase's girlfriend had grown up. He said, "It was kind of a freak circumstance, so that was something cool that stuck with me [and] with the school as well." Because of this, Chase repeatedly described how he had looked forward to starting the coursework at his current PEI and to feeling connected with his civilian peers. However, once he started his coursework, he noticed how his student veteran identity occasionally made him feel separated and disconnected from his civilian peers instead. For example, he said:

> We have a class of 150 students. There's only three vets, including myself. Don't love it. We [the student veterans] all had jobs two weeks into the semester, like the first people [to] lock up jobs. We're all at big [companies] in our summer, which is tough to do. We get more of us in here because we do well while we're here. But I definitely relate with [the other student veterans] a lot.

Aside from occasionally feeling disconnected from his civilian peers, Chase stated that his transition into his PEI was "pretty normal" and that he sees himself as, "a regular student that happens to be a veteran." As such, Chase appeared to be excited about the opportunity to pursue

higher education in a field that will advance his career prospects; he seemed to be highly engaged and passionate about his coursework.

Jay

Jay (he/him/his) is a 33-year-old White, male veteran who had completed five semesters at his current PEI located in Indiana as of his interview. Jay served in the Marine Corps for 11 years during which time he was deployed overseas three times, with each deployment lasting approximately seven months apiece. During his time in the military, Jay reached the rank of Sergeant (E-5); he reported that he had been exposed to combat. He stated that he had been forced to discharge from the military due to his inability to achieve his required promoted rank in time and that, "[he] was a little salty. [He] was really sad. [He] wasn't super happy about how [he] and the military broke up." However, he described how he could "only be salty about it for so long," and that he had decided "it's time to buckle down" for his pursuit of higher education. Jay explained that he had experienced a divorce and a period of homelessness following his discharge from the military, and that he believed higher education would provide him with greater direction and stability in life. Following his decision to pursue higher education, Jay has since served in the Navy Reserve. Additionally, Jay reported that he had experienced higher education culture for the first time as he did not complete any college-level courses while serving. Jay did not participate in the member check process despite his initial expression of interest in doing so.

Jay presented on time for his interview and was casually dressed and appropriately groomed. He appeared to be engaged throughout the interview as he maintained a squared and open posture with consistent eye contact toward his camera. Additionally, he seemed to be enthusiastic and jovial during the interview as he tended to maintain a broad smile while

speaking, chuckled about his experiences, and frequently nodded in agreement. Jay also tended

to use hand gestures to accentuate his points (e.g., brushing knuckles together, interlocked

fingers, "finger guns"), which when combined with his facial expressions, gave me the

impression that he was enthusiastic about his military and PEI experiences and that he earnestly

wanted to share his perspectives and opinions with me. This enthusiasm was clearly present in

Jay's movements as he appeared quite animated and kinetic during his interview. He tended to

swivel back and forth in his chair and shake his head while speaking to accentuate certain words,

though these movements did not appear to be overly exaggerative or demonstrative as they

instead were performed in a smooth, genuine, and passionate manner. Jay expressed his

awareness of these behaviors when he said, "I talk with my hands a lot, and that's kind of a

military thing where you want to get people's attention, so you point them around [a lot]."

Because of this, I found it relatively easy to interact with Jay as he provided extensive details

about his experiences as they related to the interview prompts and would then continue in his

responses until his thoughts about the prompts were fully exhausted. Again, I was quite struck by

his behaviors and how they gave me the impression that he was enthusiastic about his

participation in the study as he genuinely appreciated the opportunity to share his military and

PEI experiences with me.

Jay described his transition into higher education as a way of reorienting himself and as a

way to refocus his direction in life. He stated that, "I was homeless for a little bit, so the GI Bill

allowed me to push my education as well as get a steady check again [so] that I could get my feet

under me again." Jay did not linger on his experiences of homelessness, though it was clear from

his responses that the stipend he had received through the GI Bill had been essential for his

acquiring stable housing and completing his coursework. As such, Jay chose to study in a field

that he was both passionate about and was a growing sector so that he could secure the

occupational stability that would provide for himself and his son. Jay has since moved across the

country and transferred from the PEI that he initially attended to his current PEI because his

current PEI's program "is a higher-ranked program." He stated that he made this decision

because he wanted to acquire the training and credentials he would need for a strong career after

his graduation, which again reiterated his passion for a better life.

Despite the initial stressors he had encountered following his discharge from the military

and his transition to his current PEI, Jay did not describe having any particular difficulties

transitioning into higher education culture overall. However, throughout the interview he

repeatedly expressed his longing to return to the military as well as his sentimentality about his

experiences within the military and military culture. For example, he said:

> It's a brotherhood, man. It's a completely different world. When my ex-wife would ask, or my family asks, I struggle to fully explain exactly the connection you can have with guys while you're in the military. Because you're seeing them so much. You're so ingrained into the system. Almost like a college setting where you're living in a dorm… Same thing happens in the military. You're living in a barracks, which is basically a dorm, and you're seeing guys [from] eight in the morning until four at night. And then again, you're going to the dorm and seeing those same guys again. So it's a lot of ingraining brotherhood that makes it super easy to connect and hang out <laugh>.

Jay frequently described how he had attempted to recapture that feeling of brotherhood at

his current PEI, though he explained how his interactions with his civilian peers could not

recreate these experiences. Consequently, Jay did not report having extensive contact with his

civilian peers as, "I almost treat college like a job" and instead described how, "it's easiest to

kind of blend in and be less noticeable when lectures are happening just 'cause you get to kind of

sit there and be a part of the audience." Because of this and his role as a father, Jay stated that he

intentionally chose not to spend extra time on his PEI's campus or to engage with his peers.

Specifically, he said:

> It's just weird because I'm 33 and a lot of people in college are 18 to 22, so trying to connect to people with that big of an age gap is just a little weirdness… Again, because my age, and then I don't live on campus. I live an hour-and-a-half away from campus, so it's quite a drive. And so even the stuff like dorm life or whatever that most college kids kind of get being away from their home for sometimes the first time, things that I kind of miss out on just because, you know, I got my son and trying to take care of all that stuff so I don't even live near all that life. So it's a little… I'm not sure the word for it, but almost like disconnecting. That I'm halfway and I have one foot in but then one foot out.

These comments were congruent with his other statements during the interview where he described how he tended to prioritize his son's well-being and care since his son had additional needs that required his support and attention (e.g., medical appointments, rehabilitation). Because of this, Jay seemed to be less connected with his PEI and with his civilian peers, and instead more invested in fulfilling his obligations as a father. However, he repeatedly described how he missed the feeling of connection that he had with others while in the military and that he goes out of his way to try to rekindle that feeling. He said:

> A lot of people miss it and they just kind of wanna still have a little bit of that connection. And so sometimes I'll go over to the VA hospital here in [my PEI], or near [my PEI], just to talk to guys. You know, it's a little reminder I guess. Like, I miss the military, but I don't regret getting out as weird as that sounds. I just miss it sometimes. And so being able to go to the VA hospital and still get a little bit of that connection that I miss from being so ingrained into a system like that.

Jay stated that his desire to go to the VA likely stemmed from the manner in which he separated from the military. Again, he described how, "me and the military kind of broke up" when "[I] didn't get promoted in time and ended up getting out due to that." Jay said, "I was real sad… so a lot of it at the beginning of 2019, 2020, was kind of being a bad apple and kind of having a bad attitude about it." However, Jay later expanded upon his experiences with homelessness and how the COVID-19 pandemic had prompted him to transition into his current PEI. He said:

> My life wanted to turn into getting into higher education and wanting to get a college degree. A lot of that turned into, you know, it's just time to buckle down… I can't

continue to just be crappy about the situation. I just gotta grow past it and be able to adapt and fix it basically.

 As such, Jay appears to have experienced a renewed direction in life that stemmed from the rekindling of his priorities and motivations. With this, it appears that Jay has passionately progressed in his coursework at his current PEI so that he can forge a better life for him and his son. However, it also appears that Jay has attempted to identify substitutes within higher education culture for that feeling of connection and brotherhood that he had had with others while in the military so that he does not have to complete his coursework in isolation.

Jeff

Jeff (he/him/his) is a 33-year-old White, male veteran who was currently completing his first semester at his current PEI located in North Carolina as of his interview. Jeff served in the Army for nine years during which time he was deployed overseas once, with the deployment lasting approximately five months. During his time in the military, Jeff reached the rank of Sergeant (E-5); he denied any exposure to combat. He decided to pursue higher education so that he could retrain for a new career that was more congruent with his perceived skills. Jeff served in the Army Reserve following the completion of his active-duty service and he did complete college-level courses while serving. Jeff participated in the member check process and verified the accuracy of the content and themes that were derived from his interview.

Jeff presented on time for his interview and was casually dressed and appropriately groomed. He appeared to be engaged throughout the interview as he maintained a squared and open posture while sitting upright in his chair with consistent eye contact toward his camera. Additionally, he seemed to be friendly and cooperative during the interview as he tended to maintain a relaxed posture, smiled, laughed, and joked about his transition and PEI experiences. Jeff was quite animated given his extensive use of hand gestures (e.g., snapping, clasped hands,

broad sweeping movements) to accentuate certain words and phrases. The combination of his

gestures and his facial expressions (e.g., smile, raised eyebrows, smirk) fostered a relaxed tone to

the interview, giving me the impression that he was open and genuine about his PEI experiences

and that he found humor in these experiences. His responses were thoughtful, complete, and

occasionally pedantic as he would at times provide extensive details about his PEI experiences

(e.g., describing coursework procedures in detail to explain how his civilian peers perceived his

work ethic). Because of this, I found it refreshing to interview Jeff as he tended to maintain a

lighthearted approach to his acculturation and PEI experiences which translated to his apparent

ease throughout our conversation. Additionally, I sometimes found it difficult to follow along

with his descriptions about his PEI experiences as he would occasionally drift tangentially

toward more superfluous details about the minutiae of his coursework.

Jeff believed that his decision to attend his current PEI was an opportunity for him to

rectify his disappointing initial attempt at higher education and to retrain for a better career. Jeff

described how he initially had participated in a training program for managerial positions at

convenience stores as he neared his discharge from the military. After transitioning into his role

as a manager, Jeff explained that he had felt disillusioned about his career prospects and that he

believed pursuing higher education was more conducive to his career goals. He said:

> Working 60 hours a week for 50 grand was not worth it. So I was like, "You know what?
> I had the Forever GI Bill, now's the time." So I quit my job and then decided to go
> back… I had dropped out of college twice actually <laugh>, so it was a bit of like
> unfinished business.

As such, Jeff described his transition into higher education as a means of bettering himself and as

a way to obtain a career that was meaningful to him. Jeff explained how this transition was

difficult for him as, "at some point along the way, it just became easier to keep working because

I've been working for 10 years. So I wasn't ready to make such a drastic change and go all in on

school." However, Jeff stated that he had motivated himself to follow through on this transition by choosing a degree program that reflected his childhood passions. Specifically, he said:

> Life takes different paths. And so I ended up dropping outta college, doing the military thing, but when it came time for me to go back, I thought back on the things that I enjoyed. And so those memories from childhood came back. And then also I spent a decent amount of time consuming [degree] related media. And so I was just like, why not?

Given these reflections about his values, Jeff described how he was highly invested in the coursework at his current PEI as he hoped to achieve a career that he was passionate about and to rectify the unsatisfactory endeavors into higher education that he had experienced prior to his military enlistment. He added:

> I really didn't adjust well to college when I finally went. So I dropped out the first time after a semester-and-a-half. I was really encouraged to go to this other college, and I lasted a semester there. And it was about that time that I was considering dropping out again that I was like, "Man, I've really gotta get my shit together" <laugh>.

Because of this, Jeff described how the military had assisted him in the refinement of his career goals, motivation, and dedication, which had allowed him to persist in his current attempts at higher education.

Jeff described feeling slightly disconnected from his civilian peers upon transitioning into his current PEI. He described how, "they wanna be social, they want to have all these experiences, but I've had all of those already for the most part. So I don't need that anymore." For Jeff, these feelings of disconnection tended to stem from the age discrepancies that he had with his civilian peers. For example, he described one specific event:

> I went out for drinks with a couple people from a school club the other night. And I guess it has been quite some time since I had drinks with somebody in their twenties <laugh>. It's very different than when you have alcohol with people that are your own age. A 10-year difference is quite significant <laugh>. And I'm like, "Oh, was I that cringey when I was drinking in my early twenties?" <laugh>

Because of this, Jeff described how he tended to maintain a mission-oriented approach to his higher education. He said, "I'm there to learn, I'm there to get my education, get my degree, and then get a job." This mission-oriented approach seemed to strongly align with his overall educational goals of achieving a career that aligned with his childhood passions, though it also seemed to reflect his general disillusionment about higher education that he had experienced once he attended his current PEI. Jeff made several comments during the interview about how he had started to doubt the utility of higher education and its ability to provide the opportunities he needed to achieve a meaningful career. For example, he said:

> I still remember growing up, you go to school, go to college, get good job, you get the American dream… there's still a shred of truth to that, like that still kind of exists. But we have seen how that was a lie for a long time, essentially. 'cause that's not the case anymore. It's not our parents' generation where you could get a job outta high school and work and get a pension and retire and do that one job outta high school and be able to pay for their house to have a family. We don't have that anymore.

As such, it seemed that Jeff had learned from his previous experiences in higher education and that his current educational pursuits were aligned with his perceived worth and his childhood passions. However, Jeff also seemed to maintain reservations about his ability to connect with his civilian peers and whether his current educational pursuits will be able to produce his desired outcomes. Combined, Jeff appeared to be excited and passionate about his opportunity to pursue higher education in a field that will advance his career prospects, though he is cautious and plans to treat his coursework as a job so that he may more efficiently progress toward his career goals.

Jimmy

Jimmy (he/him/his) is a 25-year-old White, male veteran who was currently completing his first semester at his current PEI located in Colorado as of his interview. Jimmy served in the Army for 7.5 years during which time he was deployed overseas once, with the deployment

lasting approximately nine months. During his time in the military, Jimmy reached the rank of Sergeant (E-5); he reported that he was exposed to combat and that he had been wounded. He decided to discharge from the military to pursue additional higher education so that he could obtain a successful and less physically demanding career. Jimmy did not serve in any inactive components (e.g., National Guard, Reserve) following the completion of his active-duty service, though he did complete college-level courses while serving. Jimmy participated in the member check process and verified the accuracy of the content and themes that were derived from his interview.

Jimmy presented on time for his interview and was casually dressed and appropriately groomed. He appeared to be engaged throughout the interview as he maintained a squared and open posture while sitting upright in his chair with consistent eye contact toward his camera. Additionally, he seemed to be serious and cooperative during the interview as he tended to maintained a neutral expression, furrowed his brows, and nodded in agreement while listening to the interview prompts. Jimmy's facial expressions were mildly constricted (e.g., downturned corners of his mouth, direct eye contact) as he chewed gum and shifted his eyes back and forth throughout the interview. Jimmy used hand gestures seldomly, though when he did, they were brief and used to articulate broad, ambiguous themes (e.g., open hands in a circular motion). Additionally, he tended to use quick, brief head nods or head tilts to articulate specific words and phrases.

The combination of Jimmy's aforementioned expressions and gestures gave me the impression as if he was interacting with a superior officer, and that he was unsure about whether he could openly speak his mind with me. As such, his responses were complete, professional, and typically remained on topic until he realized he could speak freely. This was particularly

noticeable to me when I asked him about what he did not like about higher education culture. Upon my doing so, Jimmy paused to collect his thoughts, subtly smirked when I reiterated that his responses were confidential, and then proceeded to speak with an increased rate of speech once he realized that he could express himself fully without consequence. Because of this, I did not find myself feeling tense as I recognized that Jimmy was answering genuinely and earnestly. Instead, I enjoyed noticing the subtle changes in Jimmy's demeanor as he became more comfortable with expressing himself more fully as these behaviors likely mirrored his interactions with his civilian peers. This assisted me in better identifying the topics and concerns that he considered to be important to discuss as his behaviors that were associated with his comfort tended to be outliers to his generally neutral expressions. Additionally, it was refreshing for me to see the glimmer of relief in his eyes when he realized that he could express himself more openly and without judgment.

Jimmy described his transition into higher education as an opportunity to better himself and to achieve a career that was more congruent with his perceptions of self-worth. He stated that, "I was doing construction. It was exhausting. My body just hurt and I wasn't enjoying myself," and that he wanted to go back to school because, "it wasn't because I couldn't be successful in [construction], but I felt like I would have to work too long to do it… [my family] all had degrees and they all had a lot more success." As such, Jimmy explained how he decided to pursue higher education as his education benefits, "would make the steps to get [a degree] much easier," and that, "it just seemed natural to use the benefits available to me to go and get my degree." Because of this, Jimmy reported that he had maintained a rather disciplined and serious approach to his coursework so that he could achieve his mission of obtaining his degree.

Jimmy described how he had felt quite distant and disconnected from his civilian peers, especially when he compared the interactions that he had had with them to those he had had with his friends in the military. He said:

> I am in a lot of classes with people who are much younger than I am, and there's definitely [an age difference], granted it's not quite, you know, 15, 20 years like some of my other peers, but it's almost a 10-year difference between some of us. And it shows. They have a… I don't wanna say it's a false sense of superiority 'cause that's not quite right, but I think it's just a misplaced sense of confidence where they think they know more than they do. And it's frustrating because I think, "I know that I don't know that much," especially when it comes to certain subjects.

In contrast, he described the relationships that he had made in the military:

> A lot of my closest friends are still in the service, so finding time to just stay in touch is challenging… I think of times when I had to drive to [our mission location] for specific missions. But we're driving up there in these semi-trucks and it's terrible. You do it all in one day. It's about 15 hours in the truck, splitting between two people. You're tired, you're exhausted. But you're sitting there, you're either blasting music, telling jokes, you know, you find a way to make it enjoyable. And it's just the people that would go into it with these great attitudes that make it what it is.

Because of this type of contrast, Jimmy described his transition into higher education, "as a numerical scale, one to seven, I'd say it's about a five. It's not great every day, it's not great all the time, but it's really what I put into it. And I enjoy it. I have a good time." He made several comments throughout the interview about how he believed that the military had made him a well-rounded individual who was primed for success in higher education. For example, he said:

> I think [the military] made me more disciplined, more patient, and more open-minded. Not to say I was close-minded going in, but you don't understand where everyone comes from if you're just living in your little bubble. And you can get that experience at college, too. But I felt like it was far more pronounced in the military because you had people from every state. We had people from different countries in our military when I was going through. And the experiences are wildly different from these people who grew up, I wouldn't say exceptionally rich, but they were very well off, to people who were exceptionally poor and they had nothing else. So we all came together and we united in all of it. And it's a really cliche thing to say, but we were all green, didn't matter about anything else 'cause we were all united in this nonsense. And I think that's what allowed me to get to understand so many different things and so many different walks of life and appreciate them for what they were.

Jimmy seemed to maintain a high regard for the military given how he described his military experiences and friendships with reverence. These descriptions tended to contrast with his perceptions about his current PEI experiences as he frequently expressed criticisms about the attitudes and work ethic of his civilian peers. He described one such perception:

> A lot of [my civilian peers], you can see that they were raised in a city setting, and a lot of the socialism and communism stuff was preached very heavily to them. I don't want it to sound like I'm slamming on them because when you're taught all of that stuff from a very young age, it's gonna definitely lead you to believe certain things. But I find it's ironic because I think there's some cognitive dissonance where, oh, well, I'm racist and I'm talking about Jimmy being racist because [he's] a white man. Whereas they don't see that it's racist to identify someone simply because of the color of their skin. It's like, "Okay, do you not see the irony in your statement? Do you not see the issue with the statement?"

Additionally, Jimmy briefly described his slight resentment about how the military treated him following his separation from active-duty service. He said, "Everything that they say that is there for you, it's not there. You have the VA there, but ultimately the moment that you have that DD-214 in hand and you drive off that installation, that's it. The military's done with you as far as they're concerned." As such, Jimmy appeared to be taking this opportunity to pursue his educational goals seriously with an openness to interact with peers whose opinions differ from his own. However, he also seemed to be skeptical about his ability to connect with his civilian peers in the ways that he connected with others in the military, which suggests that he still longs for the relationships that he had while in the military.

John

John (he/him/his) is a 32-year-old White, male veteran who had completed one semester at his current PEI located in Michigan as of his interview. He served in the Air Force for 10 years, during which time he was deployed overseas six times, with each deployment lasting approximately three months apiece. During his time in the military, John reached the rank of Technical Sergeant (E-6); he denied any exposure to combat, though he reported that he had been

wounded at some point. He decided to discharge from the military to pursue additional higher education so that he could deepen his knowledge and understanding about the topics that he learned about while serving. John served in the Air Force Reserve following the completion of his active-duty service and had completed college-level courses while in the military. John participated in the member check process and verified the accuracy of the content and themes that were derived from his interview.

John presented on time for his interview and was neatly dressed and groomed. He appeared to be engaged as he maintained a squared and open posture while sitting upright in his chair with consistent eye contact toward his camera. Additionally, he seemed to be friendly and cooperative during the interview as he maintained a subtle half-smile while speaking, smirked while discussing his criticisms about his current PEI, and spoke softly with occasional pauses prior to answering the interview questions so that he could first collect his thoughts. John tended to use hand gestures to accentuate certain comments and phrases (e.g., tapping on desk, flipping hands up), which punctuated his words. The combination of John's expressions and gestures gave me the impression that he was genuinely open to sharing his PEI experiences with me, though his professional and occasionally pedantic demeanor also made it seem as if he was interviewing for a job. Of note, there were times when John recognized that he was providing superfluous details about his PEI experiences and subsequently self-corrected (e.g., "Sorry, I'm trying to stick… I get talking, I'm trying to stick to the talking points"). Because of this, I occasionally found it challenging to follow his answers as some of his responses were extensive and cumbersome yet rich in detail. To some, John's answers may have resembled passages from a textbook in that each sentence was carefully laid out, yet its totality of passages were dense and expansive.

John described his transition into higher education as a continuation of his previous education that he had received while in the military. He stated that, "during active-duty, I started an undergraduate program," and that, "initially I started that program with the intent to commission [in the military]." However, John also described how his education had been redirected as, "life things happened, timelines didn't line up very well," and that "I didn't finish my undergraduate degree until two years after I separated from active-duty, which was a 10-year period." Because of this, John described how he had been unsatisfied with his job prospects following his discharge from the military and that he wanted to go back to school for additional education so that he could achieve a job that he was passionate about. He said:

> I also felt that my experience up to that point was not sort of relevant enough for me to secure a job in a field that I, you know, really wanted to pursue. And so I decided that I would actually really benefit from, and probably actually really need to go to [my PEI] in order to sort of get more skills, the networking piece, just to be exposed more to the world.

As such, John described his return to higher education as one that would deepen his knowledge and experience with his field of study so that he would be better prepared for a meaningful career.

John described how his overall transition into his current PEI, "has not been terrible, not been super hard." He did not mention any specific concerns about his interactions with his civilian peers, though he did describe how, "I just have such a different life experience and there are ways in which that really help me… But there are also ways in which obviously, you know, there are times when I feel I'm pretty far behind <laugh> the curve timeline-wise." John repeatedly described how he felt that he was behind his peers in his career development and preparedness for a career in his field. He said:

> There was some sort of [these] feeling of FOMO [fear of missing out], a little bit of like, you know, I kind of left [the military and the Department of Defense] behind and it

seemed like such a quick decision. And a lot of people were questioning me… So even though I was still there, still in the area and working on my undergrad, which I was like, you know, why didn't I get this done? Like way before, you know, when I had <laugh> before I had a kid and when I was young and I had time. You know, all these things. It kind of forced me to really not go anywhere at first.

Additionally, he reported that he had been surprised by the work ethic of his civilian peers and how they did not share his beliefs about accountability. For example, he described one specific situation:

People who are like, "Oh yeah, I didn't go to that class." I'm like, "What do you mean you didn't go to the class?" That's just so common, you know? And it's not necessary to go to every single class all the time. But for me, that's such a weird [and] foreign thing. I'm auditing a class where my attendance doesn't even matter and I'm not getting a grade. And I missed a session and I had a heart attack about it because I forgot. I think that that would be very different in the military as far as people going [to class].

However, aside from these situations, John acknowledged how there are several components of his coursework that are, "automatic for me" as he can use experiences that he had learned during his time in the military. Additionally, John described how he had noticed how he tends to gravitate toward his fellow student veterans. He said:

I don't really actively network with other veterans, although that thing still happens very often, relatively often where I'll notice in some kind of way whether, um… For example, over the weekend I ran into someone who was in my, one of my classmates here at the school who is a Marine vet. And we had never spoken before, and I had seen something that said, "This guy [is a] Marine vet," and had a picture of him. And so I was like, you know, that's in here now. And I ran into him out just in the wild and started talking about that. And so that does happen.

As such, John appears to be trying to find his footing in a program that he is passionate about while experiencing lingering concerns that he is behind, and less prepared than, his peers. Additionally, there still appeared to be some lingering doubts for him about whether he made the correct choice in leaving the Department of Defense (DoD). Overall, John seemed to be content with his current functioning at his PEI and that his mission-oriented approach to his coursework has assisted him in progressing toward his educational goals.

Lance

Lance (he/him/his) is a 39-year-old male veteran; he declined to identify his race and had completed five semesters at his current PEI located in Indiana as of his interview. Lance served in both the Marine Corps and the Army for 11 years combined during which time he was deployed overseas two times, with each deployment lasting approximately 12 months apiece. During his time in the military, Lance reached the rank of Corporal (E-4); he reported that he was exposed to combat and that he had been wounded at some point. Lance served in the National Guard following the completion of his active-duty service and had completed college-level courses while in the military. He decided to discharge from the military to pursue additional higher education so that he could deepen his knowledge and understanding about topics he had learned about while serving. Lance did not participate in the member check process despite his initial expression of interest in doing so.

Lance presented on time for his interview. He was casually dressed and appropriately groomed. He appeared to be engaged throughout his interview as he maintained a squared and open posture while leaning back in his chair with consistent eye contact toward his camera. Additionally, he seemed to be friendly during the interview as he smiled, made jokes, and nodded in agreement while listening to the interview prompts. However, he also seemed to be somewhat guarded and occasionally even cagey throughout the interview as he tended to stroke his chin, furrowed his brows, and repeatedly asked me to specify the wording and the intent of the interview questions (e.g., "What do you mean by that?"). Lance also repeatedly asked me about who would have access to the study's data and findings. He asked, "Where are you publishing this?" when I asked him about what he had noticed about higher education culture. However, when he did not appear to be as guarded, his responses tended to be more informal and

occasionally supercilious, as if he were recounting his PEI experiences to a subordinate or an underclassman.

  Lance was quite expressive when he described his military and PEI experiences and exhibited a wide variety of facial expressions (e.g., raised eyebrows, widened eyes, scrunched face and nose, grimacing, smirking) at various times. These expressions contrasted with his other facial expressions of skepticism and suspicion when he appeared to be guarded (e.g., squinting, furrowed brow, tilted head). Lance used only a few hand gestures to punctuate his words and instead remained relatively still aside from swiveling back and forth in his chair and darting his eyes from side to side. The combination of Lance's expressions and gestures made it a bit difficult for me to gauge the purpose of our initial interactions as it seemed to be unclear what his motivations were for participating in the study, particularly if he had been suspicious and concerned about who would be able to read his responses. His comments and behaviors were especially confusing to me as he had requested a copy of the interview questions prior to his interview, and because he had asked several questions pertaining to his concerns before I had begun recording during the informed consent process.

  The culmination of Lance's expressions, gestures, and comments at times gave me the impression that he had been trying to analyze me and my role as the interviewer. Because of this, I found it slightly more challenging to interact with him as it seemed as if he was highly attuned and sensitive to any misstep; this increased the pressure I felt to describe the intent of each interview question as adequately and accurately as possible. This was particularly difficult as I did not want to articulate the intent of the interview questions in ways that may influence how he could respond to them. However, toward the end of the interview I grew a greater appreciation

for his more subtle and sly sense of humor, particularly his dry mocking of others' quirks that he

had observed at his current PEI.

Lance described his transition into higher education as a continuation of the previous

education that he had received while in the military. He stated that, "I got my undergrad and

master's [degree] on active duty," and that he had wanted to go back to school because his cousin

had suggested to him that he obtain further specialization in a particular field of interest. As such,

Lance recounted his pursuit of higher education as a means to achieving the highest quality

training that he could receive. Specifically, he said:

> When I got offers, I wanted to go to this other university and it felt like a really good fit
> and everything. But then [Lance's mentor] was just kinda like, "You know, [my PEI] is
> number one" <laugh>. So I remember I asked like my ortho surgeon, I was like, "How
> did you pick your medical school." She's like, "Go to the highest ranked one you can
> afford to go to." I'm like, well, if it's number one and they're paying for it, I can go there
> <laugh>.

Because of these suggestions, Lance stated that it took him a considerable amount of time

to learn the specific quirks and nuances of his current program as, "I was not really prepared for

[my program] and didn't understand the culture and how things work." He did not seem to view

his previous experiences in higher education culture and the degrees that he had earned as being

helpful in his transition given the specificity of his current program. He said:

> I'm a first-generation student, so a college degree at all is already a big deal for me. So I
> think that would've probably been the first thing. And then just understanding earlier
> what [my program] is, 'cause you know, if I had to know this much stats I would've
> probably just been on Khan Academy when I was running around organic farming on my
> own time with nothing to do.

As such, Lance almost described his transition into his current PEI as a series of coincidences

with his final decision to attend his current program having occurred by happenstance. For

example, he said, "I did really well and I got a bunch of offers and there was one guy that at

[different PEI] who was studying some of the same stuff I was studying. And I honestly didn't

realize he was interviewing me when we were having a conversation. Like that's how oblivious I was." Additionally, he described one such encounter:

> I just jumped on a train and went to Boston and started cold-calling folks. And I met one guy who turned out as a Dean, which dean's not a title or whatever. I don't know. You get a Ph.D., you're still a doctor, so he is called going by Doctor, not Dean, whoever. He's pretty chill and he told me he had like 20 minutes to talk. Then an hour-and-a-half later, he was like, "You know, I'm gonna put you in touch with this person. You need to do this…" He's like, gave me the checklist and the cheat code and everything. And I was like, all right, I can do this. So I just started doing all that.

The combined experiences that led to his current PEI gave me the impression that Lance had a general idea of what he wanted to do in higher education, though he was unsure about how to execute and achieve that vision. He described how he had been able to transition into his current program due to the guidance from those who were close to him and, in some cases, people whom he had met by pure coincidence. Consequently, Lance seemed to appreciate the support and direction that he had received from others which had assisted him in his decision to specialize in his field of interest.

Once Lance had transitioned into his program, he described how he had experienced difficulties with connecting with his civilian peers given his military experiences and his overall demeanor. He described how, "I can't take stuff seriously anymore because nobody's gonna die." Specifically, he said:

> [Professors] are like, "Hey, here's this stupid rule, do this training." And I don't feel like it <laugh>. If you can't tell me why it's not important, [I'm not doing it]. I guess [that's] a bit of a belligerent attitude. And it's kind of fun because I'm like, "What are you gonna do? Kick me out? Like who cares?" <laugh>... I enjoy class, I enjoy learning, but there's some stupid training about our emergency procedures during a tornado, which basically is just like, hide under a desk or something. And then this is where all the fire extinguishers are. And I'm like, "I don't even go on campus that much. I don't care where your fire extinguishers are and if there is a tornado, I'm probably gonna just be irresponsible and try to leave just because I really don't want my car getting tore up" <laugh>.

Lance reported that he had felt unmotivated to interact and form relationships with his civilian peers as he believed that their perceptions and concerns in life were incongruent with his. Because of this, he doubted that he could take their concerns very seriously and that his feelings of disconnect from them could create consequences that would negatively impact his progress toward his higher educational goals. Additionally, Lance described how, "there's something I do about the way I carry myself that a lot of people are intimidated by. So I don't know that it's culture as much as [my] presence. I'm also one of 2% of people here that have a tan, so that's like an extra layer." Combined, it seemed to me that Lance had taken a mission-oriented approach to his coursework. However, given his military experiences, he also seemed to consider his current PEI's routine as procedures that were at best comedic nuisances, and at worst were annoying impediments to his goals. Aside from these perceptions about his routines, Lance described how he had maintained an overall attitude of keeping his head down and persisting in his work, as, "I don't have relationships with people in the faculty 'cause I guess I pissed off one person and they went and talked to their friends and their friends and their friends. And next thing you know, it's like I'm blacklisted." Consequently, Lance appeared to be diligent during his current opportunity to pursue additional education, yet he had been reluctant and suspicious of the intentions of other civilians given that he may have few supports and resources in his current PEI's program.

Louise

Louise (she/her/her's) is a 24-year-old White, female veteran who had completed one semester at her current PEI located in Wisconsin as of her interview. Louise served in the Army for 5.5 years during which time she was deployed overseas twice, with each deployment lasting approximately 12 months apiece. During her time in the military, she reached the rank of

Sergeant (E-5); she reported that she had been exposed to combat. She decided to discharge from the military to pursue higher education so that she could retrain for a new career that was more congruent with civilian occupations. Louise did not serve in any inactive components (e.g., National Guard, Reserve) following the completion of her active-duty service, though she did complete college-level courses while serving. Louise did not participate in the member check process despite her initial expression of interest in doing so.

Louise presented on time for her interview; she was casually dressed and appropriately groomed. She appeared to be engaged throughout the interview as she maintained a squared and open posture while leaning forward in her seat with consistent eye contact toward her camera. Additionally, she seemed to be friendly and cooperative during the interview as she maintained a smirk, laughed, joked, and smiled while listening to my interview questions. Louise was particularly expressive with her facial expressions when she described certain military experiences that she enjoyed, which contrasted with her furrowed brows, frown, and clenched jaw when she discussed other specific topics (e.g., trust in others while in and outside the military). Additionally, she tended to use extensive hand gestures (e.g., quick circular movements, rigid slice through the air) to accentuate certain points and words that she wanted to emphasize. The combination of Louise's various expressions and gestures gave me the strong impression that she had been open and genuine with me in discussing her current PEI experiences and that she had earnestly wanted to provide sufficient details about her life to better contextualize her acculturation experiences. However, they also gave me the impression that there were specific components of her military and PEI acculturation experiences that she did not feel as comfortable to more fully disclose to me. Because of this, I found it relatively easy and relaxing to interact with Louise as I trusted that she would adequately answer my interview

questions and that she also would provide clear indications about topics that she otherwise would prefer not to discuss.

Louise described her pursuit of higher education as an opportunity for her to transition into a career field that was more applicable to her interests. She stated that, "my job that I had in the military was not very transferrable to civilian life," and that, "I needed to get education in something in order to get a job in the civilian world." As such, Louise described her pursuit of higher education as a way for her to learn applicable skills that would offer her improved job prospects. Because of this, she stated that she believes that her program, "seemed like an easy in to federal agencies to get a job," and that her current program will produce, "a degree that would actually be useful." This gave me the impression that Louise had maintained a more pragmatic approach to her education, which again was reflected in her responses to the interview questions as she gave few details about the reasons that led her to pursue higher education aside from those listed above.

Louise described how she had felt an initial sense of disconnection and isolation from her civilian peers as she had started her current transition into higher education. She explained how she had to transition from, "a bubble in the military" to a relatively strange and more unknown environment. She said:

> I was kind of weird 'cause you don't quite feel like you… at least [to] me, I didn't feel like I quite belonged with people I went to school with. It was hard to figure out connections, because then there's an age gap as well that you're dealing with. And especially myself with developing, after you've done stuff like that, and then you come to the civilian world and you're dealing with you know, no offense, but college kids that are younger, they just have different priorities and thoughts in life. And from the stuff I dealt with, I was like, so many of these things are just not important, you know?

Because of this gap in age and experiences, Louise further described how she had relatively few connections with other students at her current PEI. For example, she said:

I kind of just feel strange, like I said before. You don't feel like you belong and that you… it's just confusing how other people behave and what their priorities are in life. And it does make you wonder, like when you've done such a serious job and a job where people's lives are literally on the line and then you go to doing schoolwork. You're like, "This is nice and all, but this is a little bit of bullshit, right?" Like this isn't real. Like we're studying, cool. But isn't this kind of bullshit? <laugh> So it's a weird perspective and you kind of have to let go of. A lot of times with whether it's deployment or stateside, like you're always doing stuff where your adrenaline's going and like, okay, you gotta be in the zone.

However, Louise also expressed a limited degree of engagement with other student veterans at her current PEI. She said, "It's strange, but I would say [it's] easier to connect with a community that [shares perspectives], there's like-minded veterans that you can connect with." Aside from these situations, she stated that, "it's gonna be fine <laugh>" while she had transitioned into higher education. She said, "It's scary and it's weird, and it's uncomfortable and it's strange and it feels like you're an outsider and you're trying to break into this world that you don't quite belong in, but you can do it." As such, Louise appeared to be in the process of reconciling with her current transition into higher education and identifying how she can find an increased sense of belonging at her current PEI. However, she also appeared to be highly motivated and focused on her degree so that she could accomplish her educational goals.

Mike

Mike (he/him/his) is a 39-year-old White, male veteran who had completed six semesters at his current PEI located in Utah as of his interview. He served in the Air Force for three years during which time he was deployed overseas twice, with each deployment lasting approximately 10 months apiece. During his time in the military, he reached the rank of Staff Sergeant (E-5); reported that he was exposed to combat and that he had been wounded at some point. Mike served in the National Guard following the completion of his active-duty service and had completed college-level courses while in the military. He decided to discharge from the military

to pursue higher education because his civilian employer at that time had offered to pay for his additional schooling that would advance his career. He participated in the member check process, verifying the accuracy of the content and themes that were derived from his interview.

Mike presented on time for his interview. He was casually dressed and appropriately groomed. He appeared to be engaged throughout our time together as he maintained a squared and open posture while leaning forward and resting his arms on his desk with consistent eye contact toward his camera. Additionally, he seemed to be polite and cooperative during the interview as he maintained a slight half-smile while speaking, chuckled when he made a joke, and frequently nodded while listening to my interview questions. Mike tended to furrow his eyebrows and clench his jaw when using hand gestures to accentuate certain words and phrases, but these gestures were relatively brief and restricted in motion (e.g., brief circular waves, tapping the side of his hand on the desk). The combination of his expressions and gestures gave me the impression akin to as if he had been interviewing for a job position, and that his responses to my interview questions were elaborations upon details from his resume. However, it is important to note though that Mike did provide rich details about his military and PEI experiences which suggested that he was quite aware of how much information was required to sufficiently describe his acculturation experiences. Because of this, I found it to be relatively easy to interact with him as I could usually ask an interview question and feel confident that he would adequately describe his experiences. However, I also recognized that he likely would not deviate from the interview prompt in any significant way.

Mike described his transition into higher education as being his second chance to pursue and achieve a college degree. He stated that, "the first time I went to college before I enlisted, it was a disaster. And basically I dropped out and enlisted." Mike further explained that, "I was

very undisciplined and disengaged before I entered the military," and that this was the reason, "why I failed out and had to enlist." As such, he recounted how he had participated in a training program while serving in the military to help facilitate his transition into a civilian career after the military. Once he had been discharged from the military, Mike stated that he had accepted his employer's offer of financial assistance to attend his local PEI so that he could have another opportunity to obtain his degree and to advance his career with the company. While reporting these experiences, Mike tended to articulate having a fairly pragmatic approach to his transition into higher education as he wanted to maximize his opportunities for success while also remaining within the parameters of his employer's financial assistance. Specifically, he said:

> I chose the school because it's just local to right here. I figured if I was ever gonna have to take in-person classes, it'd be more convenient to be somewhere closer. I also know that there were online-only schools available, but some of the degree choices were limited on those. So just to open myself up to the greatest number of opportunities, I just figured a closer school would be, easier, you know, just open more opportunities, I guess. And as far as degree program, well, the stipulation from the employer was that I choose something that was somewhat mission-related.

However, Mike then recalled how he had later resigned from that company, which then afforded him the opportunity to choose his major himself. Because of this, he recounted how he had become highly invested in the coursework at his current PEI as it was, "something that better aligns with my interests" and that, when compared to his first attempt at higher education, has, "been easier in the sense that I'm not struggling." As such, Mike tended to report having a relatively positive view of his PEI experiences throughout the interview as he perceived said experiences as an opportunity for him to finish the tasks and to succeed with the goals that he had been unable to previously complete.

While transitioning into his current PEI, Mike acknowledged how he had looked forward to connecting with people outside of the military and to being able to expand his social network.

Unfortunately, he reported that he had experienced noticeable feelings of disconnection from his

civilian peers at his PEI. He said:

> The opinions and perspectives of students who have never been in the military, don't
> know anything about it, are very… they're different. Jarring, almost. Some of that is
> probably due to just the age difference. You know, being someone who did 12-ish years
> in the military and then got out and then went to school seven years after that. I'm much
> older than most of my classmates, so I don't have many experiences with classmates that
> are my age, not in the military. So it may be an age thing versus a military [thing]. But
> yeah, just their perspectives on the world and life and how things work are very different
> than mine.

Because of these interactions with his civilian peers, Mike described how he tended to

have a relatively small group of friends who were better aligned with his military identity and

experiences. He said, "All of my friends are either veterans that work in contractor [*sic*] or

defense type roles or work for the DoD. So my bubble is very small in that regard." However,

Mike also acknowledged how this "bubble" of his may be due to his limited contact with his

civilian peers. He stated that, "I don't go to class in-person very often" due to the nature of his

coursework and that, "I've only been onto the campus [a few times]. I could probably count

maybe just 15, 20 times total." As such, he tended to describe his interactions with his civilian

student peers as having occurred either virtually (e.g., Zoom) or during brief in-person breakout

groups. Mike explained how these interactions had been disappointing to him because, "one of

the things that I looked forward to when I first started going to school was… maybe I can find

people to talk to that are different because living in a bubble is not good for personal growth and

understanding." He added how his obligations outside of his coursework had further exacerbated

his feelings of disconnect as he otherwise had limited opportunities to interact with his civilian

peers, and that what interactions he could cultivate had felt unproductive to him. He said:

> I ran into the whole time and, you know, how that was gonna fit in. And I was like, I'm
> not gonna just take time outta my day to go sit at the student union and flag down
> passerbys and be like, "Hi, what do you think about life?" And then in class, if we get a

breakout group to do a discussion, we're really just discussing the course material. We don't really talk about our backgrounds and our lives. 'Cause like I said, I'm not there to make friends. I'm not there to build relationships. I have a good group of friends and coworkers, you know, people in my life. Like, I don't need to also make friends with a bunch of 18- and 19-year-olds. If I wanna do that, I can go to my coworkers, which I have much more in common with.

Consequently, Mike described how these interactions with his civilian student peers had cultivated a mission-oriented approach to higher education for him in that he no longer prioritized the expansion of his social network via his PEI. Instead, he explained that he is now content with having more limited contact with his civilian peers as it has allowed him to focus almost exclusively on his coursework. He reported that he still has maintained his enthusiasm about having a second chance at higher education, though his enthusiasm about his current PEI and his civilian peers had become tarnished as his daily PEI experiences grew to be increasingly incongruent with his initial expectations. He said, "I really have walled myself off. Not in a, like, I can't handle it, I don't wanna do it. I don't care about school." He clarified that, "I don't care" about the more superfluous components of his current PEI such as self-exploration and that, "I'm here to take these classes, meet these requirements, and that's it." As such, Mike appeared to have been initially excited about his new opportunity to pursue higher education in a field that he was passionate about, though his initial enthusiasm seemed to have been slowly eroded by his disappointing interactions with his civilian peers. Consequently, he seemed to since have cultivated a more mission-oriented approach to his education, which consisted of his increased distancing and separation from his civilian peers and from his current PEI.

Tori

Tori (she/her/her's) is a 32-year-old White, female veteran who had completed seven semesters at her current PEI located in South Dakota as of her interview. Tori served in the Army for five years, during which she was deployed overseas once for approximately 12 months.

During her time in the military, she reached the rank of Sergeant (E-5); she reported that she had been wounded at some point. She decided to discharge from the military to pursue higher education to give herself a clearer sense of direction in her life. Tori did not serve in any inactive components (e.g., National Guard, Reserve) following the completion of her active-duty service, though she did complete college-level courses while serving. She did not participate in the member check process despite her initial expression of interest in doing so.

Tori presented on time for her interview. She was casually dressed and appropriately groomed. She appeared to be engaged throughout our time together as she maintained a squared and open posture while sitting upright in her chair with consistent eye contact toward her camera. Additionally, she came across as friendly yet serious during the interview as she smiled and laughed when she joked about the absurdities that she had experienced while attending her current and previous PEIs, though she also tended to furrow her brows and slightly frown when describing the majority of her military and PEI experiences.

Tori frequently arose from her seat throughout the interview to tend to her dogs; this frequent movement and changes in her background that occurred each time she sat back down juxtaposed with her relatively consistent, neutral, and serious expressions. She also tended to use hand gestures (e.g., broad sweeping motions, waving in circular motions) to accentuate certain words and phrases she used, though these gestures were infrequent and seemed to be used sparingly by her to articulate certain significant points nevertheless. The combination of Tori's expressions and gestures gave me the impression that she was quite open and genuine with me about her current PEI experiences and that she earnestly wanted to provide sufficient details about her life to contextualize her overall PEI acculturation experiences. Because of this, I found

it relatively easy to interact with Tori as I was confident that she would provide heartfelt descriptions about her military and PEI experiences.

Tori described her transition into higher education as a second chance for her to receive her college degree. She stated that, "this is my second attempt at higher education since I've been out," and that she wanted to go back to school because, "I felt very isolated [at my first PEI after discharging from the military]. It was a really terrible experience. Just not a good culture fit for me." Tori recounted how she had felt disappointed by her initial PEI experience and that she had needed to move and start a new job to achieve the sense of direction in her life that she had hoped higher education would have provided for her. During this period, she recalled how she had started seeing a therapist and that it "was really, really transformative for me" as she had the opportunity to truly feel connected with someone outside of the military. Consequently, she explained how she had felt refreshed and reenergized to go back to school and accomplish her educational goals as a result. She said:

> I went and saw her for a year-and-a-half… And I still don't quite know what I wanna do, but I ended up applying, going back to school this time for [my field of interest] just because I was like, if I can do even half of what she did for me, for somebody else, that feels like a good pathway. So I still don't know what that's gonna look like, but that's why I'm here now.

As such, Tori reported her pursuit of higher education as a means of furthering her renewed interest in a meaningful career following the support that she had received from her therapist. Because of this, she conceded that she had been highly invested in the coursework at her current PEI given her dissatisfaction with her initial PEI experiences. She recalled, "Just for example of how isolated and distant I was at that school, to this day, nobody's called me. No one noticed that I didn't even finish the semester. Nobody cared. There's been no follow-up." Consequently, Tori tended to communicate her military and PEI experiences quite seriously as

she seemed to have truly wanted to convey how she, "wasn't doing well mentally" at her first

PEI, and that she had experienced significant emotional growth since transitioning into her

current PEI.

Tori recounted these initial transition difficulties further by articulating how she had been

unaware that she had been struggling during her transition into higher education culture. She

conceded that the transition was, "really, really hard. Harder than I expected" to separate from

the military. Specifically, she said:

> I think the biggest thing is the first year that I started at [my current PEI]. I got involved
> with SVA [Student Veterans of America] and so I started talking to other veterans again.
> And that's the first time beyond my NCO [noncommissioned officer] that I've been
> around any veterans at all since I got out. And I didn't realize until talking to them how
> much… feeling like you're kind of failing and you don't know who you are or what
> you're doing, how much that is the norm and not the exception. 'Cause that kept me from
> talking to anybody or asking for help for a long time because I thought I was the only
> idiot who, like, couldn't figure this out, you know?

Tori recalled how these conversations with other student veterans had helped to

normalize her feelings of inadequacy and how her interactions with her student veteran peers

ultimately had been transformative for her. She articulated how she had, "started making friends

and talking to everybody at school" at her current PEI after realizing that she was not alone in

her PEI transition experiences. She recounted how freeing it had felt to realize that, "we all

basically had the same story of getting outta the military and hitting a point where it basically felt

like you fell off a cliff." An example of this was when she was confessed how, "sometimes I feel

like I'm a bit too much for the regular world, you know? I'm working on that too, on trying to

figure out how do I soften and fit in [with my civilian peers] and still be me." Tori explained

how, "I wanna leave behind some of the intensity, some of the aggression that inherently is

required for being in the military." Consequently, she acknowledged how this had resulted in her

tendency to reserve her friendships to fellow student veterans who may be more apt to

understand this intensity rather than for her civilian peers who instead may be repelled by it. Because of this, Tori stated that most of the friendships that she had developed at her current PEI had been with fellow student veterans, and that she does not tend to interact with her civilian classmates given her belief that they would not understand or welcome her various perspectives as a student veteran.

Tori articulated how these interpersonal patterns were likely developed during her initial PEI experiences as she did not enjoy her interactions with her civilian classmates. She said, "my last school was really tough 'cause I was kind of the only non-traditional student there. It felt, and I don't even wanna get into it, but it just didn't feel good. I feel [*sic*] very ostracized there." Given her feelings of disappointment with those prior interactions, Tori appeared to then have been excited about having another opportunity at higher education. She acknowledged how she had appreciated the opportunity to have a start fresh at her current PEI with other student veterans who had normalized her transition experiences. Consequently, she seemed to have been excited about this new opportunity, though she also seemed to be cautious and slightly reserved due to her concerns that she might again encounter similar experiences of rejection and isolation while progressing in higher education.

Synthesized Themes

The following section outlines the eight synthesized themes that emerged during the data analysis of the meaningful and clustered horizons of all 11 participants. These eight synthesized themes emerged through the distillation of these meaningful and clustered horizons via the three phases of Moustakas's (2010) descriptive transcendental phenomenological approach, which identified representative descriptions that encapsulated the meaning and essences of these participants' acculturation experiences within civilian postsecondary educational institutions

(PEIs). Their specific theme names were chosen in an effort to provide themes that not only accurately captured these participants' narratives, but that also were readily understandable to stakeholders within PEIs (e.g., fellow student veterans, PEI faculty and administration, PEI healthcare providers).

Each of these themes have been clustered to address their corresponding research question. In doing so, these themes will describe the acculturation experiences reported by these participants, particularly (a) the acculturation stress experienced by post-9/11 student veterans as they enter the higher education culture of civilian PEIs, (b) the acculturation strategies used by post-9/11 student veterans to address and resolve their acculturation stress, (c) the military values that post-9/11 student veterans chose to retain when entering into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs, (d) the military values that post-9/11 student veterans chose to abandon when entering into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs, (e) the higher education values that post-9/11 student veterans chose to adopt while attending civilian PEIs, and (f) the higher education values that post-9/11 student veterans chose to reject while attending civilian PEIs. Each research question will be listed followed by its corresponding themes and descriptions. In all, eight synthesized themes with three subthemes are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Research Questions and Synthesized Themes

Research Questions	Synthesized Themes
Q1: What are the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as they navigate within the dominant higher education culture of civilian postsecondary educational institutions?	1: Acculturation Stress 1.1: Loss of Stability 1.2: Loss of Identity 1.3: Navigating New Norms 2: Separation as Stability 3: Marginalization 4: Integration
Q1a: Which, if any, aspects of their military cultural identities do post-9/11 student veterans choose to maintain or abandon during their acculturation processes within the dominant higher education culture of civilian postsecondary educational institutions?	5: Retained Values 6: Abandoned Values
Q1b: Which, if any, aspects of the dominant higher education culture do post-9/11 student veterans choose to adopt or reject during their acculturation processes within civilian postsecondary educational institutions?	7: Adopted Values 8: Rejected Values

Theme 1: Acculturation Stress

To better understand the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans, one first must recognize the nature of the acculturation stress that can be experienced when transitioning into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. Every participant described experiencing a noticeable and distinct transitional process following the completion of their military service, and these transitions were typically associated with the stress that arose from changes in their routine, identity, and culture. Among these participants, this stress seemed to be most pronounced when entering into the higher education culture of PEIs as the majority of these participants transitioned into higher education shortly after their discharge from the military. For most, this

transition was characterized by difficulties in adjusting to the new settings, expectations, and obligations of PEIs. For example, Tori described her initial transition into higher education culture as, "Hard. Really, really hard. Harder than I expected." This perspective was echoed by Louise, who reported her transition as such: "It's scary, and it's weird, and it's uncomfortable, and it's strange, and it feels like you're an outsider and you're trying to break into this world that you don't quite belong in."

These sentiments were expressed to some degree by each participant as they were keenly aware that their service within the military would end at some point and that they would experience a transition out of the military, yet each one was surprised by the extent of the stress that was associated with their transition into higher education culture. For Lance, he stated that, "When you're getting out of active duty, you don't think about yourself. Like once you finish TAPS and then sign your stuff and you're done, you're like, cool, I'm transitioned. And then you go cash the reality check of, no, you're not <laugh>." As such, the stress experienced by these participants tended to be associated with the discrepancies between their expectations about the number of life changes and disruptions that they would experience while transitioning and the actual number of adjustments that they would need to enact when entering higher education culture. Jay said, "It's a little jarring trying to get your feet under you again to blend in," while John described his transition and stress as such:

> It was very quick and fairly jarring. I was really conflicted. I'm very prone to feelings of obligation or duty, and I was fairly conflicted about the notion of separating for what felt like kind of selfish reasons when I was a really high performer and sort of abandoning <laugh> the unit, abandoning the mission. All of these things were kind of difficult for me.

The specific factors that contributed to this stress will be described in greater detail while discussing each subtheme of acculturation stress. However, it is important to note that for many

of these participants, this stress was not resolved by eventual prolonged exposure to the higher

education culture of PEIs. As such, it is important to understand the shared factors that appear to

contribute to the acculturation stress and how these participants have attempted to resolve this

stress as the effects of this stress tend to be experienced throughout their time within higher

education culture.

Theme 1, Subtheme 1: Loss of Stability

Each participant contrasted their current PEI experiences with their military experiences,

particularly in the degree of routine, structure, and support that they have received. As described

in previous chapters, military culture is typically characterized by a rigid hierarchy, clear

procedures, and the continuous reinforcement of various expectations and protocols. In this

culture, each participant described having a degree of stability that they could depend on during

their military service. This environment was recalled by Jay:

> It's just way stricter in the military. It's very lined up. You're told where to be, when to be, how to be, what to wear, all those things. The military does a very good job of making it easy for the average person. And you kind of lose out individuality. You gain individuality getting out. But you lose a lot of that structure of ensuring that your needs are very, very met. The military does do a very good job at that, just in knowing that I didn't know how to rent an apartment. I was 30 getting outta the Marine Corps, and I was like, I don't even know how to fill out an apartment application because the military takes care of all that stuff for you. So you lose a lot of that.

Each participant expressed complaints about the restrictions they experienced while in

the military, though each also described a degree of comfort and security they experienced by

being able to rely on the structure of the military. Jimmy said:

> In the military, you typically know exactly what's going on every day. As long as you're in the right place, the right time, in the right uniform, you're set. 85% of my success was dictated by those three things. The other 15% was typically just performance... And it was nice because I think there was someone just willing to take care of us. And now I don't have that as much. I still have people who care about me, but it's not quite the same as the military.

Through these expectations and routines, these participants described feeling a degree of predictability and stability in the military which they could depend upon. Every day they could expect to wear the same outfit, to see the same people, to perform the same job, and to experience the same stressors with occasional, brief variations that would quickly return to the norm. Louise expressed similar perspectives as did Jimmy when she said:

> The military is not a place where your individuality is cherished or they're pushing you to explore things. You're there to do a job, and you gotta make sure you do that job. There's lives on the line. So you have to keep things very regimented and strict because it's lives in danger.

As such, these participants described the expectation within military culture that one would relinquish a degree of personal choice and individuality for the routine, stability, and support of a shared mission and identity. To foster this stability, Alice recalled how life within the military "was very close knit whether you liked it or not." John articulated further:

> You're totally a foreigner in this new place. And the military does a really good job in my experience of acknowledging that and generating a community which is able to absorb new members very quickly into a feeling of familiarity, or a feeling of, you know, this isn't that scary. Like, you're with us, kind of thing. I think that that comes from culture, I think it comes also from process.

These participants repeatedly explained how the military had several processes that quickly integrated newcomers into its culture and how these processes provided stability at the expense of their individuality. Because of this, each participant reported experiences of stress while transitioning into higher education culture due to the loss of the processes that fostered the stability they had grown accustomed to within the military.

The predominant stressor that was described by these participants while they transitioned into higher education culture was the sheer contrast between the stability that they had experienced within the military and the encouragement of self-exploration that they then received in their PEIs. Louise reported her experience as such:

The initial transition of going from a bubble in the military where you're just surrounded by like-minded military people. Everyone kind of operates in the same style, the same clock, the same punctuality. And then transitioning over to civilian where it's just not. People are just doing what they do, and you gotta let them do what they do because in the military you could tell people what to do, but in this world, no, you just gotta leave it.

The loss of shared similarities in perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs while transitioning into a new culture appeared to be salient among these participants as these similarities could promote perceptions of stability and guidance. Allen said:

My last station in the military, it was either people that were currently in the military or people that have retired from the military. So I was basically around it all the time for the last 20 years. This is the first time I've really not been around it, not around people that have been in the military.

Nearly every participant described experiencing initial stress and confusion when they transitioned into the higher education culture of PEIs as they did not receive the direction and guidance that they had grown accustomed to while in the military. Participants such as Lance explained how, "You're just kind of floating in space," while being expected to know which steps to take next. For Alice, she confessed that, "Coming and becoming a civilian and choosing your own adventure, choosing your own degree, was kind of, like, excuse me? <Laugh> I get to actually choose now? I have no idea what I wanna do." Without clear expectations, procedures, and directives, several participants expressed feeling discombobulated and uncertain about how to proceed in their transition. As Louise described:

It's like you walk into D&D [Dungeons & Dragons] and they get to a point and they're like, "So what are you gonna do?" And it's not that there's options, no one's telling you what to do, and there aren't even options. It's just literally, "What do you wanna do?" That's an odd comparison, but I feel like that kind of is the comparison. It's just more freedom to be able to make choices. And I think that's easy and fun for some people. I think sometimes, getting outta the military, it's a little overwhelming. 'cause then you're like, "Oh, what do I do?" You're just used to people telling you what to do or people saying like, "You can do A or B." So it's just a strange mental adjustment of all of a sudden be like, "Oh, I guess I can just pick whatever."

The ability to choose, to express one's individuality, and self-guidance were typically described as incongruent with military culture. For Alice, "I feel like in the military it was very much prompted from higher ups, whereas becoming a civilian, I have to have the wherewithal and the humility to go reach out and ask instead of it being provided for me." Having that wherewithal seemed to present unique challenges for these participants as they transitioned into higher education culture as it tended to require increased awareness about their needs as well as increased accountability for their actions. An example of this was recalled by John:

> It is really the first time that I've made a decision to put myself in a place and do something of my own volition as an adult or maybe really ever. So living with the decisions that you actually make instead of living with decisions that the DoD [Department of Defense] makes on your behalf is a totally different thing. It feels much less stable. It's definitely a grass is greener thing when you're in where sometimes you're thinking like, man, I don't have any control and I wish I had more control. I wish I could decide how to spend my time and what I wanted to do. And then I got out and I am making these choices, and I'm realizing how cushy it is to have that backstop of being like, well, I'm not making any of these decisions, you know? So at the end of the day, whatever happens isn't really on me, I'm part of a bigger machine and I'm just a small cog in this big thing and they're making all the decisions and I'm just doing whatever they trained me to do. So that aspect of the transition has been a little more difficult than I could appreciate at the time when I was getting out.

By having decreased predictability, increased accountability for their actions, and increased uncertainty about their direction in life, these participants reported experiencing increased stress during their transitions into higher education culture as they no longer had the structure and support that comprised the stability that they had known in the military. Because of this, the loss of stability tended to form the foundation of their acculturation stress while they transitioned into higher education culture as the mechanisms and procedures that they had relied upon in the military to assist them with their transitions were no longer available to them. As such, the loss of stability appears to be instrumental in understanding the acculturation stress

experienced by post-9/11 student veterans and how it influences their strategies to resolve this

stress.

The loss of the stability found within the military appeared to be more noticeable when

contrasted with the nature of PEI settings. For Mike, the lack of clear, meaningful objectives

within his PEI obfuscated his sense of direction and made him feel unstable. He said:

> Going into the civilian world was eye-opening. There was so much free time, I had no
> idea what to do with myself. It was just so freewheeling, fancy free. There was nothing to
> do. I had too much free time, I didn't like it. There was nothing to do. I wasn't working
> toward any goal.

These observations were echoed by Jimmy, who described how he had experienced a significant

shift in pace and expectations when he entered the higher education culture of his PEI:

> I don't have enough to do. It's funny when people complain about [how] I have to do a lot
> of writing, but right now I'm not working so I can kind of figure out a tempo. I feel like
> more than 80% of my time is nothing. I complete my classwork pretty quick. I get back
> from the gym, it's 6:30, I hop in the shower, make some breakfast, start my homework at
> 7:30 in the morning. And by noon, if I'm not completely finished with it, I have maybe
> two or three things left to do. So I feel like I'm not occupying enough of my time.
> Whereas in the military, I felt like my time was being occupied but not utilized. I was
> constantly at work, five days out of the week. You're sitting in the office, you're doing
> something for the first four hours, and you might be screwing around for the next four.
> But you were doing something. So it's hard to find stuff to do sometimes.

These PEI experiences seem to compound the stress that previously had been described

as these participants repeatedly detailed how their consistent work toward a specific and

measurable objective provided them with clear direction in life. Consequently, it appears that

having this sort of direction in life was associated with a degree of predictability and stability

that they could rely upon. As such, the cultural value of leisure for self-exploration within higher

education culture appears to evoke increased stress as these participants appeared to perceive it

as antithetical to the directives that they had experienced within the military. This suggests that

the recognition of leisure time following the completion of work highlights the previously

described experiences of stress arising from uncertainty in their choices and increased

accountability for the choices that they made. By not having enough work to fully occupy their

time, participants seemed to express awareness that they now must decide for themselves how to

fill their day and to determine whether these decisions will progress them toward their goals.

Again, while it seems that each participant has been able to adapt to these changes in

expectations during their transitions, the increased toll of needing to make decisions that

previously had been accounted for by their superiors have nonetheless eroded their perceptions

of stability and have elicited increased stress for them. Louise depicted this stress as such:

> There's a lot of veterans that I've known that don't handle the transition well. Because
> they shut down or, you know, change is hard. And I think a lot of people have a hard time
> bridging that gap because again, since the military is so much more like, "I'm gonna tell
> you what to do and this is your schedule," you don't have to think too much. And then
> you go into civilian life and now you actually have to manage your stuff. Like, you can't
> just rely on someone to make sure you're at PT on time and you're dressed appropriately.

> This stress also appeared to be heightened when these participants perceived their

decisions as having significant consequences. For example, Jay repeatedly described how he

experienced increased stress following his transition when he became responsible for his

family's well-being once he lost the stability of the military. He said:

> A lot of it has been stress. The transitions from military to the civilian world is extremely
> stressful, especially if you have a family like I did. Am I gonna be able to provide for my
> family for any length of time? I was living fairly comfortably at an E-5 Sergeant rank
> with dependents, like you get a little bit of extra money for that kind of stuff. I was living
> fairly comfortably in that world, too. All of a sudden now I have to attempt to live that
> comfortably off of whatever job I can find.

The stress of finding housing that accommodates their educational goals, a job that sufficiently

covers family and educational expenses, and choosing a degree field that will sufficiently meet

their personal and familial needs all contribute to the stress that these participants did not have to

experience while in the military. As such, it again is important to note that this loss of stability is

not the only source of stress that these participants have experienced while transitioning into the

higher education culture of their PEIs, though it is a foundational factor that must be considered

when discussing the nature of acculturation stress among post-9/11 student veterans.

Theme 1, Subtheme 2: Loss of Identity

In addition to their loss of stability, these participants repeatedly described experiencing a

loss of identity while transitioning into the higher education culture of PEIs. This loss of identity

appeared to align with the identities that these participants had developed while in the military

and their perceptions that they were no longer able to embody these particular identities at their

PEIs. These identities frequently embodied the values of military culture, the mission associated

with their specific occupation, and how well they could execute their role to accomplish that

mission. Consequently, these participants reported feeling considerable stress while transitioning

into their PEIs as they no longer had those core components of their identities (e.g., the mission),

which previously had offered such immense direction and stability. John described this stress as

such:

> I wish that I knew how much my identity is wrapped up in my competency as a person in
> the military, as a service member. My entire formative experience as an adult was all in
> the military. And while I was in, I spent a fair bit of energy believing that I was not being
> brainwashed or indoctrinated into the culture of the military as much I saw [in] other
> people. I always thought of myself as kind of immune to the cultural stuff that you see,
> like the way that some people act who were in the military in certain jobs.

Several participants recounted how they had entered the military immediately after high

school and had remained within military culture throughout their early adulthood. Because of

this, these participants frequently acknowledged how they constantly were immersed in military

culture during the developmental stages associated with their adult identity formation and that

the military significantly impacted how their identity developed. Jimmy said:

I think what a lot of people don't understand is when you go to basic [basic training], they break you down. I like that crucible idea more where you're breaking down metals, you have a bunch of different things and you've gotta put them all together to make one. I think that fits much better because they don't build you up individually, they build you up as a team.

As was previously described, this identity formation process appears to instill in servicemembers the sense that an individual's identity is a component of the collective military identity and that one's perceptions of competence, support, and direction are intertwined with the objectives and the mechanisms of the military itself. Consequently, separation from the military and military culture tends to prompt experiences such as Lance's who said, "One of the issues with the culture is that you're like this monk in Times Square because you're now separated from the collective and doing the things that you normally do." As such, these participants again reported experiences of increased stress while transitioning into the higher education culture of PEIs as they tended to be separated from the collective, the environments, and the experiences that had shaped their adult identities. They no longer had the structure, support, or stability that the military had afforded them. Because of this, their stress appeared to stem from both confusion about their roles and expectations associated with their new student veteran identities and the decreased stability from what they had received in the military, which previously had assisted them in navigating their new identities within the military.

These participants frequently described feelings of loss and a lack of direction associated with the loss of their military identities. Tori said:

I never thought that the military was my whole identity. I just thought it was [Tori] who also wore a uniform, but getting out now for a couple of years, I don't know who I am without the uniform. It's always been who I've been as an adult. So I think that that shift has been a lot harder than I was expecting and kind of taken me by surprise a little bit.

This loss appeared to be particularly salient for these participants following their discharge and departure from the military as the contrast between military culture and higher

education culture illuminated core components of their identities. Lance described how, "It's weird because you can't really put a finger on what the culture is until you know what it's not. And you don't realize what it's not until you're a civilian and living with not the 1% of the population." John echoed this sentiment by saying, "I don't think I really had the opportunity to truly reflect on it until I was outside of the whole system and really experiencing what it's like to be fully outside of the DoD, to really appreciate the things that stick with me." Because of this cultural encapsulation, these participants did not appear to have sufficient opportunities when within the military to prepare themselves for this loss of identity following their discharge as well as how to better navigate their new identities as student veterans. Tori said:

> We spend so much time being trained how to be in, it kind of feels like an injustice that there's basically nothing on the backend to teach you from a mental health side how to get back out, you know? Or even an acknowledgement of all that went into making you a veteran or a service member and then being like, "Hey, these are things you're gonna have to think about now that you're out."

Because of this internalization of military cultural values, those participants who immediately transitioned into their PEIs following discharge tended to report feeling additional stress as they needed to independently recognize, address, and adapt to their new identities as student veterans while also navigating the new cultural norms of higher education culture and managing their lives without the support of the military. This stress was particularly noticeable for Jay, John, and Allen, who maintained significant ranks and statuses within their positions, which were lost following their discharges. Jay elaborated:

> It's weird because I don't like to flaunt my veteran service. But at the same time, when you're in the military, and I don't know how to say this without like ringing my own bell, I was a very important person and a person who people knew me, people knew my name. So you get used to having a certain stature, a certain weight to your name. When people said, Sergeant Jay, that meant something. You kind of lose that coming into the civilian world, and part of it makes me want to flaunt my military service and veterancy because, it's weird to say, I kind of expect to be spoken to a certain way. I expect a certain respect. I just expect that immediately back, it's second nature in the military that you lose in the

civilian world. Not that people are super disrespectful, it's just a certain way that things are said or a certain way that you're talking to me that it's a little weird.

These sentiments were repeated by John, who confessed, "Relative to my position and rank and all that stuff, I had a lot of respect and a certain reputation as a service member I left behind. You don't really realize how much of your identity it is until I was out." As such, it seems that the daily PEI interactions that were described by these participants repeatedly reminded them of their lost status outside of the military and thus reinforced their loss of identity within higher education culture. It is important to reiterate how this could be particularly stressful given that most of these participants did not anticipate this loss of identity while they were in the military and that these realizations most often tended to occur in the midst of transitioning into their PEIs. For Tori, she conceded how, "There's been a lot I've had to unpack there, and I feel like I'm still unpacking as far as who I am. And I think that that's been the hardest part." Because of this, the loss of identity, having to form a new identity as a student veteran as well as navigating the roles and expectations of this new identity appear to be a significant component of acculturation stress for post-9/11 student veterans as they transition into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs.

Theme 1, Subtheme 3: Navigating New Norms

A final component of PEI acculturation stress that was described by these participants was the navigation of new norms within the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. Every participant recalled how they had to recognize and adjust to situations where their attitudes and behaviors seemed to be incongruent with the norms of higher education culture. Those participants articulated how this recognition occurred most readily when they realized that the intensity and the seriousness of their demeanor, which had been appropriate and the cultural norm within the military, now contrasted with the demeanor of their peers within their PEIs.

These participants then explained how this recognition required them to evaluate the differences in the behaviors of those around them, to recognize how their behaviors and attitudes contrasted with the new higher education cultural norms, and to determine whether their behaviors and attitudes now needed to be adjusted to better align with these new norms. This process was particularly noticeable for those participants who had experienced and adapted to elevated risks and threats within the military as the norms that they had been accustomed to seemed to impact their perceptions of higher education cultural norms. Louise explained:

> You don't feel like you belong; it's just confusing how other people behave and what their priorities are in life. It does sometimes make you wonder, like, when you've done such a serious job and a job where people's lives are literally on the line and then you go to doing schoolwork, you're like, this is nice and all, but this is a little bit of bullshit, right? Like, this isn't real. We're studying, cool, but this is kind of bullshit <laugh>.

These participants described how this contrast between the experiences that they had in the military and those within their PEIs, particularly the contrast associated with serious, life-threatening consequences to their actions, minimized the seriousness of potential transgressions of higher education cultural norms. For example, Jimmy reflected on how his experiences in combat affected his perspectives about what is important to consider when interacting with others and how it contrasted with his PEI experiences. He recalled:

> When you're in Afghanistan and you're getting shot at, no one gives a shit about the color of your skin. No one gives a shit about how much money you have <laugh>. Dude, we're trying to get outta this. It's us or them. And frankly, I think I wanna choose us right now. So I think that's where there's these huge differences. While it's not as high stakes, I feel like they [my peers] never had the high stakes situations that they had to get out of.

Lance concurred with these sentiments as he recognized the differences in stakes and consequences for his actions as he transitioned into civilian settings. He explained:

> Just dealing with civilians, it felt like I was a sellout. Because you get to a point and you're like, you know what? No matter how good a job I do, nobody cares. It's not going to matter. I'm not going to win the war because we're not at war at a cement plant, you know <laugh>?

Because of these experiences, these participants described how navigating the new norms of higher education culture tended to involve their recognition that the seriousness, the urgency, and the intensity they had known within the military was incongruent with the expectations associated with their new identities as student veterans. For some, like Louise, this recognition indicated that they likely would not experience the same excitement and engagement within higher education culture as she had in the military. She conceded:

> It's a weird perspective and you kind of have to let go. Like, a lot of times with whether it was deployments or stateside, you're always doing stuff where your adrenaline's going and like, okay, you gotta be in the zone. Like, we're at range today, so you gotta be focused. And then you go into this state of more middle of the road existence, which I know is more normal, but it's hard to figure that out. And it can sometimes feel like your middle of the road is actually bland and kind of depressing because you're not having these intense highs of doing these crazy things and making it through trouble and dangerous situations. Now it's just middle the road. So you're like, well, this is lame, but you gotta learn to adjust, right?

This recognition can also coincide with their previously described stress associated with the loss of identity as the recognition of comparably blander cultural norms within higher education culture may also reiterate the loss of excitement and opportunities that are associated with a military cultural identity. However, these participants also confessed how this recognition can elicit additional stress when they realize the consequences of violating higher education cultural norms.

Also as previously described, the seriousness of military experiences and the comparably inconsequential stakes of higher education dilemmas tended to predispose these participants toward minimizing conflicts within higher education culture. These participants depicted how this minimization affected their ability to recognize the new norms of higher education culture as taboos within higher education culture may be perceived as incidental until they experience the consequences of violating these taboos. This experience was described as being particularly

stressful as these transgressions tended to be unexpected and contrasted with the ingrained

military cultural norms. Tori quipped:

> I make a joke that your transition hasn't fully started until you've made a civilian cry. You know? 'cause the communication styles are so different. I'm very good at direct communication, but that's been a hard one for me when I worked at [my former employment], 'cause it was like learning how to supervise people more softly, you know? And sometimes I feel like I'm a bit too much for the regular world, you know?

Nearly every participant expressed comments and scenarios that aligned with Tori's

description, and nearly every initial experience of violating higher education norms involved

incongruent communication patterns of some kind. Jimmy recounted his violation as such:

> I have a very, very blunt filter and everyone has way too many feelings about things. I say it and I don't realize that's not appropriate. So everyone gets offended by it instead of saying, "Hey, we don't typically say that anymore because it's not typically appropriate." And I think there's just a failing of how to tell someone, "Hey, that's not okay." That's just immediately slamming them because oh, you're different than I am. So you're obviously just an asshole.

Chase expanded upon this by describing how, "You can't tell everybody the exact truth straight

up like how you would in the military. Even if you don't feel like it's coming off as harsh,

somebody else might. So I think that is a bit of a change." For example, he recalled a specific

example of how he violated a higher education norm when he tried to provide feedback on his

peer's work. He said:

> It's difficult when talking to peers and stuff. I'm friends [with] the international students from Korea. She was asking me a question about a class, and I just answered it normal, I thought. And she almost started crying and I didn't feel like I was being rude at all. It was just a huge shock for her. The first time I was helping her with her resume, I noticed during it that this is probably coming off as pretty harsh. But she had great things that she had done, but it was so poorly written. And I was like, "You are a fantastic candidate, but when I look at this, you seem like a horrible candidate." And I was like, "You have to expand on these things. You have to tell me what you did." But then I realized in the middle of it, I'm like, "Alright, I gotta walk this back a bit."

Alice expressed similar experiences with her civilian peers by saying how, "Being in the

military we can speak kind of harshly <laugh>" and that she has had to recognize that "some

jokes are not appropriate in the civilian realm" of higher education culture. Again, these participants conceded how these experiences can elicit stress during their transition as they did not perceive their behaviors to be violations of higher education cultural norms and that they did not anticipate the intensity of the reactions to what they perceived as relatively inconsequential violations. For Tori, the stress of these violations meant that, "I'm trying to figure out how do I soften and fit in and still be me, but in this new environment" while others like Jimmy explained how, "I still have very much to learn about civilian life… It's very challenging." It is important to note though that this recognition of having violated norms is only one component of these participants' challenges in navigating the new norms of higher education culture.

Once these participants recognized their violation of higher education norms, each participant recounted subsequent recognitions of military cultural norms that also were incongruent with higher education norms. Specifically, these violations demonstrated to them how there were certain components of their military cultural identities that appeared to be incongruent with the higher education cultural norms, which further reinforced their realizations that they needed to recognize how their military cultural identities presented in their lives outside of the military. Through this recognition, these participants depicted experiences of acculturation stress as the recognition of incongruencies prompted their need to evaluate and adjust either their behaviors or their expectations to resolve this stress. For Lance, he realized that his communication style was incongruent with his peers', and he was unsure about how he needed to adjust. He said:

> I'll tell somebody flat out they're screwing up and expect 'em to fix it or get outta the way. Whereas here, they won't say, "Hey, you did this. I have a problem with what you did," or even, "I have a problem with you." Either one of those would be fine. It's just all this underhanded back-stabby stuff. I've been out for a while and I'm still not used to it.

Additionally, Jay explained his observations about how his tone was incongruent with his PEI. He noted:

> It's not as boisterous. It's not uncommon to walk into a military unit [and] people are yelling at each other, but that's just normal conversation kind of thing. Whereas for a civilian world where it's not as loud, it's not as used to random growling and random noises you're saying at each other for confirmation of hearing something <laugh>.

As previously described, every participant expressed their awareness about situations where their communication patterns that had been adaptive for them and encouraged within the military now were incongruent with their peers in higher education culture. For Jimmy, he recounted several experiences where he recognized how his communication patterns violated higher education norms and that his peers then perceived him negatively for these violations. He recalled how he felt stressed when interacting with his peers following these experiences as he felt pressured to adjust his communication patterns in ways that then seemed incongruent with his military cultural identity. He said:

> I have always learned just call it how you see it. If someone's not performing, you need to tell 'em that they're not performing. If someone's being a dick, you tell 'em that they're being a dick. And I think that they expect you to cater to their specific needs. "Well, that's not very nice because my experiences were bad." I don't know your past, I don't care about your past. I'm here with you right now in this moment, and I'm gonna tell you exactly where you're failing and you need to remove your emotions from it. So I think there's way too many emotions involved in this. And it's a rude awakening 'cause it was happening in the military, and I can see it happening here. We're expected to care about people's feelings when my first and only experiences with you were in this class, and I have to know all about your past. It's like, I don't know what you want me to say here. I'm not gonna go around and say slurs, I'm not gonna just be racist or inherently bigoted for no reason. But if you're being insufferable, I'm gonna tell you that you're being insufferable and you need to grow up <laugh>.

As such, these participants repeatedly illustrated how navigating new norms fueled a significant component of their acculturation stress as they either experienced consequences for violations of the new higher education norms or they felt pressured by others in their PEIs to adjust and

comply with the norms in ways that genuinely felt incongruent with their military cultural identities.

A final component to navigating new norms as described by these participants involved learning how language and meaning differed in higher education culture from terms used within the military. For these participants, the definitions and expectations within higher education culture differed significantly from what they had encountered in the military. For example, Lance recalled how he had initially experienced difficulties adjusting to higher education culture as the definitions within the Marine Corps were antithetical to those used in higher education culture. One such example regarded his reluctance to go to his professor's office hours for assistance. He explained:

> One of the things that you may or may not know is that office hours in the Marine Corps basically means you're gonna lose a stripe, which means I did not go to office hours for my professors because I really thought that meant you were in trouble. Which is why I suck[ed] so bad at stats for a long time. But once I understood that this language translation situation, it was like, "Okay, I can work with this."

Conversely, Jay asserted how wording and phrases that were common within the military did not convey the same meaning within higher education culture. He said:

> The Marine Corps has very common sayings where someone says something to you and you respond with "err" or "rah" or "kill," and weird things like that. Obviously if a professor said, "Does everyone understand this?" And I said, "Kill," like that's a little weird in the civilian population. Or if I just said random mumblings of "err" and "rah," and people would be like, "Does this guy even understand language? He's just growling at me?"

Allen recounted similar experiences when he encountered flexibility in his assignment deadlines. For him, deadlines within the military were inflexible and he needed to adjust his work accordingly to meet expectations. However, he acknowledged stress when encountering differing meanings for his PEI's deadlines and expectations. He conceded:

It can be difficult sometimes for sure, just 'cause I'm not used to deadlines being flexible. Or if there's instructions on how to do something, I'm not a big fan of deviating away from that 'cause I figure if those instructions are there for a reason. Someone probably screwed something up at some point by deviating, so the instructions are there to guide you, you follow 'em. Not everyone has that mentality.

Lastly, Lance elaborated how individual words can differ in the military and how it can be difficult and stressful to navigate these differences within higher education culture. For example, he described a situation in the military where a certain term was considered complimentary in civilian settings, yet it was considered an insult within the military. He recalled:

We're called collective culture. The word individual in the Marine Corps is like a dirty word. Like that's worse than the F word. And I remember there was some contractor or something that was there, we were standing in formation and Lieutenant says, "Hey, this is such and such, he's gonna be around for a while. He's an outstanding individual." And then he's sitting there like, "I am, thanks. That's very nice of you." And then everybody [is] in formation is like, "All right, got it, douchebag <laugh>."

It therefore is necessary to highlight how these participants articulated the navigation of new norms in higher education culture as a significant component of their acculturation stress. In addition to the recognition of norm violations and the consequences of these violations, these participants detailed how they also must learn to filter and translate information to understand what is now expected of them as student veterans. Further, they also must translate information in a way that is culturally congruent with others in higher education culture so that they are adequately understood. Combined, these participants recounted how these processes can be mentally taxing and stressful as they require them to continuously monitor their interactions, how they present themselves in their PEIs, and how others respond to their behaviors. The loss of stability, the loss of identity, and the navigation of new cultural norms all seem to present distinct yet intertwined challenges for post-9/11 student veterans. Consequently, the synthesis of these factors also appears to account for a significant amount of the acculturation stress that is associated with transitioning into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. The following

sections will describe the various strategies that these participants reported using to resolve their

acculturation stress.

Theme 2: Separation as Stability

Separation was the predominant strategy that was reported by these participants to

resolve their acculturation stress while transitioning into the higher education culture of civilian

PEIs. As a reminder, separation refers to an individual choosing to separate themselves from

individuals or components of the host culture without adopting any of its more dominant cultural

characteristics in favor of aligning with individuals or environments that embody and

significantly maintain their heritage cultural identity (Berry et al., 1997). Every participant

conceded how to varying degrees they felt more comfortable when interacting with other

veterans and when in settings that endorsed military cultural values. John expressed how it, "Felt

fairly surprising to me coming out [of the military] and sometimes feeling the most at home

when I randomly run into other vets" and how he wished, "I knew at the time that I got out how

much I had internalized that [military cultural identity]." As previously depicted, each participant

reported feeling a loss of military identity while transitioning out of the military and,

consequently, reported feeling a longing for reminders of their military service. For example,

Allen confessed:

> I've wanted to be done with the military for a long time, [I was] looking forward to it.
> And now that I am, there's definitely a lot of things that I miss about it. One, I went from
> being a hundred percent surrounded by the military to seeing a guy in a Navy hat across
> Walmart and going up to talk to him. I went from a hundred percent saturated to like zero
> percent military. That was such a drop that I never thought I would say I missed the
> military, or I missed talking about military related things. But less than a year from being
> retired, I definitely miss it a little bit.

Some participants such as Jay described how they intentionally sought out reminders of their

military cultural identities. He said:

> For a while I did volunteering just to go talk to guys. 'Cause a lot of people, especially transitioning guys, miss it and they just wanna still have a little bit of that connection. So sometimes I'll go over to the VA hospital near [my PEI] just to talk to guys. It's a little reminder, I guess. I miss the military, but I don't regret getting out as weird as that sounds. I just miss it sometimes. So being able to go to the VA hospital and still get a little bit of that connection that I miss from being so ingrained into a system like that.

Other participants such as John expressed a desire to transition away from their military cultural identities following their discharges. However, these participants expressed surprise by the meaningfulness of experiences where they encountered reminders of their military cultural identities within civilian settings. For example, John recalled:

> There's this little diner in the town next to [my PEI] called [the restaurant name], and it's this tiny little military-themed diner because there was a World War II bomber factory in that town. And the whole place is filled with pictures of military stuff, World War II, the ceiling is hanging with model airplanes from World War II and things. And we went there 'cause it was kind of a novelty, but then I was immediately struck by how this feels not like a novelty. It feels very familiar. And sitting there and like, I can hear the guys in one table near me in the Army, and that feels normal. Like this old guy sitting in another table near me has a hat on with a certain type of airplane on it. And it just felt like you can relax a little bit more. I really did not anticipate that.

This desire for reminders of military service and their military cultural identities as well as the comfort that they experienced when encountering these reminders was fundamental to understanding the predominant acculturation strategy that was expressed by these participants.

These participants also repeatedly articulated a distinct and voluntary separation from their civilian peers within higher education culture as they felt more comfortable interacting with others who endorsed military cultural values. Tori explained:

> I'm in a weird bubble where for the most part I'm just spending time with the other veterans. But that's helping me feel a little bit more included at the school. I can't say that I'm transitioned into the higher education culture, it's like I'm almost just in a bubble within it.

Mike further elaborated about this "bubble" by saying:

> All of my friends are either veterans that work in contractor or defense type roles or work for the DoD. So my bubble is very small in that regard. One of the things that I looked

forward to when I first started going to school was maybe I can find people to talk to that are different, because living in a bubble is not good for personal growth and understanding. But then I ran into the whole time [constraints] and how that was gonna fit in. And I was like, I'm not gonna take time outta my day to go sit at the student union and flag down passerbys and be like, "Hi, what do you think about life?" And then in class, if we get a breakout group to do a discussion, we're really just discussing the course material. We don't really talk about our backgrounds and our lives. 'Cause like I said, I'm not there to make friends. I'm not there to build relationships. I have a good group of friends and coworkers and people in my life. I don't need to also make friends with a bunch of 18- and 19-year-olds. If I wanna do that, I can go to my coworkers which I have much more in common with.

Additionally, Mike conceded how "I really have walled myself off," and Lance explained that "I don't like the people at campus, so I don't have to go to campus." These participants described how this separation from their civilian peers typically stemmed from feelings of disconnection from their peers and higher education culture while also feeling increased connected with reminders of their military cultural identities. Most of them explained how the age difference between them and their civilian peers made them feel disconnected. Jay elaborated:

It's just weird for me because I'm 33 and a lot of people in college are 18 to 22, so trying to connect to people with that big of an age gap is just a little weirdness… It's almost disconnecting that I'm halfway and I have one foot in, but then one foot out.

In addition to the age difference concern, some participants such as John confessed how they also felt disconnected from their civilian peers because they did not resemble the friendships that they had grown accustomed to within the military. Specifically, he recounted military friendships and the contrast with his civilian peers as such:

Oftentimes extreme amount of accountability in the military bleeds over into personal relationships in the military. You have these friends who are basically ride or die friends. You make a plan and you're gonna stick to that plan. Whether it's just a plan to do nothing and hang out, whether it's a plan to go on a 10-day hike or whatever it is, people commit. We're in this together, we're gonna do it. And that experience is not the same with civilian friends. We'll make a plan and people are like, "Eh, actually I just don't really feel like it." And in the military brain, you're like, "What do you mean you don't feel like it? You committed, we made a plan." It's like, "This is what we're doing." And I think that there's a certain level of safety in having prior military friends <laugh> because

maybe you feel like they're just more accountable or their follow through is better. Maybe that's a subconscious thing. <laugh>.

Because of these feelings of disconnection, these participants did not report having a strong desire to connect with their civilian peers within higher education culture. For example, Alice explained how, "I treat school as a job, and I don't participate in undergrad activities where you would have more interaction and get closer to undergraduate students." By contrast, these participants repeatedly reported having increased feelings of connection with their fellow student veterans and those who endorsed military cultural values. For example, Jimmy expressed:

> When I see a veteran and we end up chatting, it's almost instant. Like that instant connection that we have where we just have that shared unison. And it was never about the color of our skin. It was never about where our past was. It was about, yeah, we did something similar.

> This similarity in experiences, perspectives, and cultural identities appeared to be fundamental in these participants' desire to separate from their civilian peers and the higher education culture of their PEIs. Mike's reason for separation was to intentionally remain engaged with "people that act and talk and sometimes think very similarly," while others such as John and Chase found themselves inadvertently drawn toward other veterans. John said, "You'll be talking to someone and suddenly you'll be realizing like, 'Wait a minute, are you a veteran? Did you serve?' And you're like, 'Why am I gravitating generally toward other vets?'" Chase elaborated on this gravitation by saying, "I definitely relate with [student veterans] a lot. One of 'em was Army and one was Navy. But there still seems to be a common bond, just in the way we can talk to each other. And it just feels a little more loose. I think there's less pressure to be a certain way or be somebody." This comfort appears to be associated with the inherent commonality of military service and the expectation that the other individual will understand to some degree and empathize with a shared military cultural identity. These participants further elaborated how this

understanding and empathy was a key distinction between fellow student veterans and peers that endorsed military cultural values and their civilian peers who primary endorsed higher educational cultural values. Jay explained this contrast as such:

> It's easier [to connect with veterans] I think because the military [is] such a brotherhood that it's an immediate thing no matter what. Like once I go to a VA hospital, it could be a Navy guy, it could be an Army guy. And even though I did 11 years in the Marine Corps, it's still an immediate "What's up brother?" Instead of like, "What's up Jay <laugh>?" You know what I mean? Whereas college, there's that connection, but it's not quite the same. I'll still get that connection of what's up Jay but there's that small disconnect where it's not a full, immediate integration that you get with the military.

This immediate connection and the inherent expectations that are associated with a shared military cultural identity appear to generate some predictability and stability within interactions. By sharing a military cultural identity, these participants seemed to be better able to expect certain responses or behaviors from their fellow student veterans, which seemed to have assisted them in better predicting and navigating these interactions. Combined, these participants articulated how they experienced feeling increased stability during these interactions, which contrasted with the instability that they experienced when interacting with their civilian peers within the new norms of higher education culture. This perceived stability is therefore critical to understanding these participants' use of separation as a strategy to resolve their acculturation stress as it both alleviates the loss of stability that they experienced while transitioning out of the military while also allowing them to reengage with their lost military cultural identities. The net result of student veterans utilizing separation within higher education culture is the formation of isolated spaces and communities within PEIs that offer these participants stability via the endorsement of their military cultural values.

Most of these participants recounted how they were either actively engaged with their PEI's student veteran office or had previously interacted with fellow student veterans in these

spaces. In general, these spaces were depicted positively and served as a refuge for them within

the perceived instable higher education culture. Jimmy said:

> I love the vet center at the school I go to because it still allows me to go and have some of
> those experiences and still just be able to shoot the shit with someone and go, "Hey man,
> you know, I'm having a hard time today." And we just exchanged short stories and it
> helps a little bit.

Jeff echoed similar sentiments when he elaborated:

> [My PEI] has the [PEI Veteran's Service Area], it's got a lounge with computers and
> snacks and stuff. But the important part is it's kind of a sequestered space. Technically
> anybody could go in there because it's public university and there's no truly private areas
> aside from maintenance stuff. But it's a space for us, it allows us a place to be away from
> all the other students.

These PEI veteran service offices seemed to be the preferred locations for these participants to

sequester in when they chose to separate from their civilian peers and the higher education

culture. For example, Tori described how "if I'm not in class and I'm on campus, I'm just doing

stuff in the lounge. I'm connecting with people." Additionally, Jeff explained:

> On the daily I spend a decent amount of time in that office around other people that were
> in the military. A lot of 'em are dependents of service members, but even they have a
> better understanding of military service than people that have no affiliation at all. 'cause
> they see their parents go through and they get a secondary absorption of that culture. But
> it's still a piece of it and it's enough that they understand what you've gone through 'cause
> they saw their parents go through it. They get it 'cause they've been around it... It's all the
> acronyms, all the services, all the shops, all the intricacies of the military that they
> inherently get. And you don't have to explain to 'em.

In these spaces, these participants did not have to explain themselves, their perceptions,

or their behaviors as extensively as they would with their civilian peers. By separating and

engaging with fellow student veterans and peers who also endorsed military cultural values,

these participants reported increased perceptions of their stability and comfort within PEIs. Jay

conceded:

> You'll get a little reminder of it, like you have a burp later and your coffee comes back
> up. Like you get a little taste of that from earlier. That's kinda like what I get, it's a little

hidden nostalgia to be like, "Oh yeah, do you remember how good this could be?" That's the main thing that I think you leave behind. I will never, and it is unfortunate to say, I'll never have a connection again with the guys that I had before [in the military].

As such, these participants reported their use of separation from higher education culture as a core strategy for managing their acculturation stress as the perceived stability that it generated alleviated many of the stressors that they experienced following their discharges from the military. Additionally, these participants were better able to maintain and express components of their military cultural identities in ways that they felt unable to in their civilian PEI settings. Combined, separation seemed to allow them to recreate components of their military cultural experiences that they had missed when they separated from the military, which brought them stability in an otherwise tumultuous transition.

Theme 3: Marginalization

While these participants reported separation as a core strategy for resolving their acculturation stress, it was not the only strategy and was not the preferred strategy for those who felt disconnected from their student veteran peers. Marginalization was the second-most common acculturation experience that was endorsed by these participants, who often felt disconnected from both their civilian peers in higher education culture and from their student veteran peers in military culture. As a reminder, marginalization refers to an individual not adopting any of the cultural characteristics from the more dominant culture and not maintaining their heritage cultural identity (Berry et al., 1997). For these participants, they did not feel a strong connection to their military cultural identities. Additionally, their stress was compounded by them feeling more disconnected from their civilian peers within higher education culture and being unable to find stability in their PEIs. Louise recalled her experience as such:

It was kind of weird 'cause you don't quite feel like you. I didn't feel like I quite belonged with the people I went to school with. It was hard to figure out connections. Because then

there's an age gap as well that you're dealing with. Especially myself with deploying, after you've done stuff like that, and then you come to the civilian world and you're dealing with, no offense, college kids that are younger, they just have different priorities and thoughts in life. And from the stuff that I dealt with, I was like, so many of these things are just not important, you know? The hardest part about that is I always feel like there's two sets of veterans, where you have veterans that are hanging onto the military and then veterans that are like, "I'm ready to move forward and I just need to be surrounded by people that are doing that as well."

These participants tended to depict marginalization as a characteristic of their transition rather than an intentional acculturation strategy such as separation. For some, marginalization was occasionally inconspicuous with times where they were unaware that they were experiencing marginalization. Tori conceded, "I didn't even notice I was really isolating. I was doing a lot of paperwork, I was avoiding people, I was just not happy." In these situations, these participants described marginalization as occurring when they could not establish meaningful connections with their new higher education culture and when they did not feel connected with those who endorsed military cultural values. Consequently, marginalization tended to result in these participants adapting their expectations about forming meaningful connections with others as a way to better manage their acculturation stress. For Alice, she confessed that, "I was looking for a tribe and I haven't found one. I think you gotta be okay with not really belonging with a certain group of people." Additionally, Lance explained:

I think some people try and then try to bring me into their tribe, and their tribe is not necessarily manifesting values that I have. It almost feels like pity because they're like, "Oh, you're a lonely little boy, come play with us"… So, there's a bit of friction. 'Cause if they try the wrong way, it's easy to get sort of written off immediately.

These participants illustrated several components of their marginalization and factors that made them feel more disconnected from both their civilian peers and fellow student veterans. However, it is important to first note how this marginalization impacted them.

These participants explained how marginalization can be mentally and emotionally taxing as they do not perceive themselves as having any support in their transition process and that they must independently manage their acculturation stress. They described how this can be particularly challenging when their identities are negatively appraised by both their civilian peers and fellow student veterans at their PEIs. Alice confessed:

> It's hard and maybe I don't project it physically, but at least mentally it's been really tough. I think there's just a lot of stuff going on the inside that I work very hard on not projecting. Because again, whether I like it or not, whatever community I find myself in, I'm the spokesperson of either female, first generation, military. And I realize that that's a lot of people. A lot of people wear those different types of identities and where they feel like they're the spokesperson. I think it's very hard to go from the military where people find out that you wanna go to college and they start calling you a liberal. And there's just a lot of negative, "Oh, well, you're gonna become a liberal when you go to college." Like, you don't need to be so obtuse. The benefit of learning in higher education is it's okay to change your opinion, that is necessary for evolution. And then come and being on the opposite sides of the spectrum, like, "Oh, you must be a massive Trump supporter and killed tons of people and you love killing people." It's like, no <laugh>, it's a lot different than that. It's a lot harder than that. I just wish that people would understand that it is more difficult. It's not an immediate change and I may be two years removed from my separation, but it's still really hard.

Nearly every participant who reported feeling these experiences of marginalization described how their experiences were difficult and uncomfortable for them. Again, few participants expressed the intentional utilization of marginalization as a strategy to better manage their acculturation stress given the discomfort that it invoked. Instead, this marginalization was depicted as an outcome of their disconnection with those at their PEIs and as something that they needed to manage independently. Tori recalled:

> I felt very isolated. It was a really terrible experience. Just not a good culture fit for me…
> And just for example of how isolated and distant I was at that school, to this day,
> nobody's called me. No one noticed that I didn't even finish the semester. Nobody cared,
> there's been no follow-up. I think my last school was really tough 'cause I was kind of the
> only non-traditional student there. And I don't even really wanna get into it, but it just
> didn't feel good. I felt very ostracized there.

This isolation tended to occur when these participants felt more disconnected from both their civilian peers within higher education and from their fellow student veterans who endorsed military cultural values. In these situations, these participants described how their civilian peers either rejected them for not endorsing higher educational cultural values or negatively perceived them due to their military cultural identities. John explained:

> I consider myself liberal and progressive. And there are very, very few things that I disagree with from that political portion of the spectrum. It is difficult to come across as a straight white male military veteran, wife and a kid. I think that being a veteran and having experience in life at times complicates people's perspectives on issues of national security or migration or climate issues or whatever. That can be a little bit challenging... I am absolutely like, "We're on the same team," and it's really hard to communicate that, being like, "I'm with you and therefore I think you should know some things, some perspectives about that."

Alice concurred with these sentiments when she confessed how "I've pretty much separated myself and my affiliation with being in the military just because I feel like a lot of times the undergraduate student population does not relate well." These participants recalled how these experiences can be particularly difficult for them as the perceived necessity of concealing their military identity from their civilian peers thus exacerbates their stress from losing their military cultural identities. Louise explained:

> I'll be honest. There's a lot of times where I don't even point it out. I'm not walking around wearing things that scream "I'm a veteran" because it's a distinct thing that can make you not part of the group. The hard thing about that is with the military, you're taught you need be part of the group, you gotta belong to this group, you're here to take care of each other. So it's kind of an instinct that you have to find another group. You have to be part of another group because you're supposed to. So it kind of makes me stand out a little bit as a sore thumb.

Because of these military-based mentalities, these participants described how they experienced difficulties in integrating with their civilian peers in higher education culture when they felt othered, judged, and ostracized by them. During these situations, these participants recounted how they felt disconnected from their civilian peers and that this disconnection then

exacerbated the stress that they felt while attempting to navigate through the new norms of

higher education culture. Lance elaborated:

> One of the issues is that the average troop is blonde hair, blue eyed white boy that speaks perfect English. Whereas if I were wearing a turban or some other ethnic thing, or I had an accent or something, that kind of made it clear this guy's from somewhere else. That would signal to the civilians more clearly that there was probably something else going on. But when I come in there and I speak perfect English, but I'm saying the things we say on active duty, they have no frame of reference and they're like, "This guy is deliberately being a jerk."

These sorts of presuppositions and misunderstandings that these participants had when

interacting with their civilian peers typically prompted them to withdraw from the higher

education culture and to gravitate toward their fellow student veterans instead. However, they

also expressed having further difficulties when they subsequently felt disconnected from these

student veterans.

These participants articulated several reasons for why they may not feel as connected

with their fellow student veterans or others at their PEIs who also endorsed military cultural

identities. For example, Louise and Alice explained how they wanted to move away from their

military cultural identities once they had left the military, albeit for different reasons. Alice stated

that her experiences of minimization as the only female in her unit motivated her to transition

away from her military cultural identity while Louise believed that it was simply time for her to

transition into a new identity once she entered her PEI. However, both participants explained

how the other student veterans at their PEIs endorsed military cultural values that conflicted with

their motivations and made them feel more disconnected with their student veteran peers. Louise

conceded:

> It's still tough because veterans are all people. And so they're gonna have different approaches. Like some people wanna hold onto that military life and what that was. And other people like myself are like, "Okay, that is done. I wanna move on and do other things."

Additionally, Alice recalled:

> I was expecting to find more moderate people… While I was in, I was the sole female, so it was always like, "Oh, well the female, this is her point of view. This is all women's point of view." No, it's not all women's point of view. And now I've transitioned to like, "Okay, here's the veteran, this is DoD's point of view." No, it's not <laugh>… In my unit before I got out, it was the complete opposite. I was in a county where it was MAGA [Make America Great Again] everything, like Trump everything. If you don't like Trump, then you're like the demi-god *[sic]*, like just ridiculousness. And then I switched to the opposite side of the spectrum where I'm just like, "Ugh, okay, well, this is different." So I'm not a part of any group, I'm kind of in no man's land. And you just gotta be okay with it. Sometimes it's hard.

These participants recounted how their interactions with their fellow student veterans who endorsed military cultural values to a degree that seemed to be incongruent with their PEI goals tended to make them feel more disconnected with the student veteran population at their PEIs. Lance explained how "Even among this community, I was still a little bit disconnected," while John recalled how "I receive emails from the veteran services office here, but I do not go to any of the events or anything like that. I don't really actively network with other veterans… I don't participate in the institutional veteran support stuff." Because of this, those participants who experienced increased marginalization tended to feel more isolated when their expectations about finding communities of support outside of the military were dashed by the realities of their PEI experiences. Consequently, these participants reported how they tended to resort to their military cultural values, particularly those regarding self-reliance and endurance, when feeling more marginalized so as to independently cope better with their acculturation stress. Mike explained that "The coping mechanism that I have enacted was to fall back on my active-duty military time when things are packed to the gills," as "it was kind of hard navigating those obstacles" independently. Unfortunately, nearly every participant who articulated this pattern also reported struggling with their feelings of acculturation stress and burnout from their transition process.

For some participants such as Alice, they told how they attempted to better manage their acculturation stress by adjusting their expectations to accept that they will remain marginalized and that they may need to find support from other marginalized individuals. Alice confessed:

> I think I can find comfort in that I'm not the only one. I may be one of two [veterans] in the [program], but talking to first-generation black women who are also entrepreneurs, they wear many other hats as well. So it is at least comforting to know that there's other people and other experiences. But then it's also kind of hard though, too, to break into that and like, "Hey, you're different than the majority of people, and I'm different. So that makes us similar even though our differences are separate." It's hard to break into that space where like, "Hey, we probably have a lot in common besides what's on the surface and the identities that we share. We should chat."

Other participants such as Tori attempted to manage their acculturation stress by adjusting their expectations about their military cultural identities and by reconnecting with their fellow student veterans. Tori explained how she was unaware of these struggles until she started to interact with other student veterans more and thus feel less marginalized:

> I got involved with SVA [Student Veterans of America] and I started talking to other veterans again. And that's the first time beyond my NCO [noncommissioned officer] that I've been around any veterans at all since I got out… I didn't realize until talking to them how much feeling like you're kind of failing and you don't know who you are or what you're doing, how much that is the norm and not the exception. 'cause that kept me from talking to anybody or asking for help for a long time because I thought I was the only idiot who couldn't figure this out, you know? And then once I started making friends and talking to everybody at school, even though we were in different branches, different MOSs [military occupational specialties], different lengths of time of service, we all basically had the same story of getting outta the military and hitting a point where it felt like you fell off a cliff. And I just wish that that process was more normalized.

In these circumstances, it appears that some of these participants who reported experiences of marginalization had adjusted their acculturation strategies toward separation when they were no longer able to adequately manage and resolve their acculturation stress via other means. It is therefore apparent by these participants' responses that their experiences of marginalization may be temporary as their acculturation strategies may be more fluid and contingent on their ability to resolve their own acculturation stress.

Theme 4: Integration

While separation and marginalization were the two most common acculturation strategies that were reported by these participants, there was an additional strategy recounted when integration occurred. Integration was the least commonly expressed acculturation strategy by these participants. As a reminder, integration refers to an individual demonstrating significant cultural adaptation with the dominant host culture while also demonstrating the significant maintenance of their heritage cultural identity (Berry et al., 1997).

In general, these participants described their integration as a strategy to make their transition into higher education culture easier by utilizing various adaptive skills they had adopted while within military culture. In this sense, those participants who reported experiences of integration tended to depict their acculturation in a more utilitarian manner and that this strategy was a tool that they used to resolve their acculturation stress. These participants acknowledged how this was primarily because they wanted to accomplish their higher educational goals as quickly and as efficiently as possible, and that the adoption of specific traits from higher education culture was more of a pragmatic means to an end rather than a complete adoption of a higher education cultural identity. Mike explained this process as such:

> I would say you find the culture that works best for you, and you bring that culture with you and make the second culture you don't fit into as much make it fit to you… But the school and my education will never be my identity the way that someone who went to regular school, university of so-and-so, and they're an alum, and they had their experiences there and that drives what they have done in the military. Other people are putting their face paint on for athletic events, or even just day to day everyone's wearing school apparel and stuff. And I have a shirt, but that's not a thing anymore. It's not the real world, so it's not like I'm diving into that culture.

This mentality of finding what works best and making everything else fit was fairly common among these participants and will be described in greater detail in the upcoming sections discussing the adopted and rejected higher educational cultural values. However, it is

important to first describe the specific techniques these participants reported to demonstrate their use of integration within their PEIs. Each participant who recalled their use of integration stated that the techniques that they used were in response to their interactions with their civilian peers in higher education culture and the roles that were associated with their new student veteran identities. For example, Jeff explained how, "I've been out long enough that I've adjusted more to the civilian way of doing things to where it's not as rigid" and that his experiences working with the Department of State in the military allowed him to prepare for these interactions. He elaborated:

> It's had its challenges, but it was kind of something that I did in the military anyway. 'Cause in my job, I had to work with the Department of State so I had that cultural adjustment within the United States government. Which the Department of State is a notoriously difficult work environment for military personnel to adjust to <laugh>. Because they're very much still civilians. But also in [my job] we do a lot of cultural analysis. So we are exposed to other cultures and we understand 'em and we understand cultural differences. So I would say it's harder for me to be culture shocked than say the average person, because I recognize when things are just a difference of culture and that it's not a big deal.

By having repeated exposures to civilian and higher education culture, participants such as Jeff recalled how they were able to utilize their interactions during these experiences to adopt more adaptive techniques that would better allow them to navigate the new norms of higher education culture. These participants essentially acknowledged how their use of integration and their strategic adoption of specific values allowed them to better adapt to higher education culture, which then decreased friction and conflicts with their civilian peers and reduced their acculturation stress overall. Lance explained his experiences with this process as such:

> My emails apparently need to be more than two sentences, otherwise they sound aggressive. And then the longer my emails get, the more unclear they become to people or the more passive aggressive they sound to people. 'Cause I just don't have that much to say... So I have a signature block, it just pops up and it says all that and it says the exact same thing. Hello whoever, hope this finds you well. I type my two sentences and then it says, "I would appreciate your support in this. Thanks for your time. Best, Lance." And

sometimes I'll delete the word "would," so it just says, "I appreciate your support in this." But it was kind of like a middle finger to the one guy that wants me to write a brand email every time <laugh>. And I make sure that I use it every time. Like, I'll email him unnecessarily just because I wanted him to read that <laugh>.

Consequently, integration seemed to be used as one way to further reduce their conflicts, to increase the efficiency of their work within higher education culture, and to avoid future acculturation stress as they complete their higher educational goals. To do this, these participants explained how they relied on the task completion and the conflict resolution skills that they had learned within the military to more efficiently complete their assignments and to decrease the potential for increased acculturation stress.

These participants who reported experiences of integration explained how they appreciated the higher education culture of learning and that they had a clear goal to progress toward. Mike posited how, "I really enjoy the school part of it 'cause there is a definite thing that you're working toward. There's something to be accomplished. It's not just showing up, filling out paperwork, or doing whatever it is you do." However, they also confessed how they wanted to accomplish their higher educational goals as quickly and as efficiently as possible so that they then could progress toward their further life goals. To accomplish this, these participants described how they could rely upon their military experiences and adopt the skills that they had learned from these experiences to then meet the needs and expectations that were associated with their roles as student veterans. Chase conceded, "You're studying a lot, but after working for so long and being in the military, showing up to class and studying until six or seven, it's not that bad. There's worse things I could be doing. So I think that that's really helped." Specifically, Alice recounted:

Distilling when you have a project due, like when you backwards plan. Okay, this is the end objective that we need and this is our due date, now we backwards plan and these are

the steps that we need to do in order to accomplish this. So if I wasn't in the military, I don't think I'd have that kind of structure.

Additionally, Chase recalled how the military had taught him the skills to navigate and to resolve conflicts with his civilian peers while he completed his tasks in higher education culture. He said:

> Something that really, really helps from that veteran standpoint is you learn how to talk to people of different levels, especially superiors. What the right way is to talk to your boss and then your boss's boss, and then somebody that's a real high up and how you have to act and behave around them, and how you can talk to your boss when it's just you two versus when their boss is around. And things like that maybe seem simple but don't come naturally to everybody. That's something that I notice, I think that comes from being a veteran and being in the military that just plays and really benefits me in the regular civilian world.

These participants also detailed how they were able to use strategies such as these to complete their tasks more efficiently and to better manage their acculturation stress within their PEIs. For example, Mike explained:

> The ability to get a job done or complete a task quickly without allowing outside influences to drag you down? I think that it really equates well to school… there's still a lot of busy work and stupidity and cost benefit analysis that I do on a weekly basis. When there's an assignment that I don't really wanna do, I really fall back on that. I remember in basic having a punishment where we had to take our toothbrushes and scrub the floor of the latrines. And it really was stupid. But we knew that afterwards they were gonna issue us all new toothbrushes, so I wasn't worried like, "Ah, this is gonna be gross." And like, "What was the point?" There was nothing I had to do that day. It was literally, this is a task given. It's stupid. Just do it. Fine. I feel the same way when I'm given an absolutely asinine writing assignment. This means nothing, but I need the 10 points to get my A, B, C, whatever to pass. So I just knock it out, takes me 30, 45 minutes and we get done with it. It just doesn't really matter. I might not even agree with it, I might think it's stupid, but just get it done. That is what the professor who is in a position of authority has decided is necessary. And since I don't like it, afterwards, we're afforded a course overview evaluation, and I just keep notes and put that in there.

The above is a prime example of how integration was utilized by these participants within higher education culture. They recognized new expectations and cultural norms being associated with their coursework that they disagreed with that elicited frustration, stress, and negative

perceptions from them about higher education culture. However, these participants also acknowledged how their previous military experiences tempered these perceptions and stress and instead helped them to identify how they could use these experiences to better adapt and resolve their acculturation stress. In doing so, these participants described how they could adjust to the new norms of higher education culture and respond to their conflicts and stressors more appropriately. Consequently, they reported feeling decreased acculturation stress as their conflicts had been resolved. These participants confessed how this process can be highly efficient and can have adaptive downstream effects on their progress toward their goals such as how their civilian peers and their PEIs perceive student veterans. Lance explained:

> [My PEI] has a [military student program], so it's active-duty people who get sent to get their Ph.D. and master's. And we're developing a reputation here, they've developed a reputation of the hard workers. They jam their stuff out and they're gone in three years. They are on time and they do everything they need to do. So I think some of the faculty are looking at it as a pool of talent they can recruit from.

It is through the integration experiences of these participants that the utility of their maintenance or abandonment of their military cultural identities is apparent. Conversely, these experiences also illustrate how their adoption and rejection of higher educational cultural values appears to be strategic and in response to their management of the previously described factors associated with their acculturation stress.

Theme 5: Retained Values

As was previously mentioned, these participants stated that they typically retained certain aspects of their military cultural identities and the values that were associated with these identities when they helped them decrease their PEI acculturation stress. However, they also acknowledged how several of these military-based values of theirs had become intrinsic

characteristics of their being and that the retention of these values was unconscious. Tori

explained:

> So much of the military culture is subconscious almost. So much of what we're taught is just baked into the fiber of our being, because we are not really beyond shouting the warrior ethos every morning at six o'clock.

Allen concurred with this sentiment by saying that, "I don't know how to necessarily turn

it off. It's sort of just omnipresent in my personality," while Chase stated that, "I try my best to

leave [the military] behind, but I can't." These sorts of statements were fundamental to better

understanding the acculturation experiences of these participants as they influenced the degree of

acculturation stress that they experienced following their discharge from the military and

whether they intentionally chose acculturation strategies that ultimately retained components of

their military cultural identities. As previously stated, these participants had described how they

subconsciously felt inclined to separate from their civilian peers and instead move more toward

their fellow student veterans because there was an intrinsic feeling of comfort that they had when

interacting with others who also endorsed military cultural values. It therefore makes sense that

these participants reported that they have continued to notice certain values that they had retained

from the military given the contrast between military and higher education cultures, though they

still experience situations where their civilian peers point out other retained values of theirs that

they had been unaware of. Jay recounted such a situation:

> It's intangible things that you drag along with you through the military that you don't really realize. Part of it is because I was in for so long that it's almost an indoctrination where the things I do and say... I kind of drag along with the military and then people will be like, "Man, you just walk different. You hold yourself different." And I'm like, I <laugh> I don't understand it, but there's always something where someone is like, "Oh, you have this little je ne sais quoi almost that military people just kind of act a little bit different." But because you're so ingrained in it, you don't really notice yourself.

Mike elaborated on this process by saying how, "The military has defined me by giving me a way to think about the world and how to navigate problems or think about issues that come up." Because of these engrained behaviors, these participants frequently depicted how their retained values from the military were comprised of both conscious and unconscious decisions that were often intentional yet occasionally unintentional. Tori expressed this sentiment as such:

> I'm still learning a lot of the ways that the military shows up and is still in my life. And then trying to decide, is this beneficial? Is this still serving me or is this something that I need to adjust?

It is therefore important to recognize how these participants described the values that they had decided to retain as they seemed to be the most salient during the pursuit of their higher educational goals. Every one recounted how they had retained military values that were associated with routine, structure, and organization. John conceded, "I definitely kept the tendency toward structure and stability," while Jimmy explained that, "I still have a lot of the structure. I still wake up early, I still go work out early. I have a plan of what I'm gonna do. I still try and stay relatively organized." They acknowledged how this adherence to structure and routine helped them to better organize their PEI transition experience and better instill remnants of that stability that was lost after their discharge from the military.

Additionally, these participants recounted how this routine and structure affords them the opportunity to evaluate themselves and others so that they can adequately prepare for stressors. Louise explained:

> I've definitely stuck to the being punctual part of it. I've definitely stuck to making sure that I'm squared away, as we like to say, and helping other people. I think that gets really cemented in you, and so it could be random strangers, it could be classmates, it could be your neighbor, but there's still a part of you that's like, if you see someone struggling, you should help them in any way that you can.

The retention of military values that are associated with looking out for others and helping them when needed was frequently expressed by these participants. For example, Lance noted:

> I think there is certainly a degree of where I feel a little bit responsible for people that are in my sphere of influence. I've got my backpack over here, I've got a couple tourniquets and I don't expect anybody to be an active shooter, but I really would hate to not have one if I needed it. Every once in a while something will happen and I'll be like, "Okay, what would I do if it happened now? And I had to deal with this specific group of people? I'd probably just go tell them to go down the steps or maybe I'd tell 'em to stay here and I'd go try to figure it out or something like that." So I think there's a certain degree of always being a step ahead of the situation that I try to keep.

These participants did not state that this degree of preparation was an expectation from their PEIs, from their civilian peers, or from their fellow student veterans, and none of them said that they ever actually have needed to take action to help those around them. In a sense, Louise succinctly articulated the retention of this value by saying, "I take care of my shit and I take care of my friends. That's what you're supposed to do." Therefore, it is interesting that these participants frequently recognized the retention of certain values that are associated with preparedness and how these values also were associated with structure and stability, even though they did not seem to have a direct impact on their progression toward their higher educational goals.

These participants also repeatedly expressed their retention of certain values that are associated with conflict resolution and task completion while stressed. Again, they stated that the retention of such values was pragmatic as they had assisted them in achieving their goals while within the military and had helped them to progress in their educational goals while experiencing PEI acculturation stress. For some participants such as John, these values continue to assist them in persevering through stressful situations and provide them with the motivation to continue when feeling overwhelmed. He recalled:

I've been in some very stressful situations with potentially extremely bad outcomes. I've worked with people who are not very good at coping with those situations. And I think that now I am able to persevere through stressful situations with the caveat being that as long as I'm a part of a team that's trying to get through something, I can be cool as a cucumber. Just totally upbeat and really fostering and maintaining a positive environment within a team. I think that that's something that I learned to do in the military. What I didn't really learn to do was to do that for myself as an individual. So I definitely struggle with that.

Louise, Allen, and Tori all reiterated these similar sentiments by recounting how they also have been able to navigate and resolve stressful situations within higher education culture by retaining certain military cultural values. Louise recounted:

There's like a switch where if the stress is up and things need to happen, then it's all of a sudden like a switch that I can do where I am completely focused and dead serious and we are gonna get this done. You can take your emotions out of it, which can be good, can be bad <laugh>. It depends on when it happens.

Additionally, Allen said:

I was a little bit tougher than I thought I was. I was able to persevere through a lot of difficult environments and [it] definitely helped me understand how when presented with a challenge to break it up and how to prioritize efforts and lead people and how to understand what I want as a leader and how to be a good follower.

This concept of breaking down challenges and figuring out solutions while feeling stressed also was echoed by Tori who acknowledged:

I'm really good at figuring things out when I need to, and keeping going no matter what's thrown in my path. I'm really good in crisis type situations, but I'm really good at just figuring it out, you know? And I have been doing that since I've been out.

Combined, these participants stated that they believe their retention of certain military cultural values that are associated with perseverance and conflict resolution since have assisted them in more successfully navigating stressors and in continuing to make progress toward their educational goals when experiencing PEI acculturation stress.

The second-most reported retained military value that was expressed by these participants was associated with perseverance, but more closely aligned with tenacity. They frequently

echoed previous statements about accomplishing their mission no matter the cost when they depicted the retention of this value and its impact on their coursework. For example, Jay explained:

> Just study habits, just knowing that I have to get something done and buckling down to do it. If that means I need to stay up till midnight, 1:00 AM, 2:00 AM, to get that paper done that's due the next day, then it's just what I have to do. It's just something that needs to get done. And it's a little shocking sometimes. You don't really notice it in the moment, but looking back at it, like, I've stayed up till midnight last night to finish some chemistry discussions that are due today. So just getting simple things like that, looking back, make it more obvious to me.

This tenacity to complete their tasks no matter what was consistently reported by these participants. Again, it seems that they retained this value as their assignments were critical to the mission of achieving their degree and that remaining steadfast in their work progressed them toward the accomplishment of that mission. Mike described how the retention of this value affected his work ethic at his PEI:

> Just sit down, knock it out, don't worry about it. I don't have to complain about it... If they want me to write a three-page paper, [I] sit down, knock it out. If I need to do a multiple choice listing something, just do it. Answer these questions, it's fine.

When these participants described how they had retained this value following their military service, they frequently contrasted their experiences with those of their civilian peers. During these contrasts, they expressed surprise about how this value was not endorsed by their civilian peers and implied that it was absent in higher education culture. For example, Jeff explained:

> Some of my classmates, they're like, "Oh, I do it over the course of three days or something." And I was like, "What? I just sit down and chug it out in a couple hours and just do it." And they're like, "What? How do you do that? How do you have time for that <laugh>?" I'm like, "I don't know, because I scheduled time for it."

It therefore seems that this retained value of tenacity that was reported by these participants is also associated with a more mission-oriented perspective that was ingrained to

their military cultural identities. However, the retention of this value was not reserved for individual work just as the progress in the mission of the military was not accomplished by individuals. Each participant recalled how they also had retained values associated with teamwork to accomplish various tasks. They stated that their awareness of this retained value was most apparent to them during group projects as they were assigned to teams just as in the military and that their team's success was contingent on their ability to execute its objectives. Alice explained:

> If you're not part of a team, you're thrown in kind of by yourself into projects where you have to develop quick relationships in order to start working with others. So I've definitely kept that. That has helped me a lot with group projects. Then also in the military you learn to ask the necessary questions if you don't understand it. 'Cause if you don't understand it, then it's gonna be a detriment to the mission.

> While these participants described how the retention of this value can be highly adaptive in accomplishing PEI groupwork with their civilian peers, they also reported that it can be difficult, particularly if they are still adjusting to the new norms of higher education culture.

Allen conceded:

> I think in some group project I'm pretty careful about, like, don't go into this group project and just take over. Be a little more standoffish, a little quieter, let some of the other personalities drive it. 'Cause I don't want the former E-8 in me to be just coming out and giving the military a bad name or playing into any kind of military stereotype that someone might have.

These participants therefore explained how the retention of this tenacity and adherence to teamwork for the sake of the mission can present with unique challenges as it can approach the retention of other military values that are associated with accountability for self and others. However, these participants also acknowledged how the retention of these values can encroach on the new norms of higher education culture and may lead to them having negative experiences with their civilian peers. In these situations, they reported feeling increased stressors that are

associated with the retention of these values and how these stressors then prompted them to abandon said values, which will be described next in the Abandoned Values section.

Lastly, some participants articulated how they had retained certain military-based values that were not particularly adaptive nor beneficial in higher education culture; yet they nevertheless were subconsciously retained. For participants such as Louise, Lance, and Tori, values associated more with hypervigilance and threat-appraisal were retained by them despite incongruence with the actual threats that are more associated with higher education culture. Lance explained:

> I wander around and I check people's hands and stuff. I just reflexively do it. The other interesting thing is I usually keep my headphones in because I don't want to be sitting around trying to process everything in the environment. Also, it keeps people from coming up to me and saying stuff.

Louise elaborated on these behaviors by saying:

> A darker side of that is it's hard for me to trust people. It's hard to relax in a lot of situations 'cause it really gets instilled in you, like the whole pulling security and watching for threats and all that thing. So it's hard to go to a place and just be like, relax. Like, you don't need to be thinking about the next steps. You don't need to be thinking about what would happen if something bad happened here. You can just relax.

While these participants reported holding an awareness that the retention of these values was not directly benefiting their progress toward their higher educational goals, they also did not feel that they could outright abandon these values. Tori explained that, "I feel like a lot of the stuff that I've learned is helpful in certain situations," that are associated with the retention of these values, and that, "I don't think I'd wanna leave [that awareness] behind entirely." As such, it seems that these participants were highly aware that the retention of these values may contribute to or exacerbate their PEI acculturation stress, yet the anticipated stress that is associated with abandoning these values during situations where they are needed outweighs the daily stress that their retention incurs. Consequently, it seems that there is a series of complex interest balancing

that is associated with certain military cultural values that these participants intentionally chose to either retain or abandon.

Theme 6: Abandoned Values

These participants tended to report similar motivations for their abandonment of certain military cultural values as they had for their retention of other values. Primarily, they stated that they frequently abandoned those military cultural values that they perceived as inhibiting their transition into higher education culture or those that were associated with more negative and undesirable experiences that they had within the military. This was most readily apparent when they recounted how they had abandoned values that were associated with more superfluous routines in the military. When asked about which values they had abandoned following their discharge from the military, nearly every participant responded immediately that they had abandoned those military routines that were associated with forced preparedness as they thought that they now were unnecessary toward their mission. Jeff depicted this process as such:

> I didn't hold on to a lot of the military rituals. I've heard stories of parents that basically treat their house as though they're in the military and then they stay that way after they get out. I'm just like, "Why <laugh>? You had to do that there because you were forced to. Now you're a civilian, you can do whatever." So I held on to the parts that were beneficial and then tossed out all the rest <laugh>.

This mentality was most often associated with the physical training that was mandated within the military; most participants readily expressed substantial relief and satisfaction about being able to abandon the values associated with such mandatory preparation. Jeff explained how, "Something I got over so fast was the waking up at 5:30 or 6:00 and then going and doing PT. Never liked it. Never adjusted." Jay elaborated:

> A lot of that stuff [I abandoned] is more on the physical side. Obviously you have a very strict schedule when you're in the military. My daily schedule in the military was wake up at 5:00 AM, and Reveille would be sound. We would get ready for PT at like 5:30. We'd all meet up, we would finish PT around 6:30, 7:00, and then everyone would go

shower, go to breakfast together, and then at 8:00 AM we would be at work. And then 4:35 we'd be off work and you could do whatever. And a lot of times guys would be like, okay, 5:00 PM is my gym time and people would go work out again. So small things like that, a lot more strict schedule, because my college schedule is kind of strict.

These participants tended to report how they appreciated the opportunity now to determine their own schedules and the tasks that would occupy their day. As such, they frequently depicted their motivation for abandoning the values that were associated with mandated routine and structure as their desire for regaining their autonomy that had been suspended while in the military. This was particularly noticeable for participants such as Chase, who had prepared to withdraw from military culture as soon as his service was completed. He recalled:

I knew coming in, I was gearing myself up to transition out. I was eager to be involved where I could, but also always have an eye on what's gonna matter on the resume when I'm moving on from here… I prepped intensely for the separation almost as soon as I got in. Not in an arrogant or adversarial way. I wouldn't always share it with everybody, but I was prepping for that point right from the beginning because I knew that was what I wanted to do and I wanted to make sure I was successful there… I was about as far removed from true military. We were basically regular employees that happen to wear the uniform… I view myself now as somebody that did serve in the military, but not really as part of my identity.

Because of this mentality, participants such as Chase recounted how they readily abandoned those values that were more associated with mandated routines as they were an undesirable component of their military cultural identities and did not further them toward their higher educational goals. It should be noted though that these types of statements frequently conflicted with their previous statements about their PEI acculturation stress and how their loss of structure seemed to decrease their perceptions of stability. It therefore seems that these participants reported that they wished they were able to retain the structure that they had known in the military while also abandoning the components that were more related to others telling them how that structure would be formatted.

These participants also detailed how their abandonment of certain military cultural values tended to be in response to their negative PEI transition experiences. This was most apparent when their military cultural values conflicted with the higher education cultural norms, resulting in their having more negative interactions with their civilian peers. Consequently, these participants articulated how the abandonment of their military cultural values was in response to these kinds of situations so that they then could better adapt and decrease the opportunities for additional acculturation stress. The military cultural values that were most frequently abandoned in response to these situations were more associated with seriousness, intensity, and urgency as these participants recounted how those values did not translate as well in higher education culture. Louise reflected:

> The other piece of it is it feel too serious. Like in a setting where everybody is just joking around and having a good time and being silly. Like, it seems like you're the serious guy 'cause you're the one that's not just being as silly, 'cause I feel like you just have a more serious perspective on life.

Tori elaborated further by saying:

> I wanna leave behind some of the intensity, some of the aggression that inherently is required for being in the military. Like figuring out how to learn that not everything has to be done with brute force, you know?

These participants then elaborated how the retention of these values was incongruent with the stressors that they had encountered within higher education culture and that their further retention likely would elicit greater stress in their lives moving forward. Allen conceded:

> I definitely have to take a step back and be like, "Okay, it's just dropping our daughter off at school. It's not <laugh> going on deployment for the military. If we're a minute late, it's probably not gonna be the end of the world."

Again, these participants described how these attitude adjustments and their decisions to abandon certain military-based values associated with seriousness, intensity, and urgency were often in

response to the inappropriateness of their expressing these values in response to higher education stressors.

As previously mentioned, these participants did not encounter the same threats and stressors at their PEIs that they had experienced while in the military. Consequently, they tended to report the abandonment of these values as a means of better navigating and adapting to the new norms of higher education culture so that they were not ostracized by their peers. This was apparent when their military cultural values directly contrasted with higher education values and impeded their progress toward their higher educational goals. For example, Chase explained how, "I think in the military you tend to get a little tunnel vision. This is my role, this is my job. You don't want to step outside of it. I pretty much dropped that immediately." As such, these participants recounted how they readily abandoned the military values that were associated with mandated and forced preparedness as well as those associated with seriousness, intensity, and urgency as they now felt to be incongruent with the norms and goals of higher education culture. In doing so, they articulated how they were able to better reduce their acculturation stress by being more able to navigate the new norms of higher education culture more efficiently and progress in their higher educational goals, all of which reinforced their decisions to abandon these values all the more.

However, it is important to note that these participants reported having relatively few military-based values that they had decided to abandon aside from those previously mentioned. They readily acknowledged their abandonment of certain activities and routines that were associated with these values, though they then were unable to identify their abandoned values as clearly as they had when they identified retained values. It therefore seems that this may be an additional situation as was previously described by these participants where these values are

more subconsciously engrained, and their awareness of said abandoned values may be more subdued for them until they are observed to be in contrast to those who readily endorse military cultural values.

Theme 7: Adopted Values

Very few participants reported their intentional adoption of higher educational cultural values as they did not describe themselves as being particularly motivated to adopt a higher education-based cultural identity. Again, this was primarily because they perceived higher education more as an end to a means for achieving their long-term goals and that their adoption of higher educational cultural values was unnecessary following their departure from their PEIs. This process will be explained further in the next section, though these participants did report their enjoyment and understanding about the importance of specific higher educational cultural values. Mike explained:

> There are pros to [higher education culture]. It doesn't really fit my personality and the culture that I've really grown up in and known for the last 20 some years. But I see the value in it and if I could get some of that and bring it back with me, I feel like it would benefit my interactions in the military and stuff like that as well.

Specifically, these participants acknowledged how they have enjoyed engaging with the values associated with the pursuit of knowledge and self-improvement that are inherent in higher education culture. Lance conceded how, "I like that the people that I tend to talk to are smart and able to hold a very intelligent conversation," while Jeff said that, "Everybody's there for a reason and they're there on purpose. So I'm having those higher level conversations that I wanted." Jimmy echoed these sentiments by confessing:

> I enjoy it. I have a good time. I get to go and experience people, I get to have conversations, and ultimately I get to expand my knowledge. And that's really a big deal to me, is becoming more well-versed in things is huge to me.

Because of this, these participants described how they enjoyed the liberty to pursue their

more academic interests as this was unavailable to them in the military. Louise explained:

> I definitely enjoy the learning environment. To contrast with the military, yes, you were learning, but you were learning about military shit <laugh>. So there wasn't a lot of deep thinking and a lot of, like, let's learn about this different corner of the world. Science, we weren't learning about science. Just the pure learning aspect of it. And that it feels like a space where you can more freely pursue interests educationally. 'cause in the military, you can do college classes, sure. But it's just not quite the same openness or freedom to follow whatever educational path you want.

Mike expanded upon this liberty to gain a breadth of knowledge when he recollected:

> I very much like the pursuit of knowledge portion of it. Not just in one area, but the breadth of it I think is desirable and something that we don't have enough of at work or had enough of in the military. And the ability to think and change your way of thinking and acquire so many different perspectives is good. One of the reasons I wanted to go to school was to get that perspective because I felt like that is a necessary thing. So in that respect, it's very, very beneficial.

It therefore seems that these participants were most interested in adopting higher educational

cultural values when they more closely aligned with their higher educational goals and when

they could choose what they wanted to learn instead of being told what to learn as they had in the

military.

Related to their liberty to choose what to learn, these participants also recounted how

they expressed the most interest in adopting higher educational cultural values that were

associated with leisure to learn for the sake of knowledge. Each participant acknowledged how

they appreciated the ability to choose when and how they worked toward their higher educational

goals and that they had the leisure to learn what they wanted to learn. Tori recognized, "I can

choose when I work and when I don't work. And that is the antithesis, the opposite of the

military. And that's really nice. I like that part." Lance echoed this sentiment when he joked, "I'm

paid to find serious answers to [the] silly questions that I choose. That's pretty cool. I can wake

up and do whatever I want to do long as I get my job done." These participants explained how

they felt more motivated to engage with higher education culture and adopt its values when they

felt that their learning was more personally meaningful to them rather than being filled with

more superfluous, mandated material like they had experienced in the military. Chase elaborated:

> I'm actually interested in this material and learning more about it. I wish more people had the opportunity that I've had in their later twenties to go back and just to study, because it's been awesome. It really has.

Additionally, Tori articulated her experiences:

> I do love the fact that now that I'm at [my PEI], there has been a lot of support in allowing each person to pursue what they're interested in within the confines of the class that we're taking. So I write all of my papers on veteran-related things. I'm able to angle what I'm studying to what I'm interested in. And there's been a lot of support for that. I still have a lot of questions on like, who the hell I am and what I'm doing and how the military impacted me. And being given the space to really sit with and explore that I think is really special.

> These participants described how this leisure to study what they are interested in has also

afforded them the ability to seek out additional learning opportunities that had not been available

to them while in the military. Alice explained:

> Being in the community that I was in before, in special operations, [I was] a part of a special ops team that was very insular. So this has been a great experience in being exposed to different types of people. And I would have to say I really enjoy [it], besides a couple professors. I've actually really enjoyed having such close contact, like experts in their field, going to office hours with my [program] professor and asking to see her dissertation. That was really cool. And just interacting with these giants in their field, it's pretty neat to have access to these super smart people where they may be narrowly focused in their one field, but at least they know it in and out. And they legit are an expert, which I have found to be phenomenal.

As such, these participants recalled how they had responded well to the higher educational

cultural values associated with the liberty and leisure to study what they want, when they want,

and how they want because these values directly contrasted with how education was presented in

the military. Lance provided an example when he said:

> I started out in Japan with [my previous PEI] which was in-person classes [on base]. And one of the things about the culture is that pretty much everybody that's in class with you

has the same frame of reference. If you start asking stupid questions, soon as we have a break, somebody's gonna snatch you up and say read your damn book, shut up.

Therefore, these participants stated that they instead enjoyed the values associated with learning in civilian higher education culture because it afforded them the liberty to progress in their higher educational goals in a more meaningful way. It thus seems that the ability to choose what material to learn and how to learn it in higher education culture was highly desirable to these participants and that it impacted their willingness to adopt its cultural values. Conversely, the following section will discuss how these participants were more reluctant and unwilling to adopt higher educational cultural values when these values were stifled and when their progress toward their higher educational goals were impeded.

Theme 8: Rejected Values

Generally speaking, the majority of these participants did not hold higher education as an institution in high regard and doubted the utility of most higher educational cultural values. Chase articulated this bluntly when he said, "I do think academia at large is some crap." They reported that they were most opposed to higher educational cultural values that were more associated with bureaucracy, compartmentalization, pettiness, elitism, and self-aggrandizement as these values either mirrored negative values that they had experienced within the military or conflicted with those higher education values that they instead wanted to adopt. Mike expressed how these values make him "personally feel that too much emphasis is put on going to school and having that experience and that education when it's not completely necessary at all," while Chase reiterated his stance by saying that he thinks higher education culture is, "Bullshit <laugh>. I'm sorry, but I mean, pompous, elitist bullshit. That's honestly what comes to my mind." Consequently, these participants reported that they most frequently rejected these higher

educational cultural values as they perpetuated and exacerbated their acculturation stress and ultimately impeded their progress toward their higher educational goals.

These participants recounted how they felt most opposed to higher education culture and its values when they impeded their own meaningful pursuit of knowledge. Specifically, they reported that they felt most inclined to reject higher educational cultural values when values that were associated with bureaucracy and compartmentalization decreased the intentionality of their learning and tarnished the utility of their coursework. Alice explained:

> I would have to say it's kind of hard being a civilian and doing class full-time. Like seeing the point, especially when it's a class that doesn't really apply to my degree. So when it came to art class and the professor and I kind of butted heads, it's just kinda like, well, you know, I really don't care. Which wouldn't have happened if I was in the military.

Jay elaborated further by saying:

> I hate the idea of college because I'm so focused on getting a job and prepping my future for a specific job that when I'm taking something like a chemistry class, I'm like, almost call it a high school mentality when people are doing math and they're like, "When am I ever going to do math?" You know what I mean? I'm so focused on getting a career in [my field], I'm like, "When am I ever gonna use chemistry? Why am I taking a chemistry class?" I'm in a gothic architecture class for one of my electives, why am I wasting three hours a week and $2,000 to take a gothic architecture class when I'm wanting to get a [career field] job?

These participants recalled how they negatively perceived their experiences of mandated general education curriculum as it felt to them to be more superfluous learning that was primarily meant to satisfy prerequisites and their PEI's metrics. As such, they reported feeling an aversion to these experiences as they did not embody the higher educational cultural values associated with liberty and the leisure to pursue meaningful education that they wanted to adopt. They stated that these experiences actually had eroded their perceptions of higher education culture and made them want to reject its values since they had degraded the purpose of their education. Chase explained:

A lot of schools have lost the fact that your job is still to educate these people and to prepare them either for further studies or to enter the workforce. That seems to no longer matter, which I think it's really unfortunate because this stuff costs so much money. If you're paying even $15,000 a year, I mean, that's still a lot of money. It used to be a decent car.

These participants detailed how this sense of degradation stemmed from these higher educational cultural values and eroded the perceived utility of higher educational pursuits. Jeff said:

I feel like academia has lost a lot of respect in popular culture, or just in culture at large. 'Cause a lot of people don't see the value of it… they see it as this money hole, and they're not without cause, 'cause most of the times the highest paid person at a university is the college football coach <laugh>. And when their kid goes off and gets a degree in liberal arts and then they can't get a job, I get where their frustration's coming from <laugh> because it's like, yeah, maybe that wasn't the best thing to go for. What did they actually learn?

Because of these types of observations, these participants expressed a reluctantance to adopt higher educational cultural values and instead wanted to reject these values as their time within higher education culture was limited and its values would serve little purpose once they departed that culture. Jay quipped:

I will be candid here. I hate college. I hate the idea of college…. college does a really good job of teaching concepts, whereas I am a much more of a let's just do it kind of person. If you're telling me to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, I need to see how to make a ham sandwich. You know what I mean? I need that one-to-one kind of comparison. Whereas college gets into like, "Well, this is bread and this is peanut butter, and you can combine these." It's so much more concept-based instead of example-based that it just loses me… The school system is a little set up to fail and antiquated, it's built from the past, basically it's built on rote memorization and you're just expected to know and expected to learn things. I don't think that's realistic. I have a whole bunch of friends who are [in my career field] and they're literally like, "90% of my job is googling how to do something." So it's hard for me to want to really dive into college and really understand concepts. Part of me does just because I'm interested in puzzling out stuff, but then a part of me is like, I could just get a [career field] job right now.

Thus, these participants explained how they felt that their coursework was not as meaningful and that it did not espouse adaptive higher educational cultural values. Instead, they recounted how they felt more burdened by unnecessary coursework, which made them want to

separate and disengage from higher education culture so that they could depart from the culture

as quickly as possible. Allen recalled:

> I remember at the end of every program I've been in, I can't wait to be done and not have that weekly burden. And I already feel that way right now. I cannot wait to be done and move on and not have that kind of burden each week of knowing that I have assignments that are due.

Allen recounted an example of this superfluous burden and how it negatively impacts his

perceptions about his coursework. He said:

> Every class I've ever done has done a discussion board post method where you have to post about a topic by Thursday and then respond. To me that's such a manufactured waste of time. People are just replying and filling it with fluff. I really don't feel like there's a ton of educational value in that. And every online class I've ever done has done that... it's really tough to have a conversation that way and you have to do it x amount of time on x amount of days. I think it ends up becoming a little bit of a waste of time.

Because of this, these participants frequently reported their rejection of higher education culture

and its values as the coursework that stemmed from its values that are more associated with

bureaucracy and compartmentalization appeared to decrease its perceived utility and purpose of

their engagement with the culture.

These participants also repeatedly articulated their rejection of higher educational cultural

values that are more associated with identity formation and political activism as well. Nearly

every participant recounted how they had been surprised, annoyed, and frustrated by the amount

of political activism within higher education culture. Alice explained:

> I was not expecting to be head down studying in the quad in the sunshine with my back against a tree, and then find myself in a student-led protest about more strict COVID restrictions and things of that nature... I just wasn't expecting to jump into a pot of activism, and just topics that I had never had to deal with before, like gender identity and stuff like that. That's just very different.

These participants described how they perceived this activism as detrimental to their coursework and that it ultimately impeded their pursuit of knowledge as well as the achievement of their higher educational goals. Jimmy remarked:

> I just don't like political agendas, period. Everyone has their biases. Everyone has a different experience. Just because I might have a more conservative or liberal background doesn't mean that I wanna hear about it at school. I'm here to learn about the subject. And I think it's the professor's job to do their best to teach the material that is in the class. And it's hard to avoid bias entirely, but if you can stick to what the material outlines, then we're good. I think sometimes it's hard to avoid political agendas, and I think it's poisoned itself quite a bit. Or telling me how I need to approach things.

Chase expanded upon this when he posited:

> There seems to be a promotion from the staff, not the professors, but the other staff, to turn [higher education] into this thing that it's bigger than [the program] and almost promoting people to make it their whole life, their whole identity. But also at the same time, dropping the importance of what you're coming here to study. And I think you had so many people in my class that don't want to study, so they hate the classes and they're miserable. But they're part of every group and they're protesting once a week about something. And that's not to speak on the validity of the protests or the subjects or whatever, but just [that] they're involved with everything but the school themselves. And I think that a lot of the staff kind of coerces students into that, especially students of certain demographics. I don't think there's ill intent on the part of the staff, but I think it has bad repercussions for the students... it upsets me seeing that because it's usually first-generation students that get sucked up into it. I'm first-generation and it feels manipulative.

These participants detailed how they were opposed to these types of values as they actually conflicted with the higher education cultural value of liberty to learn what they want, how they want, and when they want. Specifically, they described how they felt that the instillation of political activism in higher education culture impeded their ability to pursue meaningful knowledge as the time and resources that are spent to discuss politics were at the expense of mastering the course content. Additionally, and as previously stated, these participants were uninterested in the cultural values that are associated with identity formation as they were frankly uninterested in adopting a higher educational cultural identity. Consequently,

these higher educational cultural values were believed to have impeded their ability to attain

meaningful knowledge and to achieve their higher educational goals. Jeff explained:

> If it's [my civilian peers'] first time out on their own, they wanna be social, they want to have all these experiences. But I've had all those already for the most part. I don't need that anymore. I'm there to learn. I'm there to get my education, get my degree, and then get a job. So it's easier for me to buckle down and do something and just get it done than it is for some other people.

Mike expanded upon this sentiment when he said:

> We get these surveys from the school and they're like, "How much are you involved in campus? How much do you like our programs? How much do you wanna be in the student school culture?" And I was like, "I'm not, I don't care. I'm here to take these classes, meet these requirements, and that's it." I need 18 more credits or 12 more credits or whatever it is this semester. I get those credits and I'm done. I'm not there to grow as a person and find people and become a new personality or whatever. This is just an extension of my workday, you know, boom, boom, boom, knock it out, get it done, and then that's it.

Because of this, these participants expressed how they readily rejected those higher

educational cultural values that had impeded their ability to accomplish their ultimate higher

educational goals. They acknowledged how they enjoyed meaningful learning and how they

wanted to adopt those higher educational cultural values that were fulfilling their PEI's purpose

of preparing them for their careers, though they were uninterested in adopting any cultural values

that otherwise would divert or impede their educational goals.

Conclusion

These participants detailed several components of their acculturation experiences while

transitioning into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. Specifically, they described their

acculturation stress, which was comprised of various adjustments related to their loss of stability,

their loss of identity, and the navigation of new norms that are associated with higher education

culture. To better manage and resolve their acculturation stress, these participants identified three

distinct acculturation strategies.

The predominant PEI acculturation strategy that they identified was separation, which was characterized by their distancing themselves from higher education culture and from their civilian peers, and instead toward their fellow student veterans and those who endorsed military cultural identities. They recounted how this separation helped them to gain more stability, and that this stability assisted them in resolving their acculturation stress. The second most common acculturation strategy that they identified was marginalization, which occurred when they felt more disconnected from both their civilian peers and from their fellow student veterans. In these situations, these participants reported marginalization as feeling unaligned to both higher education culture and military culture, which typically resulted in them either changing their expectations about their finding group membership at their PEIs or their adjusting their acculturation strategy more toward separation to better resolve their acculturation stress. Integration was the final acculturation strategy that was identified. This involved their adjustment of their military cultural identities to better align with the new norms of higher education culture. These participants described how these adjustments decreased the frequency of conflict between their military cultural identities and the norms of higher education culture, which ultimately decreased their acculturation stress. Conversely, they also detailed how the adaptation of their military cultural values toward their coursework had assisted them in more efficiently progressing toward their higher educational goals.

These participants also identified several military cultural values that they had chosen to retain and to abandon when entering the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. They depicted taking a more pragmatic approach to the retention or abandonment of their military cultural values and that these values tended to be measured by their utility in higher education culture. They reported that they tended to retain those values more associated with structure, routine,

conflict resolution, task completion under pressure, perseverance, and tenacity, as these values were more directly applicable to their coursework and alleviated their stress in higher education culture. However, they also acknowledged how they subconsciously retained several components of their military cultural values given the ingrained nature of their military cultural identities, which did not become salient to them until they ultimately contrasted with higher educational cultural values or when they created conflicts with their civilian peers.

Conversely, these participants repeatedly recalled their abandonment of certain military cultural values when they did not demonstrate utility in higher education culture, often prolonging or exacerbating their acculturation stress. The most commonly reported military values that they had abandoned were those more associated with mandated routines, seriousness, intensity, and urgency, as these values either mirrored negative experiences that they had encountered while in the military or felt incongruent with the norms of higher education culture. Most participants expressed difficulty in identifying specific military cultural values that they had chosen to abandon, which suggests that certain values may be more subconscious until their endorsement causes conflict that then prompts reflection and abandonment.

These participants also identified several higher educational cultural values that they chose to adopt and reject while within higher education culture. They reported few higher educational cultural values that they chose to adopt, though they frequently detailed values that were more associated with liberty to attain meaningful knowledge and the leisure to pursue knowledge as desirable as the values they would be most likely to adopt. Conversely, they repeatedly rejected any higher educational cultural values that they perceived as inhibiting their progress toward their higher educational goals as they believed that they conflicted with the more desirable higher educational cultural values. The higher educational values that these participants

most readily rejected were those that were more related to bureaucracy, compartmentalization, pettiness, elitism, self-aggrandizement, identity formation, and political activism. They repeatedly stated that they perceived their transition into higher education culture as temporary while they pursued their higher educational goals, and that these higher educational cultural values in fact impeded their ability to achieve these goals. Consequently, they reported feeling an increased motivation to reject these higher education cultural goals as they perpetuated and exacerbated their acculturation stress, while also demonstrating little utility for their adoption outside of their PEIs.

The following chapter will discuss further implications of these descriptions, the limitations of this study, and how these descriptions may inform future research about the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as they transition into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

It's a testament to my adaptability, to figure out how to adapt and overcome. And that's a thing you learn in the military.

- Louise

Introduction

In Chapter IV, I introduced the individual participants of this study and presented the synthesized themes that had emerged from their interviews per Moustakas's data analysis approach (2010). In this chapter, I will present a summary of the study and then provide a comprehensive discussion of the results. Next, I will provide a summary of this study's findings and their connection to the current and pertinent body of literature. I then will discuss the implications from this study as they relate to (a) academics, (b) clinical practice, and (c) research. Lastly, I will review the limitations of this study which will be followed by recommendations for future research pertaining to the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans in the higher education culture of civilian PEIs.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

Q1   What are the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as they navigate within the dominant higher education culture of civilian postsecondary educational institutions?

Q1a   Which, if any, aspects of their military cultural identities do post-9/11 student veterans choose to maintain or abandon during their acculturation processes within the dominant higher education culture of civilian postsecondary educational institutions?

Q1b Which, if any, aspects of the dominant higher education culture do post-9/11 student veterans choose to adopt or reject during their acculturation processes within civilian postsecondary educational institutions?

Overview and Purpose of the Study

To date, more than 2.9 million post-9/11 veterans have pursued higher education following their military service (IVMF, 2017) with nearly one million student veterans currently attending civilian PEIs (Holian & Adam, 2020; VA, 2022). Post-9/11 veterans are the most likely veteran cohort to pursue higher education (SVA, 2017), with the total U.S. student veteran population expected to grow continually in the coming years (VBA, 2022). However, post-9/11 student veterans still account for only 4.5% of undergraduate and 5% of graduate students in the U.S. (Holian & Adam, 2020), despite their increased presence in PEIs. As such, post-9/11 student veterans hold a significant cultural minority status on civilian PEI campuses that warrants the examination of their unique higher education cultural experiences.

The existing body of literature detailing student veterans PEI experiences has unfortunately obfuscated our understanding about this population's overall experiences within higher education culture (Borsari et al., 2017). For example, several studies had identified student veterans as being at an increased risk of experiencing depression and suicidal ideation when compared to their civilian peers (Bryan & Bryan, 2014; Drum et al., 2017; Norman et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2018). Conversely, several studies had also indicated that there are no significant differences in the rates of depression and suicidal ideation between student veterans and their civilian peers (Borsari et al., 2017; Pease et al., 2015). The net result of these discrepancies has produced positive clinical considerations for the treatment of student veteran concerns (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Ghosh et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2016), though the nature of the challenges experienced by student veterans within civilian PEIs has remained ambiguous.

The reality of observable metrics has demonstrated that post-9/11 student veterans largely perform remarkably well in civilian PEIs and exceed the performance of their civilian peers in multiple measures of academic aptitude (IVMF, 2017; Kim & Cole, 2013; SVA, 2019). In general, post-9/11 student veterans graduate from their PEIs at a rate that is similar to the national average (54% vs. 53%; NASPA, 2013; SVA, 2017, 2019), graduate from their PEIs at a significantly higher rate than do other adult/nontraditional students (54% vs. 39.2%; IVMF, 2017), and achieve significantly higher GPAs than do their civilian counterparts (3.34 vs. 2.94; IVMF, 2017; SVA, 2019). Further, most post-9/11 student veterans do not report any diagnosable mental or physical health conditions or disabilities (Bonar & Domenici, 2011). As such, the wealth of positive clinical considerations that have been produced by these studies to treat student veteran mental health concerns (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Ghosh et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2016) may in fact be insufficient in addressing the actual stressors that are experienced by most post-9/11 student veterans.

Despite the above, recent developments in the student veteran body of literature have suggested that PEI acculturation challenges are the primary concerns for most post-9/11 student veterans rather than reintegration difficulties (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Ghosh et al., 2021). These developments have highlighted how this discrepancy may have obfuscated our understanding of PEI experiences for this population. Borsari et al. (2017) illustrated this obfuscation by demonstrating that the effectiveness of certain mental health interventions for student veteran PEI concerns could not be determined despite the abundance of research on the topic. The researchers observed that there did not appear to be a unified understanding of student veteran PEI experiences and that there was therefore no unified method by which to approach their concerns (Borsari et al., 2017). Consequently, it seemed that the perpetuation of research

about the reintegration difficulties of post-9/11 student veterans may have been inappropriate for the majority of this population and that a reconceptualization of their concerns was warranted.

For the purposes of this study, Berry's Model of Acculturation (BMA) was the most appropriate framework for understanding the PEI experiences of post-9/11 student veterans given the recent research about this population's concerns (e.g., Ghosh et al., 2021). The BMA is one of the most empirically supported models of acculturation and has consistently demonstrated its validity when applied to the acculturation processes of other minority populations (e.g., Berry & Sam, 1997). The BMA attitudinal dimensions provided important context to the acculturation stress that individuals experience while transitioning into new cultural environments and while interacting with individuals who endorsed cultural identities that differ from their own (Berry & Sam, 1997). As such, the BMA was critical in the conceptualization of acculturation processes as the attitudinal dimensions can better inform how an individual may choose specific acculturation strategies to manage and resolve their acculturation stress (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Berry et al., 1986; Berry & Kim, 1988; Doná, 1993; Doná & Berry, 1994; Sinha et al., 1992). Because of this, the utilization of the BMA to conceptualize the PEI acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans was prudent as it offered a framework to better define and understand said experiences.

Ultimately, the purpose of this study was to describe the essence of the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as they navigated within the dominant higher education culture of civilian PEIs. Specifically, this study aimed to conceptualize the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans by simultaneously identifying the components of their military cultural identity that they decided to maintain or abandon in PEI settings as well as which components of the dominant higher education culture that they decided to adopt or reject.

In doing so, this study was able to further the research in a direction that was more congruent with the real-world concerns of most student veterans as well as help to address a critical factor of student veteran PEI experiences. Because of this, this study had hoped that this new direction would better address the concerns that most post-9/11 student veterans report experiencing in their PEIs.

<div align="center">

**Summary of Findings and Their Relationships
with Current Literature**

</div>

This section includes a discussion of the synthesized themes that emerged from the data analysis process, their thematic connection to this study's research questions, and their relevance to the current literature. Some of the themes, particularly those that are more related to the nature and the content of acculturation stress, were consistent with the previous qualitative and quantitative research examining student veteran PEI experiences. However, other themes also emerged that expanded upon the student veteran experiences that already have been described by the previous research and that further clarified our understanding of their PEI experiences.

Theme 1: Acculturation Stress

Better understanding the nature of the acculturation stress that is experienced by post-9/11 student veterans when they transition into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs is critical to our more accurately understanding their overall PEI experiences. Every participant here depicted a noticeable and distinct transitional period following the completion of their military service, and these transitions typically were associated with increased stress arising from changes in their routines, their identities, and their cultural environments. Among these participants, this stress seemed to be most pronounced when entering into the higher education culture of PEIs, as most of them transitioned into higher education shortly after their discharge from the military.

Each of these participants had recounted their PEI acculturation stress as difficult, uncomfortable, and at times a factor that exacerbated their other life stressors (e.g., familial, occupational, and financial stressors). They explained that they had thought that they had been adequately prepared for their transition out of the military, particularly those who had looked forward to discharging from the military, but that the reality of their ultimate transitions was often far more difficult than they had anticipated. Several of these participants, such as Lance, reported that they had thought the military's transition programs (e.g., Transition Assistance Program [TAPS]) had prepared them enough for their transition; however, they were greatly surprised by the actualities of what their transitions actually entailed. In general, this acculturation stress was most frequently associated with the realities of their now existing within a new and dominant culture. It also was associated with the realizations that certain components of their military cultural identities now were incongruent with the new culture and that these components may need to be suppressed for their success within the culture.

This experience was consistent with the previous literature as the initial exposure to PEI higher education culture and the contrast between cultural values seems to be a particularly sensitive period for student veterans who had recently discharged from the military (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009; Black et al., 2007; Borsari et al., 2017). In general, the previous literature posited that the loss of structure, routine, and a clearly defined mission had prompted reintegration challenges (Elnitsky et al., 2017; Norman et al., 2015; Orazem et al., 2017). However, the present study identified several components of this stress that expanded upon the considerations of several studies related to the acculturation challenges of post-9/11 student veterans (Ghosh et al., 2021; McCaslin et al., 2021). The following sections will provide summaries of these components, how they contributed to these participants' reported

acculturation stress, and how each component either reinforced or expanded upon the previous literature.

Theme 1, Subtheme 1: Loss of Stability

The loss of stability that was depicted by these participants was comprised of both the loss of structure and the loss of support that they had felt within the military. Each of these participants recalled how their military experiences had been largely defined by a rigid set of hierarchies, routines, policies, procedures, and objectives. At times, they had resented that structure as it often meant the loss of individual autonomy and liberty. However, these participants acknowledged how their transition into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs had illustrated to them just how much they had grown to rely upon the stability that the military had provided them.

For these participants, this loss of stability typically appeared to be associated with a loss of predictability, mission, and support. They explained that the transition into higher education culture meant that they were required to independently formulate new schedules, routines, and expectations that had previously been dictated to them. As such, they reported that they had experienced decreased predictability in their daily interactions as they could no longer rely upon the expectations that they would interact with the same people in the same locations at the same time during the same job. This sentiment aligned with the PEI experiences that had been described by student veterans in previous studies (Demers, 2011; Koenig et al., 2014; McCormick et al., 2019) and reaffirmed the importance of structure and expectations, or a lack thereof, within student veteran acculturation stress.

Additionally, these participants explained how their cultural identity differences meant that it was more difficult for them to predict how their civilian peers would respond to their

behaviors and disclosures. Each one conceded how they had grown to expect certain responses from their peers within the military given their shared military cultural identities, though negative interactions with their civilian peers due to their cultural differences had decreased their predictability in these interactions and thus had increased their acculturation stress. While these sentiments reflected those from the previous literature (Demers, 2011; Mahoney et al., 2021; McCaslin et al., 2021; Norman et al., 2015), there has been little analogous research as to how these sentiments may relate to the PEI acculturation stress that is experienced by post-9/11 student veterans.

The loss of a clear and discernable mission was another significant component of the loss of stability. These participants reported how in the military the daily decisions related to their overall mission typically had been assigned by their superiors and the Department of Defense (DoD). Those decisions had decreased their autonomy which occasionally prompted feelings of frustration and resentment. However, those decisions also decreased their perceived sense of accountability for the conflicts and for the disappointing outcomes that stemmed from these decisions. Additionally, those decisions clearly defined the individual roles that these participants were responsible for in the overall mission and how progress toward that mission ultimately would be measured. Consequently, the loss of a clearly defined mission, how progress in the mission would be measured, and knowing who would be responsible for progress in the mission all contributed to their feelings of increased uncertainty and instability.

The reported loss of a clearly defined mission aligned well with the current body of literature, as this factor has been frequently associated with veteran and student veteran transition stress (Sayer et al., 2010; Sayer et al., 2011; Thomas et al., 2018). As such, it is an important component of the overall loss of stability, as these participants expressed feeling increased stress

when having to determine their individual objectives and mission within their new higher education culture. While these participants and the body of literature have demonstrated that student veterans are quite capable of establishing their goals and direction in higher education (Smith-Osborne, 2012; SVA, 2019; Wilson et al., 2021), the loss of a clear mission is nonetheless a stressor and a contributing factor to the overall loss of stability during their acculturation processes.

Lastly, the loss of support was a significant component of their loss of stability. As previously described, these participants had clearly identifiable objectives in the military as well as clearly defined resources, protocols, and personnel who were responsible for supporting them during the mission. Each of these participants had recalled how the military had provided countless policies, procedures, and tasks to assist them and their families while navigating new transitions. This support was vital to them in alleviating the stress of deployments, unit transfers, and career changes, yet was unavailable to them following their departure from the military. While this loss of support has been depicted in the previous literature (Institute of Medicine [IoM], 2010; McCormick et al., 2019; Orazem et al., 2017), it typically has been presented as a general and comprehensive characteristic of military service rather than a significant and specific component of PEI acculturation stress.

The descriptions from these participants in this study expanded upon this literature by providing additional context about the policies, procedures, and protocols that had contributed to their perceptions of support within the military. Further, these descriptions contextualized how they had experienced increased stress upon losing this support following their discharge from the military. Specifically, not knowing who to contact for support had elicited feelings of uncertainty, which then contributed to the loss of stability within higher education culture.

Theme 1, Subtheme 2: Loss of Identity

For these participants, their loss of identity appeared to align with the identities that they had developed while serving in the military and their perceptions that they were no longer able to embody those identities at their PEIs. This loss of identity was most noticeable for those such as Jimmy, who had recently discharged from the military, which was congruent with prior research that posited that military cultural identities are most salient after separation from the military (Dolan et al., 2022). Additionally, this loss of identity was noticeable for participants such as Jay, Allen, and John, all of whom had extensive careers within the military that fostered prestige, responsibility, and recognition. Combined, these participants recounted how their formative experiences as young adults had been within the military and that their perceptions of competence, support, and direction had been specifically intertwined with the objectives of the military. As such, the contrasting values of higher education culture tended to underscore the loss of their military cultural identities and contribute to their overall acculturation stress. This altogether means that student veterans must simultaneously reconcile with the meaning of their lost military cultural identities while formulating their understandings of their new student veteran identities within higher education culture.

The previous research related to post-9/11 student veteran PEI experiences have noted the loss of this identity (Koenig et al., 2014; Legreid & Betters-Bubon, 2020; Mahoney et al., 2021), though it tended to associate this loss as a separate stressor within their reintegration challenges. By making this distinction, the stress that is associated with the loss of identity is better contextualized as it demonstrates how this loss can decrease the perceived predictability of interactions with others, one's expectations about their role as a student veteran, and the perceptions of one's worth outside of military culture. Additionally, this distinction also suggests

potential motivations for the PEI acculturation strategies that were reported by these participants (e.g., separation) as the stress that is associated with one's loss of identity may prompt behaviors that seek to recapture components of that lost identity.

Theme 1, Subtheme 3: Navigating New Norms

The final component of acculturation stress as illustrated by these participants was their navigation of new norms within the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. Each of these participants described how they had recognized and adjusted to situations within their PEIs where their military cultural values were completely incongruent with the values of higher education culture. In doing so, they frequently confessed how they had felt as if they did not belong in higher education culture, that they were disconnected from their civilian peers, and that there were components of their military cultural identities that were incompatible with the nature of higher education culture. These experiences aligned well with previous works describing student veteran PEI experiences (Garcia, 2017; Hammond, 2017; Legreid & Betters-Bubon, 2020; Mahoney et al., 2021), and reinforced the impact of new cultural norms on the acculturation stress of post-9/11 student veterans.

However, this study expanded upon this literature by providing rich descriptions of specific interactions that these participants experienced while navigating the new norms of higher education culture (e.g., communication differences, misinterpretations of cultural taboos). In doing so, this study increased the understanding about what may occur as a student veteran navigates the new norms of higher education culture, how violations of higher education cultural norms can elicit negative experiences from their civilian peers, and how the navigation of these norms can contribute to the overall acculturation stress of student veterans. Plainly put, adjusting to the new expectations, mannerisms, and the lexicon of higher education culture appears to be

highly stressful for student veterans as they tend to exert a significant mental and emotional toll when they endorse cultural values that are at times diametrically opposed to those expressed by their civilian peers.

Theme 2: Separation as Stabilization

These participants reported separation to be the predominant strategy that they used to resolve their acculturation stress while transitioning into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. This separation was characterized by (a) increased feelings of comfort and familiarity that were present for them when interacting with fellow student veterans but were absent when interacting with their civilian peers, (b) an increased desire to seek out situations and environments where military cultural values are more openly expressed, and (c) a distinct emotional and physical detachment from their civilian peers as well as from environments where higher educational cultural values are more openly affirmed and expressed.

The nature of the separation that these participants articulated appears to be highly congruent with the descriptions of separation as were exhibited by other minority populations (Berry, 1992; Berry et al., 1989; Doná & Berry, 1994; Sinha et al., 1992); this reinforces the appropriateness of the BMA in conceptualizing the acculturation processes of post-9/11 student veterans. In particular, the increased feelings of comfort, familiarity, and predictability that these participants reported when interacting with others who also endorsed military cultural values echoed the sentiments of minority refugee populations who had separated from their dominant host cultures (Doná, 1993; Doná & Berry, 1994; Sinha et al., 1992). The acculturation experiences of these participants within higher education culture therefore strongly aligned with the acculturation experiences of other minority populations. Thus, it seems likely that student veterans will continue to utilize separation as their preferred acculturation strategy until they

encounter more desirable higher educational cultural values that elicit stability within their PEIs and that match or exceed their separation experiences. Conversely, it also seems likely that they will continue to utilize separation unless the stability that they experience within their separation wanes, and as they no longer perceive their fellow student veterans as a significant source of support within their PEIs.

Theme 3: Marginalization

Marginalization was the second-most common acculturation strategy reported by these participants for resolving their acculturation stress while transitioning into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. This marginalization was characterized by (a) a distinct emotional and physical detachment from both their civilian and student veteran peers, (b) a desire to transition away from their military cultural identities resulting in the abandonment of their military cultural values, and (c) the inability to adopt higher educational cultural values due either to negative experiences with their civilian peers or incongruence between higher education and military cultural values. Combined, those who depicted experiences of marginalization tended to feel alone within their PEIs and that they must change their perceptions about the support they need within higher education culture to manage their acculturation stress.

The nature of the marginalization that these participants reported was highly congruent with the descriptions of marginalization as exhibited by other minority populations (Berry, 1992; Berry et al., 1989; Doná & Berry, 1994; Sinha et al., 1992), particularly disaffected refugees who fled from their origin culture (Doná, 1993; Doná & Berry, 1994). In these situations, marginalization of the refugees occurred when they experienced negative interactions with the host culture, which then led to increased feelings of rejection and disconnection from individuals within the host culture (Doná & Berry, 1994). Additionally, the refugees who had experienced

marginalization also tended to report feeling disconnected from their peers who endorsed cultural

identities that were more aligned with the culture that they had fled from (Doná, 1993). As such,

they tended to feel alone in their environments and adjusted their perceptions of support to one of

self-sufficiency to manage their acculturation stress (Doná, 1993; Doná & Berry, 1994). The

experiences of these participants were therefore highly congruent with the experiences of other

marginalized minority populations and aligned well with the typical experiences and motivations

that were associated with those who use marginalization as a strategy to manage acculturation

stress (Berry et al., 1997).

It is important to note though that there were certain unique components of these

participants' military cultural identities that influenced their perceptions of disconnection and use

of marginalization to manage their acculturation stress. Some participants such as Alice, Tori,

and Louise articulated holding military cultural values that were associated with a collectivist

cultural identity within the military. Specifically, they explained how the military had valued the

immediate integration of individuals within the military and that they had received the cultural

message that they must integrate into a new group whenever they enter a new environment.

Consequently, these participants recounted how they had experienced increased acculturation

stress when they were unable to more adequately integrate into higher education culture and

instead adjusted their perceptions (e.g., abandonment of this military cultural value) to better

align with the more self-sufficient perspective of marginalization.

While the previous literature has described this mindset adjustment in other populations

(Berry, 1970; Berry et al., 1997), it does not seem to have examined the specific marginalization

experiences of populations who share cultural values that are similar to those that are typically

observed within the military. As such, the specific military cultural value of quickly integrating

into new groups may reflect a component of the acculturation stress that can be experienced by other highly collective minority populations that has not been fully explored yet in the literature. By better understanding said value, PEIs may be more equipped to address a significant component of the initial acculturation stress that their student veterans experience upon entering higher education culture. In doing so, PEIs might be able to better align their directives with this value in ways that more strongly recognize and promote connections with either student veteran or civilian peers as well as reduce the perceived necessity of utilizing marginalization to manage their PEI acculturation stress.

Theme 4: Integration

Integration was the least commonly reported acculturation strategy used among these participants to attempt to resolve their acculturation stress while transitioning into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. Integration among these participants was characterized by (a) their pragmatic interest balancing of cultural values as they relate to their educational goals, (b) their retention of military cultural values that facilitate the efficient achievement of educational goals, (c) their adoption of higher educational cultural values that promote the pursuit of meaningful and applicable knowledge, and (d) their abandonment of consciously and unconsciously retained military cultural values that tended to elicit more negative interactions within higher education culture and instead impair their achievement of educational goals. Combined, those participants who depicted these experiences of integration tended to perceive their adaptability to the higher education cultural norms as critical to the management of their acculturation stress.

The nature of the integration that these participants reported appeared to be highly congruent with the descriptions of integration as exhibited by other minority populations (Berry,

1992; Berry et al., 1989; Doná & Berry, 1994; Sinha et al., 1992). However, these participants seemed to be more utilitarian in their considerations about which cultural values to retain or abandon than other populations. In general, these participants tended to maintain a more mission-oriented approach to their PEI experiences, which distilled both military and higher educational cultural values to a gradient of helpful and unhelpful values. In other words, each participant seemed to have an internal and individualized cutoff point within this gradient when determining which values would be most beneficial in progressing them toward their higher educational goals. Consequently, any value, whether military- or higher education-based, that was determined to be adaptive seemed to be either retained or adopted. Conversely, any value that was considered an impediment to their academic goals seemed to be either abandoned or rejected.

As such, the considerations from these participants reflect several conscious and unconscious cognitive processes that likely are representative of integration (Berry et al., 1997), but nevertheless seem to differ given the mission-oriented intentionality of choices about the cultural values that are maintained or abandoned. This suggests that the current body of literature may require the additional examination of the use of integration among minority groups who maintain a more temporary presence within a dominant host culture as it is currently unclear whether the goal-directed attitudes that were expressed by these participants are more universal to integration in general or more unique to the integration of individuals with military cultural identities. Plainly put, it is currently unclear whether this observed interest balancing of cultural values manifests from the time-limited nature of higher education or whether student veterans usually endorse similar tendencies in any permanent and dominant host culture outside of the military. Better understanding this distinction therefore is critical to decreasing student veteran

PEI acculturation stress as it would more effectively illustrate whether this interest balancing needs to be accounted for primarily within PEI settings or whether it is instead a more fundamental component of their general non-military integration experiences.

Military Values

Each of these participants reported several military cultural values that they believed represented military culture and how they perceived these values as rather formative for their military cultural identities. The comments that identified specific values were not explicitly included in the synthesized themes as this study's research questions asked about which aspects of their military cultural identities were retained or abandoned, not whether there were specific values that were retained or abandoned within higher education culture. However, these comments contextualized these participants' responses as they identified salient military cultural values and provided them with contrast when describing their current military cultural identities within their PEIs. As such, the following sections will provide summaries of which aspects of the military culture that these participants chose to retain or abandon, how they related to their acculturation experiences within the higher education culture of civilian PEIs, and how each component either reinforced or expanded upon previous literature.

Theme 5: Retained Values

As previously mentioned, these participants stated that a significant proportion of the military cultural values that they had retained within higher education culture are subconscious given their rather ingrained nature, and thus are beyond their awareness until their civilian peers make comments about them. However, once these retained values had been identified, these participants articulated how they had engaged in interest balancing to pragmatically determine whether these values were beneficial to them within higher education culture. These participants

readily identified the military cultural identities that they had chosen to retain as these values were considered by them to be adaptive and useful in the achievement of their educational goals. Specifically, they reported that they tended to retain certain military cultural values more associated with routine, structure, organization, perseverance, tenacity, teamwork, conflict resolution, and task completion while stressed.

The current body of literature has repeatedly identified each of these values as highly desirable and beneficial within the military (Dunivin, 1994; Goldich, 2011; Hall, 2011; Wilson, 2008) as they promote a more task-focused and mission-centric approach to overcoming obstacles (Hall-Clark et al., 2019; Meyer et al., 2016; Weiss & Coll, 2011). The military cultural values that had been retained by these participants are therefore congruent with those illustrated in previous student veteran research (Wilson, 2008; Wilson et al., 2021).

It is important to note though that these participants also identified several military cultural values that they had chosen to retain that did not align with the current body of literature. These participants, particularly those who had served within combat, security, or high-risk occupations, reported that they had retained several military cultural values that typically are associated with hypervigilance and threat-appraisal. They explained how these values had initially been more subconsciously retained and that they only had become aware of these values once they realized that their behaviors and attitudes were incongruent with the actual threats associated with higher education culture.

However, they also explained how they had chosen to retain these values further as the thought of needing them within their PEIs after they had been abandoned was highly distressing as it conflicted with their military cultural value of preparedness. The anticipated stress of being unprepared during an emergency was so distressing for them that they believed any impairments

within their PEIs that arose from the retention of these values (e.g., concentration difficulties, increased isolation) was acceptable given the perceived severity of hypothetically abandoning their preparedness. As such, these participants stated that they had continued to retain these military cultural values even after they had become aware that they occasionally interfered with their coursework and higher educational goals. Curiously, this also suggests that certain military cultural values may be tiered and that the retention of specific core values (e.g., preparedness) might necessitate the retention of auxiliary military-based values (e.g., vigilance and seriousness) that support these core values regardless of their individual utility within higher education culture.

The retention of these military cultural values that were not explicitly beneficial was interesting as the current body of literature does not seem to have conceptualized these behaviors in the ways that were articulated by these participants. There have been several studies that have identified these values and the behaviors that often are associated with these values as barriers to reintegration (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009; Alschuler & Yarab, 2018) and as factors that may exacerbate acculturation stress (Ghosh et al., 2021). However, few have considered how the distress stemming from the abandonment of these values may be equally, if not more, impairing to student veterans. Consequently, it is possible that the decisions to retain their specific military cultural values that they reported having may not align entirely with the previous literature (Berry et al., 1997), as it seems that they still chose to retain certain military cultural values that were not particularly beneficial for them in resolving their PEI acculturation stress.

Theme 6: Abandoned Values

These participants tended to report similar motivations for the abandonment of any of their military cultural values as they had for the retention of these values. Primarily, they stated

that they had frequently abandoned certain military cultural values that they had perceived as inhibitive in their transition into higher education culture. The abandoned military cultural values that were articulated by these participants related primarily to the mandated components of the military such as regimented routines and forced preparedness (e.g., physical training, extended work hours). They depicted these components as being undesirable experiences within the military and as now no longer serving a purpose for them outside of the military, which ultimately prompted their abandonment within higher education culture. Additionally, they stated that they also had abandoned those military cultural values more associated with seriousness, intensity, and urgency as such values were fairly incongruent with the stressors associated with higher education culture, elicited more negative interactions with their civilian peers, and thus exacerbated their acculturation stress.

As previously mentioned, the motivations that these participants had recounted for abandoning certain military cultural values was congruent with the overarching pragmatism within military culture (Dunivin, 1994; Goldich, 2011; Hall, 2011; Wilson, 2008). However, it is important to reiterate that they frequently indicated that the abandonment of such military cultural values was in response to negative interactions that they since had received within higher education culture. These responses align with previous research which suggests that certain components of a student veteran's military cultural identity are subconscious given their ingrained nature (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009; Black et al., 2007). Consequently, it seems that these participant experiences expanded upon prior research by providing rich descriptions of PEI experiences that contextualize their motivations for the abandonment of certain military cultural values within higher education culture.

While the PEI experiences of these participants had helped to better contextualize their motivations for the abandonment of such military cultural values, it is important to note that there is a paucity of research that has explicitly examined the abandonment of military cultural values within civilian settings. This may be related to the general lack of research related to the acculturation processes of student veterans (Ghosh et al., 2021) and also may be indicative of this burgeoning field of research. The blunt truth is we need to better understand when student veterans choose to abandon certain military values, why they choose to abandon these values, and how the abandonment of these values can reduce their PEI acculturation stress. In doing so, we can better understand where the personal responsibility for student veterans to abandon maladaptive military cultural values ends and where the institutional responsibility for PEIs to reduce the acculturation stress of their student veterans begins. Combined, this would give a more complete picture of student veteran acculturation processes and how to best address the acculturation stress that can stem from their retention of certain military cultural values.

Higher Education Values

These participants shared several comments about their perceptions of higher education culture, its unique cultural values, and the overall utility of said values. These perceptions were quite unified among them, especially in their initial expectations about what higher education culture would entail as well as their ultimate disappointment and disillusionment about the culture once they had entered their PEIs. The following sections will provide summaries of which aspects of higher education culture these participants chose to retain or to abandon, how they related to their acculturation experiences within the higher education culture of civilian PEIs, and how each component either reinforces or expands upon previous literature.

Theme 7: Adopted Values

As previously mentioned, very few of these participants acknowledged their intentional adoption of higher educational cultural values as they did not portray themselves as being particularly motivated to adopt a higher education cultural identity. They had been keenly aware that their exposure to higher education culture was to be temporary, and that the adoption of its values were limited to those which were most beneficial during their time within that culture. Specifically, they tended to acknowledge only adopting higher educational cultural values which would allow them to more efficiently achieve their higher educational goals and to transition out of higher education culture as quickly and as seamlessly as possible. The higher educational cultural values that had been adopted tended to relate to the pursuit of knowledge, self-improvement, the liberty to choose what to learn, and the leisure to learn for the sake of knowledge. These participants reported that they had adopted these values because they aligned with their initial expectations about higher education culture, made their coursework more engaging and meaningful, and ultimately made their education feel more useful and applicable to their future careers.

The higher educational cultural values that these participants had adopted appeared to be highly congruent with the body of literature depicting the pillars of higher education (Craig, 2004; Geiger, 2015). The higher education values that embody these pillars seemed to encourage these participants to adopt these values due to their perceived utility which, once adopted, seemed to further them toward their higher educational goals, which then decreased their acculturation stress. However, the motivations that they had reported for adopting these higher educational cultural values seemed to be unique to this population given their more utilitarian and goal-directed approach to reducing acculturation stress. In particular, the values that

facilitated the processing of their military experiences and fostered their self-improvement for a meaningful career outside of the military seemed to be unique to the student veteran population as it suggested that they are keenly aware of the assistance that they need from their PEIs to achieve their academic and occupational goals. Thus, these experiences further reflected the transient nature of their presence within higher education culture as they chose to adopt the cultural values that would reduce their immediate acculturation stress, help them accomplish their mission of achieving a degree, and further them toward their occupational goals.

Theme 8: Rejected Values

These participants reported that they had rejected most higher educational cultural values due to their perceptions about the utility of these values outside of higher education culture. They readily rejected any higher educational cultural values that they believed would impede their ability to achieve their higher educational goals. Specifically, they explained that they had rejected higher educational cultural values that were more associated with bureaucracy, compartmentalization, pettiness, elitism, and self-aggrandizement as these values either mirrored negative values they had experienced within the military or had conflicted with what higher education values they instead wanted to adopt.

These participants tended to associate higher educational cultural values that were more related to bureaucracy, compartmentalization, and self-aggrandizement as impediments to their higher educational goals while values related to pettiness and elitism were either diametrically opposed to their military cultural values or reflected personality traits of individuals whom they had negative interactions with while in the military. Of note, it seemed that the higher educational cultural values that these participants had rejected were more associated with the erosion of the pillars of higher education culture (Craig, 2004; Geiger, 2015), which contributed

to their disillusionment about higher education culture and their overall negative perceptions about the culture.

The experiences of many participants and their motivations for rejecting certain higher educational cultural values expanded upon the current body of student veteran literature as there seems to be a significant shortage of research examining this topic. As previously stated, most of the research examining student veteran PEI experiences have implied that the adoption of higher educational cultural values among student veterans is expected and that their inability to adopt these values is more representative of their reintegration challenges (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Borsari et al., 2017). Because of this, it seems that the PEI experiences of these participants and their motivations for rejecting certain higher educational cultural values expands upon the existing student veteran literature as it suggests that undesirable components of higher education culture elicit the rejection of certain values rather than certain components of student veteran military identities inhibiting their ability to adopt higher educational cultural values. Specifically, this suggests that higher education culture may perpetuate maladaptive cultural values that actually are undesirable to student veterans and that these values discourage them from adopting more of a higher educational cultural identity. Thus, it may be that the difficulties of integrating student veterans into higher education culture are the fault of PEIs for perpetuating these values rather than always being due to the more personal or systemic deficits that student veterans must individually overcome.

This distinction is important to note as it emphasizes the current paucity of literature examining the components of higher education culture which are perceived to be undesirable to student veterans. This would suggest that PEIs cannot hope to fully integrate their student veterans into higher education culture by implementing interventions designed to help them to

overcome personal or systemic deficits if this population is in fact uninterested in incorporating certain values from this culture. As such, the perceptions and PEI experiences that were described by these participants expands upon the literature as it illustrates the need for the further examination of rejected higher education cultures and how this rejection may impact the acculturation strategies chosen by student veterans to manage their acculturation stress within civilian PEIs. By examining this rejection further, PEIs may be able to better ascertain how to adjust their higher educational cultural values in ways that limit the expression of those rejected values and to reduce the acculturation stress of their student veterans. Additionally, this examination may simultaneously shift the expected burden of adjustments within PEIs from the student veterans needing to overcome personal and systemic deficits to PEIs more critically evaluating the appropriateness of their own cultural values and how those values are expressed among their faculty.

Limitations

First and foremost, the exploratory nature of this study itself was its fundamental limitation. The paucity of research examining the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans within the higher education culture of civilian PEIs meant that the research questions that were derived for this study were intended to be necessarily broad, which ultimately blunted its ability to focus on the specific minutiae of these participants' PEI experiences. Consequently, this study definitively stated a priori that it did not intend to reach saturation given the breadth of its research questions. It is clear that this study did not reach saturation as the themes that were articulated by these participants would likely be echoed by future participants, though each new participant would also likely describe additional nuances about their PEI experiences that could further expand upon this study's themes. As such, this intention limited this study's ability to

generate more comprehensive themes that could represent the PEI experiences of most post-9/11 student veterans.

An additional limitation of this study was its small sample size. This study was unable to reach its minimum sample size of 12 participants and instead was only able to gather the acculturation experiences of 11 post-9/11 student veterans. This meant that this study had a miniscule fraction of the total post-9/11 student veteran population within U.S. PEIs, which significantly limits the representativeness of its themes for this population. It is possible that these themes do resonate with other post-9/11 student veterans and their acculturation experiences within higher education culture; however, it is unlikely that these themes can resonate entirely with their PEI experiences as there are too many specificities within said experiences and their intersecting identities for this study's research questions to adequately address. As such, this study appears to be limited to an exploratory indicator that further research about the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans within higher education culture is sorely needed; though it cannot generate specific and representative themes that encapsulate these experiences for the population at large.

This study was also limited in its representation of specific demographics and regions. I was able to recruit only three female student veterans, which meant that their PEI experiences were disproportional to those that were expressed by their male counterparts. It is therefore unlikely that the PEI acculturation experiences and the subsequent acculturation stress of female post-9/11 student veterans were adequately depicted within this study in kind. The same limitations can be applied to other post-9/11 student veteran demographics as this study was mostly comprised of White, young adult post-9/11 student veteran participants who had discharged from the U.S. Army or Air Force as enlisted servicemembers. This meant that this

study's sample underrepresented the PEI acculturation experiences of other student veterans according to race, ethnicity, age, sex, gender, service branch, rank at discharge, and conflict era. Additionally, this study collected student veteran PEI experiences from only eight U.S. states and fewer than 10 public PEIs, which again highlights the limited geographic representativeness of its themes. As such, the acculturation experiences that were portrayed within this study offer valuable insights about the nature of acculturation stress and the acculturation experiences of student veterans within higher education culture; however, it again would be inappropriate to suggest that these experiences are representative of all student veteran PEI acculturation experiences.

A related limitation is that this study focused exclusively on the PEI acculturation experiences of student veterans who attended four-year universities. It did not collect any descriptions of PEI acculturation experiences for post-9/11 student veterans who attended community colleges, technical colleges, or other higher education programs that differed from four-year universities. Additionally, this study focused exclusively on the acculturation experiences within civilian PEIs rather than military PEIs. Several of these participants reported experiences within military PEIs or civilian PEIs within military bases that were instructed exclusively by military personnel, and it was clear that the higher education culture within these PEIs differed significantly from those reported by civilian PEIs. It would therefore be inappropriate to suggest that the themes derived from this study are applicable to the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans within the higher education culture of all PEIs.

Similarly, this study's eligibility requirements may have underrepresented the number of post-9/11 student veterans who have experienced marginalization within higher education culture

due to the requirement that they must be currently enrolled in a civilian PEI. The participants

such as Tori who had reported feeling marginalized at their PEIs tended to also depict increased

feelings of stress, isolation, and difficulties remaining within higher education culture. As such, it

is possible that student veterans who experience marginalization may be more at risk of attrition

and choose to withdraw from their PEIs to resolve their acculturation stress. Because of this, it is

possible that they would be ineligible for any studies that require them to be currently enrolled at

a PEI despite them having been exposed to higher education culture and them having used

marginalization as an acculturation strategy. Consequently, it is possible that this study did not

fully capture the essence of marginalization among post-9/11 student veterans within higher

education culture as the eligibility requirements prevented the recruitment of student veterans

who had experienced marginalization yet had withdrawn from their PEIs.

      Lastly, this study focused exclusively on the military cultural values and higher

educational values that were present within the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student

veterans. This study was therefore limited in its ability to conceptualize the myriads of other

cultural identities and values that possibly were held by these participants within higher

education culture as it is highly unlikely that their military cultural identities and their associated

values were the exclusive driver of their acculturation stress within higher education culture

(e.g., first-generation student status). This again highlights the limited representation of the

intersecting identities that each post-9/11 student veteran holds within civilian PEIs and how the

blunt research questions of this study might have been unable to more adequately parse these

cultural nuances from the overall acculturation experiences that they reported. This therefore

condensed the acculturation experiences of these post-9/11 student veterans and the subsequent

conceptualization of their experiences with the BMA (Berry et al., 1997) into a binary of either

military or higher educational cultural values as opposed to the myriad of other intersecting cultural values that they may hold. This condensing was necessary given the exploratory nature of this study. However, it is insufficient for the generation of themes that encapsulate the totality of the intersecting identities of post-9/11 student veterans as they transition into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. As such, this study was unable to generate themes that are entirely representative of the cultural identities of post-9/11 student veterans that are beyond their broad military cultural identities within the overall higher education culture of civilian PEIs. This therefore limits the representativeness of post-9/11 student veteran acculturation experiences that fall beyond this scope.

To add, I also learned that my initial eligibility criteria may have been overly restrictive and may have unnecessarily excluded certain interested student veterans from participating. For example, it seemed that the requirement for student veterans to have participated in a post-9/11 combat operation or to have been deployed overseas was unnecessary as several interested student veterans identified as post-9/11 veterans but did not meet these criteria. I recognize that the intentions for these criteria had been to remove ambiguity about whether the student veteran was a post-9/11 veteran, but it seems that this may have been unnecessary to make that determination. Consequently, there were several student veterans who would have otherwise been eligible to participate but who could not do so, which ultimately prolonged the recruitment process. Alternatively, future research could use other indicators for post-9/11 veteran status (e.g., military service start date, military discharge date), which may expediate the recruitment process, might lead to more efficient data collection, and could include more post-9/11 student veteran acculturation experiences, all of which should lead to more representative synthesized themes.

This study also found that the inclusion requirement to be an undergraduate student may have been unnecessarily restrictive as there were several interested student veterans who had received their bachelor's degree in the military but who were pursuing graduate degrees after their separation from the military. To the best of my knowledge, there does not appear to be any research that has examined the differences between higher education culture within undergraduate and graduate student populations. However, it seems unlikely that there are any meaningful differences between these populations given the disclosures of those participants who had previously completed their graduate studies prior to returning to higher education for additional undergraduate degrees. Because of this, it would appear that the requirement to restrict recruitment to exclusively undergraduate student veterans could be unnecessarily restrictive and again might have limited the types of post-9/11 student veteran experiences that were represented in this study.

This may have been particularly restrictive for post-9/11 student veterans who had served as officers within the military, as these individuals may have been enlisted personnel who had earned their bachelor's degrees while serving to commission as officers. In this situation, these veterans may have chosen to use their education benefits to further their education with a graduate degree rather than with a second bachelor's degree. Additionally, there may be student veterans who had completed their undergraduate coursework in a military academy, were commissioned as officers, and then pursued graduate education after the military to obtain professional careers. These situations could mean that the perspectives of officers would be underrepresented in future studies that preserved the exclusively undergraduate requirement and could limit the representativeness of any themes that they would derive.

It is important to note though that this study found that there was significant interest among the post-9/11 student veteran population to participate in this type of research given the total number of interested questionnaire responses in conjunction with the relatively quick sample recruitment process. Specifically, the strength-based conceptualization of student veteran acculturation experiences seemed to resonate highly with this group. There are several avenues for future research that may warrant further examination. The first could be an expansion of this study to determine whether saturation is even possible given the breadth of the research questions. While saturation was not reached in this study, it is possible that future studies may be able to reach saturation with a larger sample size. It would then be possible to determine whether the synthesized themes that emerged from this study aligned with the saturated themes and were in fact representative of post-9/11 student veteran PEI acculturation experiences.

To achieve this representativeness, future research must increase the sample size as well as increase the representation of those student veteran demographics that were listed above. In doing so, future researchers may be able to more confident that the saturated themes are more representative of the post-9/11 student veteran population and more fully represents the various demographics within this population. This may be a prudent and necessary step in the future research of this topic as any subsequent research examining the specific components of this study's synthesized themes may serve as offshoots and deviate the direction of this research topic before it is more firmly established. Consequently, there is the risk of erroneous conclusions about the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans within the higher education culture of civilian PEIs if the foundation of this research topic is not fully solidified first.

Implications

This section provides the implications that were gleaned from the composite themes from this study. These implications are divided into academic considerations for PEI instructors and faculty and clinical practice recommendations for the treatment of acculturation stress among post-9/11 student veterans.

Academic Implications

Acculturation stress is a significant component of the overall acculturation experiences of minority populations within dominant host cultures (Berry, 1992; Berry et al., 1997; Doná, 1993; Doná & Berry, 1994). However, the current body of student veteran literature has yet to conceptualize the PEI experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as acculturation experiences (Ghosh et al., 2021) which may have affected the types of academic resources that have been offered by PEIs and their faculties. For example, the literature has instead emphasized the mental health difficulties that post-9/11 student veterans experience when transitioning into their PEIs and conceptualize these difficulties as reintegration challenges. In doing so, these studies tend to characterize their mental health concerns as either personal or systemic deficits that impede their integration into higher education culture (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Borsari et al., 2017). As such, this study offers an alternative approach to the conceptualization of the PEI experiences of student veterans, which in turn could have significant implications for the ways in which post-9/11 student veterans are perceived in higher education culture and academia.

This study has identified how the PEI experiences of post-9/11 student veterans are highly congruent with the acculturation experiences of other minority populations within majority host cultures. Specifically, post-9/11 student veterans appear to experience acculturation

stress when entering the higher education culture of their PEIs and they utilize acculturation strategies to manage this stress within their new majority host culture. These findings affirm the appropriateness of utilizing the BMA (Berry et al., 1997) to conceptualize the PEI experiences of student veterans as a minority population transitioning into the majority host culture of higher education culture. Consequently, these findings also affirm the appropriateness of conceptualizing the PEI experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as acculturation experiences, the difficulties that they experience within higher education culture as acculturation stress, and the approaches that they utilize to resolve this stress as acculturation strategies.

This reconceptualization may be the most significant academic implication from this study as it would signify a significant shift among PEI faculty and administrators in their current understandings of student veteran PEI experiences (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009; Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Borsari et al., 2017). This reconceptualization differs from the current understanding as it instead suggests that the majority of post-9/11 student veterans perceive themselves as a minority population that is distinct from their civilian peers within the dominant higher education culture and that their stress within PEIs arises from their experiences with higher education culture, not from reintegration difficulties stemming from their military cultural identities.

This would be a significant perspective shift for PEI faculty and administrators as it would require the reexamination of their expectations about what it would mean for post-9/11 student veterans to integrate into their PEIs and the cultural values that are expressed and valued within higher education culture. For example, this reconceptualization would require PEI faculty and administrators to consider whether the adoption of higher education cultural identities among post-9/11 student veterans is an expectation of their PEI experiences. The current body of

literature has tended to characterize student veterans who have not adopted this cultural identity as experiencing reintegration challenges that limit their engagement with higher education culture and that these limitations reflected either individual or systemic deficits. As such, these studies posit that their successful resolution of such barriers to reintegration would facilitate their integration into higher education and the adoption of higher education cultural identities (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Bonar & Domenici, 2011). This perspective assumes that the ideal PEI experiences of post-9/11 student veterans is their successful integration into higher education culture and that this integration is paramount to their success within PEI settings. Consequently, it assumes that any difficulties integrating into higher education culture stem from individual or systemic deficits (e.g., misunderstandings about military experiences, limited military representation within PEIs, limited support resources) that need to be resolved so that integration can occur. Plainly put, this perspective assumes that reintegration difficulties are problems that student veterans must personally overcome and that they, not their PEIs, are at fault for not successfully integrating into PEI settings and adopting higher education cultural identities.

This study instead posits that their complete integration into higher education should not be the goal of PEIs nor a prerequisite for post-9/11 student veteran academic success as the adoption of higher education cultural identities may not be important for this population. From this perspective, the use of separation would be culturally appropriate given this population's belief that their time within higher education culture is temporary and that the cultural values of higher education have limited utility outside of civilian PEIs. As such, the absence of student veterans from PEI events (e.g., sporting events, extracurriculars, campus involvement) may be representative of their choices to abstain from higher education culture rather than an indication that additional resources need to be allocated to integrate them into these events. Again, this

would be a significant perspective shift for PEI faculty and administration as it would require them to recognize that there are certain characteristics of higher education culture that are undesirable to student veteran populations and that their integration into higher education culture and the adoption of higher education cultural identities do not seem to be goals for most student veterans.

This reconceptualization of student veteran PEI experiences instead may require a more culturally informed examination of their higher educational goals (e.g., preparation for future careers) and an introspective reflection about whether the current higher educational cultural values adequately accommodate these goals. This reflection is critical as every participant in this study commented on how the salient higher educational cultural values at their PEIs (e.g., identity formation, political activism, the attainment of superfluous knowledge) were wholly incongruent with their higher educational goals, made them feel disconnected from higher education culture, and contributed to their disillusionment about higher education as an institution. Given these perspectives, it may be understandable as to why student veterans might choose to preserve their time, energy, and resources by separating into a shared cultural community instead of engaging with a culture that, to them, does not embody values that are as congruent with their goals. Consequently, it would seem that any efforts to increase student veteran engagement with higher education culture would require either the recognition and adoption of military cultural values or the modification of higher educational cultural values in ways that are more congruent with the higher educational goals of post-9/11 student veterans.

Greater recognition and adoption of military cultural values would be a fundamental next step in the adjustment of PEI faculty and administrator perspectives as it would mean that they would need to share part of the stress, effort, and energy that is currently expected for student

veterans to better acculturate into higher education culture. For example, the military cultural values of support and accountability were depicted as fundamental for the alleviation of transition stress and for the management of conflicts during periods of stress. In these situations, these participants reported how they had been able to rely on the support that they received from others as they knew that they were equally accountable for the promises and commitments that they had made to each other. As such, they repeatedly acknowledged how they had instantly lost their trust in their PEI faculty when their staff would promise to offer support during their transitions (e.g., clarify procedural and administrative questions, identify personnel who are responsible for transition assistance) but then failed to follow-up on their requests.

This loss of trust was further demonstrated when PEI faculty had spontaneously changed their course policies and expectations in ways that deviated from their syllabi or had reneged on communication promises that they had made at the beginning of the semester. These situations signaled to these participants that their PEI's faculty and staff did not embody military cultural values, were not accountable for their actions, and would not offer the support and structure that they needed to resolve their acculturation stress. By contrast, these participants reported greater perceptions of support, understanding, and reliance upon their fellow student veterans who endorsed military cultural values as they knew that they could expect the stability and predictability of actions that stemmed from their shared value of accountability.

These types of experiences may seem minor and inconsequential, especially for individuals who may perceive them as consequences of higher educational cultural values (e.g., the flexibility to adapt). However, they seem to be a significant component of the acculturation stress that was experienced by these post-9/11 student veterans and they may reflect the misunderstandings about military cultural values that are held by PEI faculty and staff. For

example, they may perceive student veterans as being better prepared to handle more spontaneous changes in course structure given their previous need in the military to adapt to mission changes, when in fact these changes instead might destabilize their PEI acculturation processes further and elicit additional stress. This is why the reconceptualization of student veteran PEI experiences would be so significant as it would place a greater degree of ownership on PEI faculty and staff, their behaviors, and the higher educational cultural values that they endorse as they would all contribute to the new cultural norms that student veterans must navigate when resolving their acculturation stress. By adjusting the perspective that student veterans are expected to assimilate into higher education culture, there is room to consider what is reasonable to expect in terms of student veteran engagement with higher education culture and what their presence within PEIs would entail. An example of this could be the dissemination of their more adaptive military cultural values (e.g., tenacity, accountability, conflict resolution) while working on group projects with their civilian peers while they maintain a distinct and temporary presence on their campuses.

If a PEI determines that the integration of student veterans into their higher education culture is not their priority, then there is the opportunity to conceptualize their separation from higher education culture as a more appropriate acculturation strategy given the current higher educational cultural values. However, if a PEI instead determines that the integration of student veterans into higher education is a larger priority for them, then there must be a recognition that they are partially responsible for the alleviation of student veteran acculturation stress since acculturation requires changes in the values and psychology of both minority and majority populations (Berry et al., 1997). As such, there likely would need to be a greater amount of effort that must be made by PEI faculty and staff to both adopt military cultural values and to adjust

higher educational cultural values in ways that accommodate the higher educational goals of student veterans. Plainly put, PEIs should determine whether the separation of their student veterans is acceptable to them and, if it is not, recognize that they must anticipate changes within their higher education culture rather than expecting their student veterans to make personal changes that promote their assimilation.

The most immediate approach to adopting military cultural values would be the education of PEI faculty and staff about these values, how these values may present among student veterans, and how the consistent embodiment of these values may help to alleviate student veteran acculturation stress. It is important to emphasize that these participants did not state that representation (e.g., increased military veteran faculty composition) was their primary concern nor that their PEIs must have additional military veteran faculty and staff who share their military cultural identities in order to resolve their acculturation stress. Instead, they reported having increased perceptions of support, understanding, and stability when interacting with others who better understood their military cultural values and who endorsed these values themselves. As such, it seems that one of the most approachable ways for PEIs to reduce the acculturation stress of their student veterans and to increase their interest in adopting higher educational cultural values would be to embody consistent understanding, adoption, and endorsement of military cultural values among its faculty and staff.

A second recommendation would be for PEIs to reflect upon the current values within the higher education culture of civilian PEIs, how these values either embody or detract from the pillars of higher education (Craig, 2004; Geiger, 2015), and whether traits that are more associated with these values instead may repel post-9/11 student veterans from higher education culture. These participants identified several traits that were associated with the values within

higher education culture that had negatively impacted their perceptions of higher education, particularly those more associated with bureaucracy, pettiness, elitism, and self-aggrandizement. It is important to note that some of these values are relatively new to higher education culture and mark a deviation from the original purpose of PEIs (Geiger, 2015). The permeation of these value traits within higher education culture was reflected by the sentiments of these participants who believed that higher education had lost its purpose of educating students in ways that prepared them for a successful career. As such, these participants were uninterested in adopting aspects of a culture whose values were perceived as unproductive.

The implications of these perspectives are that PEIs must critically examine the values that they endorse within higher education culture as they may have a direct and negative impact on the willingness of student veterans to engage and remain in higher education culture. Consequently, the conceptualization of student veteran PEI experiences as acculturation experiences may mean that the failure of PEIs to adjust the expressed values within higher education culture would in essence eliminate half of the acculturation strategies that are available for student veterans to better manage their acculturation stress. For example, PEIs that perceive student veteran concerns as personal reintegration challenges may unintentionally be pressuring their student veterans into a binary of either assimilation or marginalization. In this situation, their student veterans might perceive themselves as either belonging to higher education culture (i.e., assimilation) or falling outside of the culture, in which case they could negatively compare themselves to their assimilated student veteran peers and feel increasingly detached from higher education culture and isolated from these peers (i.e., marginalization). Further, if post-9/11 student veterans are uninterested in adopting most higher educational cultural values, then it is unlikely that they would choose integration or assimilation as their acculturation strategies and

may lead to worsened outcomes if this population perceived separation and marginalization as the only viable strategies to manage their acculturation stress. Thus, PEIs must acknowledge the acculturation processes of their student veterans and how their higher educational cultural values might actually exacerbate their acculturation stress if they hope to promote their integration or assimilation.

This critical examination reflects the importance of higher education as an institution. As previously described, individuals entering into a new population will be more likely to adopt the population's culture if those individuals perceive this population as belonging to a distinct institution with a culture that is separate and unique from the greater society (Birukou et al., 2013; Koenig et al., 2014). While higher education historically has been perceived as a distinct institution from the general population (Geiger, 2015), the perceptions of these participants suggest that this distinctiveness has eroded to the point where the opportunities offered at PEIs are no longer unique nor distinct from those within the greater society. Each of these participants reported that they would have been galled to pay for the education that they had received from their PEIs if it were not for the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the education benefits that they had received. They frequently expressed how they believed that the required coursework was superfluous, overpriced, and ineffective in teaching them meaningful knowledge which would prepare them for a successful and meaningful career.

As such, most of these participants had become disillusioned about the purpose of higher education and that they wanted to depart from their PEIs as soon as possible. The implication of these sentiments of theirs is that there may be relatively new and corrosive values that have developed within higher education culture that would have to be examined further by PEIs if the institutional credibility and distinctiveness of higher education is to be preserved. For if this

institutional distinctiveness is lost, then post-9/11 student veterans will be less likely to adopt its cultural values (Birukou et al., 2013; Koenig et al., 2014) and may feel disinclined to interact with higher education culture in any meaningful and substantive way. Again, PEIs must recognize that it may be insufficient to expect their student veterans to want to assimilate into their higher education culture if they do not first address the more aversive values within their culture.

A final recommendation from this study is the recognition that the current coursework and structure of civilian PEIs may be culturally incongruent with the military cultural values of post-9/11 student veterans. Each of these participants had recounted how they had received extensive technical training within the military that had made them experts within their career in a remarkably short amount of time. They recalled how their military coursework had been intense, strictly regimented, and highly directional in its purpose and execution. However, they also stated that this was a fundamental component of their acculturation into military culture as it was an experience that was entirely unique to the military as an institution. Because of this, these participants reported how they had perceived most of the coursework at civilian PEIs to be fanciful, superfluous, and useless in furthering them toward their higher educational goals, yet they still completed it because they understood that it was necessary for the obtainment of their degree. These experiences distanced them from adopting the values of higher education culture and contrasted sharply from the descriptions of PEIs who had embraced the course formatting of the military.

Conversely, PEIs that had streamlined their curriculum tended to be positively received. Lance had described how his PEI had adopted an accelerated program for active-duty military personnel who received higher education while serving. Within that program, students

participated in a condensed courseload that actually encouraged their utilization of military

cultural values. In doing so, this program had gained the reputation among the PEI and its faculty

that its students were driven, highly effective in their work, and were ideal prospects for career

recruitment following graduation. It is therefore possible that the adaptation of coursework that is

culturally congruent with the military cultural values of post-9/11 student veterans may be highly

effective in promoting integration as the strategy used to resolve their PEI acculturation stress.

An example of this adaptation would be the adoption of coursework formatting that is similar to

the condensed curriculum of other industries (e.g., Agriculture and Farming Short Course). These

types of programs are highly condensed and focus almost exclusively on the attainment of skills

and knowledge that are directly applicable to the career of interest. As such, these programs tend

to emphasize preparation and certification for careers rather than the self-exploration and identity

formation that often can be seen within higher education culture at large. It therefore seems that

the cultural values within these condensed programs may be more congruent with the military

cultural values of post-9/11 student veterans and could alleviate some of the acculturation stress

experienced by this population within higher education culture.

The combined academic implications of this study are that PEIs may first want to

reconceptualize their understanding of post-9/11 student veteran PEI experiences as acculturation

experiences. Second, they could consistently adopt and endorse certain military cultural values

that more closely align with post-9/11 student veteran military cultural identities. Third, they

perhaps should reflect more upon the current higher education culture within civilian PEIs and

evaluate whether certain values that tend to be endorsed by its faculty, staff, and administrators

might actually repel post-9/11 student veterans from higher education culture and diminish their

interest in adopting its values. Fourth, they can reflect upon the current higher education culture

within civilian PEIs and evaluate whether certain values corrode the credibility and distinctiveness of higher education as an institution and how this corrosion may diminish the interest of post-9/11 student veterans in adopting its values. Finally, they could adapt its coursework formatting in ways that are more culturally congruent with the military cultural identities of post-9/11 student veterans (e.g., short course programs, self-directed coursework) and are better aligned with the higher educational goals of this population (e.g., directed and applied vs. self-exploration and identity formation).

Additionally, PEIs may choose to adopt more immediate changes to their classrooms that may have beneficial impacts for their student veterans. First, PEI faculty and instructors can improve the structure and specificity of their syllabi by clearly defining their course and assignment expectations as well as their protocols for any course changes during the semester. Second, these instructors may also choose to incorporate a disclosure statement in their syllabi about whether they identify as military veterans or endorse a military cultural identity. Third, they may offer more frequent opportunities for their student veterans to provide feedback (e.g., mid-semester evaluation vs. end of semester evaluation), particularly if their courses include topics that are directly related to their military cultural identities. Lastly, PEIs may choose to either implement military cultural awareness workshops or to incorporate this topic into existing staff training opportunities to ensure that this information is disseminated and received by staff at an organizational level.

The adoption of any of these recommendations that are based on these academic implications may help to substantially decrease the acculturation stress of post-9/11 student veterans as they transition into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs and may promote the use of integration rather than separation and marginalization to resolve their acculturation stress.

However, the adoption of all of these recommendations may be the ideal option for this population as it could provide a more culturally informed opportunity for post-9/11 student veterans to accomplish their higher educational goals, which would likely lead to the optimization of academic outcomes for this population and their PEIs.

Clinical Implications

Acculturation stress is a clinically significant concern given its ability to exacerbate preexisting mental health disorders (Berry et al., 1997). Additionally, it seems that the management of acculturation stress is one of the leading factors that motivates student veterans to seek mental health treatment at their PEI campus counseling centers (Ghosh et al., 2021). It is therefore critical for mental health providers to better understand its impact on the mental health of post-9/11 student veterans as the resolution of acculturation stress may be a significant component in the appropriate treatment of their mental health concerns. This study therefore identified several aspects of the acculturation stress that these participants had experienced that provide insight into the nature of this stress while they transitioned into higher education culture. As such, the insight that has been gained from this study may have several clinical implications for the future treatment of post-9/11 student veteran mental health concerns.

The primary clinical implication that arose from this study regarded the description of post-9/11 student veteran acculturation stress. There seems to be a dearth of research that has examined the acculturation stress of student veterans to any meaningful degree, which in turn has limited clinicians' overall understanding of this phenomenon among student veterans (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Ghosh et al., 2021). In light of this, this study identified multiple core components of these participants' acculturation stress and provided rich descriptions of how these components presented in their PEI experiences. Their loss of stability, their loss of identity,

and their navigation of new norms within higher education culture all contributed to the overall acculturation stress that they experienced and better contextualized the nature of the stressors that they endured within their PEIs. As such, it may be prudent to further examine the implications of this new understanding about the nature of student veteran acculturation stress, as addressing these components within mental health treatment settings may be clinically significant and aid in the treatment of post-9/11 student veteran distress.

Each of these acculturation stress components seemed to offer ample treatment approaches given the cognitive and affect patterns that these participants reported as responses to the stressors. Their loss of stability seemed to be frequently associated with thoughts related to uncertainty, abandonment, and regret which elicited feelings of anxiety, confusion, worry, and doubt. For example, participants such as Jay expressed uncertainty about how they would independently acquire housing, employment, and access to higher education while also supporting their families. This uncertainty tended to be exacerbated by further instability when they entered their PEIs as they then had to determine their major, how to coordinate their schedule with their other life obligations, and how to efficiently progress in their coursework in ways that would lead to more fulfilling careers.

Similarly, their loss of identity was frequently associated with thoughts about adjustment to their new settings, their patience when they perhaps felt patronized by faculty members whose behaviors toward them were more incongruent with their age and life experiences, and grief about the loss of their former careers and experiences within the military. These thoughts tended to elicit feelings of sadness, frustration, and disillusionment for them, which often resulted in various behavioral changes (e.g., avoidance of civilian peers and faculty who had made them feel disrespected). Additionally, their thoughts associated with their loss of identity at times seemed

to further exacerbate the loss of stability as they seemed to be uncertain about what their new identities as student veterans entailed and what the appropriate behaviors associated with this new identity were.

Lastly, their navigation of new norms within higher education culture tended to be associated with increased thoughts related to apprehension, experimentation, and self-monitoring, which then tended to prompt increased feelings of rejection, surprise, and regret. As previously mentioned, these participants tended to become more aware of higher education cultural norms when their military cultural values elicited more negative reactions and interactions with their civilian peers. As such, there appeared to be a conditioned apprehension among these participants when they interacted with their civilian peers as they were unsure whether they would say or do something that was culturally appropriate within the military, yet could offend or alarm those within higher education culture.

Each of these components appeared to be distinct yet intertwined with each other, and each component either elicited acculturation stress that was unique to itself or exacerbated the acculturation stress that had been generated by other components. The combination of this interconnectedness and distinctiveness of acculturation stressors offers fertile ground for a myriad of treatment approaches as each seems to be an equally important component of post-9/11 student veteran acculturation stress. As such, it seems that this study's labeling of these components as acculturation experiences may assist mental health clinicians in their conceptualization of the clinical concerns of their post-9/11 student veteran clients. For example, clinicians may be able to better validate the stress that post-9/11 student veteran clients experience when they enter the new higher education culture of their PEIs rather than conceptualize this stress as a personal deficit that they then must work in therapy to overcome to

achieve assimilation. In doing so, these clinicians may be better informed about the unique stressors that can be associated with the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans within higher education culture and be better prepared to tailor appropriate interventions that will effectively treat these concerns.

The labeling of the components of post-9/11 student veteran acculturation stress also provides the opportunity to dramatically reconceptualize the predominant mental health concerns of student veterans within PEIs. As previously mentioned, this current body of literature has typically viewed depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation as the primary mental health concerns of student veterans (Baker et al., 2009; Pedersen et al., 2020; Trivedi et al., 2015). While many student veterans have experienced these mental health concerns (Corson et al., 2013; Maguen et al., 2012; Pirelli & Jeglic, 2009), it is possible that the findings from this study can provide additional context about the precipitating factors that contribute to their development. As such, PEI clinicians and faculty can incorporate proactive interventions that more adequately address the components of student veteran acculturation stress and prevent the subsequent development of these mental health concerns. Thus, PEI clinicians may be able to more effectively address, treat, and prevent student veteran mental health concerns by more accurately conceptualizing the actual stressors that are experienced by the majority of this population (Ghosh et al., 2021).

This reconceptualization could have significant clinical implications as it would expand the scope of care for post-9/11 student veterans and would again require the reconceptualization of student veteran mental health concerns from reintegration challenges to acculturation stress. Specifically, it would require a more preventative community health perspective which proactively addresses the components of post-9/11 student veteran acculturation stress rather than wait for their mental health concerns to develop and then treat these concerns as

reintegration challenges. Consequently, a more proactive and preventative approach to the resolution of post-9/11 student veteran acculturation stress then may have the downstream effect of increased clinician availability to treat the more immediate needs of the highly distressed subset of the student veteran population who struggles with more serious mental health concerns and suicidal ideation.

This reconceptualization may also be beneficial in identifying post-9/11 student veterans who may be the most at risk of developing serious mental health concerns. This study indicated that those participants who had reported experiences of marginalization within higher education also tended to report significantly increased amounts of acculturation stress that stemmed from their subsequent isolation. For these participants, they experienced a loss of stability and a loss of identity as did the other participants, yet they then tended to identify fewer resources and supports that had assisted them in their navigation of the new norms of higher education culture. Consequently, participants such as Tori illustrated how this marginalization could foster a downward spiral for them where they may feel more isolated and that they are personally deficient because they cannot better integrate their military cultural values in ways that better manages their acculturation stress, they may think that they are the only student veterans who feel as such, and that they are solely responsible for any negative PEI outcomes that they encounter as they cannot rely on anyone else to help them. This combination of thoughts and emotions would likely contribute to further isolative behaviors for them and may lead to the development of depression, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation. As such, the awareness of post-9/11 student veteran acculturation stress and the acculturation strategies that they utilize to manage their stress may be valuable in the identification of student veterans who are most at risk for such negative mental health outcomes.

The awareness of the loss of stability may also promote increased clinical advocacy within PEIs for the benefit of post-9/11 student veterans. PEI clinicians are uniquely equipped to provide psychoeducation of PEI faculty, staff, and administrators that advocates for post-9/11 student veteran concerns (Black et al., 2007; Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Dodson et al., 2019). Because of this, PEI clinicians may have the opportunity to advocate for structural changes that better align with the military cultural values of student veterans and provide them with an increased degree of predictability and stability within higher education interactions. For example, these participants repeatedly articulated how they had several visual cues within their military interactions that provided them with a high degree of predictability for how others likely would interact with them (e.g., rank insignia, service ribbons, unit patch, overseas service bars). These cues instantly told them where the individual with whom they were interacting was in the military hierarchy, what their responsibilities were, where they had served, the regionality of their service, specific distinctions that they had earned while serving, and roughly how long they had served within the military. PEI clinicians can therefore utilize this knowledge to advocate for structural changes that align with these experiences so that the stressors associated with daily student veteran PEI experiences are alleviated.

For example, PEI clinicians could advocate for the use of clear and prominent identification badges among their staff that display pertinent information related to their roles (e.g., title, department, duties) so that student veterans could more rapidly ascertain who they are interacting with and if that staff member was the most qualified individual to assist them with their needs. Additionally, PEI clinicians could also advocate for the creation and the dissemination of departmental resource cards that clearly identify its staff members, their supervisors, their contact information, their hours of operation, and the most appropriate initial

point of contact for questions or concerns. In both examples, this information is likely already

available on the PEIs' websites. However, these types of interventions likely make this

information much more readily available to their student veterans and could help to remove

barriers that they must first overcome to acquire this information (e.g., learning which

departments are responsible for specific concerns, learning how to navigate PEI directories to

find the contact information of specific staff members). Plainly put, this could be an excellent

example of how PEIs can shift the burden of adapting to their higher education culture away

from personal student veteran responsibility and instead to a more collaborative institutional

systems approach.

Lastly, these findings offer several additional clinical opportunities to expand

collaboration between PEI counseling centers and VA healthcare facilities. The VA's Veterans

Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) Initiative is a burgeoning program that offers

partnerships between VA healthcare facilities and local PEIs to both assist student veterans in the

navigation of their acculturation concerns as well as to collaborate with PEI staff to foster student

veteran academic success within their PEIs. Through collaboration with VA initiatives such as

VITAL, PEI clinicians may be better able to provide their front-line clinical experiences while

treating student veteran acculturation concerns and better inform the national treatment of

veteran transitions into civilian settings. In doing so, PEI clinicians may become better equipped

to treat the specific mental health concerns of their student veteran population and perhaps offer

a more unified treatment approach for post-9/11 student veterans who choose to receive

treatment for their acculturation stress at either PEI counseling centers or VA healthcare

facilities. This would likely increase the number of mental health resources that are available for

post-9/11 student veterans and could increase their perceptions of support within higher education culture.

To summarize, the combined clinical implications of this study are that first, PEI clinicians are better able to recognize and identify the acculturation stress of post-9/11 student veterans. Second, PEI clinicians have a better understanding about the nature of the acculturation stress of post-9/11 student veterans and are better equipped to address the specific components of their acculturation stress. Third, PEI clinicians may provide increased psychoeducation about post-9/11 student veteran acculturation concerns to PEI faculty, staff, and administrators which elicit the structural changes required for the adoption of proactive and preventative interventions that alleviate their acculturation stress. Lastly, PEI clinicians may be able to better collaborate with VA initiatives that foster increased support for post-9/11 student veterans within their PEIs and throughout national VA healthcare facilities. The adoption of any of these recommendations may help to significantly decrease the acculturation stress of post-9/11 student veterans as they transition into the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. Further, they may reduce the risk of negative mental health outcomes that often are associated with elevated acculturation stress. However, the adoption of all of these implications may be the ideal outcome for this population as it could provide the opportunity for post-9/11 student veterans to receive more culturally informed and comprehensive treatment for their acculturation stress, which may in turn promote improved mental health outcomes within higher education culture.

Future Directions for Research

Despite the above limitations, there are several critical research implications, the most critical being that this study demonstrated that the examination of acculturation processes within the higher education culture of civilian PEIs is a viable avenue for the future research of post-

9/11 student veteran PEI experiences. There also are several lessons that were learned in this study that may assist future research as well as considerations that arose from the synthesized themes that may direct future research areas of interest. As such, this section will detail factors that may be prudent for future research and how discuss directions for the future research of post-9/11 student veteran acculturation experiences.

A promising direction for future research would be the further examination of the intersecting identities of post-9/11 student veterans and their impact on their acculturation processes within higher education culture. The female participants from this study made several comments about how their identities as females impacted their perceptions about acculturation and the acculturation strategies that they believed were available to them. These participants reported that they believed their military cultural identities were easier to conceal within their PEIs compared to their male counterparts which may have allowed them to utilize integration or assimilation more effectively to resolve their acculturation stress. Alternatively, these participants also recalled how it had been difficult for them to connect with others in the military as a female given its male-centric cultural values, which may contribute to their use of marginalization if they do not feel as connected to their civilian or student veteran peers. Furthermore, such feelings within the military may have fostered the belief for them that female student veterans must quickly integrate into communities to preserve their safety, which may in turn increase their acculturation stress if they then experience difficulties in doing so at their PEIs.

Additionally, several of these participants recounted how they were first-generation students and that their initial exposure to higher education culture exacerbated the acculturation stress that they had experienced when their military cultural values conflicted with the cultural norms of higher education culture. The intersection of these cultural identities therefore appeared

to worsen their overall PEI experiences and indicated that they may have been more likely to utilize separation to rely upon other student veterans as an acculturation strategy to help guide them through their adjustments to higher education culture. These are examples of how the intersecting identities of these participants may impact their PEI acculturation processes, but future research may wish to expand this topic and explore how similar minority cultural identities may intersect with the military cultural identities of student veterans during their PEI acculturation processes. This could provide a more robust approach to addressing the multifaceted complexities of post-9/11 student veteran PEI acculturation experiences as it could further aid PEI clinicians in garnering a more accurate conceptualization of their acculturation stress. Consequently, this could further assist PEIs in better recognizing and implementing interventions that more adequately address the acculturation needs of their student veterans.

Once the representativeness of themes has been further established, future research also may be interested in utilizing more quantitative methodologies to gauge the importance of specific acculturation factors during the acculturation processes of post-9/11 student veterans. Additionally, such methods may be beneficial in quantifying how significant certain components of their acculturation stress may be and whether certain, specific components may require greater attention for mental health interventions. This type of research would be beneficial as it would shift the current research from "what" post-9/11 student veterans experience within higher education culture to "how" they experience specific components of acculturation. This could provide a type of specificity which cannot be achieved through qualitative methodology and could be an instrumental component in the development of preventative inventories that could better identity student veterans who are at a greater risk of increased acculturation stress. In doing so, future quantitative research may be able to provide the input and the tools that are

needed by PEI clinicians and staff to more adequately support their student veterans and to prevent negative mental health outcomes that are significantly associated with elevated acculturation stress.

Future research may also be interested in examining the differences between cultural groups and how they define certain acculturation concepts. For example, a few of these participants recounted situations where they had avoided accessing more adaptive and beneficial resources at their PEIs (e.g., office hours) due to the negative connotations that these concepts carried within military culture. This line of research may be similar to other cultural research that has examined the banality of terms in one culture that are more provocative to individuals of other cultures (e.g., rubber meaning an eraser vs. rubber meaning a condom). Such research may be a critical step in the alleviation of acculturation stress for post-9/11 student veterans within higher education culture as it could decrease the lexis that they must learn while navigating the new norms of their PEIs.

By recognizing which commonly used phrases and concepts are considered more aversive by student veterans, PEI faculty and staff may be able to better adjust the descriptions of their services in ways that more effectively communicate their purpose and better encourage student veterans to engage with these services. Additionally, student veterans may be more engaged with their coursework if PEI faculty are able to better convey the intention of their assignments in ways that are more culturally congruent with student veteran perspectives (e.g., how a specific assignment should align with the learning goals of the course). In doing so, student veterans may feel more engaged with higher education culture and feel more inclined to utilize integration or assimilation to manage their acculturation stress rather than separation. Again, additional research on this topic would be helpful.

Future research also may be interested in examining the efficacy of making more gradual transitions into higher education culture, particularly for student veterans who had recently separated from the military and military culture. For example, this line of research could examine the effectiveness of providing student veterans with self-guided online general education coursework at the start of their higher education. These participants repeatedly expressed how they had been frustrated by the pace of in-person general education courses that they had been required to take compared to their self-paced online courses and how they did not perceive such courses to be as applicable to their higher educational goals. As such, these participants articulated how their perceptions about the uselessness of these courses, combined with the stress of adjusting to the new norms of higher education culture, made them feel more disillusioned about higher education and overwhelmed by the prospect of having to repeatedly experience drawn-out, unapplicable, and mandatory courses throughout their higher education careers.

By offering such courses online, PEIs may be able to reduce the acculturation stress of their student veterans by allowing them to experience the rigors of their coursework outside of higher education culture and to complete the coursework which they perceive to be more superfluous yet necessary at their own pace. This may help to decrease their overall acculturation stress as they can more efficiently progress in their higher educational goals in ways that are more culturally congruent with their military cultural identities while at the same time allowing them to transition into higher education culture and its cultural norms more slowly. Afterward, PEIs may require student veterans to attend in-person courses that are more specific to their majors, which would better allow student veterans to first establish a more foundational understanding about higher education culture before being required to fully more integrate into the culture on campus. Additionally, PEIs may consider the creation of student veteran-specific

sections of their general education courses, which could further ease their transitions into higher education culture. As such, pilot studies that examine the effectiveness of this approach may be a valuable direction for future research as it may have profound implications for the ways in which PEIs structure programs and coursework for incoming student veterans.

Lastly, future research also may be interested in conducting related studies that examine the effectiveness of the more condensed coursework formats that were previously described. Again, this is an avenue where quantitative research would be invaluable as it could allow researchers to better determine the extent to which these types of programs are desirable to student veterans, whether these types of programs may better encourage student veterans to pursue higher education, whether these types of programs could produce significantly improved academic outcomes when compared to traditional coursework. In doing so, future research may be able to identify culturally informed methods for instructing student veterans that are significantly more effective than current offerings while further reducing the acculturation stress for this population within higher education culture.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented an overview of this study's findings. I first revisited its research questions and purpose. I then provided a summary of the research findings, how they may relate to the current literature regarding the acculturation processes of minority populations and the overall mental health of student veterans. The academic and clinical implications of this study were then discussed and how they relate to the future practices of both PEIs and PEI clinicians when interacting with their student veteran populations. The limitations of this study were then discussed and how these limitations may have reduced the representativeness of this study's findings to the overall acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans. However,

I then described how these limitations offered some clarification and direction for future research about the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as well as the various avenues that future research may take to better understand these experiences within the higher education culture of civilian PEIs.

Despite its limitations and broad scope, this study greatly served its purpose as an exploratory study that examined an understudied facet of post-9/11 student veteran experiences. It expanded upon the extent student veteran research by attempting to define and articulate the nature of the acculturation processes and the acculturation stress that post-9/11 student veterans experience within the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. As such, I recognize the limitations of this initial attempt to gain a further understanding about this topic, though I feel optimistic about the direction that future research may take to deepen this understanding and how this newfound knowledge may benefit future generations of student veterans. Thus, I conclude this study with the hope that its findings will inspire others to further clarify this phenomenon so that the cultural strengths of student veterans are far better recognized, encouraged, and employed in ways that help this valuable group to flourish all the more within higher education.

References

Abrams, R. M. (1989). The U.S. military and higher education: A brief history. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *502*, 15-28.

Ackerman, R., & DiRamio, D. (Eds.). (2009). *Creating a veteran-friendly campus: Strategies for transition and success*. New Directions for Student Services.

Aikins, D. E., Pietrzak, R. H., Geraci, J. C., Benham, T., Morrissey, P., & Southwick, S. M. (2020). Beyond stigma: Understanding the "inclined abstainers" in military behavioral health-care utilization. *Military Psychology*, *32*(5), 419-427. https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2020.1784822

Alley, S., Jackson, S. F., & Shakya, Y. B. (2015). Reflexivity: A methodological tool in the knowledge translation process? *Health Promotion Practice*, *16*(3), 426-431. DOI: 10.1177/1524839914568344

Alschuler, M., & Yarab, J. (2018). Preventing student veteran attrition: What more can we do?. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, and Practice*, *20*(1), 47-66. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025116646382

American Psychological Association. (2017). *Multicultural guidelines: An ecological approach to context, identity, and intersectionality*. Retrieved from: https://www.apa.org/about/policy/multicultural-guidelines.pdf.

American Psychological Association. (2021). *APA guidelines for psychological practice with military service members, veterans, and their families*. Retrieved from:

https://www.apa.org/about/policy/guidelines-military-service-members-veterans-families.pdf.

Amiot, C. E., Doucerain, M. M., Zhou, B., & Ryder, A. G. (2017). Cultural identity dynamics: Capturing changes in cultural identities over time and their intraindividual organization. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *48*(5), 629-644. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2355

Aycan, Z., & Berry, J. W. (1996). Impact of employment-related experiences on immigrants' adaptation to Canada. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science*, *28*, 240-251.

Baiocchi, D. (2013). *Measuring Army deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan*. RAND Corporation.

Baker, D. G., Heppner, P., Afari, N., Nunnink, S., Kilmer, M., Simmons, A., Harder, L., & Bosse, B. (2009). Trauma exposure, branch of service, and physical injury in relation to mental health among U.S. veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. *Military Medicine*, *174*(8), 773-778.

Bensberg, M. (2021). Developing a systems mindset in community-based prevention. *Health Promotion Practice*, *22*(1), 82-90. DOI: 10.1177/1524839919897266

Berry, J. (1970). Marginality, stress and ethnic identification in an acculturated Aboriginal community. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *1*, 239-252.

Berry, J. W. (1990). The role of psychology in ethnic studies. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, *22*, 8-21.

Berry, J. W. (1992). Acculturation and adaptation in a new society. *International Migration*, *30*, 69-85.

Berry, J. W., & Kim, U. (1988). Acculturation and mental health. In P. R. Dasen, J. W. Berry, & N. Sartorius (Eds.), *Health and cross-cultural psychology: Towards applications* (pp. 207-238). SAGE Publications.

Berry, J. W., Kim, U., Power, S., Young, M., & Bujaki, M. (1989). Acculturation attitudes in plural societies. *Applied Psychology*, *38*, 185-206.

Berry, J. W., & Sam, D. L. (1997). Acculturation and adaptation. In J. W. Berry, M. H. Segall, & C. Kagitcibasi (Eds.), *Handbook of cross-cultural psychology* (2nd ed., Vol. 3, pp. 291-326). Allyn & Bacon.

Berry, J. W., Segall, M. H., & Kagitcibasi, C. (1997). *Handbook of cross-cultural psychology: Social behavior and applications* (Vol. 3). Allyn & Bacon.

Berry, J. W., van de Koppel, J., Sénéchal, C., Annis, R., Bahuchet, S., Cavalli-Sforza, L., & Witkin, H. A. (1986). *On the edge of the forest*. Swets and Zeitlinger Publishers.

Birukou, A., Blanzieri, E., Giorgini, P., & Giunchiglia, F. (2013). A formal definition of culture. In K. Sycara, M. Gelfand, & A. Abbe (Eds.), *Models for intercultural collaboration and negotiation* (pp. 1-26). Springer.

Black, T., Westwood, M. J., & Sorsdal, M. N. (2007). From the front line to the front of the class: Counseling students who are military veterans. In J. A. Lippincott & R. B. Lippincott (Eds.), *Special populations in college counseling: A handbook for mental health professionals* (pp. 3–20). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

Bloeser, K. J., & Bausman, M. (2020). A scoping review of contemporary social work practice with veterans. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *30*(1), 40-53. https://doi-org.unco.idm.oclc.org/10.1177%2F1049731519837355

Bonar, T. C., & Domenici, P. A. (2011). Counseling and connecting with the military undergraduate: The intersection of military service and university life. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, *25*, 204-219. DOI: 10.1080/87568225.2011.581925

Boot, M. (2013). The evolution of irregular war: Insurgents and guerrillas from Akkadia to Afghanistan. *Foreign Affairs*, *92*(2), 100-114.

Borch, F. L. (2003). Comparing Pearl Harbor and "9/11": Intelligence failure? American unpreparedness? Military responsibility? *The Journal of Military History*, *67*(3), 845-860. https://doi.org/10.1353/jmh.2003.0201

Borsari, B., Murphy, J. G., McDevitt-Murphy, M. E., Darcy, M. G., Yurasek, A., Miller, M. B. M., Martens, M. P., & Carey, K. B. (2017). Student service members/veterans on campus: Challenges for reintegration. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 87*, 166-175. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ort0000199

Brah, A., & Phoenix, A. (2004). Ain't I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality. Journal of International Women's Studies, *5*(8), 75-86.

Bryan, C., & Bryan, A. (2014). Nonsuicidal self-injury among a sample of United States military personnel and veterans enrolled in college classes. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *70*(9), 874-885. DOI: 10.1002/jclp.22075

Bullman, T., & Schneiderman, A. (2021). Risk of suicide among U.S. veterans who deployed as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn. *Injury Epidemiology*, *8*(40), 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40621-021-00332-y

Butler, M. J. (2012). *Selling a 'just' war: Framing, legitimacy, and U.S. military intervention*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Castro, C. A., & Kintzle, S. (2014). Suicides in the military: The post-modern combat veteran and the Hemingway Effect. *Current Psychiatry Report*, *16*, 459-468. DOI 10.1007/s11920-014-0460-1

Chen, V. H. (2014). Cultural identity. *Key Concepts in Intercultural Dialogue*, *22*, 1.

Congressional Research Service. (2020). *U.S. periods of war and dates of recent conflicts*.

United States Government Publishing Office.

Connelly, L. M. (2016). Trustworthiness in qualitative research. *MEDSURG Nursing, 25*(6),

435-436.

Corson, K., Denneson, L. M., Bair, M. J., Helmer, D. A., Goulet, J. L., & Dobscha, S. K. (2013).

Prevalence and correlates of suicidal ideation among Operation Enduring Freedom and

Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *149*, 291-298.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2013.01.043

Craig, C. M. (2004). Higher education culture and organizational change in the 21st century. *The*

Community College Enterprise, *10*(1), 79-89.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among*

five approaches (4th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research*

process. SAGE Publications, Inc.

Dalenberg, S., & Buijs, T. O. D. (2013). Military socialization effects and effective leadership

behavior. In H. Amersfoort, R. Moelker, J. Soeters, & D. Verweij (Eds.), Moral

responsibility and military effectiveness (pp. 97-116). The Netherlands: Asser Press.

D'Aniello, C., Marek, L. I., & Moore, L. (2017). A systemic perspective on military service

members' and their partners' perceptions of PTSD and reintegration stress: A dyadic

analysis. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, *36*(2), 39-53.

DeBeer, B. B., Kimbrel, N. A., Meyer, E. C., Gulliver, S. B., & Morissette, S. B. (2014).

Combined PTSD and depressive symptoms interact with post-deployment social support

to predict suicidal ideation in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom

veterans. *Psychiatry Research*, *216*, 357-362.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2014.02.010

Demers, A. (2011). When veterans return: The role of community in reintegration. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, *16*(2), 160-179. https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2010.519281

Dodson, C. G., Joyner, J., Latham, A., Leake, V., & Stoffel, V. C. (2019). Participating in change: Engaging student veteran stakeholders in advocacy efforts in clinical higher education. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, *61*(3), 339-364. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167819835989

Dolan, G., McCauley, M., & Murphy, D. (2022). Factors influencing the salience of military/veteran identity post discharge: A scoping review. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, *8*(1), 231-246. https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v8i1.333

Doná, G. (1993). *Acculturation, coping, and mental health of Guatemalan refugees living in settlements in Mexico* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Psychology Department, Queen's University, Canada.

Doná, G., & Berry, J. W. (1994). Acculturation attitudes and acculturation stress of Central American refugees. *International Journal of Psychology*, *29*, 57-70.

Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010, 124 C.F.R. § 3515 (2010). https://www.congress.gov/111/plaws/publ321/PLAW-111publ321.pdf

Drum, D. J., Brownson, C., Hess, E. A., Denmark, A. B., & Talley, A. E. (2017). College students' sense of coherence and connectedness as predictors of suicidal thoughts and behaviors. *Archives of Suicidal Research*, *21*(1), 169-184. https://doi.org/10.1080/13811118.2016.1166088

Dunivin, K. O. (1994). Military culture: Change and continuity. *Armed Forces and Society*, *20*(4), 531-547.

Eichler, M., Smith-Evans, K., Spanner, L., & Tam-Seto, L. (2021). Mind the gap: Sex, gender, and intersectionality in military-to-civilian transitions. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*, *7*(1), 19-36. https://doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh-2021-0018

Elnitsky, C. A., Fisher, M. P., & Blevins, C. L. (2017). Military service member and veteran reintegration: A conceptual analysis, unified definition, and key domains. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *8*, 1-14. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00369

Erciyes, E. (2015). *Three pillars of phenomenology: Husserl, Heidegger, and Merlau-Ponty*. The University of Memphis. Retrieved from:

https://www.memphis.edu/philosophy/opo2019/pdfs/erciyes-erdem.pdf

Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics, 5*(1), 1-4.

Exec. Order No. 9981, 3 C.F.R. Page. (1948). https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-9981

Frazier, P., Lee, R., & Steger, M. (2006). What can counseling psychology contribute to the study of optimal human functioning?. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *34*(2), 293-303. DOI:10.1177/0011000005283521

Fredman, S. J., Marshall, A. D., Le, Y., Aronson, K. R., Perkins, D. F., & Hayes, J. A. (2018). Interpersonal relationship quality mediates the association between military-related posttraumatic stress and academic dysfunction among student veterans. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, *11*(4), 415-423. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tra0000363

Garamone, J. (2021). *U.S. completes troop-level drawdown in Afghanistan, Iraq*. U.S. Department of Defense. https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2473884/us-completes-troop-level-drawdown-in-afghanistan-iraq/

Garcia, H. A. (2017). If you've never been there you wouldn't understand: The evolutionary reasons for veteran mistrust. *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences*, *11*(1), 53-62. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ebs0000076

Geiger, R. L. (2015). *The history of American higher education: Learning and culture from the founding to World War II*. Princeton University Press.

Ghosh, A., Santana, M. C., & Fox, T. D. (2021). The role of military culture in therapy and prevention: Training recommendations for university and college counseling centers. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, *35*(4), 393-405. https://doi.org/10.1080/87568225.2020.1753608

Giorgi, A., Giorgi, B., & Morley, J. (2017). The descriptive phenomenological psychological method. In C. Willig & W. S. Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in Psychology* (pp. 176-192). SAGE Publishing.

Goldich, R. L. (2011). American military culture from colony to empire. *American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, *140*(3), 58-74.

Goodwill, J. R., & Zhou, S. (2020). Association between perceived public stigma and suicidal behaviors among college students of color in the U.S. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *262*, 1-7. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2019.10.019

Green, J. D., Hatgis, C., Kearns, J. C., Nock, M. K., & Marx, B. P. (2017). The Direct and Indirect Self-Harm Inventory (DISH): A new measure for assessing high-risk and self-

harm behaviors among student veterans. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, *18*(3), 208-214. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/men0000116

Griffin, C. L., Jr., & Stein, M. A. (2015). Self-perception of disability and prospects for employment among U.S. veterans. *Work*, *50*, 49-58. DOI 10.3233/WOR-141929

Hajjar, R. M. (2014). Emergent postmodern US military culture. *Armed Forces & Society*, *40*(1), 118-145. DOI: 10.1177/0095327X12465261

Hall, D. M., Rings, J. A., & Anderson, T. (2020). Military life narratives and identity development among black post-9/11 veterans. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, *6*(3), 36-46. http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i3.216

Hall, L. K. (2011). The importance of understanding military culture. *Social Work in Health Care*, *50*(1), 4-18. DOI: 10.1080/00981389.2010.513914

Hall-Clark, B. N., Wright, E. C., Fina, B. A., Blount, T. H., Evans, W. R., Carreño, P. K., Peterson, A. L., & Foa, E. B. (2019). Military culture considerations in prolonged exposure therapy with active-duty military service members. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, *26*, 335-350.

Hammond, S. (2016). Complex perceptions of identity: The experience of student combat veterans in community college. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *40*(2), 146–159.

Hammond, S. (2017). Student veterans in higher education: A conversation six decades in the making. In K. Eagan, L. McBain, & K. C. Jones (Eds.), *Student veteran data in higher education* (pp. 11-21). Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Hesse, J. F. (1998). *The rift between the Army National Guard and the active Army*. United States Army War College.

Hoffmire, C. A., Kemp, J. E., & Bossarte, R. M. (2015). Changes in suicide mortality for

veterans and nonveterans by gender and history of VHA service use, 2000-2010.

Psychiatric Services, *66*(9), 959-965. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201400031

Hoge, C. W., Castro, C. A., Messer, S. C., McGurk, D., Cotting, D. I., & Koffman, R. L. (2004).

Combat duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, mental health problems, and barriers to care. *New*

England Journal of Medicine, *351*(1), 13-22.

Hoge, C. W., & Warner, C. H. (2014). Estimating PTSD prevalence in U.S. veterans:

Considering combat exposure, PTSD checklist cutpoints, and DSM-5. *Journal of Clinical*

Psychiatry, *75*(12), 1439-1441. doi: 10.4088/JCP.14com09616

Holian, L., & Adam, T. (2020). *Veterans' education benefits: A profile of military students who*

received federal veterans' education benefits in 2015-16. U.S. Department of Education.

Hood, R. W. (2013). Methodology in psychology. In A. L. C. Runehov & L. Oviedo (Eds.),

Encyclopedia of sciences and religions (pp. 1314-1322). Springer Nature.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8265-8_695

Husserl, E. (1981). *Husserl: Shorter works* (P. McCormick & F. A. Elliston, (Eds.). University

of Notre Dame Press.

Inoue, C., Shawler, E., Jordan, C. H., & Jackson, C. A. (2022). *Veteran and military mental*

health issues. StatPearls Publishing.

Institute for Veterans and Military Families. (2017). *I am a post-9/11 student veteran*.

https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/I-AM-A-POST-911-Student-

Veteran-REPORT.pdf

Institute of Medicine. (2010). *Returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan: Preliminary assessment of readjustment needs of veterans, service members, and their families*. The National Academies Press.

Institute of Medicine. (2013). *Returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan: Assessment of readjustment needs of veterans, service members, and their families*. The National Academies Press.

Interian, A., Kline, A., Janal, M., Glynn, S., & Losonczy, M. (2014). Multiple deployments and combat trauma: Do homefront stressors increase the risk of posttraumatic stress symptoms? *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, *27*, 90-97. DOI: 10.1002/jts.21885

Johnson, H. P., & Agius, M. (2018). A post-traumatic stress disorder review: The prevalence of underreporting and the role of stigma in the military. *Psychiatria Danubina*, *30*(7), 508-510.

Johnson, S. J., Sherman, M. D., Hoffman, J. S., James, L. C., Johnson, P. L., Lochman, J. E., Magee, T. N., & Riggs, D. (2007). *Presidential task force on military deployment services for youth, families and service members. The psychological needs of US military service members and their families: A preliminary report*. American Psychological Association.

Kaczmarek, P. (2006). Counseling psychology and strength-based counseling: A promise yet to fully materialize. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *34*(1), 90-95. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000005282371

Kaplan, M. S., & McFarland, B. H. (2012). Veterans who have served in the conflicts of Iraq and Afghanistan are at increased risk of suicide compared to other veterans if they have a

psychiatric diagnosis. *Evidence-Based Mental Health*, *15*(4), 99. http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/eb-2012-100914

Keats, P. A. (2010). Soldiers working internationally: Impacts of masculinity, military culture, and operational stress on cross-cultural adaptation. *International Journal of Advanced Counselling*, *32*, 290-303. DOI 10.1007/s10447-010-9107-z

Kennedy, G. C., & Neilson, K. (2002). *Military education: Past, present, and future*. Praeger Publishers.

Kim, Y. M., & Cole, J. S. (2013). *Student veterans/service members' engagement in college and university life and education*. American Council on Education.

Kinney, A. R., Graham, J. E., & Eakman, A. M. (2019). Factors distinguishing veterans participating in supported education services from veterans on campus: Evidence supporting modifiable intervention targets. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, *43*(3), 261-269. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/prj0000399

Klaw, E., Young, B., Li, K., & O'Rourke, P. (2021). Best practices in serving college student veterans: A scoping review. *Journal of Military, Veteran, and Family Health*, *7*(1), 76-86. https://doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh-2020-0024

Koenig, C. J., Maguen, S., Monroy, J. D., Mayott, L., & Seal, K. H. (2014). Facilitating culture-centered communication between health care providers and veterans transitioning from military deployment to civilian life. *Patient Education and Counseling*, *95*, 414-410. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pec.2014.03.016

Koenig, H. G., Youssef, N. A., & Pearce, M. (2019). Assessments of moral injury in veterans and active duty military personnel with PTSD: A review. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *10*, 1-15. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2019.00443

Korstjens, I., & Moser, A. (2018). Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and publishing. *European Journal of General Practice, 24*(1): 120-124. https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375092

Kort, J. (2019). *Understanding intersectional identities: Defining or being defined by only one aspect of identity can be harmful*. Psychology Today. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/understanding-the-erotic-code/201906/understanding-intersectional-identities

Langdridge, D. (2007). *Phenomenological psychology: Theory, research, and method*. Pearson Education Limited.

Legreid, J. S., & Betters-Bubon, J. (2020). *Examining the experiences of student veterans on campus: A phenomenological qualitative study* [Unpublished manuscript]. Department of Counselor Education, University of Wisconsin – Whitewater.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publication, Inc.

Lippa, S. M., Fonda, J. R., Fortier, C. B., Amick, M. A., Kenna, A., Milberg, W. P., & McGlinchey, R. E. (2015). Deployment-related psychiatric and behavioral conditions and their association with functional disability in OEF/OIF/OND veterans. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, *28*, 25-33. DOI: 10.1002/jts.21979

MacGregor, A. J., Han, P. P., Dougherty, A. L., & Galarneau, M. R. (2012). Effect of dwell time on the mental health of US military personnel with multiple combat tours. *American Journal of Public Health*, *102*(S1), 55-59.

Maguen, S., Metzler, T. J., Bosch, J., Marmar, C. R., Knight, S. J., & Neylan, T. C. (2012). Killing in combat may be independently associated with suicidal ideation. *Depression and Anxiety*, *29*, 918-923. DOI 10.1002/da.21954

Mahoney, M. A., Rings, J. A., Softas-Nall, B. C., Alverio, T., & Hall, D. M. (2021).

    Homecoming and college transition narratives of student military veterans. *Journal of*

    College Student Psychotherapy. Advanced online publication. 1-23.

    doi=10.1080/87568225.2021.1926034

Mahoney, M. J. (2003). *Constructive psychotherapy: A practical guide*. Guilford Press.

McCall, L. (2009). The complexity of intersectionality. In E. Grabham, D. Cooper, J.

    Krishnadas, & D. Herman (Eds.), *Intersectionality and beyond: Law, power, and the*

    politics of location (pp. 49-76). Routledge-Cavendish.

McCaslin, S. E., Becket-Davenport, C., Dinh, J. V., Lasher, B., Kim, M., Choucroun, G., &

    Herbst, E. (2021). Military acculturation and readjustment to civilian context.

    Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy. Advanced online

    publication. 1-10. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tra0000999

McCormick, W. H., Currier, J. M., Isaak, S. L., Sims, B. M., Slagel, B. A., Carroll, T. D.,

    Hamner, K., & Alright, D. L. (2019). Military culture and post-military transitioning

    among veterans: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, *4*(2), 287-298.

McGlinchey, R. E., Milberg, W. P., Fonda, J. R., & Fortier, C. B. (2017). A methodology for

    assessing deployment trauma and its consequences in OEF/OIF/OND veterans: The

    TRACTS longitudinal prospective cohort study. *International Journal of Methods in*

    Psychiatric Research, *26*, 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1002/mpr.1556

McGuire, A. C., Kanesarajah, J., Runge, C. E., Ireland, R., Waller, M., & Dobson, A. J. (2016).

    Effects of multiple deployments on military families: A cross-sectional study of health

    and well-being of partners and children. *Military Medicine*, *181*(4), 319-327. doi:

    10.7205/MILMED-D-14-00310

Meade, V. (2020). Embracing diverse women veteran narratives: Intersectionality and women veteran's identity. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, *6*(3), 47-53. https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i3.218

Mears, J. A. (1969). The emergence of the standing professional army in seventeenth-century Europe. *Social Science Quarterly*, *50*(1), 106-115.

Meca, A., Park, H., Higgins, J., Hamrick, H., Webb, T., Davies, R., Golembiewski, L., Bravo, A. J., & Kelley, M. L. (2020). The role of United States identity in adjustment among veterans. *Military Psychology*, *32*(6), 408-416. DOI: 10.1080/08995605.2020.1802400

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Meyer, E. G., Writer, B. W., & Brim, W. (2016). The importance of military cultural competence. *Current Psychiatry Report*, *18*(26), 1-8. DOI 10.1007/s11920-016-0662-9

Military on Source. (2020, April 8). *How to use the military tuition assistance program*. United States Department of Defense. https://www.militaryonesource.mil/education-employment/for-service-members/preparing-for-higher-education/how-to-use-the-military-tuition-assistance-program/

Military on Source. (2021, November 4). *Becoming an officer in the military after college*. United States Department of Defense. https://www.militaryonesource.mil/military-life-cycle/new-to-the-military/military-career/becoming-a-military-officer-after-college/

Miller, C. (2006). Cell phone bombs: How law enforcement can (and can't) prevent them. *Law Enforcement Technology*, *33*(1), 86-95.

Mills, J., & Birks, M. (2014). *Qualitative methodology: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.

Mirza, M., Gossett, A., Chan, N. K., Burford, L., & Hammel, J. (2008). Community reintegration for people with psychiatric disabilities: Challenging systemic barriers to service provision and public policy through participatory action research. *Disability & Society*, *23*(4), 323-336. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590802038829

Mobley, C., Brawner, C. E., Lord, S. M., Main, J. B., & Camacho, M. M. (2019). Digging deeper: Qualitative research methods for eliciting narratives and counter-narratives from student veterans. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *32*(10), 1210-1228. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1659440

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

The Monitor. (2011). Landmine & cluster munition monitor fact sheer. *Cluster Munition Coalition and the International Campaign to Ban Landmines*. http://www.the-monitor.org/media/984538/Monitor-Factsheet-Nov2011-IEDCasualties-PDF.pdf

Moore, E. (2020, March 31). *Women in combat: Five-year status update*. Center for a New American Security. https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/women-in-combat-five-year-status-update

Moustakas, C. (2010). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications.

Myers, M. (2021, September 16). *1:3 deployment-to-dwell ratio to be standardized under DoD policy starting in Nov*. Military Times. https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2021/09/16/13-deployment-to-dwell-ratio-to-be-standardized-under-dod-policy-starting-in-nov/

Nair, P., Keppell, M. J., Lim, C. L., Mari, T., & Hassan, N. (2021). *Transforming curriculum through teacher-learner partnerships*. IGI Global.

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. (2013). *Measuring the success of student veterans and active duty military students*. The NASPA Research and Policy Institute. https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/NASPA_vets_13%281%29.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). *Undergraduate retention and graduation rates*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/2022/ctr_508.pdf

Norman, S. B., Rosen, J., Himmerich, S., Myers, U. S., Davis, B., Browne, K. C., & Piland, N. (2015). Student veteran perceptions of facilitators and barriers to achieving academic goals. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, *52*(6), 701-712. http://dx.doi.org/10.1682/JRRD.2015.01.0013

Novelly, T. (2022, August 1). The Global War on Terrorism service medal won't be handed out to everyone anymore. *Military.com*. https://www.military.com/daily-news/2022/08/01/global-war-terrorism-service-medal-wont-be-handed-out-everyone-anymore.html

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 16*, 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Ong, A. D., & Burrow, A. L. (2017). Microaggressions and daily experience: Depicting life as it is lived. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *12*(1), 173-175. DOI: 10.1177/1745691616664505

Orazem, R. J., Frazier, P. A., Schnurr, P. P., Oleson, H. E., Carlson, K. F., Litz, B. T., & Sayer, N. A. (2017). Identity adjustment among Afghanistan and Iraq war veterans with reintegration difficulty. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, *9*(S1), 4-11. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tra0000225

Overton, I. (2020, October 15). A decade of global IED harm reviewed. *Action on Armed Violence*. https://aoav.org.uk/2020/a-decade-of-global-ied-harm-reviewed/

Pattison, J. (2011). Just war theory and the privatization of military force. *Ethics and International Affairs*, *22*(2), 143-162. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7093.2008.00140.x

Pease, J. L., Monteith, L. L., Hostetter, T. A., Forster, J. E., & Bahraini, N. H. (2015). Military service and suicidal thoughts and behaviors in a national sample of college students. *Crisis*, *36*(2), 117-125. DOI: 10.1027/0227-5910/a000300

Pedersen, E. R., Bouskill, K. E., Brooks Holliday, S., Cantor, J., Smucker, S., Mizel, M. L., Skrabala, L., Kofner, A., & Tanielian, T. (2020). *Addressing barriers to expanding integrated treatment options for Post-9/11 veterans*. RAND Corporation.

Pew Research Center. (2019a). *The U.S. military has downsized considerably in the post-Cold War era*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/10/the-changing-profile-of-the-u-s-military/ft_19-09-10_veteransdemographics_us-military-downsized-considerably-post-cold-war-era/

Pew Research Center. (2019b). *The American veteran experience and the post-9/11 generation*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/09/10/the-american-veteran-experience-and-the-post-9-11-generation/

Pietrzak, R. H., Johnson, D. C., Goldstein, M. B., Malley, J. C., Rivers, A. J., Morgan, C. A., & Southwick, S. M. (2010). Psychosocial buffers of traumatic stress, depressive symptoms,

and psychosocial difficulties in veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and Iraqi

Freedom: The role of resilience, unit support, and postdeployment social support. *Journal*

of Affective Disorders, *120*, 188-192. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2009.04.015

Pirelli, G., & Jeglic, E. L. (2009). The influence of death exposure on suicidal thoughts and

behaviors. *Archives of Suicide Research*, *13*, 136-146. DOI:

10.1080/13811110902835064

Polit, D. F., & Beck, C. T. (2014). *Essentials of nursing research: Appraising evidence for*

nursing practice (8th ed.). Wolters Kluwer/Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.

Radford, A. (2010). *Service members in school: Military veterans' experiences using the Post-*

9/11 GI Bill and pursuing postsecondary education. RAND.

Rattray, N. A., True, G., Natividad, D. M., Salyers, M. P., Frankel, R. M., & Kukla, M. (2019).

The long and winding road to postsecondary education for U.S. veterans with invisible

injuries. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, *42*(3), 284-295.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/prj0000375

Redmond, S. A., Wilcox, S. L., Campbell, S., Kim, A., Finney, K., Barr, K., & Hassan, A. M.

(2015). A brief introduction to the military workplace culture. *Military Culture*, *50*, 9-20.

DOI: 10.3233/WOR-141987

Reger, M. A., Gahm, G. A., Swanson, R. D., & Duma, S. J. (2008). Association between number

of deployments to Iraq and mental health screening outcomes in US Army soldiers.

Journal of Clinical Psychology, *70*(9), 1266-1272. DOI: 10.4088/JCP.08m04361

Renshaw, K. D. (2010). Deployment experiences and postdeployment PTSD symptoms in

National Guard/Reserve service members serving in Operations Enduring Freedom and

Iraqi Freedom. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, *23*(6), 815-818. DOI: 10.1002/jts.20575

Renshaw, K. D. (2011). An integrated model of risk and protective factors for post-deployment PTSD symptoms in OEF/OIF era combat veterans. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *128*, 321-326. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2010.07.022

Rossetto, K. R. (2013). Relational coping during deployment: Managing communication and connection in relationships. *Personal Relationships*, *20*, 568-586. DOI: 10.1111/pere.12000

Sayer, N. A., Carlson, K. F., & Frazier, P. A. (2014). Reintegration challenges in U.S. service members and veterans following combat deployment. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, *8*(1), 33-73.

Sayer, N. A., Frazier, P., Orazem, R. J., Murdoch, M., Gravely, A., Carlson, K. F., Hintz, S., & Noorbaloochi, S. (2011). Military to Civilian Questionnaire: A measure of postdeployment community reintegration difficulty among veterans using Department of Veterans Affairs medical care. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, *24*(6), 660-670. DOI: 10.1002/jts.20706

Sayer, N. A., Noorbaloochi, S., Frazier, P., Carlson, K., Gravely, A., & Murdoch, M. (2010). Reintegration problems and treatment interests among Iraq and Afghanistan combat veterans receiving VA medical care. *Psychiatric Services*, *61*(6), 589-597.

Schmid, A. H. (1991). The deficiency model: An exploration of current approaches to late-life disorders. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, *54*(4), 358-367.

Schreger, C., & Kimble, M. (2017). Assessing civilian perceptions of combat veterans: An IAT study. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 9*, 12-18.

Schuler, M. S., Wong, E. C., & Ramchand, R. (2022). Military service branch differences in

    alcohol use, tobacco use, prescription drug misuse, and mental health conditions. *Drug*

    and Alcohol Dependence, *235*, 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2022.109461

Sellinger, S. (2022). *The lived experience of Post-9/11 combat veterans with chronic pain: A*

    qualitative research report (Publication No. 292115399). [Doctoral dissertation,

    California School of Professional Psychology]. ProQuest Dissertation Publishing.

Senate Hearing 112-738 – 112th Congress. (2012). Terrorist networks in Pakistan and the

    proliferation of IEDs (2012, December 13).

    https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112shrg79800/html/CHRG-

    112shrg79800.htm

Sinha, D., Mishra, R. C., & Berry, J. W. (1992). Acculturative stress in nomadic and sedentary

    tribes of Bihar, India. In S. Iwanwaki, Y. Kashima, & K. Leung (Eds.), *Innovations in*

    cross-cultural psychology (pp. 396-407). Swets and Zeitlinger.

Smith, S. (2022). *What you should know about any military physical fitness test*. Military.com.

    https://www.military.com/military-fitness/fitness-test-prep/physical-fitness-test-standards

Smith-Osborne, A. M. (2012). Supporting resilience in the academic setting for student soldiers

    and veterans as an aspect of community reintegration: The design of the Student Veteran

    Project study. *Advances in Social Work*, *13*(1), 34-50. https://doi.org/10.18060/1870

Snir, A., Levi-Belz, Y., & Solomon, Z. (2017). Is the war really over? A 20-year longitudinal

    study on trajectories of suicidal ideation and posttraumatic stress symptoms following

    combat. *Psychiatry Research*, *247*, 33-38.

    http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2016.10.065

Sookermany, A. M. (2017). Military education reconsidered: A postmodern update. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, *51*(1), 310-330. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12224

Steeves, T. M. (2019). *A phenomenological exploration of moral injury among female Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Northern Colorado.

Student Veterans of America. (2017). *Research brief: Profile of the contemporary student veteran*. Retrieved from https://nvest.studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Profiles-of-a-Contemporary-Student-Veteran.pdf

Student Veterans of America. (2019). *Student veterans: A valuable asset to higher education*. Institute for Veterans and Military Families.

Student Veterans of America. (2021). *The 2020 SVA census survey: Student veteran general breakdown*. Student Veterans of America Research Department.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2010). *Understanding the military: The institution, the culture, and the people*. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2012). Behavioral health issues among Afghanistan and Iraq U.S. war veterans. *In Brief*, *7*(1), 1-8.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2021). *2020 methodological summary and definitions*. National Survey on Drug Use and Health.

Sussman, N. M. (2002). Testing the cultural identity model of the cultural transition cycle: Sojourners return home. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *26*, 391-408.

Thomas, K. H., Albright, D. L., Phillips, D., Roosevelt, K., Crawley, R., & Taylor, S. P. (2018). Mental health status in service member and veteran students at four-year postsecondary institutions: A pilot needs assessment. *Best Practices in Mental Health*, *14*(1), 1-14.

Tiemey, W. G., & Lanford, M. (2018). Institutional culture in higher education. In P. N. Teixeira & J. C. Shin (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Higher Education Systems and Institutions*. Springer. DOI:10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1_544-1

Trivedi, R. B., Post, E. P., Sun, H., Pomerantz, A., Saxon, A. J., Piette, J. D., Maynard, C., Arrow, B., Curtis, I., Fihn, S. D., & Nelson, K. (2015). Prevalence, comorbidity, and prognosis of mental health among U.S. veterans. *American Journal of Public Health*, *105*(12), 2564-2569.

Tyner, A. R. (2019). Unconscious bias, implicit bias, microaggressions: What can we do about them? *GP Solo*, *36*(4), 30-33.

United States Congress. (1942). *United States code: Second War Powers Act*.

United States Department of Defense. (2019). *Defense spending as a % of gross domestic product (GDP)*. U.S. Department of Defense. https://media.defense.gov/2019/Mar/12/2002099941/-1/-1/0/190312-D-ZZ999-001.JPG

United States Department of Defense. (2020). *2020 demographics profile: Active duty members*. Department of Defense. https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Infographic/2020-demographics-active-duty-members.pdf

United States Department of Defense. (2022). *Department of Defense announces university research funding awards*. U.S. Department of Defense.

https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2953234/department-of-defense-announces-university-research-funding-awards/

United States Department of Veterans Affairs. (2016). Key statistics by veteran status and period of service. In United States Census Bureau (2016), *American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample*. https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/KeyStats.pdf

United States Department of Veterans Affairs. (2018). *VetPop2018 Living Veterans by Period of Service, Gender, 2018-2048*. [Data set]. National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics. https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp

United States Department of Veterans Affairs. (2021a). *America's wars*. Department of Defense. https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs_americas_wars.pdf

United States Department of Veterans Affairs. (2021b). *2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report*. Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention.

United States Department of Veterans Affairs. (2021c). *Dates and Names of Conflicts*. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. https://www.va.gov/vetsinworkplace/docs/em_datesnames.asp

United States Department of Veterans Affairs. (2022) *Characteristics of student veterans: VA college toolkit handout*. Department of Veterans Affairs. https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/student-veteran/docs/VAM-061-VITAL-Characteristics-of-Student-Veterans-1-0-508.pdf

United States Veterans Benefits Administration. (2022). *Annual benefits report: Fiscal year 2021*. United States Department of Veterans Affairs.

Vacchi, D., & Berger, J. B. (2013). Student veterans in higher education. In M. B. Paulsen (Eds.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 93-151). Springer Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8005-6

Vacchi, D., Hammond, S., & Aynsley, D. (2017). Conceptual models of student veteran college experiences. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, *29*(171), 23-41. DOI: 10.1002/ir.20192

Valsiner, J. (2017). *From methodology to methods in human psychology*. Springer. DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-61064-1

Vogt, D., Borowski, S., Maguen, S., Blosnich, J. R., Hoffmire, C. A., Bernhard, P. A., Iverson, K. M., & Scheiderman, A. (2022). Strengths and vulnerabilities: Comparing post-9/11 U.S. veterans' and non-veterans' perceptions of health and broader well-being. *SSM Population Health*, *19*, 1-7. DOI 10.1016/j.ssmph.2022.101201

Warner, J., & Matfess, H. (2017). *Exploding stereotypes: The unexpected operational and demographic characteristics of Boko Haram's suicide bombers*. United States Military Academy West Point, Combating Terrorism Center.

Waszak, D. L., & Holmes, A. M. (2017). The unique health needs of Post-9/11 U.S. veterans. *Workplace Health & Safety*, *65*(9), 430-444. http://doi.org/10.1177/2165079916682524

Weiss, D., & Lang, F. R. (2009). Thinking about my generation: Adaptive effects of a dual age identity in later adulthood. *Psychology and Aging*, *24*(3), 729-734. DOI: 10.1037/a0016339

Weiss, E., & Coll, J. E. (2011). The influence of military culture and veteran worldviews on mental health treatment: Practice implications for combat veteran help-seeking and wellness. *International Journal of Health, Wellness, & Society*, *1*(2), 75-86.

Willig, C., & Stainton-Rogers, W. (2017). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Wilson, P. H. (2008). Defining military culture. *The Journal of Military History*, *72*(1), 11-41. https://doi.org/10.1353/jmh.2008.0041

Wilson, T. B., Caporale-Berkowitz, N. A., Parent, M. C., & Brownson, C. B. (2021). Grit is associated with decreased mental health help-seeking among student veterans. *Journal of American College Health*. Advanced online publication. 1-6. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2021.1953034

Yee, J., Marchany, K., Greenan, M. A., Walker, W. C., & Pogoda, T. K. (2022). Potential concussive event narratives of Post-9/11 combat veterans: Chronic effects of neurotrauma consortium study. *Military Medicine*, *186*(1), 559-566. https://doi.org/10.1093/milmed/usaa308

APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

Date: 01/26/2023

Principal Investigator: Jansen Legreid

Committee Action: **Expedited Approval - New Protocol**
Action Date: 01/26/2023

Protocol Number: 2211046551
Protocol Title: UNDERSTANDING THE ACCULTURATION EXPERIENCES OF POST-9/11
                                STUDENT VETERANS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION CULTURE OF
                                CIVILIAN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Expiration Date: 01/25/2024

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has granted approval for the above referenced protocol. Your protocol was approved under expedited category (6) (7) as outlined below:

Category 6: Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

Category 7: Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

All research must be conducted in accordance with the procedures outlined in your approved protocol.

If continuing review is required for your research, your project is approved until the expiration date listed above. The investigator will need to submit a request for Continuing Review at least 30 days prior to the expiration date. If the study's approval expires, investigators must stop all research activities immediately (including data analysis) and contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs for guidance.

If your study has not been assigned an expiration date, continuing review is not required for your research.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

For the duration of the research, the investigator(s) must:

- Submit any change in the research design, investigators, and any new or revised study documents (including consent forms, questionnaires, advertisements, etc.) to the UNC IRB and receive approval before implementing the changes.
- Use only a copy of the UNC IRB approved consent and/or assent forms. The investigator bears the responsibility for obtaining informed consent from all subjects prior to the start of the study procedures.
- Inform the UNC IRB immediately of an Unanticipated Problems involving risks to subjects or others and serious and unexpected adverse events.
- Report all Non-Compliance issues or complaints regarding the project promptly to the UNC IRB.

As principal investigator of this research project, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Obtain informed consent and research privacy authorizations using the currently approved forms and retain all original, signed forms, if applicable.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications.
- Promptly report to the IRB any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others and serious and unexpected adverse events.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records.
- Report all Non-Compliance issues or complaints regarding the project promptly to the IRB.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three (3) years after the conclusion of the project. Once your project is complete, please submit the Closing Report Form.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Morse, Research Compliance Manager, at 970-351-1910 or nicole.morse@unco.edu. Please include your Protocol Number in all future correspondence. Best of luck with your research!

Sincerely,

Michael Aldridge
IRB Co-Chair, University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

Silvia Correa-Torres
IRB Co-Chair, University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784

APPENDIX B

COMMUNICATION TO CAMPUS RESOURCES

Potential email to campus resources:

Hello,

My name is Jansen Legreid, and I'm a Counseling Psychology doctoral candidate at the University of Northern Colorado. I'm contacting you to see if your office would allow me to advertise for my research study. This study has been approved by the UNC Institutional Review Board and I'm interested in understanding the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as they transition into higher education. I'm particularly interested in which aspects of a student veteran's military cultural identity they choose to maintain or abandon in school. I'm currently recruiting participants and would appreciate it if your office could tell your campus's student veterans of this study. If you're interested in helping me, please forward the following message to any student veteran email list servers you may have access to:

Please see potential email to recruit participants in Appendix C.

Additionally, if you would like to have printed advertisements, I'm happy to deliver copies to your office. Alternatively, I'm also happy to email a copy of the advertisement file if you'd prefer to print copies yourself.

Please let me know if you have any questions and if you'd like more information about the details of my study. I truly appreciate your consideration and look forward to hearing from you.

Respectfully,
Jansen Legreid, M.S., LPCC
Doctoral Candidate in Counseling Psychology
University of Northern Colorado

APPENDIX C

CALL FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Potential email to recruit participants through email list servers:

Dear Student Veterans:

My name is Jansen Legreid, and I am a Counseling Psychology doctoral candidate at the University of Northern Colorado. I'm currently conducting research on the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans in higher education. I'm particularly interested in learning about your military cultural identity throughout your transition into higher education. Your involvement would consist of one recorded virtual interview that should take roughly 60-90 minutes as well as the potential for a brief check-in afterward. Your consideration is greatly appreciated and will help other post-9/11 veterans and their families as each interview equals a donation of up to $20 to the Yellow Ribbon Fund. If you and/or someone you know may be interested in sharing their stories and experiences, please click on this link (https://unco.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8eTGpYqt0IUzzSK) or scan the below QR code for more information.

Respectfully,
Jansen Legreid, MS, LPCC
Doctoral Candidate in Counseling Psychology
University of Northern Colorado

Potential print advertisement to recruit participants:

Are You a Post-9/11 Veteran Currently in Higher Education?

We want to hear about your acculturation experiences in higher education.

- One virtual interview (60-90 minutes long).
- Your responses will remain completely confidential.
- Your contribution will help other post-9/11 veterans and their families as each interview equals a donation of up to $20 to the Yellow Ribbon Fund.

If you are interested, please scan the QR code or email the primary researcher for additional information:
Jansen Legreid, MS, LPCC | Counseling Psychology Doctoral Candidate
University of Northern Colorado

APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPATION
IN RESEARCH

CONSENT FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
University of Northern Colorado

Project Title: Understanding the Acculturation Experiences of Post-9/11 Student Veterans in the Higher Education Culture of Civilian Postsecondary Educational Institutions

Researcher: Jansen Legreid, M.S., LPCC, Doctoral Candidate, Counseling Psychology
UNCO Email: jansen.legreid@unco.edu

Research Advisor: Jeffrey Rings, Ph. D., Associate Professor, Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education
Phone: (970) 351-1639, UNCO Email: Jeffrey.Rings@unco.edu

The purpose of this study is to describe the acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans while attending civilian postsecondary educational institutions (PEI). If you choose to participate in this study, you first will fill out a demographic questionnaire that will ask about your age, ethnicity, and gender identity, in addition to questions regarding your military and academic histories. You will then participate in a semi-structured interview (approximately 60-90 minutes). The semi-structured interview will occur virtually and will be recorded, and this recording will be stored on a password-protected device. You also will be asked at a later date to complete a member check by reviewing the themes that were identified from the information you had provided during your interview. Your participation in the member check is not mandatory and will not negatively impact your overall participation in the study, though it will provide you with the opportunity to ensure that your experiences have been accurately understood and described.

To participate, you must (a) be currently enrolled as a fulltime undergraduate student at a PEI whose courses are predominantly instructed and attended in-person in the United States; (b) have served as an active-duty enlisted personnel within either the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, or Space Force prior to their enrollment at a PEI in the United States; (c) have served in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn, Operation Enduring Freedom and/or Operation Freedom's Sentinel; (d) deployed overseas at least once; (e) have discharged from military service within the last five years; and (f) are not currently serving as an enlisted personnel and/or commissioned officer within any branch of the U.S. military while enrolled as a student veteran (i.e., Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, Space Force, Reserve, National Guard, and/or Reserve Officer Training Corps [ROTC]).

Your responses will be kept confidential to the greatest extent possible. Your name will not be recorded, and a pseudonym will be used in any field notes, transcriptions of interviews, and any other written data. I will de-identify your story to the greatest extent possible to help enhance confidentiality, not revealing specifics about you, but instead focusing on themes within your

acculturation experiences. However, I may need to breach this confidentiality in the following situations:

(a) If you reveal the intent to harm or kill yourself.

(b) If you reveal the intent to harm or kill others.

(c) In cases of suspected child, elderly, or adult-at-risk neglect and/or abuse.

(d) If you pose a risk to national security.

(e) If your study records are subpoenaed by a court of law.

Data will be stored within a password-protected document on a password-protected computer. Again, all possible efforts will be made to maximize the confidentiality of your responses.

United States Standard Form 86 (SF 86), used by the United States Government in conducting background investigations and evaluations of persons under consideration for, or retention of, national security positions, asks in Section 21 whether the individual has ever received mental health or counseling services. Participation in this research study would necessitate the answer of "Yes" on SF 86 Section 21. Though as far as can be anticipated, there is no penalty for participating in this study as SF 86 Section 21 states, "mental health treatment and counseling, in and of itself, is not a reason to revoke or deny eligibility for access to classified information or for holding a sensitive position with access to federally controlled facilities or information systems". Certain mental health diagnoses may influence the processes described in SF 86 Section 21, though the investigator will not diagnose participants during the course of the research study. Any existing mental health diagnoses, as diagnosed prior to or after your participation by a physician or other mental health professional, would need to be listed in SF 86 Section 21.

As far as can be anticipated, participants will encounter no or minimal mental, social, legal, emotional, or physical risk from participating in this research study. You may experience varied degrees of discomfort and/or distress while recounting past and current experiences and any qualitative interview will be paused or terminated if you feel that your emotions or experiences are too intense to continue. If you feel that your experiences are too intense, you are encouraged to contact any one of the local agencies that is listed at the end of this document.

Your participation will benefit other veterans, military-affiliated persons, as well as healthcare professionals and school administrators. Specifically, your participation will help healthcare professionals and school administrators to better develop veteran support services that are inclusive and can more adequately recognize the impact of military cultural identities in higher education settings. Additionally, your participation will contribute to the understanding of the unique acculturation experiences of post-9/11 student veterans. In this project, there are no known economic, legal, physical, or social risks to participants in either immediate or long-range outcomes.

There are some minimal risks in this study given the potentially sensitive nature of some of the questions that may be explored during the interview. Specifically, some questions that ask about possible unpleasant military and post-service experiences could potentially elicit some unpleasant emotions. I understand that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in a research study, but I believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and the potential, but unknown risks. You may withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. After you complete the interview, I will provide you with referrals to counselors

and other veteran-specific resources in case you (a) are interested in further processing their military experience and/or identity development, and/or (b) felt any emotional distress from the interview.

You will not receive direct compensation during your participation in this study, though your participation will elicit a donation to the Yellow Ribbon Fund to help support wounded and ill post-9/11 veterans and their families during their transition and recovery processes. The completion of your individual interview will elicit a donation of $10.00. Your participation in the member check process will elicit an additional donation of $10.00 and will result in a maximum donation amount of $20.00 per participant. A lump sum donation will be sent to the Yellow Ribbon Fund at the conclusion of the data collection and member check processes.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate at any point in this study even if you had already begun your participation. You may stop and withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please select "Yes, I consent to participate" to indicate your consent to participate in the study. You will retain a copy of this form to for future reference. After you provide your consent, you will be directed to a confidential survey webpage where you will answer questions about your demographics and military service information to determine your eligibility to participate in this study.

All participants will be invited to participate in a member check after the interview. This will involve me emailing you your de-identified results which consist of themes and significant quotes. I will also include a copy of your interview's transcript in this email so that you can review the information that was used to generate these themes. You will then have the opportunity to review the themes and set up a virtual meeting to discuss your opinions and perceptions of the themes derived from the research study. The member check is completely voluntary and your participation in this study will not be negatively affected if you choose not to participate in the member check. If you are interested in participating in a member check, please indicate this interest during your individual interview or provide your email at the end of the questionnaire and I will contact you after the initial data analysis process has been completed.

If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, Research Compliance Manager at the Office of Research, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO, 80639; (970) 351-1910.

Please contact the researcher, Jansen Legreid, if you have any questions:
Email: jansen.legreid@unco.edu

• Yes, I consent to participate
• No, I do not consent to participate

APPENDIX E

ELIGIBILITY QUESTIONNAIRE

<u>Description and Consent (included at the start of the Qualtrics Survey)</u>
See consent form in Appendix C
<u>Demographic and Eligibility Questions</u>
Name
Age
Gender
Race
State of Residence
Did you serve on active duty for any period of time while in the military?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Which branch/branches of the military did you serve in while on active duty? Choose all that apply:
- ☐ Army
- ☐ Marine Corps
- ☐ Navy
- ☐ Air Force
- ☐ Coast Guard
- ☐ Space Force
- ☐ National Guard
- ☐ Reserve

How many years did you serve on active duty while in the military?

Did your military service include any inactive service (e.g., National Guard, Reserve, ROTC)?
- ☐ Yes (Choose all that apply)
  - o National Guard
  - o Reserve
  - o Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC)
- ☐ No

Are you currently serving in any branch of the military? Choose all that apply:
- ☐ I am not currently serving in the military
- ☐ Army
- ☐ Marine Corps
- ☐ Navy
- ☐ Air Force
- ☐ Coast Guard
- ☐ Space Force
- ☐ National Guard
- ☐ Reserve
- ☐ Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC)

When did you discharge from the military?

Choose the option that best describes your rank at the time of discharge from the military:
- ☐ Enlisted
- ☐ Warrant Officer
- ☐ Officer

What was the highest rank that you achieved at the time of discharge from the military?

What was your occupation(s) in the military?

Which era best describes the period in which you served in the military? Choose all that apply:
- ☐ Vietnam Era
- ☐ Post-Vietnam Era
- ☐ Gulf War Era
- ☐ Pre-9/11 Era
- ☐ Post-9/11 Era

Which Post-9/11 combat operations were you involved in while in the military? Choose all that apply:
- ☐ Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)
- ☐ Operation New Dawn (OND)
- ☐ Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)
- ☐ Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS)
- ☐ Other (Please specify)
- ☐ I was not involved in any Post-9/11 combat operations

Were you ever deployed overseas while in the military?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

How many times were you deployed overseas while in the military?

Where were you deployed to?

On average, how long (in months) was one of your overseas deployments?

Did you ever participate in any combat situations while in the military?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Were you ever injured or wounded while in the military?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Which postsecondary educational institution (e.g., university, college) are you currently enrolled at?
Please indicate your enrollment status at your school:
- ☐ Part-time
- ☐ Full-time
- ☐ I am not currently enrolled

How are your courses this semester currently being taught (e.g., lectures, labs)?

- ☐ Exclusively in-person
- ☐ Exclusively virtual
- ☐ Hybrid (both in-person and virtual)
- ☐ Some classes in-person, some classes virtual

How many semesters have you completed at your school?

What was your highest level of education at the time of your enlistment into the military?
- ☐ Did Not Complete High School/GED
- ☐ High School/GED
- ☐ Associate's Degree/Training Certificate
- ☐ Bachelor's Degree
- ☐ Master's Degree
- ☐ Doctorate Degree
- ☐ Other (Please specify)

Did you participate in any college courses or receive any college credits while in the military?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

<u>Availability Questions</u>
Which days of the week would be most convenient for your individual interview? Choose all that apply:
- ☐ Sundays
- ☐ Mondays
- ☐ Tuesdays
- ☐ Wednesdays
- ☐ Thursdays
- ☐ Fridays
- ☐ Saturdays
- ☐ No Preference

What time of day would be most convenient for your individual interview? Choose all that apply:
- ☐ Mornings (0900-1130)
- ☐ Afternoons (1200-1630)
- ☐ Evenings (1700-2000)
- ☐ No Preference

Are you interested in reviewing the themes that were derived from your interview once the initial data collection process is completed?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Please enter your email address

Final Message

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey. Your responses have been recorded.

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Background Information (To Be Completed Prior to Interview)

Participant pseudonym:
Assigned participant number:
Interview date:
Interview start and stop time:
Interview duration:
Interview location:
Interviewer completed field notes and reflexive journal: Y/N
Date of interview transcription:
Date(s) transcription sent to participant and participant confirmation?
Follow up questions needed for subsequent interview? Y/N

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. I am trying to understand how post-9/11 veterans transition into civilian higher education settings. Please tell me a bit about what led you to pursue higher education after the military.
   a. How did you choose your school/program?
   b. What has this journey been like?
   c. What do you know now that you wish you knew then?
2. Culture can be understood as the shared customs, habits, beliefs, and values of a group. What does military culture mean to you?
   a. What does military culture look like in your daily life?
      i. How is it similar/dissimilar to when you were serving?
   b. How do you think the military has defined you?
   c. Which parts of military culture did you keep after your service?
   d. Which parts of military culture did you leave behind?
3. Please tell me about what it is like to be a student veteran.
   a. What is it like to hold a military cultural identity in a civilian setting?
   b. When do you feel like your military cultural identity is more/less noticeable?
   c. How does a day as a student veteran compare to a day right after you discharged from the military?
4. What comes to mind when you hear "higher education culture"?
   a. What have you noticed about higher education culture?
   b. What has been your experience with higher education culture so far?
   c. What do you like/dislike about higher education culture?
   d. What has it been like to transition into higher education culture?
   e. How do you think higher education would look if it was in the military?
5. Looking back from your current perspective, what do these transition experiences mean to you?
   a. How would you define the experience of transitioning from one culture to another?
      What do you wish people knew about your transition experiences?

APPENDIX G

DEBRIEF AND MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

Debrief

Thank you for sharing! This will conclude our interview. Again, here's what this study is about. The goal of this study is to examine the experiences of post-9/11 student veterans while they attend civilian postsecondary educational institutions (PEIs). Specifically, this study is looking at a student veteran's military cultural identity and which parts that they choose to maintain or abandon while attending PEIs. Additionally, this study also is looking at which parts of the PEI's higher education culture that student veterans choose to adopt of reject. In doing so, this study aims to better understand the essence of their acculturation experiences while in the higher education culture of civilian PEIs. Ultimately, I hope that these findings will promote a greater awareness among PEI faculty and healthcare providers about the acculturation processes of post-9/11 student veterans. This will hopefully help them to better recognize how parts of student veterans' military cultural identities can serve as strengths during their transition periods into higher education culture.

(If participant consented to participate in member check)

As a reminder, I will send you an email in the near future for you to participate in that member check process. This email will include the themes that were derived from your interview as well as a copy of your interview transcript so that you can review the information you provided and how it was used to form the themes. Once you have received this email, please review the themes and determine whether they accurately describe your PEI acculturation experiences. If you feel like the themes do not accurately reflect your experiences, please email me so that we can schedule a virtual meeting to discuss your thoughts further.

Thank you again for your participation in this study! Please feel free to give my contact information to any other student veterans who you think might be interested in participating. Also, please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about this study or your participation. Here is a list of national mental health resources that you can contact if you feel like the experiences that you described today were too intense.

National Mental Health Resources

Veteran Crisis Line

Phone: Dial 988 then Press 1

Crisis Text Line

Text SIGNS to 741741

War Vet Call Center

Phone: 1-877-927-8387

Women Veterans Call Center

Phone: 1-855-829-6636

NIMH Information Resource Center

Phone: 1-866-615-6464

SAMHSA's National Helpline

Phone: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

Military OneSource

Phone: 1-800-342-9647

National Resource Directory

www.nrd.gov