



Qualitative Study Examining the College Experiences and Coping Mechanisms of Post-9/11 Student Veterans Conducted During the COVID-19 Pandemic

MARK A. FEGLEY 

RESEARCH

VIRGINIA TECH.
PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

The use of avoidance coping strategies by individuals to decrease stressors and minimize negative consequences can lead to stress generation and maladaptive forms of social functioning. In student veterans, avoidant coping has been associated with increased symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder. Literature has suggested that post-9/11 student veterans tend to default to avoidance coping strategies when they face academic problems and social difficulties since maladaptive patterns of social functioning can have a significant negative impact on the postsecondary education of returning veterans. It is possible that the academic underperformance and higher dropout rates of post-9/11 student veterans could be associated with their utilization of avoidance coping strategies. While the amount of research into veteran transitions has increased in the past 10 years, little has been revealed about the lived college experiences of post-9/11 student veterans and their coping behaviors. This study aimed to examine the lived experiences, academic challenges, social struggles, and coping strategies of post-9/11 student veterans. More specifically, I examined their coping strategies as they attempted to overcome challenges during their first year of college after separating from the military. All nine participants were enrolled at the same large, Midwestern, public research university. The participants were between the ages of 23 and 43 years old and included post-9/11 veterans that were true first-time, undergraduate students with previous college credit. Participant responses yielded four predominant themes: (a) lack of identification as veterans, (b) an absence of relationships with other veterans, (c) participants used positive coping approaches, and (d) avoidance and negative coping approaches. Because the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the possible impact of pandemic isolation on the participants must be acknowledged.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Mark A. Fegley

The Ohio State University, US
mfegley2002@yahoo.com

KEYWORDS:

Coping; post-9/11; student veterans; transition theory; COVID-19

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Fegley, M. A. (2024). Qualitative Study Examining the College Experiences and Coping Mechanisms of Post-9/11 Student Veterans Conducted During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 10(1), pp. 64–75. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v10i1.422>

The expansion of the Post 9/11 GI Bill and its impact on veteran education benefits has intensified the focus on the substantial numbers of transitioning veterans departing the military, returning to civilian life, and discovering academic challenges waiting for them once they enroll in college. Veterans experience an environment less authoritative, less structured, more chaotic, and challenging than expected (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Zogas, 2017). Surrounded by younger nonveteran students (Glasser et al., 2009) and faculty who are unfamiliar with their military experiences (Naphan & Elliot, 2015), student veterans tend to feel disconnected from their academic surroundings (Strickley, 2009). Under these circumstances some veterans begin to question their appropriateness for college (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). Some scholars have implied that becoming a college student might be the most difficult circumstance a veteran can encounter (Kirchner et al., 2014).

A veteran's adjustment to college is unique because the stress student veterans experience can either be connected to school, work, home, and life demands, or can be associated with the cognitive, psychological, and physical wounds from their experiences in the military (Young, 2017). Additionally, because of the norms and learned behaviors of military training, student veterans tend to ignore academic problems, are hesitant to ask for assistance, or seek counseling when issues arise (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; McBain et al., 2012).

Encountering academic and social difficulties can lead to veterans using coping strategies to decrease stressors and minimize negative consequences in their immediate environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping can take on different forms. Problem-focused coping reduces the emotional reaction of stress and centers on resolving the issue behind the anxiety (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). College students with higher problem-focused coping styles display lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms (Eisenbarth, 2012).

Avoidant coping can be viewed as a cognitive and behavioral effort to deny, minimize, or avoid dealing with stressful demands (Holahan et al., 2005). Avoidance coping is a maladaptive form of coping (Boden et al., 2012) that has been linked to depression (Penley et al., 2002). Reliance on avoidance coping methods seems likely to generate a broad range of stressors (Holahan et al., 2005). Notably, avoidant coping is the response technique commonly used by student veterans (Romero et al., 2015). Previous studies have demonstrated that student veterans are more likely to engage in avoidant coping strategies than nonveteran students (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Whiteman & Barry, 2011). The use of avoidant coping by student veterans contributes to a substantial risk for dysfunction (Romero et al., 2015; Vacchi, 2012). Beyond the negative consequences

of not dealing with social problems and academic issues, harmful avoidant coping strategies can take the form of alcohol, tobacco, illegal drug, prescription drug, and stimulant use (Adam & Epel, 2007; Allen & Holder, 2014; Pierceall & Keim, 2007; Whiteman & Barry, 2011).

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

This study addressed the underperformance of post-9/11 student veterans in bachelor's degree programs (Cate et al., 2017). The purpose was to examine the lived experiences, academic challenges, social struggles, and the coping strategies of post-9/11 student veterans at a large, Midwestern university, during their first year of college after separating from the military. The intention was to fill a gap in the research by better understanding both the negative and positive coping responses student veterans may use when dealing with social problems and academic issues.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do post-9/11 veterans perceive their lived educational experiences during their initial (one to three) semesters of college?
2. What academic and social challenges do student veterans describe as encountering in college?
3. What coping strategies do student veterans use to reduce academic, social, and stress related difficulties?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Post 9/11 GI Bill has been used by "nearly 800,000 veterans and their families totaling more than \$12 billion" (US Department of Defense, 2019, para. 15) in the form of tuition and education-related payments. Studies have shown that the Post 9/11 GI Bill has had an immense impact on veteran college enrollment (Barr, 2015; Zhang, 2017). With an average of 200,000 service members leaving the US military annually (US Government Accountability Office, 2019), the Post 9/11 GI Bill will continue to have a large budgetary impact on the US higher education system and on service members' ability to further their post-secondary educations (American Council on Education, 2018; Sansone & Tucker Segura, 2020). In addition, changes to the Post 9/11 GI Bill have allowed service-members to transfer benefits to family members (Castleman et al., 2019).

Although a higher percentage of veterans complete some college when compared to nonveterans (National Center for Veterans Analysis & Statistics, 2011), student

veterans are less likely to complete a bachelor's degree (Cate et al., 2017), tend to have lower grade point averages (Durdella & Kim, 2012) and experience higher dropout rates during their first year of college than their nonveteran student counterparts (Cate et al., 2017). Although the negative impact of risk factors on the college persistence of nontraditional students has been recognized (Markle, 2015), dropout and completion rates indicate that student veterans have encountered experiences that negatively impact their academic progress.

EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT VETERANS

Veterans taking on the identity of a student find themselves in an environment where their experiences place them in minority status, as they enter a postsecondary environment that often does not understand them (Burke & Stets, 2009; Kirchner, 2015). Despite the massive scale of recent military actions (e.g., Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn), only 0.5% of the national population have been involved with the military (Pew Research Center, 2011). Returning veterans are often surrounded by nonveteran students, faculty, and staff who are unfamiliar with their experiences (Naphan & Elliot, 2015) and do not share a common background (Pew Research Center, 2011).

A study by Naphan and Elliot (2015) revealed that the emphasis on command structure, task, and social cohesion by the military all have a powerful and lasting effect on veterans as they transition to college. A study by Whitley et al. (2018), revealed that veterans were unfamiliar with college culture, unacquainted with student roles, tended to hide their military identities from nonmilitary peers, and reported facing challenges when transitioning to college life. Many veterans arrive at institutions struggling with role incongruities and intersecting identities, adding a layer of complexity other students do not have to contend with (Shields, 2001).

COPING MECHANISMS OF STUDENT VETERANS

For most students, stress is a part of academic life, so, students attempt to devise coping strategies to mitigate the effects of stress. Coping can be viewed as a "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Romero et al. (2015) point out the ways student veterans select a coping style is impacted by: (a) the high rates and severity of psychological symptoms among college veterans, (b) the importance military culture places on strength and independence of its service members, (c) the significance of the stigma surrounding mental illness and treatment in the military,

and (d) the reluctance to seek help from others. Avoidant coping has been associated with increased psychological symptoms of depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in student veterans (Romero et al., 2015).

Because of their shared values of strength and independence, student veterans have been found to be more likely to engage in avoidant coping strategies than their nonveteran counterparts (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Romero et al., 2015; Whiteman & Barry, 2011). Avoidant coping can result in the reluctance of student veterans to seek help, because they do not want to be viewed as dependent on anyone for support (Vacchi, 2012). When used by student veterans, avoidance coping can contribute to interpersonal problems, increasing the risk for dysfunctional behavior (Romero et al., 2015).

Gregg et al. (2016) examined the perceived coping attitudes of veterans transitioning from the US military to postsecondary education. It was revealed that differences in age and life experiences led to a communication barrier between veterans and nonveteran students. They also suggested that student veterans lean heavily on other veterans for social support and tend to socially isolate themselves from traditional student counterparts. They concluded that social isolation is indicative of an avoidant, emotion-based style of coping, but called for further studies to address the complex phenomenon of veterans transitioning from the military to postsecondary education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory has proven useful in examining the distinctive and differing characteristics of student veterans in many transition studies (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Ryan et al., 2011; McKinney, 2017). Commonly referred to as Schlossberg's 4-S Theory of Transition, the theory/model is useful in conceptualizing major life events and nonevents that can lead to change, such as getting married, becoming a parent, changing jobs, or experiencing a major illness (Schlossberg, 2011). Schlossberg's theory is applicable and is useful in analyzing the first-year college narratives of veterans, along with their use of coping mechanisms to overcome academic difficulties. Possibly the most significant element to consider in a transition is the impact of the change, and the extent to which the change alters an individual's daily life (Jenkins, 2020). A change like leaving the military for civilian life, moving across the country, and enrolling at a large state university requires a deeper and longer amount of time for adjustment than a simple job change or a move across town. By examining the differences between mil-

itary and academic culture, and the resulting challenges, Schlossberg's theory helps to make sense of a veteran's lived experiences.

The three main transition processes of the 4-S model can be defined as moving in, moving through, and moving out. When analyzing a higher education environment, the three phases can further be identified as moving into college, moving through it, and moving out (transferring, dropping out, or graduating). To successfully negotiate the individual phases, a college student must be prepared to accept change in response to letting go of old roles/responsibilities and accepting new ones (Pendleton, 2007). The 4-S transition process is broken down into coping features that are common to all transition events and nonevents but vary according to the ratio of assets and liabilities: situation, self, support, and strategies. A situation is defined as a sense of control over an event or nonevent. Self is made up of the internal skills, personal characteristics, and psychological resources that influence coping. Support is an affirmation of caring and feedback received during a transition. Strategies refer to the abilities, skills, coping responses and coping modes that make up a transitional experience.

Schlossberg's 4-S model views the coping process as a sum of assets and liabilities. Individuals that successfully deal with transitions possess more assets or have access to greater resources than those that fail to cope. Perhaps the impact of a transition is best summed up as the degree of difference between an individual's pre-transition and post-transition roles, relationships, and routines (Anderson et al., 2012). When transitioning, individuals detach from the past and move towards their new role, often vacillating between roles as they move through the process (Schlossberg, 2011).

RESEARCH DESIGN

The aim of phenomenological research is to describe social and psychological phenomenon as close to the phenomenon or lived experience as possible (Groenewald, 2004; Morse, 2011). Because phenomenology examines lived experiences from the subjective or first-person point of view, the interview becomes the primary method for data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The views expressed by the participants are generally accepted as fact as perceived by the individuals living the experience (Goulding, 2005). Phenomenology has been shown to be an appropriate methodology for interviewing student veterans, and examining their lived, conscious, and shared transition experiences (van Manen, 2014; Zuniga, 2020).

By using a phenomenological paradigm, I wanted to create an interview protocol that could depict the lived

college experiences and coping mechanisms of student veterans. I followed a semi-structured interview format that provided the opportunity to interpret the lived experiences of transitioning student veterans and to describe their coping mechanisms. Participants were asked open ended questions in one-on-one interviews. Questions followed the topics of academic problems, social challenges, coping mechanisms, and strategies that promoted college retention. I aligned the questions to Schlossberg's 4-S model, categorizing them under the 4-S subheadings (Schlossberg, 1981). I also asked preliminary questions to gather personal information, including questions on military background, grades, credit hours earned, and PTSD diagnosis.

Boyd (2001) proposed that saturation is reached using 2 to 10 participants. Creswell (1998) suggested that 10 individuals or fewer is sufficient for a phenomenological study. In all actuality for this study, a total of 10 veterans were interviewed, but one had to be excluded from the study for not meeting the criteria. In the case of this study, theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was reached and a pattern in the data was established after interviewing 9 student veterans. After data analysis was conducted, it became apparent that gathering additional information and interviewing other veterans would yield no further theoretical insights into the study's discussion of avoidance characteristics and student veterans' use of coping methods.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were post-9/11 undergraduate student veterans of any academic discipline, attending a large, primarily white, Midwestern, public research university. Participants were also discharged veterans that were first-time, undergraduate students or were transfer students, enrolled at the university between their first and third semester. This criterion was enacted to capture the new or recent lived college experiences of student veterans. No active-duty military, ROTC, or National Guard members were used for this study. Any post-9/11 veterans that had not undergone a final discharge from their branch of service were excluded.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The selected sample site institution enrolled some 61,369 students, including 46,984 undergraduate students for the 2020–2021 academic year. Ethnically and racially diverse students were listed at 23.9%, comprised of 6.9% African American, 7.5% Asian American, 5.3% Hispanic, and 0.05% American Indian/Alaskan Native. The census count of the

total amount of veterans attending the main campus in fall of 2020 was 667, with 1,083 attending all campuses. (Office of Institutional Research, 2021).

DATA COLLECTION

In phenomenological studies it is critical to select participants that have experienced the identified phenomenon. I had planned on using a combination of criterion, including snowball and maximum variation sampling to select participants. Due to a variety of factors, I only used criterion sampling to select participants that met the predefined criteria. After I received my approval/exemption letter from my university's IRB office, I reached out to the study site's office of veteran services to actively promote my study. Students that appeared to meet the criteria of being a recently enrolled post-9/11 undergraduate student veteran were sent an email invitation containing a link to my Qualtrics survey. My Qualtrics survey consisted of three questions to determine eligibility:

- Have you separated or discharged from the military?
- Are you currently on active duty, ROTC, or a member of the National Guard?
- Are you in your first, second, or third semester of study?

If students answered the eligibility questions correctly, the site automatically directed them to the informed consent page. Interested participants were given the option to complete the informed consent form and to move forward. Participants that meet the criteria and agreed to participate were contacted to set up an interview.

In May 2021, the first recruitment email containing my Qualtrics survey was sent to student veterans. Another invitation was forwarded in July 2021. A final email was sent in October 2021. Since I was focusing on student veterans in their first three terms of their academic study, a total of 402 emails were sent to student veterans that had recently enrolled. In addition, in August 2021, I was allowed to speak at the institution's student veteran orientation in front of 27 incoming veterans. All of these efforts resulted in a total of 10 student veterans consenting to interview.

Once the interview details were agreed upon, a confirmation email was sent. I interviewed a total of 10 veterans. Regrettably, one veteran had to be excluded from the survey because they were discharged from the military prior to 2001. This left me with a total of 9 qualified study participants that were included in the study. All interviews were conducted by Zoom. Interviews were audio recorded and I proofed Zoom transcripts against the audio-recordings. The corrected transcripts were member checked by send-

ing the transcripts back to the participants, asking them to review and make any corrections before the analysis of the transcripts began. Only two participants asked for some very minor modifications to be made.

DATA ANALYSIS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

I took notes during the interview sessions, and I actively focused on key phrases expressed by participants to redirect questions, allowing student veterans the opportunity to expand on their answers as we conversed. I utilized an inductive analysis approach (Thomas, 2006) to review the data and develop themes. This involved reviewing the transcripts several times, making notes, and creating headings. Meaning was given to the themes that emerged from the data (Creswell, 2012), recognizing frequently used words, phrases, themes, and direct quotes from the interviews. Next, I grouped the data by using a constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I then combined related headings into broader categories. I linked emerging themes to the research questions and to Schlossberg's 4-S's, to align the conceptual framework to the emerging themes. Lastly, I analyzed the data to determine if avoidance coping was the dominant behavior of the student veterans in the study.

Credibility in qualitative research pivots around the extent findings accurately reflect the original perspectives of participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Throughout the study I attempted to focus on the thoughts and experiences of the informants. Member checking (verifying participants transcripts) and triangulation (asking the same research questions of all the veterans) were the two strategies I used to address credibility. In terms of transferability, I maintained an audit trail by documenting my process of data collection and data analysis, allowing outside researchers the ability to replicate this study.

RESULTS

DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Nine participants between the ages of 23 and 43 years old who met the inclusion criteria and consented to the study were interviewed (See Table 1 below). Two out of the 9 interviewed veterans were women. One participant self-identified as mixed race: he described himself as White, Hebrew, and North African. Another identified as Asian Indian. The remaining 7 participants described themselves as White. Three branches of the US military were represented (i.e., Army, Air Force, Marine Corps). The Marine Corps was

PSEUDONYM	BEN	LINDA	GRANT	BRUNO	BILL	FREDRICK	IAN	MICK	RITA
Age	38	24	25	23	29	43	22	26	41
Ethnicity	White	White	White	White, Hebrew & North African	White	Asian Indian	White	White	White
Sex	Male	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female
Branch of service	Air Force	Marine Corps	Marine Corps	Army	Marine Corps & National Guard	Army	Marine Corps	Marine Corps & Naval Reserves	Air Force
Credits earned	16	16	34	27	10	6	0	0	31
Current GPA	4.0	3.89	3.2	3.3	3.7	3.95	0	0	3.6
Work	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Married	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Dependents	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Campus involvement	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No
Service-related anxiety or PTSD	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Counseling	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes

Table 1 Participant Demographics.

Note. Total number of student veterans $N = 9$.

represented by 5 participants. Seven out of the 9 (N) participants that had earned academic credit held between a 3.2 and a 4.0 GPA. For the 7 that had earned grades, (despite some early shortcomings), all displayed overall solid academic performances.

THEMES

Based on the transcribed, Zoom, and member-checked interviews, the study yielded eight emergent themes connected to the responses of the 9 study participants; however, themes one, five, seven, and eight provided the most relevant findings of the study. For the sake of brevity and focus, these four themes are described below.

Theme One: Participants Did Not Identify As Veterans—“The Military is Something I Did”

The finding that student veterans did not identify as veterans showed a strong tendency for the veterans in my study to distance themselves from their military past. Although they did not deny their veteran identities, they had, in all practical terms, moved on from the military. They were now pursuing college educations to alter their post-military career trajectories and had already renegotiated their identities as students. Bruno stated that his personal perceptions of being a veteran ended during his first semester in college. He said at that time, mentally, he became a student, and no longer considered himself to be a veteran.

Grant talked about the how the abruptness of leaving the military impacted him:

You know, one day you wake up a Marine and the next day you're done. So, you're very cut off it's not an easy transitional period, like they make it seem. My military time is something I did, not who I am, as some people make it be. Nothing against them it's, you know, just I guess with my circumstances of how my career ended and everything. I guess I have a bit of an apprehension to be involved with military related things.

Bill shared that he did not outwardly acknowledge that he was a student veteran. Nor did he seek out fellow veterans or want people to know that he was from the military unless he wanted to reveal that to them. He just wanted to come across as a confident individual.

Although 2 of the 9 student veterans willingly shared their military backgrounds with others, none of the individuals in my study displayed a tendency to hang on to their military identities after they enrolled in college. Their reasons varied, like Linda, who suggested because of her feminine, physical appearance, no one believed she was a Marine, so she rarely discussed it.

Fredrick, who had fought to stay in the Army but was medically discharged, now only identified as a student and

not a veteran. When I asked him if he would tell others of his military past, he was noticeably clear in affirming he used to be a soldier, and that part of his life was over. Fredrick voiced:

I do not allow that period to define who I am. I cut the cord completely and I'm going to start a new life and enjoy this second life. I don't want the expectations and stereotypes that go along with the label of being a veteran.

Theme Five: Absence of Relationships with Other Veterans—“I Don't Know any Veterans”

Participants showed very little interest in knowing or getting to know other student veterans. This lack of connection with other student veterans was communicated repeatedly. Ian lamented missing the camaraderie he felt with the people he served with, although he did not show an interest in becoming friends with fellow student veterans. Linda expressed that while it was hard to connect with others because of online classes during COVID-19, she simply had not met any fellow student veterans. Rita, who portrayed herself as “an old lady” at 41, was very self-conscious about being a college student at her age and felt like she did not fit in with veteran or nonveteran students, preferring to spend time with her family. Ian admitted to talking with fellow student veterans but expressed it did not go as far as making friends.

Theme Seven: Positive Coping Approaches—“Playing Rugby and Going out for a Drink.”

Three of the study participants displayed no avoidance characteristics and used positive coping methods in their approaches. They indicated that they often faced personal difficulties without resorting to avoidance techniques. Mick used a kind of reward system for himself. He would plan and work ahead to make sure he took care of any homework before the weekend and would reward himself every Saturday by playing rugby and socializing with his friends. Ian went from drinking (in the service) as a coping mechanism to now working out in a gym. He said he had learned to address problems, so they did not build up and cause a lot of stress in his life.

Participants frequently talked about positive coping activities that did not directly solve their problems but helped them deal with their problems. These self-care techniques included painting, working out, walking the dog, bike riding, reading a book, taking a nature walk, hanging out with friends, playing video games, and even sleeping. Over time, the student veterans that used these positive coping methods, increasingly gained a sense of control

over what was happening (situation) and were able to deal more effectively with differences between the military and academic culture. Rita talked about the personal rituals she employed when attending in-person classes. A few minutes before each class, she would take deep breaths and calm herself in order to “slow her brain down,” which helped her to think more productively. She also admitted to experiencing the necessity to sit in the same spot before the class fills up, “It's like I can't go in there in a full room and just sit down.” When I asked her if these techniques helped to reduce her anxiety, she expressed “They make things a little easier.”

Theme Eight: Avoidance and Negative Coping Approaches—Destructive Behaviors

Three of the 9 student veterans displayed a clear leaning towards dealing with stressful demands by using destructive avoidance methods. Bill admitted to drinking too much to deal with the loneliness he had encountered in college. Fredrick, the oldest student veteran I interviewed at 43, was also the longest serving, with 22 years in the Army. Fredrick acknowledged that he suffered from service-related PTSD and a lot of military related medical issues. Fredrick often felt anxiety while driving to campus. He talked about his coping mechanisms and habits of avoidance, drinking, and smoking. Fredrick explained: “In a nutshell, I would say that the baggage that I acquired in the military has made it difficult, and that baggage is PTSD, alcoholism, and depression.” Fredrick mentioned that certain things can activate or set off unhealthy coping behaviors, like the news report of the explosion at the Kabul airport and the death of 13 service members. He recalled, “I immediately started chain smoking and drinking.” He freely admitted to resorting to these destructive behaviors to deny or avoid dealing with the stress generated by the news report. Ultimately, reliance on avoidance methods and using unhealthy behaviors created additional stressors in his life by further aggravating his health issues and putting additional pressure on his relationships.

Bruno described his unusual coping approach of being excessively involved to avoid or minimize stressful demands. He had a habit of becoming overly involved in work, projects, and campus organizations. He said that once he got out of the military, he noticed he developed a tendency to submerge himself in his work, not allowing himself any free time. This has carried over to his behavior in college. Bruno stated:

I guess, here is where I have to admit, something negative. I bury myself in work a lot. I know that's a very toxic, very hurtful thing to do. I think, even after being in college after only like maybe a year,

my resume is like a mile long now. I think it's very destructive. I think it's harmful. It harms my sleep a lot. I think it harms a lot of my relationships. I think relationship avoidance, you know, becoming a workaholic, becoming very career driven and very focusing on myself a lot, is a double-edged sword, and mostly blame them, the military, on that.

LIMITATIONS

Because of the primary aims of the study was to explore the lived experiences of post-9/11 student veterans, generalization to a broader student population or to all student veterans, is not possible. In addition, because the research was conducted at a large, 4-year public research university in the Midwest, no claim is made that this institution is typical of other similar institutions. My study can only provide a profile of some student veterans' academic and social experiences at a large Midwestern research university, specific to when and where the study was conducted.

DISCUSSION

This study provides insight into the lived experiences of post-9/11 student veterans as they transition from the military to college life. More specifically, student veterans' use of coping methods, and how these coping methods impact their academic progress. This study clearly illustrates that the transition of veterans from the military to college is unusually complex, and that individual experiences can vary greatly. While student veterans share many characteristics with nontraditional students, it is apparent that they are a unique population. I found that when faced with academic and social challenges, student veterans were not uniform in their adoption of coping methods. My findings revealed that 3 of the 9 study participants displayed strong avoidance qualities, 3 displayed some avoidance characteristics, and the remaining 3 showed no avoidance tendencies at all.

In theme one, the findings showed that participants no longer wanted to identify as veterans. In addition, the student veterans displayed a strong tendency to distance themselves from their military pasts. Most of the student veterans in my study (7 out of the 9) no longer identified as veterans. Although they did not deny their veteran identities, they had in all practical terms moved on from the military. They were now pursuing college educations to alter their post-military career trajectories and had already renegotiated their identities. They now viewed themselves

as students not veterans. My findings also showed that seven out of the nine veterans preferred to keep their military background confidential from nonmilitary classmates. Unexpectedly, they also did not share their backgrounds with fellow student veterans. Although 2 of the 9 student veterans willingly shared their military backgrounds with others, none of the individuals in my study displayed a tendency to hang on to their military identities after they enrolled in college. These veterans ended their old set of roles, routines, and relationships once they separated from the military, and were in the moving in or moving through phase of college.

Unlike service members who returned from Vietnam, post-9/11 veterans have encountered less societal opposition and more public support. I did not expressly ask the participants in my study if they felt any sense of stigma associated with their service. In all the interviews I conducted, there was no mention of any negative or stereotypical comments directed at the student veteran participants from faculty members or from traditional college aged students. While the student veterans harbored some minor frustrations with the classroom behavior of their younger student classmates, these feelings were not antagonistic or mean spirited.

Regarding theme five, participants displayed a lack of bonding with other student veterans. The lack of relationships runs contrary to previous studies that suggest that veterans tend to lean on one another for support during their transition to college. Seven of the 9 participants (that had earned grades) were performing in a solid academic manner without peer support from other student veterans. While the lack of relationships was attributed to an indifference towards making friends with fellow veterans, the impact of COVID-19 should be considered a contributing factor because online classes were required during that period, and forming relationships was made difficult by a lack of live interactions with fellow students.

Theme seven findings confirmed that student veterans were not uniform in their approach to coping methods and instead used a combination of positive and negative approaches when faced with academic and social challenges. However, 3 of the participants displayed no avoidance characteristics and exclusively used positive coping methods in their approaches. They indicated that they often faced personal difficulties without hesitancy or resorting to avoidance methods. Furthermore, they were keen to not let stress build up and favored talking through problems with others. It is important to note that participants frequently talked about coping activities that did not directly solve problems but helped individuals deal with the problem. These self-care techniques included painting, working out

at the gym, walking the dog, bike riding, reading a book, taking a nature walk, hanging out with friends, playing video games, and even sleeping. These behaviors can be compared to positive coping behaviors such as participating in team sports, exercising, practicing religion, mental health counseling, and medication management. My findings can be further linked to comparable coping activities described in the literature review: meditation, listening to music, watching television, reading, working out, fishing, and socializing with friends.

Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory suggested that having access to assets and resources, commonly referred to as the 4 S's (support, strategies, self, and situation), can enhance an individual's ability to manage a transition. When discussing the positive coping methods and the techniques of the three participants who used self-care techniques, these student veterans showed a strong tendency to tackle problems in a positive manner. They developed effective methods (strategies) to deal with their transition from service member to student veteran by better modifying situations and controlling the meaning of problems. They often built on the skills they had acquired in the military, learning from previous mistakes. This helped them use internal resources and personal characteristics (self) in a more productive manner to cope with change. Over time they increasingly gained a sense of control over what was happening (situation) and were able to deal more effectively with differences between the military and academic culture.

As examined in theme eight, although the literature supports the contention that avoidant coping is the default coping response used by student veterans (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Romero et al., 2015). The findings of this study expanded the current literature by demonstrating that student veterans use differing levels of avoidance as well as a combination of positive and negative coping methods. Three of the 9 student veterans displayed a clear leaning towards avoidance.

My findings also indicated that 2 of the 9 student veterans that usually resorted to avoidance methods were suffering from lingering mental health issues. These participants commonly admitted to using destructive and unhealthy coping methods. The literature typifies these negative coping methods such as the overuse of alcohol, caffeine, and tobacco. I found an increased use of alcohol with veterans in the "avoidance" and "some avoidance" categories. Some participants also mentioned the use of alcohol to dampen the sense of loneliness they were experiencing in college.

By applying Schlossberg's theory (2011), I found that the veterans in my study had advanced their role change,

disassociated themselves from the military, and had mentally "moved on." These veterans ended their old set of roles, routines, and relationships once they separated from the military, and were in the moving in or moving through phase of college, depending on the number of terms they had completed.

CONCLUSION

Maladaptive methods like avoidance coping can have a significant negative impact on the higher education of student veterans. The findings illustrate that the study participants did not uniformly resort to avoidance techniques, but instead used a combination of positive and negative coping approaches when faced with academic and social challenges. Notably, 3 of the 9 student veterans exhibited a distinct penchant towards stress avoidance, 3 showed some levels of avoidance, while the remaining 3 displayed no avoidance characteristics at all. Unexpectedly, most participants in my study did not want to associate with or identify as veterans. I found that the veterans had advanced on to new student identities, disassociated themselves from the military, and had mentally moved on in their civilian transitions.

Many universities now provide role-dependent specialized services for student veterans. Correspondingly, if veterans no longer identify as veterans or are reluctant to be surrounded by other veterans, programs like veteran orientations, student veteran first-year experiences, and counseling services offered at student veteran centers might be hard to justify if individuals are unwilling to take advantage of those support mechanisms. Universities should have holistic communication strategies in place that extend help, guidance, and support to student veteran non-identifiers. If universities unwittingly create stress or anxiety for student veterans, then they are not adequately serving their needs. Institutions can benefit from this research by better understanding the varied coping methods of this unique and deserving student population.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Edward C. Fletcher of The Ohio State University.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Mark A. Fegley  orcid.org/0000-0002-5206-4095
The Ohio State University, US

REFERENCES

- Adam, T. C., & Epel, E. S.** (2007). Stress, eating and the reward system. *Physiology & Behavior*, 91(4), 449–458. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.physbeh.2007.04.011>
- Allen, J., & Holder, M. D.** (2014). Marijuana use and well-being in university students. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 15(2), 301–321. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-013-9423-1>
- American Council on Education.** (2018). *Toolkit for veteran friendly institutions*. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Veterans-Toolkit-2018.pdf>
- Anderson, M. L., Goodman, J., & Schlossberg, N. K.** (2012). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking Schlossberg's theory with practice in a diverse world* (4th ed.). Springer.
- Barr, A.** (2015). From the battlefield to the schoolyard. *Journal of Human Resources*, 50(3), 580–613. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.50.3.580>
- Boden, M. T., Bonn-Miller, M. O., Vujanovic, A. A., & Drescher, K. D.** (2012). A prospective investigation of changes in avoidant and active coping and posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms among military veterans. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment*, 34(4), 433–439. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10862-012-9293-6>
- Bonar, T. C., & Domenici, P. L.** (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: <https://doi.org/10.1080/87568225.2011.581925>
- Boyd, C. O.** (2001). Phenomenology the method. In P. L. Munhall (Ed.), *Nursing research: A qualitative perspective* (3rd. ed., pp. 93–122). Jones and Bartlett.
- Burke, P. J., & Stets, J. E.** (2009). The roots of identity theory. In *Identity theory* (pp. 18–32). Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195388275.003.0012>
- Callahan, R., & Jarrat, D.** (2014, March 4). Helping student servicemembers and veterans succeed. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 46(2), 36–41. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2014.897189>
- Castleman, B. L., Murphy, F. X., & Skimmyhorn, W. L.** (2019). Marching across generations? Education benefits and intrahousehold decision-making. *Journal of Human Capital*, 13(3), 410–433. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/704321>
- Cate, C. A., Lyon, J. S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B. Y.** (2017). *National veteran education success tracker: A report on the academic success of student veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill*. Student Veterans of America. <https://studentveterans.org/research/nvest>
- Creswell, J. W.** (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design*. Sage.
- Creswell, J. W.** (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Pearson.
- Durdella, N., & Kim, Y. K.** (2012). Understanding patterns of college outcomes among student veterans. *Journal of Studies in Education*, 2(2), 109–129. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5296/jse.v2i2.1469>
- Eisenbarth, C.** (2012). Coping profiles and psychological distress: A cluster analysis. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 14(3), 485–496.
- Folkman, S., & Lazarus, R. S.** (1985). If it changes it must be a process: A study of emotion and coping during three stages of a college examination. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 48(1), 150–170. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.48.1.150>
- Glasser, I., Powers, J. T., & Zywiak, W. H.** (2009). Military veterans at universities: A case of culture clash. *Anthropology News*, 50(5), 33–33. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1556-3502.2009.50533.x>
- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L.** (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1097/00006199-196807000-00014>
- Goulding, C.** (2005). Grounded theory, ethnography and phenomenology. *European Journal of Marketing*, 39(3/4), 294–308. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560510581782>
- Gregg, B. T., Kitzman, P. H., & Shordike, A.** (2016). Well-being and coping of student veterans readjusting into Academia: A pilot survey. *Occupational Therapy in Mental Health*, 32(1), 86–107. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0164212X.2015.1082081>
- Griffin, K. A., & Gilbert, C. K.** (2015). Better transitions for troops: An application of Schlossberg's transition framework to analyses of barriers and institutional support structures for student veterans. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 86(1), 71–97. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2015.0004>
- Groenewald, T.** (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(1), 42–55. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690400300104>
- Holahan, C. J., Moos, R. H., Holahan, C. K., Brennan, P. L., & Schutte, K. K.** (2005). Stress generation, avoidance coping, and depressive symptoms: A 10-year model. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 73(4), 658–666. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.73.4.658>
- Jenkins, K. J.** (2020). *Transition stories of student veterans* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Mississippi].
- Kirchner, M. J.** (2015). Supporting Student veteran transition to college and academic success. *Adult Learning*, 26(3), 116–123. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159515583813>

- Kirchner, M. J., Coryell, L., & Yelich Biniecki, S. M.** (2014). Promising practices for engaging student veterans. *Quality Approaches in Higher Education*, 5(1), 12–18.
- 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. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375092>
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S.** (1984). *Stress, appraisal and coping*. Springer.
- Markle, G.** (2015). Factors influencing persistence among nontraditional university students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 65(3), 267–285. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713615583085>
- McBain, L., Kim, Y. M., Cook, B. J., & Snead, K. M.** (2012). *From soldier to student II: Assessing campus programs for veterans and service members*. American Council on Education. <https://www.aascu.org/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=5505>
- McKinney, M. A.** (2017). *The transition experience of U.S. veterans from military life to higher education* [Doctoral dissertation, University of New England].
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J.** (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Morse, M.** (2011). *River experience: A phenomenological description of meaningful experiences on a wilderness river journey* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Tasmania, Hobart].
- Naphan, D., & Elliot, M.** (2015). Role exit from the military: Student veterans' perceptions of transitioning from the US Military to higher education. *The Qualitative Report*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2094>
- National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics.** (2011). *Educational attainment of veterans: 2000 to 2009*. US Department of Veterans Affairs. https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/education_FINAL.pdf
- Office of Institutional Research.** (2021). *Statistical summary 2020–2021*. The Ohio State University. www.osu.edu/osuto-day/Statistical%20Summary2020.pdf
- Pendleton, K. J.** (2007). *Using Schlossberg's transition theory to identify coping strategies of welfare recipients attending post-secondary institutions* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Louisville]. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/1110>
- Penley, J. A., Tomaka, J., & Wiebe, J. S.** (2002). The association of coping to physical and psychological health outcomes: a meta-analytic review. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 25(6), 551–603. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1020641400589>
- Pew Research Center.** (2011). *The military civilian gap: War and sacrifice in the post 9/11 era*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2011/10/veterans-report.pdf>
- Pierceall, E. A., & Keim, M. C.** (2007). Stress and coping strategies among community college students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 31(9), 703–712. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668920600866579>
- Romero, D. H., Riggs, S. A., & Ruggero, C.** (2015). Coping, family social support, and psychological symptoms among student veterans. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 62(2), 242–252. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000061>
- Rumann, C. B., & Hamrick, F. A.** (2010). Student veterans in transition: Re-enrolling after war zone deployments. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 81, 431–458. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.0.0103>
- Ryan, S. W., Carlstrom, A. H., Hughey, K. F., & Harris, B. S.** (2011). From boots to books: Applying Schlossberg's model to transitioning American veterans. *NACADA Journal*, 31(1), 55–63. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12930/0271-9517-31.1.55>
- Sansone, V. A., & Tucker Segura, J. S.** (2020). Exploring factors contributing to college success among student veteran transfers at a four-year university. *The Review of Higher Education*, 43(3), 888–916. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2020.0011>
- Schlossberg, N. K.** (1981). A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 9(2), 2–18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00110008100900202>
- Schlossberg, N. K.** (2011). The challenge of change: The transition model and its applications. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 48(4), 159–162. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1920.2011.tb01102.x>
- Shields, N.** (2001). Stress, active coping, and academic performance among persisting and nonpersisting college students. *Journal of Applied Biobehavioral Research*, 6(2), 65–81. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9861.2001.tb00107.x>
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J.** (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Strickley, V. L.** (2009). *Veterans on campus: A white paper*. Paperclip Communications.
- Thomas, D. R.** (2006). A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237–246. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748>
- US Department of Defense.** (2019, Jan. 9). *75 years of the GI bill: How transformative it's been*. <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/Features/story/Article/1727086/75-years-of-the-gi-bill-how-transformative-its-been/>
- US Government Accountability Office.** (2019). *Transitioning service members*. <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-19-438R>
- Vacchi, D. T.** (2012). Considering student veterans on the twenty-first-century college campus. *About Campus*, 17(2), 15–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/abc.21075>
- van Manen, M.** (2014). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Left Coast Press.
- Whiteman, S. D., & Barry, A. E.** (2011). A comparative analysis of student service member/veteran and civilian student drinking motives. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 48(3), 297–313. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2202/1949-6605.6322>

- Whitley, S. E., Benson, G., & Wesaw, A.** (2018). *First-generation student success: A landscape analysis of programs and services at four-year institutions*. National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.
- Young, S.** (2017). Veterans adjustment to college: Construction and validation of a scale. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 2(2), 13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.13>
- Zhang, L.** (2017). Veterans going to college: Evaluating the impact of the post-9/11 GI bill on college enrollment. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 40(1), 82–102. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373717724002>
- Zogas, A.** (2017). US military veterans' difficult transitions back to civilian life and the VA's response. *The Costs of War*. <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2017/us-military-veterans-difficult-transitions-back-civilian-life-and-va-s-response>
- Zuniga, R. M.** (2020). *Master teacher perceptions on the impact mentoring programs have on teacher retention* [Doctoral dissertation, Abilene Christian University].

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Fegley, M. A. (2024). Qualitative Study Examining the College Experiences and Coping Mechanisms of Post-9/11 Student Veterans Conducted During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 10(1), pp. 64–75. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v10i1.422>

Submitted: 23 January 2023 **Accepted:** 31 October 2023 **Published:** 21 February 2024

COPYRIGHT:

© 2024 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Journal of Veterans Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by VT Publishing.