



Student Veterans at Two-Year Institutions: A Phenomenological Study of Support Services

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of student veterans with support services at two-year higher education institutions. Using a phenomenological design, it provided space for student veterans to share their stories. Grounded in Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement, the study focused on in-depth interviews with six student veterans. The transcribed interviews were analyzed based on Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological model and Creswell's (2013) phenomenological method. The findings aligned with the theoretical framework and contributed to the literature on student veterans in higher education. Using analytic induction analysis, six key themes emerged: early preparation and planning for college, awareness and utilization of academic tutoring, peer connections with fellow veterans, understaffing of campus military-affiliated offices, awareness and utilization of disability and mental health services, and awareness and utilization of career services. These findings reinforce Astin's framework by underscoring the role of student engagement, institutional support, and meaningful involvement in promoting student success. The study offers key implications for institutional practice, which centers on institutions investing in early transition planning, providing veteran-informed faculty training, and fostering peer networks among student veterans.

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The landscape of higher education was transformed with the enactment of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the GI Bill, which was driven by the needs of returning World War II veterans seeking new skills and training (Hammond, 2017). As the GI Bill has evolved, it now helps veterans to pursue post-secondary education (Muth, 2022). In its first year, approximately 88,000 veterans utilized these benefits and attended higher education institutions, which created exponential enrollment growth for this student population on college campuses (Hammond, 2017). The increasing enrollment of veterans in higher education brings notable challenges for academic institutions and student veterans. For colleges, one of the primary challenges is identifying the unique needs of student veterans to provide adequate support services to address those needs (Morris et al., 2019). For student veterans, common challenges include navigating the transition from military service to higher education, finding a sense of belonging on campus after ending their military career, and managing service-related disabilities (Borsari et al., 2017; Horner & Brooks, 2024; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021; Ilegan et al., 2022; Shue et al., 2021). In response to these challenges, higher education institutions have developed support services tailored to the needs of this student population (Morris et al., 2019). Standard support services include Academic Advising, Career Counseling, Disability Services, and Veteran and Family Services (Lange et al., 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examined the experiences of student veterans in higher education and is guided by Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement. The review explored student veterans in college, the challenges they face as they transition from military to academic life, and the support services provided for them on college campuses. While there is substantial literature around these areas, there is an empirical gap in how student veterans engage with and utilize these support services in higher education. This review of the literature seeks to provide the context for this study and address this gap in the literature.

STUDENT VETERANS IN COLLEGE

Pursuing a college degree is an important milestone, providing opportunities to develop employment skills, acquire academic knowledge, and engage in the enriching experiences of campus life. While higher education is a positive experience for many, some students encounter substantial challenges throughout their academic journey. Among these are students from special and

underrepresented populations, such as student veterans, whose experiences are often shaped by the support they receive from their institutions. To better understand their needs, scholars have examined various aspects of student veterans' experiences, including their presence on college campuses (Cofield, 2019; Dean et al., 2020; Klaw et al., 2021), academic performance and progression (Sansone & Segura, 2020; Vacchi et al., 2017), and the barriers they encounter (Ellis, 2019; Ghosh et al., 2021; Lopez et al., 2020). In addition to these challenges, the ability of student veterans to navigate and utilize educational benefits critically influences their academic experiences. The GI Bill is a catalyst for many veterans to pursue higher education, offering financial support to ease the transition into civilian life (Muth, 2022). Over time, the GI Bill has undergone numerous revisions, shaped by shifting political climates and military conflicts arising from global events (Muth, 2022). Since its inception, this legislation has played an integral role in the lives of veterans, exerting substantial social and economic influence (Hammond, 2017; Muth, 2022).

CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENT VETERANS

Student veterans in higher education often face challenges linked to their admissions classification, challenges they share with other student groups such as first-generation students, students of color, and nontraditional learners. For instance, first-generation students may struggle with retention due to academic difficulties, while students of color and non-traditional students often report a diminished sense of belonging (Sikes et al., 2020). Student veterans most closely resemble nontraditional students, who are typically older, part-time, commuting learners with priorities centered on academics rather than campus life (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Bean & Metzner, 1985). Like nontraditional students, veterans commonly face financial burdens, family responsibilities, and social disconnection (Cofield, 2019; Mackiewicz, 2018; Newton, 2017). However, they also experience distinct challenges such as transitioning from military life, coping with service-related disabilities, and struggling academically due to inadequate support services (Ellis, 2019; Ghosh et al., 2021; Lopez et al., 2020).

Transition to Civilian Life

From enlistment, service members enter a structured, rigid environment that highlights a group mentality gradually supplanting individualistic mindsets (Ghosh et al., 2021; Pease, 2021). Despite variations in cultural backgrounds, a new identity is created through the initial military training indoctrination (Morse, 2020). Therefore, transitioning out of the military has represented one of the most notable challenges for veterans. This difficulty can be attributed to the rapid shift in their environment and the anxiety

of facing the unknown (Buzzetta et al., 2020). As service members finish their military service and embark on a new academic journey, many may feel lost and disoriented, struggling to find purpose after their military transition and adaptation to a new environment (Brohawn et al., 2023; Edwards et al., 2022).

Service-Related Disabilities

Service-related disabilities are physical or mental injuries sustained during military service, for which veterans receive compensation based on severity (Morse, 2020). While disability benefits are not new, improved documentation and access to care have made the system more effective, which is especially important given the rise in injuries linked to prolonged military conflicts. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the longest since Vietnam, lasted from 2001 to 2021 and involved the deployment of approximately 4.1 million service members, increasing veterans' exposure to injury (Morse, 2020; Pease, 2021). The literature identifies several prevalent military service-related injuries, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), amputations, burns, and both physical and mental trauma (DeCoster, 2018; Morissette et al., 2021; Pease, 2021; Sansone & Segura, 2020). These health challenges are linked to poor academic performance and heightened risks of suicide and self-harm among student veterans (Hedegaard et al., 2021; Kinney et al., 2020; Mahoney et al., 2021; Messerschmitt-Coen, 2021; Umucu et al., 2022).

Military Culture vs. Academic Culture

Another notable challenge is navigating the differences between military and civilian cultures (Atuel & Castro, 2018; Greer, 2020; Robertson & Eschenauer, 2020). From enlistment, service members enter a structured, rigid environment that highlights a group mentality gradually supplanting individualistic mindsets (Ghosh et al., 2021; Pease, 2021). Despite variations in cultural backgrounds, a new identity is created through the initial military training indoctrination (Morse, 2020). Shen and Tian (2012) describe academic culture as the outward expression of the shared values, principles, and behavioral standards of individuals engaged in learning and research within a campus community. Like any other enterprise, higher education institutions develop their own institutional culture within the higher education scope, resulting in a personal culture particular to their beliefs. As service members enter the academic environment, the differences in values, the lack of peer support, and the lack of knowledge of processes and policies can create a massive obstacle for students new to higher education institutions (Horner & Brooks, 2024; Robertson & Eschenauer, 2020).

SUPPORT SERVICES FOR VETERAN STUDENTS

Support services within higher education emerged from faculty recognizing students' need for assistance beyond classroom instruction (Carr & London, 2019). These services encompass various institutional programs, departments, and resources designed to support students academically, socially, and emotionally (Erdil, 2007; Lange et al., 2016). Over time, higher education institutions have increasingly acknowledged the critical role of support services in fostering student success, particularly among marginalized student populations. Lange et al. (2016) developed a conceptual model for support services tailored for student veterans' academic and transitional success that offers a holistic approach to delivering support services. Their method established four key support services for veteran students' academic success: academic services, career services, disability services, and family support services (Lange et al., 2016).

Other studies examining student veterans (Alzen et al., 2021; Burke, 2021; Caldwell et al., 2021; Thistlewaite, 2022) have also identified and corroborated the importance of support services within academic, career, disability, and veteran and family services, as standard practices for institutions to offer student veterans. These service areas have evolved to become a benchmark and have been the foundation for creating many services with empirical evidence that supports their positive impact on student veterans' campus performance (Lopez et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2024; Sikes et al., 2020).

Importance of Support Services

A wealth of research has examined the academic performance of student veterans to explore the factors influencing their college experiences (Kinney et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2020; Sansone & Segura, 2020; Stephenson, 2025). These studies highlight the significance of positive experiences with support services in influencing academic performance (Cofield, 2019; Lopez et al., 2020; Sansone & Segura, 2020). The success of student veterans can also be attributed to core values learned in the military, such as discipline and accountability, which motivate them to pursue their academic goals diligently (Sikes et al., 2020). Despite the challenges affecting this student population, several studies have highlighted the resilience and perseverance of the student veteran population, which are attributes that have helped them succeed on their academic journey (Robertson & Eschenauer, 2020; Sikes et al., 2020). These findings highlight the endurance and strength of character cultivated within the student veteran population, which helps overcome obstacles and contributes considerably to their academic success.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The guiding theoretical framework for this study is the theory of student involvement. Astin (1984) developed this theory to complement traditional pedagogical theories that minimize the role of students and the importance of their involvement in campus activities. Traditional pedagogical theories argue that student success is linked to variables such as subject matter, resources, and individualization of resources. Astin (1984) argued that more importance should be given to what the student does (i.e., how motivated and how much time and energy the student devotes to learning) and focus less on what the instructors or the institution can provide. Astin (1984) found that students need to be motivated, get involved, and put effort and energy into the program or class for the academic journey to be successful.

As part of his student involvement theory, Astin (1984) also introduced the input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model, which illustrates the various factors influencing student development in educational settings. Inputs are characteristics inherent to individuals before they engage with the environment. The environment represents the setting in which individuals are placed and developed. Outcomes represent the results that individuals develop following their exposure to the environment.

This theoretical framework was chosen because of its strong emphasis on the student experience. Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement not only highlights the central role of student motivation, effort, and engagement in shaping educational outcomes but also provides a structured framework for examining how individual characteristics interact with institutional environments. The I-E-O model offers a useful lens for understanding the unique traits and prior experiences that student veterans bring with them and how these shape their adjustment, involvement, and success within higher education. By centering the focus on what students do and how they engage with their learning environments, this framework grounds this study in a student-centered perspective that is especially relevant for examining the educational experiences of veterans.

While Astin's (1984) I-E-O model provides the scaffolding to examine the student services aimed at helping student veterans throughout their academic journey, there is limited literature on how they engage with and utilize these services while attending their academic institutions. To contribute to the current literature on student veterans enrolled in higher education, this phenomenological study was conducted to explore the experiences of six student veterans with support services at their two-year higher education institutions.

METHOD

This qualitative study used a phenomenological design to examine the lived experiences of student veterans with support services at their two-year higher education institutions. This methodological approach was chosen because it allows rich, in-depth conversations that center the voices of student veterans, offering detailed insights into their lived experiences with support services in higher education. By capturing these personal narratives, the study complements the understanding gained from previous research that primarily used quantitative methods to explore this topic.

PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLE

The recruitment process for participants began after obtaining approval from Georgia Southern University's Institutional Review Board (IRB # H24269). The first criterion for the sample was to select students who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces and who were currently enrolled at a two-year institution of higher education in Georgia. The second criterion stipulated that students must be 18 years or older. The participants were recruited through informal email invitations based on recommendations from higher education professionals working with student veterans. In addition, snowball sampling techniques were utilized to expand the participant pool, whereby identified participants recommended other potential individuals who met the study criteria. This process resulted in the identification of six student veterans who agreed to participate in the study. Should thematic saturation not have been reached, additional participants would have been recruited.

POSITIONALITY

We acknowledge that the role of researchers in a qualitative study is critical, as they profoundly influence the coding and thematic analysis of the data, and ultimately the overall findings of the study. The research team was led by Dr. Alejandra Miles, a military veteran currently employed as a college administrator. In her role as a college administrator, she has worked with veterans in several capacities, including serving as a military services coordinator, site coordinator, and analyst within veteran affairs. Miles conducted the interviews, transcribed the data, and drafted the initial thematic analysis of the findings. The other remaining members of the research team, Dr. Steven Tolman, Dr. Cordelia Zinskie, and Dr. Carl Sorgen, are faculty members within a college of education. They assisted and supported Miles in this data collection and analysis process. This process included peer debriefing, theme validation sessions, and reflexive dialogues.

DATA COLLECTION

The primary instrument for this study was a structured protocol designed for conducting in-depth, individual interviews. This protocol was based on a conceptual framework categorizing support services for veteran students into four areas: academic, career, disability, and veteran and family services (Lange et al., 2016). The protocol was piloted with two student veterans who did not participate in the research study to establish the validity and reliability of the questions. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted 40 to 60 minutes at a convenient time for the participant. The literature review on student veterans and support services informed the development of the interview questions for this study. Additionally, participants were provided with a supplemental handout, which described services categorized by Lange et al. (2016).

STUDY PROCEDURES

Upon approval from Georgia Southern University (IRB approval # H24269), the lead researcher emailed directors, coordinators, and other higher education professionals working with student veterans on college campuses in Georgia to seek recommendations for students to interview and begin the snowball sampling process. The researchers also sought potential participants in student events at local technical colleges per the system's requirements. The data collection period was conducted from May 2024 through November 2024. After expressing interest in the study, students underwent a screening process to determine eligibility. After selecting the participants and receiving formal consent, Zoom interviews were scheduled at a time convenient for both the participant and the lead researcher. Before beginning the interview, consent forms were reviewed with the participants to ensure clarity and understanding. Once the interview commenced, an interview protocol was sequentially followed, utilizing a list of previously designed questions. The interview protocol also allowed follow-up questions and clarification as needed. The interviews were video-recorded and transcribed using the Zoom online feature. The transcripts were manually reviewed by the research team to ensure accuracy. This process allowed the lead researcher to listen to the audio recordings multiple times and become deeply engaged in the conversations. By fostering familiarity with the transcriptions, the lead researcher was able to immerse themselves in the data, which in turn strengthened the thematic analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

The transcribed interviews were analyzed based on Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological model and Creswell's (2013) phenomenological method. Unneeded words were eliminated to ensure an easier understanding

of the data. During this reduction process, bracketing was used to identify the keywords or phrases that described the participants' lived experiences in college with regard to support services for veterans. Analytic induction analysis codes data to identify patterns and formulate potential explanations. Coding the data allowed the highlighting of significant data segments, laying the groundwork for interpretation and drawing conclusions. Horizontalization was used during the six data analysis cycles to assign equal value to the interview statements. Horizontalization, as a part of the phenomenological reduction process, entails the researcher giving equal value to all the statements made by the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Data were further analyzed through textual and structural descriptions to identify assertions and corresponding subthemes. A triangulation method identified the most common responses for each theme and subtheme. After data gathering and data analysis were completed, the themes were presented and supported by illustrative quotes from the participants. In the final step, textual and structural analysis were used to identify the overall meaning of the lived experiences of student veterans who utilize support services at their higher education institutions. This analysis was structural in establishing the meaning of the phenomenon beyond direct textual transcription (Moustakas, 1994).

TRUSTWORTHINESS

One strategy was for the lead researcher to pilot the interview protocol with a few student veterans. This ensured the validity of the interview protocol by confirming that the questions were interpreted as intended. Piloting the interview protocol ensured that the questions were straightforward, leading to answers that focused on the studied concept. The lead researcher collaborated with a methodologist throughout the development of the protocol and maintained this collaboration during the interview process, data collection, and data interpretation, thereby enhancing the study's validity and reliability. To establish credibility, member-checking was conducted with the participants in this study. This process enabled participants to review the transcription of their interviews, clarify any points, and provide additional information or corrections.

FINDINGS

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANTS

The researcher interviewed six student veterans, following Creswell's (2013) recommendation that a sample of three to 10 participants is appropriate for phenomenological research. By employing this approach, the study aimed

to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of student veterans with support services at their two-year institutions. The composite textural description (Table 1) summarizes the participants' self-disclosed demographic and student-related information, highlighting key aspects of their backgrounds, academic paths, and military associations. All participants in the study completed at least one semester at their current institution pursuing an associate degree. Although the study was open to all student veterans, all individuals who volunteered and met the inclusion criteria identified as male. As such, the final sample consisted exclusively of male student veterans who were over the age of 24. Two participants were White/Caucasian, three were Black/African American, and one was Hispanic.

EMERGENT THEMES

Analysis of data from individual interviews revealed six key themes related to student veterans' experiences with support services at their two-year institutions. These recurring themes in participants' narratives offer valuable insights into their interactions with various support services on campus. The themes (Table 2) are as follows: (1) early preparation and planning for college, (2) awareness and utilization of academic tutoring, (3) connections with fellow

student veterans, (4) understaffing of campus military service offices, (5) awareness and utilization of disability support programs, and (6) awareness and utilization of career services programs.

Early Preparation and Planning for College

Participants in this study emphasized the importance of being prepared before starting college and encouraged other veterans to do the same when transitioning into an academic setting. They highlighted the lengthy processes involved in transitioning out of the military, enrolling in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) system, and completing the necessary steps to secure educational benefits. All six participants noted that starting early and developing a plan were critical factors in achieving a smoother transition and academic success. Jimmy stated the following when starting the process of going to college:

Start early. For most [VA chapter] benefits, you don't necessarily have to start early, but for those of us that have disabilities, you definitely want to start early. You definitely want to figure out what accommodation you're going to need; you're going to [want to] figure out what schedules are going to work for you.

PSEUDONYM	RACE/ETHNICITY	DEGREE TYPE	MILITARY BRANCH
CR	Hispanic	Associate	National Guard/Army
Cuzzo	Black/African American	Associate	Army
EL	Black/African American	Associate	Army
Jay	White	Associate	Air Force
Jimmy	White	Associate	Army
Tommy	Black/African American	Associate	Army

Table 1 Individual Profiles of the Male Participants.

THEME	DEFINITION
Early preparation and planning for college	Examines participants' perceptions regarding the importance of planning ahead and initiating all necessary paperwork related to the GI Bill early, as well as the processes involved in starting college.
The impact of interactions with professors	Discusses how both positive and negative interactions with professors influence the college experiences of student veterans.
Connections with fellow student veterans	Examines the participants' perceptions of the importance of building connections with other student veterans.
Understaffing of campus military services offices	Discusses participants' experiences with the military office and how understaffing impacts the services provided.
Awareness and utilization of disability support programs	Examines participants' awareness of the services provided and highlights the underutilization of the office.
Awareness and utilization of career services programs	Discusses participants' understanding of the available services and explores the reasons for the limited use of the office.

Table 2 Emergent Themes.

Jay also shared his thoughts regarding academic services and starting college:

I'd say, get in touch before you start school and just get what you need done before you get started. Get that plan in place and give them a call before you even register. Sign up [and make an appointment]; they'll help you out and let you know. It's a straightforward and easy process. Just kind of get that initiative going even before you start and get in touch.

Participants highlighted the significance of starting the process early and creating a plan for attending school. One way they suggest doing it is by researching prospective institutions to understand the resources available to support them.

Awareness and Utilization of Academic Tutoring

Another key theme that emerged from participant responses was students' awareness of but underutilization of academic tutoring services. All participants indicated they were aware of academic tutoring services, yet they expressed different reasons for not using them. Despite this awareness, participants offered various explanations for not utilizing the services, including not needing the services, having confidence in managing the coursework independently, or being uncertain about how to use the services. The participant who utilized academic tutoring was highly satisfied with the services and results and stated, "Tutoring services...[at my institution] are second to none. The individuals that work there are very knowledgeable of [math]." This positive reflection highlights the potential benefits of academic tutoring, particularly when students are aware and open to utilizing the support.

In contrast, the five other participants, although aware of these services, expressed little motivation to engage with them. Some responses revealed uncertainty about the services available or their applicability. For instance, Jay expressed, "I haven't used tutoring or writing labs or anything else like that, [in fact], I don't know if they [my school] offer them." CR expressed, "No, [I have not used tutoring] so far. Fortunately, I haven't had to use them." While all participants were aware of the tutoring and similar academic services available, respondents did not place too much importance on these available resources. Within this theme, two subthemes emerged related to academic services: the importance of positive interactions with professors and the impact of negative interactions with professors.

Importance of positive interactions with professors.

Participants expressed that professors play a vital role in shaping the academic environment and emphasized the importance of positive interactions with faculty for achieving

academic success. Participants noted that supportive faculty members are essential for success, particularly for students balancing academic responsibilities with ongoing military commitments. This was especially important for CR, who has experienced those connections and expressed: "I have one professor currently that is a veteran. We kind of understand each other, understand each other's lingo, where we're coming from. She's very supportive." The experiences shared by CR highlight the positive impact that veteran professors and faculty members with military backgrounds can have on student veterans.

Impact of negative interactions with professors. While many student veterans had positive interactions with their professors, others expressed frustration and dissatisfaction. Two participants recounted instances where professors appeared dismissive of their military backgrounds, made insensitive comments, or failed to accommodate the unique challenges veterans face. The participants felt that certain professors held misconceptions about their experiences, which lead to biased assumptions or a lack of understanding regarding their perspectives. Cuzzo expressed the following statement:

The professors are so used to dealing with kids who have no life experience, and they're a little bit dismissive. That was one of the things that kind of bothered me. The core class is just like it's like high school all over again.

EL also experienced some negative interactions with instructors and gave the following statement:

In night school and as a fellow instructor, I think that the instruction of the curriculum is bad. The program is based [off] a national organization called the NCCER. These guys have given a guide to how things need to be done to get certified in the electrical field. However, the way that the electrical field is put together is not good. Curriculum is not good. What you get when you go to these schools is a low form of education.

These experiences highlight a greater concern among student veterans regarding the quality of instruction and the lack of understanding from faculty. Cuzzo's frustration originates from feeling dismissed due to his life experience, suggesting that some professors may not effectively engage with non-traditional students, particularly those with military backgrounds. Similarly, EL's critique of the instructional quality in his program reflects a disconnect between standardized curriculum guidelines and the actual effectiveness of classroom teaching.

Connections with Fellow Student Veterans

All participants emphasized that the most beneficial factor in ensuring academic success is the support provided by other student veterans. Although the services available varied across institutions and participants had diverse experiences, they unanimously agreed that having a support system composed of fellow student veterans is essential for academic success. Jimmy stated the following regarding the importance of talking to other veterans:

My advice would be to talk to your fellow veterans and to talk to our school certifying official. She is extremely good, knowledgeable and can definitely point the students in the correct direction as far as getting support and the aid that they need.

Cuzzo also expressed the importance of connecting with other veterans and stated the following about helping fellow veterans:

As a student, I've helped our students just with my experience and knowledge of the VA system, the Voc Rehab system, and the GI bill system. I've helped more veterans just from personal knowledge based on how I went in the service as far as ranking everything and understanding programs more.

The statements from these participants highlight the critical role that peer support plays in the success of student veterans. Cuzzo's insights demonstrate how veterans can help one another by offering guidance from navigating the VA and GI Bill systems to understanding the practicalities of military life in a civilian context.

Understaffing of Campus Military Service Offices

Military service offices are a primary resource for student veterans to process their GI Bill payments, tuition assistance, and other military-related administrative processes each semester. This office is essential for supporting veteran students; however, its structure differs by institution. All the participants emphasized the crucial role of this office in providing support; given this, the impact of understaffing on veteran students cannot be overlooked. Three out of six participants expressed dissatisfaction with their institution's understaffed Military Service office, highlighting the challenges this shortage creates. Jimmy expressed the following:

The military service center is understaffed. There's one full-time and one part-time employee, and I believe we have a population of somewhere around 700 student veterans and family members. That is a large population to serve and a very diverse

population to serve, and right now, they have very limited support in that endeavor.

The testimony from Jimmy further emphasized the strain caused by understaffed Military Service offices, highlighting how this issue negatively impacts the support that veterans and their families rely on. Another important issue this understaffing brings is the limited availability of services at satellite campus locations, which presents notable challenges for student veterans. At many institutions, essential services are centralized on the main campus, leaving veterans at satellite locations with limited or no direct access to these resources. Cuzzo offered the following statement:

A lot of veterans are in the cyber program at the Cyber Center. I got to drive all the way back to main campus to handle any issue. We need a representative down there. Somebody needs to be there for veterans so they don't have to come all the way to campus.

As he stated, the shortage of military service personnel hinders student veterans' ability to navigate essential school processes. This lack of assistance not only creates logistical difficulties but also fosters feelings of isolation and exclusion from the larger student body.

Awareness and Utilization of Disability Support Programs

While the participants did not frequently utilize support services, having them available was important and reassuring. All six participants acknowledged awareness of the support services offered by the Disability Services office; however, they reported not utilizing these resources. A common reason cited was that they did not perceive their disability as severe enough to warrant using the services. CR expressed the following: "Fortunately, my disabilities are not as much physical as anything else, so all these accommodations, as far as physical accommodations, I really don't need." Jay noted the following regarding disability services: "I never needed it [to use the services], I never needed any other accommodations, so I never had a reason to." Although many participants have not utilized Disability Services, they emphasized the importance of having these resources available and expressed appreciation for the office's existence.

Awareness and Utilization of Career Services Programs

Although participants were aware of the programs and resources available, they rarely utilized them. Four participants cited various reasons for not using these

services, including employment in federal positions, a lack of need for job assistance, or feeling it was too early in their academic journey to benefit from career support. CR stated regarding Career Services:

Currently, no, I have not done any of this [utilized Career Services]. I think it's primarily because I'm currently not looking for a job at the moment. I think that once I'm closer to finishing my education, I think I will. Maybe a year out.

Jay also stated the following about not using career services: "No, I have not used them yet. I do plan on it since I'm graduating next semester. They send out emails, but I have not used them." This suggests that while Career Services provides useful resources, their utilization among student veterans may be influenced by individual career timelines, perceived relevance, and immediate professional obligations, highlighting the need for more tailored engagement strategies to serve this population better.

DISCUSSION

EARLY PREPARATION AND PLANNING FOR COLLEGE

The theory of student involvement provides a valuable framework for understanding the relationship between early preparation and planning for college and the academic success of student veterans. Astin's theory posits that student learning and development are directly correlated with students' time and effort in their educational experiences (Astin, 1984). In this context, the theory's I-E-O model highlights how student veterans' military backgrounds influence their academic engagement and outcomes (Verlander, 2022). For military and veteran students, the "input" component includes their extensive military training and experiences, which often instill valuable traits such as discipline, maturity, resilience, self-reliance, and a strong work ethic (Verlander, 2022). These inputs uniquely shape how veteran students engage with their academic environments and respond to the institutional support available to them.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the first thematic finding of this study further illustrates how the "input" component of the I-E-O model--the values and skills developed through military service--plays a critical role in shaping student veterans' academic trajectories (Morgan, 2018). This finding emphasizes the importance of early preparation and planning for college, reinforcing how the discipline, structure, and foresight cultivated in military contexts directly contribute to student veterans'

successful transitions and ongoing academic achievement in higher education. Furthermore, this also highlights how student veterans need, seek, and may build a structured environment. Participants consistently highlighted the value of proactive planning and early preparation, a sentiment supported by existing literature on student veterans. Research has shown that service members thrive operating within a structured system guided by values such as honor, integrity, and loyalty, which translates into their academic lives as a commitment to discipline and responsibility (Messerschmitt-Coen, 2021; Morse, 2020; Sikes et al., 2020).

In addition to the "input" component, transitioning from military to academic life requires student veterans to adapt their skills to meet the demands of a civilian educational environment. Astin's (1984) concept of the *environment* component highlights how the academic setting influences students' experiences. For student veterans, supportive resources such as veteran support centers, academic advising, and peer mentorship programs are critical environmental factors that further foster their success (Lange et al., 2016; Morgan, 2018). The combination of robust internal attributes and accessible external support systems exemplifies how student veterans navigate the complexities of higher education and excel academically (Lopez et al., 2020; Mackiewicz, 2018; Sikes et al., 2020). Lastly, Astin's *output* component, which assesses the outcomes of student involvement, is also evident in the success experienced by student veterans who engage in early preparation and planning. The deliberate application of their military-acquired skills results in higher academic achievement, personal growth, and the successful attainment of educational goals. Through their commitment to structured preparation and resilience, student veterans exemplify how intentional involvement contributes to positive academic and personal development outcomes.

AWARENESS AND UTILIZATION OF ACADEMIC TUTORING

All the participants expressed an awareness of academic tutoring services available at their institutions. However, they reported choosing not to utilize these services, citing a range of personal and contextual factors. The reasons for the underutilization included time constraints, self-reliance, or uncertainty about the value of academic support. The findings are consistent with existing literature, which characterizes student veterans as resilient, self-resistant, and often reluctant to seek assistance (Edwards et al., 2022). This pattern of behavior reflects a broader cultural narrative among military-affiliated students who often view help-seeking as unnecessary or indicative of weakness, which can hinder engagement with institutional support resources (Edwards et al., 2022). Similarly, the

results align with Mackiewicz's (2018) study, which found that some student veterans consciously chose not to access academic support services, even when aware of their availability. These parallels suggest that underutilization is not solely a matter of awareness but reflects deeply rooted attitudes towards independence, perceived self-efficiency, and academic identity shaped by prior military experience (Mackiewicz, 2018; Stephenson, 2025).

THE IMPACT OF INTERACTIONS WITH PROFESSORS

Some participants emphasized the importance of positive interactions with professors and how these relationships contribute to their overall academic success. Four participants stressed that when professors demonstrated understanding, approachability, and a willingness to accommodate their unique needs, they felt more engaged and motivated to succeed academically. The findings support that positive interactions can enhance student veterans' confidence, sense of belonging, and overall academic performance (Dean et al., 2020; DeCoster, 2018).

On the other hand, two participants expressed dissatisfaction with their interactions with professors, noting that they had encountered negative experiences throughout their academic journey. These negative interactions may stem from the fundamental differences between military and academic cultures, which can challenge student veterans as they transition into higher education (Robertson & Eschenauer, 2020). The two responses support the existing literature, which suggests that cultural differences impact students' sense of belonging and cultural acclimation (Hunter-Johnson, 2020; Robertson & Eschenauer, 2020).

CONNECTING WITH FELLOW STUDENT VETERANS

Participants emphasized the importance of establishing connections and maintaining communication with fellow student veterans, highlighting that their most valuable support comes from peers who share similar experiences. They expressed a strong sense of camaraderie and pride in exchanging knowledge, offering guidance, and sharing personal experiences to facilitate their fellow veterans' transition (Ghosh et al., 2021; Hornor & Brooks, 2024; Jenner, 2019; Pease, 2021). This finding aligns with existing literature, which highlights the distinctiveness of military culture and its influence on veterans' interactions in civilian settings (Ghosh et al., 2021).

The military fosters a highly structured and hierarchical environment that emphasizes collective identity over individualism, shaping the perspectives of service members and reinforcing a deep sense of group cohesion (Ghosh

et al., 2021; Morse, 2020; Pease, 2021). Consequently, this ingrained group mentality extends into civilian life, where veterans naturally seek support within their community, reinforcing the principle that veterans are most effective in assisting one another. The tendency of student veterans not only to seek help but also to support fellow veterans aligns with existing literature, which highlights veterans' strong desire to give back to society through service (Jenner, 2019). All participants expressed pride in being a resource for other veterans, further supporting previous research on student veterans' sense of duty and mutual support (Ghosh et al., 2021; Jenner, 2019). Jenner (2019) found that veterans are driven by a desire to give back, which is often linked to their motivation for joining the military. This finding aligns with Jenner's research, as participants not only relied on one another for support but were also eager to assist fellow veterans in navigating college and VA processes.

UNDERSTAFFING OF CAMPUS MILITARY SERVICE OFFICE

The GI Bill is a crucial benefit for student veterans. It allows them to pursue higher education by covering tuition and fees, as well as providing a monthly housing allowance (Muth, 2022). These financial benefits enable many veterans to leave employment and temporarily commit to their academic journey (Mackiewicz, 2018; Starwalt, 2015). However, while the GI Bill alleviates financial burdens, it also requires that higher education institutions implement effective systems to help student veterans navigate the complexities of benefits administration and payment processing (Mackiewicz, 2018; Muth, 2022; Starwalt, 2015).

Navigating the processes required to access GI Bill benefits can be challenging, particularly when institutional support structures are insufficient (Hammac, 2019; Mackiewicz, 2018). Jenner (2019) highlighted that student veterans define success in varied ways, with many students viewing academic achievement and program completion as deeply intertwined with their ability to maximize and use their benefits strategically. Jenner noted that "[schools need to] properly attend to non-academic responsibilities and integrate local strategies of savvy benefit use to improve outcomes for student veterans" (p. 38). This perspective highlights the necessity for institutions to recognize the financial support provided through the GI Bill and ensure that administrative processes are efficient, transparent, and accessible to student veterans.

All participants echoed the literature (Brohawn et al., 2023; Mackiewicz, 2018; Starwalt, 2015) regarding the critical role of an institution's military service office. They emphasized that a well-functioning, adequately staffed

office ensures a smooth transition into higher education. Conversely, when these offices are understaffed or lack the necessary resources, veterans often face delays in receiving their benefits, which can lead to financial instability, added stress, and potential disruptions in their academic progress. This finding aligns with previous research, which suggests that institutional commitment to veteran support services impacts student veterans' academic success and overall college experience (Honor & Brooks, 2024; Jenner, 2019; Mackiewicz, 2018).

AWARENESS AND UTILIZATION OF DISABILITY SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Student veterans with disabilities face unique challenges as they transition into higher education, requiring targeted support services to ensure academic success and overall well-being (Edwards et al., 2022; Morissette et al., 2021). While the military instills resilience and self-sufficiency, these qualities may also contribute to a reluctance to seek assistance, particularly for mental health and disability-related concerns (Edwards et al., 2022). Participants in this study stated that they were aware of disability support programs, yet they did not utilize the available services.

Student veterans with disabilities often rely on peer support, community building, and altruistic healing as mechanisms for adaptation (Jenner, 2019). This sense of camaraderie and mutual aid allows them to share coping strategies, encourage one another, and foster an inclusive environment that mitigates the stigma associated with seeking assistance. However, despite the availability of institutional disability support services, many veterans remain unaware of or underutilize these resources. According to Ghosh et al. (2021), military-affiliated students are more likely to access mental health services through their institution's counseling and health centers rather than through the Department of Defense (DoD) or the VA. However, the responses from participants in this study do not support that notion, as all participants were aware of the services yet did not utilize them.

Astin's (1984) I-E-O framework provides a valuable perspective for examining the awareness and use of disability support programs among student veterans with disabilities. This model suggests that student outcomes result from the interplay between their pre-existing characteristics (inputs), their collegiate experiences (environment), and the subsequent results (outcomes; Astin, 1984). Military-affiliated students often enter higher education with resilience and self-sufficiency, which, while advantageous, can also hinder their willingness to seek disability accommodations or services. The responses from this study echoed that none of the participants were actively receiving any support services.

From the I-E-O framework perspective, the inputs encompass factors such as military training, prior experiences with adversity, and the stigma surrounding mental health and disability. These inputs shape veterans' perceptions and attitudes toward support-seeking behaviors. The collegiate environment, including institutional support programs, faculty attitudes, and peer interactions, further influences veterans' decisions. Despite institutional efforts to offer accessible support, veterans may perceive these services as unnecessary or incompatible with their self-reliant identities. As previously noted, participants frequently believed that they should manage their challenges independently, reflecting the ingrained resilience from military culture.

AWARENESS AND UTILIZATION OF CAREER SERVICES PROGRAMS

Participants in the study reported being aware of career services but had not utilized them, primarily for personal reasons. Some were already employed, while others felt they did not need job search assistance or believed it was too early in their academic journey to seek career-related support. However, the role of experienced career service professionals is especially important for student veterans, as they can help identify transferable skills, such as administrative, computer, and problem-solving competencies, that are critical for building strong résumés and easing the transition to civilian employment (Hunter-Johnson, 2020; Schlesinger et al., 2021). Without this guidance, student veterans may struggle to recognize how their military-acquired skills align with civilian job demands, potentially underestimating or overlooking strengths that could enhance their employability (Hunter-Johnson, 2020; Schlesinger et al., 2021).

Astin's I-E-O framework provides a valuable model for understanding student veterans' awareness and utilization of career services, as their career readiness is shaped by the interaction between their pre-existing characteristics (inputs) and their collegiate experiences (environment) (Astin, 1993). Military-acquired skills serve as both assets and barriers, as student veterans often exhibit self-sufficiency that may lead to underutilization of career services. This aligns with findings that participants in the study were aware of available resources but largely disengaged due to personal factors such as employment status or perceived irrelevance. Institutional factors, including faculty engagement and structured career development initiatives, influence their interaction with these services (Schlesinger et al., 2021). Integrating career support into academic experiences through faculty involvement or mandatory career development programs may encourage greater participation, align services with

the unique needs of student veterans, and improve their career transition outcomes.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR SUPPORT SERVICES

The development of the interview questions was guided by the Conceptual Model for Support Services proposed by Lange et al. (2016). This model asserts that the support services provided to student veterans should be categorized into four primary areas: Academic Support, Career Services, Disability Services, and Veteran & Family Support Services. The underlying premise of this model is that such categorization allows for a more structured and efficient approach to addressing the diverse needs of student veterans.

The findings of this study do not align with Lange et al.'s (2016) Conceptual Model for Support Services, particularly regarding disability services. Despite the model's emphasis on categorizing support services into distinct areas, none of the participants in this study reported actively receiving services from the disability services office. This discrepancy suggests that either student veterans are not utilizing these services due to a lack of awareness, perceived stigma, or accessibility barriers, or that their support needs are being met through alternative means outside of formal disability services. Additionally, this finding may indicate a potential gap in the implementation or effectiveness of disability support services within higher education institutions. Further research is needed to explore the reasons behind this lack of engagement and assess whether modifications to the model are necessary to better reflect student veterans' actual experiences and needs.

Additionally, the findings of this study do not align with Lange et al.'s (2016) model of Career Services. Although participants demonstrated an awareness of the career support resources available, they reported minimal engagement with these services. The reasons for this underutilization varied; some students indicated they were not far enough along in their academic programs to benefit from career services, while others cited personal reasons for their lack of participation. This finding raises important questions about the accessibility, timing, and perceived relevance of career services for student veterans.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings from this study suggest several implications for higher education institutions seeking to enhance the academic experiences and outcomes of student veterans. These implications are vital for faculty and administrators to consider when designing policies and programs that support the unique needs of this student population.

PROMOTING EARLY PREPARATION AND PROACTIVE PLANNING

To facilitate a seamless transition for student veterans into higher education, institutions should prioritize the development of resources and programs that provide early preparation and proactive planning. The discipline, structure, and problem-solving skills instilled through military service can be leveraged to support veterans' academic pursuits. Institutions can also incorporate comprehensive academic advising and peer mentorship programs into early preparation initiatives to further support student veterans. Academic advisors trained in military-to-civilian transitions can assist veterans to align their academic goals with career aspirations, maximize their use of GI Bill benefits, and manage course loads that meet their needs. Peer mentorship from experienced student veterans can also guide balancing coursework with personal responsibilities, adapting to different teaching styles, and utilizing campus services effectively.

FACULTY TRAINING AND AWARENESS

Two-year institutions could invest in comprehensive faculty development programs that focus on the distinct experiences of student veterans. Training faculty to recognize the challenges of military culture, including rigid hierarchical structures, deployments, and service-related disabilities, can help foster more inclusive and supportive academic environments (Robertson & Eschenauer, 2020). Additionally, guiding faculty on how to adapt classroom policies, such as offering flexible deadlines, alternative participation methods, and clear communication, can enhance the academic engagement of student veterans.

FACILITATING PEER SUPPORT NETWORKS

Establishing robust peer support networks is essential for student veterans, as these connections cultivate a sense of camaraderie, belonging, and mutual support. To promote these connections, institutions could invest in dedicated veteran resource centers, gathering spaces, or organizations that create opportunities for veterans to engage with one another, share experiences, and offer guidance. By establishing spaces specifically designed for student veterans, institutions can foster a welcoming environment that acknowledges the unique challenges faced by veterans and provide them with the necessary support to successfully navigate academic and social transitions (Barmak et al., 2023). Another effective approach to fostering peer support is structured peer mentorship programs, where more experienced veteran students mentor those newly transitioning into higher education.

ENHANCING MILITARY SERVICE OFFICE CAPACITY

The understaffing of military service offices has been identified as a barrier for veterans accessing GI Bill benefits and other essential services (Klaw et al., 2021). Many veterans face delays in receiving financial support due to inefficient processing systems and a lack of dedicated personnel to assist them, which aligns with some of the responses from this study. To address this, institutions should prioritize staffing military service offices by hiring additional personnel and providing specialized training for current staff to better support veterans in navigating their benefits. This is particularly crucial for satellite campuses, where veterans may have limited access to direct support. Streamlining the processing of GI Bill claims and ensuring the timely delivery of financial assistance are essential steps in reducing stress and allowing veterans to focus on their academic pursuits (Jenner, 2019).

RAISING AWARENESS OF CAREER SERVICES

The underutilization of career services by student veterans suggests a need for more targeted outreach. Institutions should develop strategies to increase awareness of these services, particularly for veterans who may be unaware of the services available to them. This should include targeted marketing campaigns or orientations specifically for veterans, where they are introduced to the available resources. Additionally, career services could be adapted to cater to the specific needs of student veterans by providing workshops on translating military experience into civilian job skills and assisting with identifying transferable competencies (Hunter-Johnson, 2020; Schlesinger et al., 2021). This may involve offering one-on-one career counseling, resume workshops, or job placement assistance tailored to veterans' unique skill sets.

ENCOURAGING UTILIZATION OF MENTAL HEALTH AND DISABILITY SERVICES

Encouraging veterans to utilize mental health and disability services remains a critical challenge, primarily due to the resilience that many veterans develop during their military service (Vest et al., 2024). One effective strategy for achieving this is through targeted outreach campaigns that highlight the value of seeking help and demonstrate that doing so is a sign of strength, not weakness. These campaigns should include messaging emphasizing how mental health services contribute to overall well-being and academic success, thereby reframing seeking support as a positive and empowering decision (Morris et al., 2019). In addition to outreach efforts, peer support programs have proven particularly impactful for student veterans (Barmak et al., 2023). Peer mentorship programs, where veterans mentor other veterans navigating the same challenges,

provide a powerful platform for encouraging help-seeking behavior. This form of support can be instrumental in breaking down the stigma that often surrounds mental health and disability services.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should investigate the long-term academic and career outcomes of student veterans to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how military service impacts post-secondary success. A particularly valuable area of inquiry involves examining how the skills, discipline, leadership, and adaptability acquired during military service contribute to persistence in higher education, time to degree completion, and long-term career attainment.

Furthermore, longitudinal research could assess whether veterans who engage in proactive academic planning, such as utilizing advising services, setting long-term educational goals, and developing time management strategies early in their academic careers, demonstrate higher rates of retention and graduation compared to those who experience difficulty during the initial stages of academic integration.

Additionally, further research is needed to investigate faculty perceptions of student veterans and the impact these perceptions have on teaching practices, student engagement, and classroom dynamics. While this study emphasized the beneficial effects of increased faculty awareness and professional development related to military-affiliated students, there remains a need to explore how instructors' beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes can shape the educational experiences of student veterans. Another important area for future research involves exploring the reluctance of student veterans to seek disability accommodations or mental health support services. Although military culture instills values such as resilience, independence, and stoicism, these values may inadvertently contribute to veterans' hesitation to access necessary psychological and academic support resources upon transitioning to civilian and academic life.

Lastly, while most institutions of higher education offer career services to support students' transition into the workforce, this study revealed that many student veterans are either unaware of or disengaged from these resources. This disconnect suggests a gap between the services provided and specific needs, expectations, or awareness levels of the student veteran population. Future research should investigate how career development programs can be better tailored to align the distinct career trajectories and aspirations of student veterans.

LIMITATIONS

The first limitation of this study is the small sample size. The study included only six student veterans, which constrains the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of student veterans across two-year college campuses in the Southern United States. Although the small samples are common in qualitative research, the limited number of participants restricts the extent to which these findings can be transferred to other contexts. A second limitation is that all the participants were identified as male, which prohibits the ability to explore gender-related differences in the experiences and challenges of student veterans in higher education.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the critical role of support services in promoting the academic success and well-being of student veterans at two-year institutions of higher education. Aligning with Astin's (1984) I-E-O framework, the findings demonstrate that student veterans' military backgrounds influence their engagement with institutional environments and support structures. Subsequently, there is a need for institutions to address the underutilization of these services. Consideration should be given to implementing outreach strategies to student veterans to promote their utilization of these services, provide faculty training on how to support student veterans, and establish peer mentoring programs to foster social interaction.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The qualitative interview transcripts generated and analyzed during this study are not publicly available, as the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this research and the subsequent participant written consent did not include permission to share this data outside of the research team and their ultimate dissemination of the findings through publications and presentations.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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