



Institutional Coherence in Veteran Student Experience: A Structural Complement to Transition Theory

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Research on veteran students in higher education has largely been framed through transition and student success models that emphasize individual adjustment, coping, and resilience. While these frameworks have generated important insights, phenomenological evidence suggests that many challenges experienced by veteran students persist beyond initial enrollment and are shaped by how institutional systems are organized and experienced over time. Drawing on prior qualitative research documenting veterans' lived experiences, this article advances institutional coherence as a provisional analytic construct for examining how policies, supports, administrative processes, and timelines align from the student's perspective. Institutional coherence does not assess the mere presence of services or overall effectiveness; rather, it conceptualizes the degree to which institutional components function as an integrated pathway that is intelligible and navigable. Reframing veteran experiences through this lens helps explain why high motivation and persistence may coexist with frustration, fatigue, and diminished institutional trust. By shifting analytic attention from individual transition to institutional structure, this article contributes a complementary perspective to existing models and underscores the role of institutional design in shaping cumulative educational experience. Implications for research, institutional responsibility, and broader nontraditional student populations are discussed.

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Over the past two decades, colleges and universities have enrolled substantial populations of military-affiliated students, particularly following the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, prompting expanded institutional attention to veterans' academic pathways, support structures, and campus climate (Cate, 2014; Elliott et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). This sustained presence has also drawn scholarly attention to institutional climate, belonging, and structural navigation challenges affecting veteran learners (Elliott et al., 2011). In response, higher education research has devoted substantial attention to veteran transitions, examining issues of access, persistence, mental health, academic adjustment, and belonging. Much of this work has been guided by well-established transition and student success frameworks that emphasize individual coping, resilience, and adaptation to new academic environments (Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg et al., 1995). These models have generated valuable insights and have informed a wide range of institutional practices designed to support veteran learners.

At the same time, a growing body of research suggests that prevailing transition models may be insufficient to explain the full complexity of veteran student experiences. Veterans frequently report strong educational commitment and goal clarity, yet report persistent feelings of alienation, exhaustion, and institutional friction (Barmak et al., 2023; Elliott et al., 2011; Lim et al., 2018). This apparent contradiction—academic success alongside ongoing strain—raises questions about whether the challenges faced by veteran students can be fully understood as transitional difficulties rooted primarily in individual adjustment.

Over the past decade, veteran studies scholarship has increasingly moved beyond transition-only interpretations to examine structural, cultural, and institutional forces shaping veteran student experiences. Work published in the *Journal of Veterans Studies* has interrogated deficit framings, explored institutional climate, and examined how “veteran-friendly” designations may mask deeper cultural tensions and structural contradictions (Carter et al., 2023; Moeck et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2019). This scholarship has emphasized that veteran experiences cannot be reduced to individual adjustment processes but must be situated within institutional structures that mediate opportunity, recognition, and navigation. While these contributions have significantly expanded the field's analytic scope, less attention has been given to how institutional components function cumulatively across time from the student's perspective. The present analysis builds on this shift by proposing institutional coherence as a structural lens that complements and extends these emerging conversations.

Recent qualitative scholarship has brought this tension into sharper focus, particularly studies examining veteran students' lived experiences of navigating institutional systems beyond initial enrollment (Lim et al., 2018; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Spencer & Singleton, 2026). More recent phenomenological work at two-year institutions similarly documents how support services are experienced as fragmented and unevenly coordinated, requiring veterans to independently reconcile institutional inconsistencies across offices (Miles et al., 2025). Phenomenological research examining how veterans make meaning of their entry into higher education documents experiences characterized by fragmented support systems, administrative opacity, reliance on self-advocacy, and limited institutional availability outside traditional schedules (Spencer & Singleton, 2026). Importantly, these experiences are reported not as isolated obstacles encountered early in enrollment, but as recurring features of veterans' day-to-day navigation of higher education systems. Veterans in such studies often describe succeeding academically while simultaneously expending considerable cognitive and emotional labor to compensate for institutional gaps.

These findings complicate dominant narratives of transition as a bounded period of adjustment followed by integration. Phenomenological and institutional climate research within veterans studies has similarly noted that transition is frequently described by participants as ongoing rather than episodic, with institutional friction persisting beyond initial enrollment periods (Miles et al., 2025; Morris et al., 2019). If veterans continue to encounter systemic friction well beyond initial entry, then an analytic focus on individual coping may obscure more fundamental institutional dynamics. Transition frameworks are well-suited to examining how individuals respond to change, but they are less equipped to interrogate how institutional arrangements themselves may produce or sustain misalignment for learners whose educational pathways are nonlinear.

This gap is particularly consequential given the characteristics of contemporary veteran students. National demographic data and institutional research consistently indicate that veterans are more likely than traditional undergraduates to be older, to have dependents, and to enroll part-time, conditions that heighten the impact of administrative and temporal misalignment (Barmak et al., 2023; Cate, 2014). These demographic patterns have been widely documented in empirical examinations of veteran student reintegration (Elliott et al., 2011). Many veterans are older than traditional undergraduates, balance family and employment responsibilities, and enter higher education with substantial prior learning acquired outside formal academic settings. Their trajectories often involve

interrupted enrollment, credit transfer, and navigation across multiple bureaucratic systems, conditions that prior research has shown to complicate persistence even among highly motivated adult learners (Bailey et al., 2015; Berger, 2001). In such contexts, success depends not only on personal resilience, but on the degree to which institutional policies, services, timelines, and expectations align in ways that are intelligible and navigable.

The purpose of this article is to advance a conceptual interpretation of veteran student experiences that shifts analytic attention from individual transition to institutional structure. Building on empirical insights documented in recent phenomenological research (Spencer & Singleton, 2026), this article argues that many challenges attributed to veteran transition are better understood as manifestations of institutional incoherence. The present article does not reanalyze or extend previously published empirical data; rather, it uses prior phenomenological findings as a conceptual point of departure to examine their structural implications for institutional design (Spencer & Singleton, 2026). When coherence is low, students are required to absorb complexity, reconcile inconsistencies, and develop workaround strategies in order to progress.

Importantly, this article does not seek to revise or reinterpret previously reported empirical findings, nor does it propose a replacement for existing transition theories. Rather, it aims to clarify what such findings suggest about the limits of transition-centered explanations when applied to veteran learners. By treating phenomenological evidence as indicative of broader structural patterns, this analysis contributes a conceptual lens that complements existing models while foregrounding institutional responsibility in shaping student experiences.

Reframing veteran challenges in terms of institutional coherence has several implications. First, it helps explain why high motivation and persistence do not necessarily translate into a sense of belonging or institutional trust. Second, it highlights how resilience may function less as evidence of effective support and more as an adaptive response to systemic misalignment. Finally, it suggests that improving veteran outcomes requires more than expanding services; it requires attention to how institutional components interact and accumulate across a student's academic pathway.

The argument proceeds as follows. The next section synthesizes what recent phenomenological research reveals about veterans' navigation of higher education, focusing on structural implications rather than thematic findings. The article then examines why dominant transition and student success models struggle to account for these patterns. Building on this analysis, the concept of institutional coherence is introduced as a provisional

construct for understanding how alignment—or the lack thereof—shapes veteran student experiences. The article concludes by considering implications for institutional practice and future research.

By shifting the analytic frame from transition to structure, this article seeks to contribute to ongoing conversations about equity, responsibility, and design in higher education. In doing so, it positions veteran student experiences not as exceptional cases requiring individualized accommodation, but as instructive sites for examining how higher education systems function for all learners navigating complex, nonlinear pathways.

CONTEMPORARY DEBATES IN VETERANS STUDIES AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Over the past decade, veterans studies scholarship has developed along several interrelated strands that collectively complicate transition-centered explanations of student veteran experience. First, scholars have advanced Veteran Critical Theory (VCT) as a framework for interrogating how institutional narratives, cultural positioning, and deficit framings shape veterans' experiences within higher education (Carter et al., 2023). VCT scholarship has emphasized that veteran identity is constructed within institutional contexts that simultaneously valorize military service and reproduce forms of marginalization, rendering veterans hyper-visible in some domains and invisible in others.

Second, a growing body of research has examined institutional climate and belonging, particularly at campuses with high concentrations of military-affiliated students (Morris et al., 2019). These studies demonstrate that institutional environments labeled “veteran-friendly” may still produce structural and cultural tensions that complicate veterans' sense of integration. Such findings underscore that the presence of targeted services does not necessarily translate into navigational clarity or institutional trust. Third, scholarship has increasingly documented the administrative and bureaucratic complexity veterans encounter when navigating higher education systems, particularly in relation to benefits certification, advising coordination, and cross-office communication (Dudley-Miller, 2020; Miles et al., 2025). Rather than identifying isolated service gaps, this research highlights patterned inconsistencies across institutional domains that require students to synthesize fragmented information and reconcile contradictory guidance.

Together, these strands of scholarship suggest that veteran student experiences are shaped not only by individual transition processes, but by the organization and interaction of institutional systems themselves. While

VCT foregrounds questions of power, representation, and cultural positioning, and institutional climate research emphasizes belonging and perception, less attention has been devoted to examining how institutional components align—or fail to align—across time from the student’s perspective. The present analysis builds on these ongoing conversations by proposing institutional coherence as a complementary structural lens that clarifies how administrative, temporal, and procedural arrangements collectively shape veterans’ cumulative navigation of higher education.

WHAT THE PHENOMENOLOGY REVEALS ABOUT INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE

Phenomenological research on veteran students’ transitions into higher education has contributed significantly to understanding how veterans interpret and navigate academic environments. Rather than portraying transition as a singular moment of adjustment, this body of work emphasizes the ongoing interpretive labor required as veterans move through institutional systems. When viewed collectively, these accounts point beyond individual experience toward recurring structural conditions that shape how higher education is encountered, a pattern also observed in earlier qualitative studies of student veterans’ re-enrollment and persistence (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

The use of phenomenology in this context is not incidental. Phenomenological inquiry is uniquely suited to examining institutional responsibility because it captures how policies, procedures, and expectations are lived rather than merely implemented. Quantitative assessments of veteran outcomes often focus on retention, GPA, or service utilization, metrics that may obscure the interpretive and administrative labor required to achieve those outcomes. By foregrounding lived experience, phenomenology reveals how institutional arrangements are encountered across time and how coherence—or incoherence—emerges through repeated interaction. In this sense, phenomenology functions not only as a method for describing student perception but as a diagnostic tool for examining how institutional systems operate in practice. By centering lived experience, phenomenology allows researchers to trace how institutional responsibility is distributed across policies and practices, making visible structural conditions that may otherwise remain analytically diffuse.

Recent qualitative evidence documents that veterans’ experiences are marked by persistent navigation demands that extend well beyond initial enrollment (Spencer & Singleton, 2026). These demands do not appear as discrete barriers that can be resolved through orientation or early intervention. Instead, they emerge as routine features of institutional interaction—across advising structures,

benefits administration, disability accommodations, faculty expectations, and campus services. Veterans frequently describe needing to piece together information across offices, anticipate administrative delays, and rely on personal initiative to resolve problems that are formally within institutional responsibility. Similar patterns of administrative opacity and cross-office misalignment have been documented in institutional contexts such as academic medical centers, where students with military backgrounds report difficulties navigating overlapping bureaucratic structures (Dudley-Miller, 2020).

What is notable in this body of research is not simply the presence of obstacles, but their patterned distribution. Institutional support is often available yet inconsistently accessible. Policies exist, yet their application varies across contexts and personnel. Information is provided, yet rarely in forms that accumulate into a coherent understanding of how systems operate over time. As a result, veterans are required to engage in continuous sense-making—not only about academic content, but about institutional processes themselves. These patterns complicate conventional interpretations of transition difficulty.

Veterans in phenomenological studies routinely demonstrate high levels of motivation, discipline, and academic engagement (Lim et al., 2018; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Spencer & Singleton, 2026). Many articulate clear educational goals and draw on prior military experience to structure their learning. Despite this, they report significant cognitive and emotional effort devoted to navigating institutional arrangements. The resulting tension—strong personal capacity alongside ongoing institutional friction—suggests that the source of difficulty lies not primarily in individual readiness, but in how institutional systems are organized and experienced, echoing prior findings on veteran alienation and institutional mismatch (Elliott et al., 2011).

From a structural perspective, these experiences indicate a misalignment between institutional design and the realities of nontraditional student pathways. Veterans often enter higher education with interrupted educational histories, substantial prior learning acquired outside formal academic contexts, and responsibilities that extend beyond campus boundaries. Phenomenological accounts suggest that institutional processes frequently presume linear enrollment, continuous availability during standard business hours, and familiarity with academic bureaucracy. When these assumptions do not hold, responsibility for alignment shifts to the student.

A recurring implication of this research is the centrality of self-advocacy as a compensatory mechanism. Veterans frequently describe learning how to navigate systems through trial, error, and informal networks rather than through transparent institutional guidance

(Spencer & Singleton, 2026). While self-advocacy is often framed positively within student success discourse, phenomenological evidence suggests it functions less as empowerment and more as a requirement imposed by institutional complexity (Lim et al., 2018; Miller, 2015). In such contexts, success depends on a student's capacity to absorb and manage misalignment rather than on the coherence of the system itself.

Temporal structure also emerges as a significant dimension. Institutional availability—whether offices are accessible, processes are responsive, or decisions are timely—often operates according to schedules that conflict with veterans' work, family, or caregiving responsibilities. Phenomenological accounts indicate that when institutional timelines do not align with students' lived schedules, friction accumulates. This temporal misalignment reinforces reliance on workaround strategies and further obscures institutional expectations.

Importantly, these experiences are not described as exceptional or temporary. Veterans report encountering similar navigation demands across semesters and administrative contexts. This persistence suggests that what is being documented is not a transitional lag, but a structural condition. The phenomenological emphasis on lived experience thus reveals how institutional arrangements are felt, interpreted, and negotiated over time, offering insight into system-level dynamics that are often invisible in quantitative or outcome-focused research.

These patterns point toward a central contradiction: institutions may offer numerous veteran-specific supports yet still require veterans to function as integrators of fragmented systems. Phenomenological research does not merely catalog challenges; it reveals how institutional design places ongoing interpretive and administrative labor onto students. Veterans' reported resilience and persistence, while often celebrated, may therefore mask the extent to which success is achieved through personal compensation for institutional incoherence. A scoping review of student veterans' academic outcomes and well-being similarly suggests that positive performance indicators can coexist with elevated psychological and structural strain, complicating assumptions that persistence alone reflects institutional effectiveness (Moeck et al., 2022).

This interpretation does not diminish the value of existing transition frameworks, nor does it suggest that individual coping processes are irrelevant. Rather, it underscores the need for analytic approaches capable of accounting for how institutional structures themselves shape student experience. Phenomenological evidence provides a critical vantage point for this shift, as it captures how policies, services, and expectations are encountered in practice rather than how they are intended to function.

By reading phenomenological findings through a structural lens, veteran student experiences can be understood as diagnostic of broader institutional dynamics. The challenges veterans describe are not solely about adapting to higher education; they are about navigating systems that lack alignment across functions, timelines, and responsibilities. This insight motivates the need for a conceptual framework that moves beyond transition as an individual process and toward coherence as an institutional property.

WHY EXISTING MODELS FALL SHORT

Transition theory and related student success frameworks have played a foundational role in shaping how higher education understands student adjustment, persistence, and engagement (Ryan et al., 2011; Schlossberg, 1981). These models have been particularly influential in research on adult learners and student veterans, offering structured ways to examine how individuals respond to change, mobilize resources, and adapt to new academic environments. Concepts such as coping, resilience, social support, and integration have provided valuable language for describing the challenges veterans face as they move from military service into higher education.

When considered alongside phenomenological evidence, however, the explanatory limits of these models become more apparent. Transition-oriented frameworks are primarily designed to analyze individual responses to change. Their analytic focus centers on how students interpret transitions, develop strategies, and draw upon internal and external resources. While this perspective is well-suited to understanding subjective experience, it implicitly treats institutional contexts as relatively stable backdrops rather than as dynamic systems that actively shape the difficulty of transition itself.

Student success and retention models similarly emphasize student behaviors, attitudes, and competencies. Even when institutional factors are acknowledged, they are often conceptualized as discrete inputs—services, programs, or interventions—that act upon students. This framing encourages research and practice to ask whether students are using available supports or whether additional services are needed. Less attention is given to how institutional components interact, overlap, or contradict one another from the student's point of view.

A central limitation of these approaches lies in their assumption of linear progression. Many dominant models implicitly presume that students move through higher education in relatively predictable sequences—admission, orientation, coursework, progression, and completion (Bailey et al., 2015; Schlossberg et al., 1995). For learners whose trajectories conform to these assumptions, institutional

systems may appear navigable and coherent. For veterans, however, educational pathways are often nonlinear, shaped by interrupted enrollment, credit transfer, prior learning recognition, and competing work and family obligations.

In such contexts, institutional design features that appear neutral or efficient can generate friction when encountered across time and administrative boundaries. Similar critiques have emerged in first-generation college student scholarship (e.g., [Collier & Morgan, 2008](#); [Stephens et al., 2012](#)), where researchers have noted how institutional assumptions regarding cultural capital and bureaucratic fluency shift responsibility for navigation onto students whose backgrounds diverge from dominant norms. Like veterans, first-generation students often encounter higher education as a system requiring translation and self-advocacy rather than as an integrated pathway. These parallels suggest that the patterns identified in veteran phenomenology may reflect broader structural dynamics rather than population-specific deficits.

In addition, transition and success models tend to locate difficulty at moments of entry or early adjustment. Challenges are frequently framed as temporary disruptions that diminish as students become integrated into campus life. Phenomenological research complicates this temporal framing by demonstrating that veterans continue to encounter navigation demands well beyond initial transition periods. When difficulties persist across semesters and institutional interactions, explanations centered on incomplete adjustment or insufficient coping lose analytic traction.

Another limitation concerns how institutional responsibility is conceptualized. Transition frameworks emphasize strengthening individual coping resources, while student success models often prioritize expanding services or interventions. Both approaches risk obscuring how institutional arrangements distribute cognitive, emotional, and administrative labor. When policies, timelines, and support structures are misaligned, the burden of coordination shifts to students, reflecting broader organizational patterns in which institutional arrangements shape how administrative labor is distributed ([Berger, 2001](#)). Veterans reported reliance on self-advocacy and informal problem-solving suggests that success often depends on compensating for systemic gaps rather than benefiting from coherent design.

Importantly, this critique does not imply that existing models are incorrect or obsolete. Transition theory remains a powerful tool for understanding how individuals interpret change, and student success frameworks have contributed to meaningful improvements in access and persistence. The issue is one of scope rather than validity. These models are not designed to account for how institutional complexity

accumulates across interactions or how misalignment becomes a persistent feature of student experience.

Phenomenological evidence thus exposes a mismatch between analytic focus and observed patterns. Veterans are not simply adapting to new roles; they are repeatedly navigating institutional systems that require translation, anticipation, and workaround strategies. Their experiences suggest that difficulty arises not only from the demands of transition, but from the structure of the environments into which they transition. When institutional systems operate as fragmented rather than integrated wholes, individual resilience becomes a prerequisite for progress. Recognizing this limitation creates space for conceptual development. If existing models explain how students cope within systems, there remains a need for frameworks that explain how systems themselves produce or mitigate navigation demands. Such an approach shifts attention from whether students successfully adapt to institutional expectations toward how institutional arrangements align—or fail to align—with the realities of diverse educational pathways.

In this sense, phenomenological findings do not challenge transition or student success models; they reveal what those models leave unexplained. By highlighting persistent patterns of institutional friction experienced by capable and motivated learners, veteran student experiences point toward the importance of examining coherence as an institutional property. Addressing this analytic gap requires moving beyond individual-centered explanations toward concepts capable of capturing how policies, supports, and timelines function collectively from the student's perspective.

INSTITUTIONAL COHERENCE AS A MISSING CONSTRUCT

Institutional coherence is not offered as an alternative to VCT, which has foregrounded power, representation, epistemology, and institutional culture in shaping veteran experiences within higher education ([Carter et al., 2023](#)). VCT scholarship challenges assimilationist and deficit-oriented interpretations of student veteran transition by interrogating how institutions construct veteran identity through policy discourse, programming, and symbolic recognition. In doing so, VCT exposes how narratives of resilience, discipline, and service can coexist with institutional practices that marginalize veterans' knowledge, constrain recognition of prior learning, or reproduce bureaucratic barriers under the guise of support. Rather than treating transition difficulty as a matter of individual adjustment, VCT situates veteran experience within broader systems of institutional power, illuminating how cultural positioning, belonging, and legitimacy are negotiated within higher education environments.

Institutional coherence operates at a complementary analytic level. Whereas VCT interrogates how institutional narratives and power structures shape veterans' cultural and political positioning, institutional coherence examines how administrative coordination, procedural alignment, and temporal expectations shape veterans' navigational labor across time. In other words, VCT clarifies how veterans are positioned within institutions, while institutional coherence examines how institutions are organized for navigation. Together, these lenses enable a layered structural analysis that attends both to discursive power and to bureaucratic design, strengthening rather than displacing existing theoretical work in veterans studies.

The preceding analysis suggests that many challenges attributed to veteran transition are not fully explained by individual adjustment or support utilization alone. Instead, phenomenological evidence points toward recurring patterns of institutional misalignment that shape how veterans experience higher education over time. To account for these patterns, this section introduces institutional coherence as a provisional analytic construct for examining how institutional arrangements are encountered by learners navigating complex educational pathways.

Institutional coherence refers to the degree of alignment among policies, supports, administrative processes, timelines, and expectations as they are experienced cumulatively by students, building on organizational perspectives that locate student outcomes within institutional design rather than individual behavior alone (Berger, 2001). A coherent institution is not one that is free of complexity, but one in which institutional components function in ways that are intelligible, predictable, and mutually reinforcing from the student's perspective. Coherence, in this sense, is relational rather than absolute; it emerges through interaction between institutional design and student trajectory.

This definition distinguishes institutional coherence from the mere presence of services or programs. Institutions may offer extensive supports while remaining incoherent if those supports are difficult to access, unevenly applied, or poorly integrated across offices and timeframes. From the student's vantage point, coherence is reflected in whether information accumulates meaningfully, responsibilities are clearly located, and institutional responses align with stated policies and expectations. When coherence is low, students must invest additional effort to interpret rules, anticipate procedural breakdowns, and reconcile contradictory signals.

Institutional coherence is also distinct from institutional effectiveness as it is commonly measured. Effectiveness is often assessed through aggregate outcomes such as retention, completion, or service utilization. Coherence, by contrast, concerns how institutional processes are

experienced in practice, particularly by students whose pathways do not conform to dominant assumptions of linear progression. An institution may perform well on outcome metrics while still imposing substantial navigation burdens on certain populations, particularly students whose pathways diverge from linear enrollment assumptions (Bailey et al., 2015).

Phenomenological accounts of veteran student experience suggest that institutional incoherence manifests in several interrelated ways. Empirical findings from campus-based studies further indicate that veterans frequently perceive institutional barriers not as isolated administrative errors, but as patterned features of institutional environments, particularly at campuses with high veteran enrollment concentrations (Morris et al., 2019). Policies governing advising, benefits, accommodations, and academic progression may be internally consistent within individual offices yet misaligned across institutional boundaries. Temporal expectations—such as office hours, response times, and administrative deadlines—may conflict with students' work and family obligations. Information may be available but fragmented, requiring students to synthesize guidance independently. In such contexts, institutional processes operate as parallel systems rather than as integrated pathways.

A key implication of this construct is the redistribution of responsibility. When institutional coherence is low, the burden of integration shifts to the student. Veterans must engage in ongoing self-advocacy, develop informal strategies to resolve discrepancies, and absorb the cognitive and emotional labor required to move forward. Success, therefore, becomes contingent not only on academic ability or motivation, but on a student's capacity to manage institutional complexity. This dynamic helps explain why resilience and persistence may coexist with frustration, fatigue, and diminished trust.

Importantly, institutional coherence is not presented here as a normative ideal or a comprehensive theory of higher education. Rather, it is offered as an analytic lens that complements existing transition and student success models by foregrounding institutional structure as an object of inquiry. While transition frameworks illuminate how individuals adapt to change, institutional coherence draws attention to how institutional arrangements condition the difficulty of that adaptation. This framing also allows for variation across contexts. Coherence may differ by institution, by program, or by student population, and it may fluctuate over time as students encounter different administrative domains. As such, institutional coherence is best understood as a property that can be examined, compared, and potentially improved, rather than as a fixed attribute of an institution.

By articulating institutional coherence as a construct, this article seeks to clarify what phenomenological evidence suggests but does not explicitly theorize: that persistent navigation demands experienced by veteran students are not incidental but structurally produced. Naming this dynamic provides a way to analyze how institutional systems function collectively and how responsibility for alignment is distributed between institutions and learners. The following section considers the implications of institutional coherence for veteran student success and institutional responsibility, highlighting how this lens reframes commonly celebrated indicators of resilience and persistence.

IMPLICATIONS FOR VETERAN STUDENT SUCCESS AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Reframing veteran student experiences through the lens of institutional coherence has important implications for how student success is conceptualized and pursued. Traditional approaches to veteran support often emphasize expanding services, increasing program availability, or strengthening individual coping capacities. While such efforts remain valuable, institutional coherence suggests that the effectiveness of support initiatives depends not only on their presence, but on how they align and accumulate across a student's academic pathway.

One immediate implication concerns how veteran resilience is interpreted. Persistence, adaptability, and self-advocacy are frequently cited as indicators of successful transition and effective support. From a coherence perspective, however, these qualities may also signal the extent to which veterans are required to compensate for institutional misalignment. When students must repeatedly translate policies, coordinate across offices, or anticipate administrative breakdowns, resilience functions less as evidence that systems are working and more as a response to structural demands.

Recognizing this distinction encourages institutions to examine not only whether veterans succeed, but at what cost and under what conditions. This dynamic also resonates with insights from disability studies, particularly the distinction between medical and social models of disability, which locate barriers not in individual impairment but in institutional design (Oliver, 1990). Where the medical model locates difficulty within the individual, the social model emphasizes how institutional design produces barriers that require accommodation. Similarly, a coherence perspective shifts attention from veteran adaptation toward institutional alignment, underscoring how structural features shape the effort required to participate fully in academic life.

Institutional coherence also reframes the role of veteran-specific services. Offices dedicated to veteran support are

often tasked with helping students navigate complex bureaucratic processes, including benefits certification, credit transfer, and accommodations. While these offices provide critical assistance, their necessity may itself reflect broader misalignment across institutional systems, even at institutions recognized for veteran-friendly programming (Barmak et al., 2023). A coherence-oriented approach invites institutions to consider whether responsibility for integration has been centralized in ways that leave underlying structures unchanged. Rather than positioning veteran services as intermediaries that absorb complexity, institutions might examine how policies and processes could be redesigned to reduce the need for constant mediation.

Advising structures represent another domain where coherence has practical implications. Veterans frequently interact with multiple advising systems, including academic advisors, veteran services staff, and administrative personnel. When guidance differs across these sources, students are left to reconcile conflicting information and determine which directives carry authority. Enhancing coherence in advising does not require uniformity, but it does require coordination. Clear communication channels, shared timelines, and consistent application of policies can reduce the interpretive burden placed on students and support more navigable pathways.

Temporal alignment is similarly significant. Many institutional processes operate according to schedules that presume daytime availability and uninterrupted enrollment. For veterans balancing employment, family responsibilities, and benefits requirements, misalignment between institutional timelines and lived schedules can compound stress and delay progress. Attention to coherence encourages institutions to assess not only what services are offered, but when and how they are accessible. Extending availability, clarifying response expectations, and coordinating deadlines across offices can meaningfully reduce friction without substantial resource expansion.

The concept of institutional coherence also has implications for how responsibility is distributed between students and institutions. Student success discourse often emphasizes agency, self-regulation, and help-seeking behavior. While these qualities remain important, coherence foregrounds the ways in which institutional design shapes the effort required to exercise them. When systems are fragmented, students must expend additional labor simply to identify appropriate actions. Recognizing institutional responsibility for alignment does not diminish student agency; it acknowledges that agency operates within structural conditions that can either support or constrain effective action.

Importantly, focusing on coherence shifts attention from additive solutions toward integrative ones.

Institutions often respond to identified gaps by creating new programs or services. While well-intentioned, additive approaches can inadvertently increase complexity if new components are layered onto existing systems without coordination. Organizational theory similarly cautions that layering reforms without systemic coordination can diffuse responsibility and increase administrative opacity (Birnbaum, 1988). A coherence-oriented perspective encourages institutions to examine how existing elements interact and where simplification or alignment may yield greater benefit than expansion.

Finally, institutional coherence offers a way to connect veteran student success to broader conversations about equity and design. Veterans' experiences highlight challenges faced by many nontraditional learners navigating higher education systems not designed with their trajectories in mind. By treating veteran experiences as informative rather than exceptional, institutions can use coherence as a guiding principle for improving navigability for all students whose pathways diverge from dominant assumptions. These implications suggest that improving veteran student success requires attention not only to individual support and programmatic offerings, but to how institutional systems function as integrated wholes. Institutional responsibility, from this perspective, involves reducing unnecessary complexity, clarifying expectations, and aligning processes in ways that make pathways more intelligible. Such efforts complement existing transition and student success initiatives by addressing the structural conditions that shape how those initiatives are experienced in practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

The concept of institutional coherence introduced in this article suggests several directions for future research on veteran students and, more broadly, on nontraditional learners navigating higher education systems. While phenomenological evidence provides critical insight into how institutional arrangements are experienced, additional research is needed to examine how coherence operates across contexts, populations, and institutional types, consistent with calls for organizational and systems-level analysis in higher education research (Berger, 2001).

One implication concerns the need for studies that move beyond isolated program evaluation toward analyses of how institutional components interact over time. Much existing research examines discrete supports—such as advising programs, veteran services, and transition interventions—without considering how these elements are coordinated or encountered sequentially by students. Research designs that attend to cumulative experience, rather than single points of contact, may better capture how coherence or incoherence shapes student trajectories.

Longitudinal qualitative research is particularly well suited to this task. Following veteran students across multiple semesters could illuminate how navigation demands persist, intensify, or change as students move through different institutional domains. Such work would help clarify whether coherence is experienced consistently or varies by institutional touchpoint, academic stage, or life circumstance. Longitudinal approaches could also examine how repeated exposure to institutional misalignment affects trust, engagement, and decision-making over time.

Comparative research represents another important avenue. Institutional coherence is unlikely to be uniform across institutions, programs, or policy environments. Comparative studies examining how veterans navigate institutions with differing organizational structures, advising models, or administrative arrangements could help identify features associated with greater coherence. This line of inquiry would support more nuanced understanding of how design choices influence navigability without assuming a single optimal model. Quantitative and mixed-methods research may also contribute by operationalizing aspects of institutional coherence for empirical examination. While coherence is fundamentally experiential, indicators such as policy consistency, response timelines, service integration, and clarity of responsibility could be examined in relation to student outcomes and perceptions. Mixed-methods designs, in particular, could link phenomenological insights to broader patterns, strengthening the empirical basis for institutional analysis.

The implications of institutional coherence extend beyond veteran populations, suggesting opportunities for cross-population research. Many adult learners, transfer students, first-generation students, and working students navigate similarly complex pathways. Examining coherence across these groups would help determine whether veterans' experiences reflect broader structural dynamics or population-specific interactions. Such work would also support more inclusive models of institutional design that account for diverse trajectories. Future research might also explore coherence as a dynamic rather than static property. Institutional arrangements evolve in response to policy changes, leadership transitions, and resource constraints. Studying how coherence shifts during periods of institutional change could shed light on the conditions under which alignment is strengthened or eroded. This perspective aligns with governance and organizational research that emphasizes process, discretion, and informal practices alongside formal structures.

Importantly, research on institutional coherence should remain attentive to the distinction between descriptive and normative claims. The construct is offered here as an analytic tool rather than a prescriptive

standard. Future studies can test, refine, or challenge its utility, contributing to an iterative process of conceptual development. In this way, coherence can serve as a point of dialogue across theoretical traditions rather than as a fixed explanatory framework. These research directions suggest that understanding student success requires sustained attention to institutional structure as it is lived and interpreted by students. By building on phenomenological evidence and extending analysis to organizational and system-level dynamics, future research can deepen understanding of how higher education environments support—or constrain—students navigating complex educational pathways.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that challenges commonly attributed to veteran student transition cannot be fully explained through individual-centered models of adjustment alone. While transition theory and student success frameworks have contributed substantially to understanding how veterans navigate entry into higher education, phenomenological evidence suggests that many difficulties persist beyond initial enrollment and are shaped by how institutional systems are organized and experienced over time. These patterns invite closer attention to institutional structure as an analytic focus. Building on prior qualitative research documenting veterans' lived experiences in higher education (Spencer & Singleton, 2026), this article introduced institutional coherence as a provisional construct for examining how policies, supports, timelines, and expectations function collectively from the student's perspective.

Institutional coherence does not describe the presence or absence of services, nor does it serve as a measure of institutional effectiveness. Rather, it offers a way to conceptualize how alignment—or misalignment—across institutional components shapes the effort required to navigate academic pathways. Reframing veteran experiences through this lens helps clarify why high motivation, persistence, and resilience may coexist with frustration, fatigue, and diminished trust. When institutional systems are fragmented, students must absorb the work of integration, relying on self-advocacy and informal strategies to move forward. In such contexts, success reflects not only individual capacity but also the ability to manage institutional complexity. Recognizing this dynamic shifts analytic attention from student deficits toward institutional responsibility for design and alignment.

Importantly, institutional coherence is offered here as a complementary analytic lens rather than as a replacement

for existing models. Transition frameworks remain valuable for understanding how individuals interpret and respond to change, and student success models continue to inform important institutional initiatives. Institutional coherence extends these approaches by foregrounding how institutional arrangements condition the difficulty of transition, particularly for learners navigating nonlinear pathways.

Veteran student experiences are instructive in this regard, not because they are exceptional, but because they render visible structural features that may affect many nontraditional learners navigating complex postsecondary pathways (Bailey et al., 2015).

As higher education continues to serve increasingly diverse populations with complex educational trajectories, analytic tools that account for cumulative institutional experience become increasingly important. Attending to coherence provides one such tool, offering a way to examine how institutional arrangements support or constrain student navigation over time. Beyond its descriptive utility, understanding institutional coherence as a structural property also carries normative implications. If veteran success depends in part on students' capacity to compensate for systemic misalignment, then institutions may bear responsibility for examining how design decisions distribute administrative labor. Accountability, in this sense, extends beyond providing services to ensure that institutional systems operate as integrated pathways rather than parallel bureaucracies.

Future work can refine, test, and challenge the utility of institutional coherence across contexts and populations. By treating phenomenological evidence as a starting point for conceptual development rather than an endpoint, scholars can continue to bridge empirical insight and institutional analysis. In doing so, research can contribute not only to understanding veteran student experiences but to broader conversations about responsibility, design, and equity in higher education.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

No new data were generated or analyzed for this study. The article presents a conceptual analysis drawing on previously published literature.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

This article advances a conceptual framework grounded in previously conducted qualitative research. No new data were collected for this manuscript. The original study

informing this analysis was approved by the appropriate Institutional Review Board, and all participants provided informed consent.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author is solely responsible for the conception, analysis, and writing of this manuscript.

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