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Students Veterans' Preference for On-ground Versus Online Course Formats: A Case Study at Two Midwestern Universities

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Abstract

Recently, there have been many discussions about how to meet student veterans' needs according to curricular and course formats. While national studies indicate that many student veterans enroll in online classes, questions about the nature of their preferences and requisites, especially in some university environments, remain. For instance, how do on-ground and online course formats address different student veterans' needs and desires? This article discusses a three-year, case study of student veterans' course preferences at both a comprehensive research university and a regional university, involving 42 student veterans and 59 nonveterans. Based upon results from survey data and follow-up interviews of 30 student veterans, students describe their course format preferences. Many students in our sample have a low-socioeconomic status, live in a rural location, work full-time, and have children. Moreover, despite the large number of adult learners that participants included, the majority describe themselves as having the digital proficiency necessary for engaging in online courses. Nonetheless, in this study, most students, including those of all ages, preferred traditional classes, with the student veterans reporting that the on-ground format gave them a better connection with their teacher and peers, as well as accommodating their learning style. The study's results have implications for teachers and administrators seeking information about providing course format options for student veterans.

Keywords: student veterans, combat experience, persistence factors, PTSD, TBI, traditional education courses, online and distance learning education

Introduction

Many universities, which formerly offered courses in predominantly brick and mortar spaces, now provide a more flexible environment where classes are delivered in many ways now, including face-to-face or on-ground, online, or hybrid formats. With this changing environment, there have been discussions concerning the best methods to educate and retain student veterans and dependents, who present different lifestyles and needs than many traditional student learners. For example, current discussions focus on understanding which classroom delivery methods result in the best learning outcomes for this special military-related population. For the purposes of this study, we have focused on assessing student veteran preferences and needs, as we understand that they may like one delivery method, while life events require them to enroll in classes with a different delivery format. Over a three-year timespan, we collected data from 42 student veterans and 59 nonveterans, located at either a comprehensive research university or a regional university, by asking students to participate in surveys and interviews pertaining to their course preferences. This study may assist teachers and administrators in comprehending the course preferences and needs of student veterans.

As of 2014, more than a million veterans and military service members have enrolled in college (National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), 2017), with approximately 79 percent attending public institutions (Student Veterans of America, 2014). Often characterized as "mature, motivated, and experienced" students (Navarre Cleary & Wozniak, 2013), veterans are goal-driven (Hinton, 2013) and "mission-oriented" (Hart & Thompson, 2013, p. 4) in approaching their

classwork. An estimated nearly 52 percent of student veterans finish their degrees within four or five years, a rate comparable to that of nonveteran students (VITAL, 2014).[i] Still, 62 percent of veterans are first-generation college students, as opposed to 43 percent of their nonmilitary peers, a factor that may influence the former's ability to communicate with other family members, who have attended college, in addressing its challenges (NCSL, 2017). Likewise, veterans often experience a gap of four to five years between high school and college, in contrast with the average freshman, who waits two to three months before recommencing with school (Whiteman et al., 2013). Overall, 60 percent of veterans report greater issues in acclimating themselves to campus life than do nontraditional[ii] students (Fain, 2012), and many veterans, and specifically combat veterans, report that beginning college is the "most difficult transition of all" (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 8).

Not only are many veterans attending class as full-time students, but, like other adult learners, they also often work and have families (Blaauw-Hara, 2017). Eighty-five percent of student veterans are aged 24 to 40, with only 15 percent being aged 18 to 23, as is the traditional, college-student majority. Nearly half of student veterans are married and have children (NCSL, 2017), and 42 percent work full time (American Council on Education (ACE), 2014).[iii] Additionally, some veterans, who have been deployed, especially in combat zones, return to discover that their family relationships and friendships are altered, and their career plans for post-military life remain murky (Renshaw, Rodrigues, & Jones, 2009). Of Post-9/11 veterans, 44 percent report difficulty in coming home, a rate that is 25 percent higher than in previous military eras (Pew Research, 2011). Military personnel are being deployed more often and for longer stretches than before, and a greater number with small children are being deployed. National Guard or Reserve members are called upon for involvement in conflicts more regularly (Institute of Medicine, 2013). Likewise, for 71 percent of veterans, serving in a combat zone has made readjusting to civilian life more difficult (Morin, 2011), and multiple combat tours can be especially stressful (Shea & Fishback, 2012). For some student veterans, including combat veterans, their differing life circumstances and larger world experiences cause them to feel divided from their traditional-student peers and alienated from staff and faculty (Bellafiore, 2012; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), with 84 percent of Post-9/11 veterans believing that their community does not understand matters they and their families face (Pew Research, 2011). Some student veterans present high rates of hostility, and others have numerous family issues to address (Johnson et al., 2014), and a third report feeling apathetic concerning their future outlook (Pew Research, 2011).

A small percentage of veterans, especially those who deployed and may have faced combat, are dealing with personal, psychological, and medical issues (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Rudd et al., 2011). Due to advancing technology, veterans who might have died from their injuries now live, yet suffer greater physical and psychological trauma (Johnson et al., 2014); veterans sustaining dramatic injuries are 50 percent more likely to face conflicts in entering civilian life (Pew Research, 2011). Some veterans have physical disabilities and sensory issues (RAND, 2008), and from a third to 43 percent of Post-9/11 veterans have one or more mental health diagnoses (Hosek, 2011; True, Rigg, & Butler, 2015). Many veterans have depression, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and/or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Rudd et al., 2011), and PTSD and depression are represented in greater numbers in combat veteran samples (National Center for PTSD, 2009).

However, less than 50 percent of those having a PTSD diagnosis have been treated, and only half of those, who seek treatment, receive "minimally adequate" treatment (RAND, 2008).[iv] Additionally, 39 percent of veterans suffer from alcohol abuse and three percent from drug abuse, and veteran suicide rates[v] may be as high as 8,000 annually (2008).[vi] This is what we know about veterans in general; thus, we can assume it also holds true for some veteran students.

On a related note, veterans, including student veterans, may face additional issues associated with coming from or living in rural areas. In particular, rural veterans are diagnosed with depression and PTSD at higher rates than those from more populated areas (Hudson, et al., 2014), but they may encounter greater hardships in locating and accessing Veteran Affairs (VA) services for mental and physical health conditions (Hudson et al., 2014; Spoont et al., 2011). Overall, more than 44 percent of enlistees are from rural parts of the U.S., while 30 percent of veterans live in rural areas (Gale & Heady, 2013). Still, rural veterans have less education; limited internet access; fewer job opportunities; higher poverty rates; higher disability rates, with 27 percent having at least one disability; and more health issues than urban veterans (Gale & Heady, 2013; VA, 2017).

The social, work, family, and health-related issues that student veterans face can create difficulties in their transitional process, as they attempt to locate themselves within the university and identify with fellow students (Spelman et al., 2012; Whiteman et al., 2013). Nonetheless, making a successful shift to academia is important because students, who become entrenched in a college's cultural and academic aspects, possess a greater chance of meeting learning outcomes and persisting than those who do not (Tinto, 2003). Recently, universities have revisited their missions in order to offer "as many options for learning as possible" (O'Banion, 1999, p. 13). Still, many are unable to address veterans' needs due to their growing numbers (Grossman, 2009). Moreover, universities are faced with helping a veteran population with adjustment and health issues for which staff are not trained (Boodman, 2011; Langer, 2012). As a matter for concern, first-year veterans identify a greater divide between themselves and teachers than do their peers, while combat veterans report they garner "less campus support" than others (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2010, p. 18). In order to be the most productive, nontraditional students require a supportive climate in entering college (Hays & Oxley, 1986). Given the distinctive set of "academic, health, and psychosocial stressors" affecting student veterans' outcomes (Shore et al., 2009, p. 29), colleges must continue to explore elements undergirding veterans' persistence and success rates (Horn et al., 2004). In 2012, only 25 percent of higher educational institutions could offer explanations for veterans' college withdrawal (Fain, 2012).

Today, almost three million students are involved in online degree programs, and six million enroll in one or more online course during their degree, proving online courses to be an attractive alternative (Open Education Database, 2018). Moreover, student veterans enroll in online courses often, especially active duty service members, who may have to attend to duty (NCSL, 2014).[vii] Indeed, thousands of duty standing, single parent, and even deployed members complete their college degrees annually through online education (Military.com, 2018). Service members may move from base to base or be deployed, and online courses allow them to study anywhere and anytime (Haynie, 2013). Additionally, some online programs offer more start dates than do brick and mortar ones, allowing students more flexibility (Grantham, 2016). There are benefits to online courses associated with factors based upon location; scheduling of school, work, and family activities; and learning style or preference (Kness & O'Neill, 2018). From the comfort of one's home, students can connect with their teachers and peers, who have the potential to be geographically diverse (Kumar, 2015). Meanwhile, some student veterans may not wish to enter and experience the climate of a traditional campus, from interacting with other students in person to finding the bookstore and campus offices (Kness & O'Neill, 2018; Haynie, 2013). Finally, student veterans with psychological disorders may experience difficulty in sitting in a classroom (Haynie, 2013); in an online setting they might learn additional important digital skills that will assist them in future careers (Grantham, 2016).

Nontraditional students, including veterans, often select online and hybrid courses to accommodate work and family commitments (ACE, 2014), and rural veterans may face other issues

in acclimating to college. However, do student veterans have different course format needs and preferences than nonveterans?

Literature Review

This literature review will focus on student veterans as adult learners and explore models for veteran-friendly classrooms, student veterans' course type preferences, and their outcomes upon engaging in academic coursework.

Student Veterans as Adult Learners

Universities may struggle to provide adequate support for nontraditional learners, which represents a major factor in the decline of adult learners' matriculation rates (Park & Choi, 2009). Research demonstrates that learners must perceive the coursework they are engaging as being useful (Blaauw-Hara, 2017; Kolb, Longest, & Jensen, 2013). Additionally, students need to have some choice in their preferred course format. Nontraditional students desiring traditional classes believe that they learn more in the face-to-face classroom setting than online (O'Neill & Sai, 2014). Additionally, many adult learners like having personal classroom interaction, as they perceive a traditional setting to be more immediate and efficient (Ismail, 2013). There is also evidence to conclude that nontraditional students, including veterans, benefit from a community-type mindset, according to studies conducted on cohort learning both within physical classroom (Hembrough, 2017) and online settings (Tisdell et al., 2004), the latter which we discuss in this section. Research has also shown that nontraditional students prosper when they experience a "sense of belonging" in their college environment (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017).

Besides issues affecting nontraditional students generally, there are also specific factors contributing to veterans' difficulty in transitioning to the college setting. Many veterans report uncomfortable interactions with their traditional student peer group, who may not understand or be sensitive to a veteran's background (DiRamio et al., 2008). Additionally, the flow of academic classwork differs greatly from the highly organized structure to which veterans grew accustomed during the service (Blaauw-Hara, 2017). The collective atmosphere of the military differs greatly from the individually-focused attitude in civilian life (Parham & Gordon, 2016). Moreover, those who serve in the military often incorporate that role as a central part of themselves (Jenner, 2017). Thus, for veterans to transition from their military role to a student identity, they must reshape their sense of self (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Additionally, in a study of combat-related stress' effects upon the learning outcomes of Army student veterans, various themes emerged concerning students' capacity to learn, including academic writing stress, since the participants had not attended high school in some time; sleeplessness; memory impairment; and having flashbacks, sometimes triggered by military-related course topics (Shea, 2010). Other problems that some combat veterans face include making judgments, coping under strain, understanding social cues, relating to authority, receiving constructive feedback, coming to class (Church, 2009), and managing anger, irritability, alienation, emotional numbness, and hypervigilance (Shea, 2010). Some combat student veterans are unable to finish assignments or readings or remember what they have learned or heard in class, and others have difficulty complying with the assignments' time constraints (Langer, 2012). In Shea's study, almost half of combat veterans forgot assignment due dates and could not remember how to begin an assignment, while almost a third explained that they knew what to do but could not seem to do it. Others find that they have trouble continuing with their lives or relaxing (Shea, 2010). Of combat veterans, over half believed that their deployments raised their stress level, almost a third thought that their combat experiences altered how they learned, and 11 percent felt that combat events now interfered with

their receiving of an education (2010). On average, veterans with fewer traumatic military experiences have a more positive college outcome (Carlson, 2016). However, veterans with low GPAs believe that faculty offer them less support than other students, and student veterans in general show greater stress rates than their nonveteran counterparts (Grossbard et al., 2014).

Models for Veteran-friendly Classrooms

Nontraditional students, including veterans, are adult learners (Navarre Cleary & Wozniak, 2013). According to Malcolm Knowles(1980), adult learners desire their educational experiences to be self-directed, rely on their past events and backgrounds, find interest in concepts based on an aspiration to learn about or do something, are task- and problem-centered instead of topic-driven, and demonstrate great internal motivation, descriptors that can aid them in online settings, which require students to be self-motivated, work independently, and manage their time (Tainsh, 2016). Nonetheless, veterans may experience difficulty in shifting from a structured military environment to an open academic setting (Bellafiore, 2012; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), and scholars have asked teachers to present inclusive classrooms where military-affiliated students can share their pasts (Grohowski, 2013; Leonhardy, 2009) and to undergo the training necessary to interact with a military-associated population (Hart & Thompson, 2016).

As models for facilitating student veterans' transition processes, three main programmatic approaches have been discussed. To provide students with choices, institutions offer "veteran-friendly," "veteran-focused," and "veterans-only" courses to aid military-related students' college entry (Hart & Thompson, 2016) and create an inclusive atmosphere in which the university itself becomes a space for discussing military-related topics (Hart & Thompson, 2013). Any student can enroll in veteran-friendly classes–safe spaces orchestrated to address student veterans' assets and "challenges" where the curricular theme is left to the teacher's discretion (Hart & Thompson, 2016).

Second, veteran-focused courses attract both veterans and others, including military spouses and war survivors, and may offer students choices in completing assignments, thematically and logistically. For instance, faculty may formulate coursework to allow military personnel to attend to such matters as National Guard or Reserve duty, medical visits, family events, and work duties. Additionally, veteran-friendly classes increase the level of student diversity, preclude a "deficit" model in which veterans are constructed as needing assistance for stereotypically-applied medical or psychological concerns or as requiring remediation, and allow veterans to identify themselves according to qualifiers other than military-related ones (2016). Finally, four percent of colleges promote restricted classes for veterans (Hart & Thompson, 2013), which unite a group of student veterans to eliminate the sense of alienation that they might feel on campus; create an avenue for their exploration of common, military-oriented issues; and provide a military-styled education to ease the transition (Hart & Thompson, 2016; Valentino, 2012).

Distance Education, Digital Literacy, and the Digital Divide

For nontraditional students, including veterans, there are benefits and drawbacks to taking online courses. As earlier described, online programs can provide many benefits to veterans, such as flexibility in accommodating work, family, and school and an easier transition back to the civilian realm. As a detriment to online instruction, however, perhaps the most pressing issue is the removal of the class' physicality and thereby the presence of face-to-face interaction, which some veterans report assists them in learning at a higher level. Many online courses have a heavy workload (Haynie, 2013), and students may lack accountability when the class' physical space is absent, making it more difficult to stay on task and remain motivated (Kumar, 2015). Indeed, in the military, one's schedule is regimented (Haynie, 2013). The sense of dislocation associated with online courses

may create a sense of isolation should students not reach out to the teacher and classmates (Kumar, 2015), and students may also lose the networking opportunities that happen in person (Hickey, 2015). Some veterans want the camaraderie and networking that come with student veterans groups on campus. Although some online programs offer discussion groups and mentor programs for current and former service members, these are few (Haynie, 2013). Finally, not all programs or courses are available online (Hickey, 2015), and students could face natural technological programs, both on their end, including a computer's malfunctioning, and on that of the university, such as that of a storm, that interrupt their activities (Grantham, 2016). Moreover, veterans deciding to enroll in an entirely online school can have their living stipend available through the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill cut by fifty percent (Kness & O'Neill, 2018), as well as lose the opportunity to visit the university as a new place and utilize its facilities, such as a gym (Grantham, 2016).

Online courses can provide students, including veterans, various benefits if they possess a sufficient level of digital literacy, and if the classes offer the tools students prefer. Overall, many adult-learners, including veterans, choose a self-directed path for their higher education, and as adult learners, according to Knowles's conception of "andragogy," nontraditional students can excel in online settings (Tainsh, 2016). Being digitally literate is a basic tenet of digital citizenship, with people possessing internet access (Mossberger, Tobert, & McNeal, 2007) and utilizing multiple "modalities enabled by digital tools" (O'Brien & Scharber, 2008, p. 67). Therefore, dialogues about digital literacy impact many classes' curricula. Stuart Selber has explored how "students can play a more active role in the construction and reconstruction of technological systems" (2009, p. xi). Indeed, many students identify that they like and learn more in courses with digital components (Dahlstrom et al., 2011).

In online courses, teachers must provide students with choices and flexibility as they utilize the learning management system (LMS) and course tools (Simon et al., 2014); instructors must also consider their student populations. For instance, instructors teaching rural students should consider their unique situations, as they deal with the factor of being remotely located, which may limit their access to digital technologies (Parkes et al., 2015). Moreover, with rural groups, it is important for students taking online courses to engage in collaboration as they draft essays (Eady & Woodcock, 2010) and to participate in video conferencing to connect with those from cultures having an oral tradition and a focus on community (Rao, Eady, & Edelen-Smith, 2011).

Still, some students are impacted by a digital divide, in which the population is separated by socio-economic status and technological aptitude in implementing digital technologies (Amiel, 2006). Those with lower incomes and from rural areas, as well as racial minorities, experience lower internet use-levels (U.S. Census, 2014) and lack access to digital technologies and devices at school and home (Dahlstrom et al., 2011). People having less access to digital communication forums may miss relevant information, a way to interact, or an audience for their work (Reynolds & Lewis, 1997). Like the digital divide, the participation gap denotes a divergence in digital abilities amongst groups having differing access to digital technologies (National Education Association, 2008). While discussions concerning the digital divide have been well established, regarding our study's population, they are still relevant. In surrounding university areas, which are rural, internet service may cost twice as much, be unreliable, or be unavailable. Contrarily, some students do not want to enroll in online courses, even if they have the necessary technology and digital literacy. Although such students may possess high skill levels with technology, they may not necessarily prefer to have greater technology featured in their classroom format. Moreover, online course contexts can present some students with time management problems, resulting in their failure to complete a course (Jo, Kim, & Yoon, 2015).

Scholars have described veterans' transition to the university and presented examples of veteran-affiliated curricular models located in traditional classrooms. Yet, researchers have offered minimal discourse concerning whether student veterans prefer traditional or online courses and why. This question motivated our study of the determinations involved in student veterans' decisions concerning their course-format preferences. Within our study, we investigated the course-format preferences of student veterans, some who had experienced symptoms of PTSD and TBI and who were involved in combat and were older in comparison with their nonveteran peers.

Methodology

Research Site

Defining one's institutional background and the services provided for student veterans is integral to developing veteran-accessible classes and examining their impact (see Keast, 2013; Shivers-McNair, 2014). From 2015 through 2018, we conducted our study at two Midwestern public universities, a comprehensive research one and a regional one, the latter serving the state's lowest income county. The institutions, rurally located, cater to both urban and rural populations.[viii] At both locales, some undergraduates possess first-generation,[ix] low-income backgrounds, and 28 percent are minorities, mostly Hispanic, Native American, and African-American at the comprehensive research institution, and 30 percent, Native American at the regional school. At the comprehensive research university, the freshmen retention rate is 81 percent, with almost 33 percent of students graduating within four years ("Fact Book," 2017). In turn, at the regional institution, the freshmen retention rate is 64 percent, below the national average of over 72 percent. Moreover, only a little over 11 percent of students graduate within a six-year period, and 28 percent finish at all. According to prospects at similar institutions, students should be graduating at a rate of over 39 percent (2017). Thus, at our locales, like elsewhere, some students, including veterans, face persistence issues.

As a separate issue, of students at the comprehensive research university, almost 29 percent take online classes, with approximately 50 percent of courses being offered online; and at the regional college, 58 percent of students select online courses, with approximately 75 percent of classes being offered online. At both locations, these online courses are offered either each semester or on a course rotation basis, alternating the in person and online formats, according to faculty syllabi (2017). Moreover, at both locations, students are educated about the pros and cons of face-to-face versus online or hybrid classes before making the selection through mandatory meetings with advisors before registration each semester, a college orientation course their first semester, and their completion of an orientation module before beginning any online course. Still, discussions of the distinctions among the universities' online, hybrid, and on-ground courses can become blurred, according to the course syllabi reviewed, as some on-ground classes also possess significant online components, even when they are not identified as being hybrid. For instance, in some on-ground classes, instructors post all of their course materials and utilize the discussion board and online grading features, while others do not even offer a course shell to post their syllabus and grade book.

Our state has the second highest rate of military participation per capita, providing the most National Guard members, even though the state's population is small ("Military Statistics," 2018). The comprehensive research university offers a veterans services office with a clinical social worker from the VA Hospital, peer-support specialist, and financial-aid counselors; a lounge; veteran study groups and tutoring; and a Student Veterans Association branch. It is a "military-friendly school" with a moderate veteran enrollment of just over two percent, and the university houses Army and Air Force ROTC programs. Comparably, the regional university offers financial-aid and housing counselors for student veterans. It is a "military-friendly school" with a high veteran enrollment,[x] with G.I. Bill users representing seven percent of students ("Factbook," 2017). Moreover, almost 40

percent of faculty there report having parents with military service. Both universities offer an aviation program drawing veterans, and Army and Air Force bases nearby contribute to a military presence.

Nonetheless, the regional university, from which the majority of our study's participants hail, offered no classes oriented toward student veterans before the authors arrived, and faculty and institutional partners had held few dialogues about strategies to address a military-affiliated population. To identify ways to serve military-related students, we spoke to administrators, instructors, and student veterans and surveyed the latter campus-wide. We found that some student veterans were disappointed with traditional courses since they 1) wanted veteran companionship; 2) were distracted by traditional students' texting, internet activity, and entrances and exits; 3) desired respect as adult learners with unique backgrounds; and 4) needed faculty to value their military affiliation and accommodate events surrounding their being called up or deployed. Likewise, we learned that some veterans had fallen behind in or failed courses, due to undocumented absences or incomplete assignments because they felt troubled reporting: 1) medical/counseling appointments, 2) ongoing injuries affecting their attendance, and 3) PTSD-linked episodes or military-related observance periods, such as those associated with a friend's field death.

On the other hand, we discovered that many student veterans reported problems with their online courses, too, including teachers not replying to their emails within a few days, or allowing them to make up assignments due to military activities, such as drill, or had refrained from taking them at all, as they did not feel distance education classes would meet their needs. Indeed, in order to take face-to-face courses, even when there were online sections available, most of the veterans in the study drove between an hour to an hour and a half one way to class, sometimes daily.

Research Methods

Having IRB approval, we designed our study as an instrumental case study (Cresswell, 2012). An instrumental case study offers an "opportunity to learn" (Stake, 1995, p. 6); we desired to understand more about the course preference format, traditional (or on-ground) versus online learning, of student veterans at our institutions (see Baskarada, 2014).[xi] Concerning our study's aims, we investigated whether student veterans' experiencing of PTSD (along with other determinants, including TBI or other military-related injuries, combat status, age, and desire for the companionship of other veterans in the classes), would be relevant as they made their choices concerning course format options.

A case study involves the collection of data from various sources to formulate a case description and themes (Cresswell, 2007). We gathered diverse data forms to generate results (see Yin, 2009), including surveys, documents, and interviews (Merriam, 1998). Moreover, two of the authors represented participant observers (Cresswell, 2012), teaching many students in the study. In addition to describing these authors' personal relationship to the study in the previous section ("Research Site"), we also delineate our schools' institutional contexts, the availability of services and courses for military-affiliated students, and the military-oriented student population itself as factors influencing our study's design and outcomes.

The study took place over a three-year period. At the comprehensive research university, we gathered data from students taking lower-level, elective classes that one author taught, and at the regional campus, we collected data from students campus-wide. Altogether, these students included a collection of veterans, military-affiliated students, military spouses, and nonveteran students.[xii] Our study instruments included surveys (see Appendix 1), interviews, course papers, syllabi and curriculum, and university webpages (see Yin, 2009) about services and programs available for military-affiliated students. At both institutions, we surveyed all student types. We determined the

survey items by aligning them with literature on course format preferences, including survey material from a report entitled, "Online College Students," (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2015) and an article entitled, "Predictors of Student Preference for Online Courses" (Glover & Lewis, 2013).

For students taking the survey, we asked about their course format preferences, differentiating between traditional and distance learning classes. However, the veterans and service members answered additional questions pertinent to their military status. For thirty student military members, wishing to provide additional information, we interviewed them via a semi-structured interview.

As the next step, we analyzed any course papers that the student veterans and service members had written in which they had discussed their military backgrounds and/or classroom experiences in line with our research questions in order to ascertain if these documents provided additional information (see Merriam, 1998). We evaluated forty papers written by 21 students, both male and female, with a wide range of races, majors, ages, and service branches. The paper topics to which students reacted varied, with students completing assignments about their first semester on campus, backgrounds, jobs, and families; an argument paper related to their interests or past or future career; an essay concerning the effects of psychological disorders, such as PTSD; and responses to literary and scholarly pieces about current and past wars.

To provide for flexibility and adaptation, we used a grounded theory method to collect data and identify themes in our surveys, transcripts, and documents (Strauss, 1987).[xiii] As the study continued, we searched for recurring thematic strands having "issue-relevant meaning" amongst our materials and noted, via "categorical aggregation," whether these themes would be sustained during the data collection process's entirety (Cresswell, 2007). To explore common strands in our study, we applied a thematic analysis to the data by following these steps: reading and annotating our documents, identifying themes, formulating a coding scheme, which entailed determining the themes and codes to be utilized; and coding the data (Bricki & Green, 2007) by writing codes in the documents' margins.[xiv] We developed codes connected to our research questions to define preliminary themes and findings, and two authors coded each dataset to create internal consistency. In all areas, correlation coefficients used to assess inter-rater reliability within the dataset ranged from good to adequate.

Utilizing existing literature on our subject, and the themes generated during our study, we orchestrated an analytical framework[xv] to assemble the data and render a storyline (Yin, 2009). Lastly, we evaluated the data relating to the study's setting, participants, and chronology to procure a description of the case's details (Cresswell, 2007) as linked to our main research question regarding what type of course format combat veterans would most prefer and benefit from.

To offer credibility to the study's claims, we immersed ourselves in prolonged field engagement (Cresswell, 2012), by considering our research questions over a long period, and offered thick descriptions of military-affiliated students' backgrounds in order to lend our study a sense of reality for readers (Cresswell & Miller, 2000). We also created a triangulation of data by utilizing numerous data types and various methods to validate the emerging findings of our study.

Sample Demographics

This study focused on full-time students, with 42 veterans and service members, 11 veteran spouses, and 48 nonveteran students participants. The 42 veterans and service members ranged in age from 21 to 67, with an average age of 36 years.[xvi] More men (n = 33; 79 percent) than women (n = 3; seven percent) participated, replicating the military's demographics for gender. Most military branches were represented in the study, with 26 in the Army (62 percent). Caucasian students (n = 22; 52 percent) with a military background represented the majority, with Native Americans (n = 12;

29 percent) ranking second. By race, veterans' demographic patterns matched those of the university and surrounding community. Twenty-five (60 percent) of the veterans reported earning a combined household income of less than $30,000 a year, with an average of three people living in the home. Finally, 19 veterans (forty-five percent) were married, 12 (35 percent) had children, and 15 (36 percent) reported having full-time employment, with these factors being comparable to those for the NCSL and ACE. In the study, student veterans from many disciplines participated, including business, aviation, safety, criminal justice, and psychology.

Of participants, 31 veterans (74 percent) had served in combat. Of those with combat experience, 20 veterans (65 percent) also reported a PTSD diagnosis. Three of the veterans, who did not experience direct combat, also reported PTSD. Additionally, 21 (50 percent) reported more than one tour of duty. Students still on active duty did not participate in the study, but National Guard and Reserve members did. The veterans reported an average of seven years in the service, with an average of three deployments. Moreover, 32 veterans had PTSD, sixteen had TBI, seven had sleep difficulties, ten reported anxiety issues, eight reported depression, six reported combat injuries, six reported non-combat issues, six reported being on disability benefits, three reported sexual assault while deployed, two reported previous suicidality (not current), and five had hearing difficulties. See Table 1 for all students' demographic traits.

Table 1. Veteran and Service Member and Nonveteran Students' Demographic Characteristics

N=42 Veterans and Service Member Students | *N*=11 Military Spouses | *N*=48 Nonveteran Students

	Veterans and Service Members	Military Spouses	Nonveterans
Military Branch	Army, *n* = 26; Marine, *n* = 8; Navy, *n* = 5; Air Force, *n* = 4. Combat veteran, *n* = 31	N/A	N/A
Sex	Men, *n* = 39; Women, *n* = 3	Women, *n* = 11	Men, *n* = 17; Women, *n* = 30; missing data, *n* = 1
Race	Caucasian, *n* = 22; Native American, *n* = 18; Hispanic/Latino, *n* = 2; Asian, *n* = 1; missing, *n* = 5	Caucasian, *n* = 7; Native American, *n* = 3; missing, *n* = 1	Caucasian, *n* = 29; Native American, *n* = 12; African-American, *n* = 2; Hispanic/Latino, *n* = 4; mixed, *n* = 1
Married	Married, *n* = 19; Single, *n* = 9; Divorced/separated, *n* = 14	Married, *n* = 5; Single, *n* = 5; Divorced/separated, *n* = 1	Married, *n* = 9; Single, *n* = 37; Divorced/separated, *n* = 2
Children	*n* = 12 reported one or more children in the home	*n* = 2 reported one or more children	*n* = 9 reported one or more children
Age	18-24, *n* = 4; 25-34, *n* = 15; 35-44, *n* = 15; 45-54, *n* = 3; missing, *n* = 5	18-24, *n* = 8; 25-34, *n* = 1; 35-44, *n* = 2	18-24, *n* = 37; 25-34, *n* = 8; 35-44, *n* = 2; ≥ 45, *n* = 0

PTSD Diagnosis	*n* = 32	*n* = 0	*n* = 2
TBI	*n* = 16	*n* = 0	*n* = 1, sports related injury
Works at Least 20 Hours Weekly	*n* = 30; Veteran students who did not report working, *n* = 12	*n* = 8; spouses who did not report working, *n* = 3	*n* = 15; Nonveterans who did not report working, *n* = 11
Higher Institution Type	Comprehensive research university, *n* = 2; Regional university, *n* = 40	Comprehensive research university, *n* = 1; Regional university, *n* = 10	Comprehensive research university, *n* = 7; Regional university, *n* = 41
Major	Business, *n* = 7; Aviation, *n* = 5; Safety, *n* = 4; Criminal Justice, *n* = 8; Psychology, *n* = 8; Education, *n* = 4; English, *n* = 2; undecided, *n* = 4	Business, *n* = 2; Aviation, *n* = 1; Criminal Justice, *n* = 1; Psychology, *n* = 3; Education, *n* = 1; English, *n* = 1; undecided, *n* = 2	Business, *n* = 27; Aviation, *n* = 1; Criminal Justice, *n* = 1; Psychology, *n* = 1; Education, *n* = 8; English, *n* = 2; Journalism, *n* = 2, Chemistry, *n* = 2, Fisheries and Wildlife, *n* = 2, Undecided, *n* = 2

Veteran Versus Nonveteran Course Preferences

We analyzed the survey data that included 101 adult students attending two diverse institutions. First, we wanted to see if the veterans were selecting a preference for traditional, online, or a mixture of course delivery methods when compared to nonveteran students. (Due to a dearth of research on military spouses' course format preferences, we also included a small group of spouses in order to make an exploratory analysis.) Using SPSS 23.0 software, we chose a Pearson Chi-square analysis to compare whether veteran status (military student = 1, military spouse = 2, nonveteran = 3) and course delivery method (traditional = 1, online = 2, both = 3) were related. A statistically significant relationship was found, X^2 (12) = 32.10, $p < .001$. Results suggest that military-affiliated students have a preference for traditional or on-ground classroom settings, whereas the nonveteran students were more likely to desire an online format. Refer to Table 2 for percentages.

Table 2. Chi-square Results for Traditional Versus Online Course Delivery Preferences

N=42 Veterans and Service Member Students | *N*=11 Military Spouses | *N*=48 Nonveteran Students

Note. *N*=101. *N* denotes sample size, X^2 = Chi-square

Group	Traditional *N* (%)	Online *N* (%)	Both *N* (%)	Missing *N* (%)	Total *N* (%)	X^2	*p*-value
Military service	**32 (76%)**	6 (14)	4 (9)	0	42 (41%)	39.91	< .001
Military spouse	**7 (64%)**	2 (18)	1 (9)	1	11 (11%)		
Civilian	14 (29%)	**29 (60)**	5 (10)	0	48 (48%)		
Total (%)	53 (52%)	37 (37)	10 (10)	1 (1)	101 (100)		

Course Preferences When Considering PTSD

Based on previous research (see Church, 2009; Shea, 2010), we evaluated the course preferences between all students with and without a diagnosis of PTSD. We chose a Pearson Chi-square analysis to compare whether a self-reported diagnosis of PTSD resulted in differences in course delivery method preference. We compared those with self-reported PTSD diagnosis (PTSD = 1, No PTSD diagnosis = 2) and course-delivery-method preferences (traditional = 1, online = 2, both = 3) to determine if they were related. We failed to achieve a statistically significant relationship, X^2 (3) = 7.31, $p > .05$. However, the students having PTSD were more likely to prefer a traditional classroom setting, in comparison to those without it, who preferred a range of course delivery methods. Refer to Table 3 for percentages.

Table 3. Chi-square Results for Traditional versus Online Course Delivery Preferences

N= 42 Veterans and Service Member Students | *N*=11 Military Spouses | *N*=48 Nonveteran Students

Note. *N*=101. *N* denotes sample size, X^2 = Chi-square

Group	Traditional *N* (%)	Online *N* (%)	Both *N* (%)	Missing *N* (%)	Total *N* (%)	X^2	*p*-value
PTSD Diagnosis	**20 (77%)**	5 (19)	4 (15)	0	26 (26%)	7.31	NS
No PTSD	***33 (44%)***	***32 (43)***	6 (8)	1	75 (74%)		
Total (%)	53 (52%)	37 (37)	10 (10)	1 (1)	101 (100)		

Course Preferences When Considering PTSD and Military Affiliation

Based on the previous analysis, we evaluated course preferences on a deeper level by focusing on course preferences, PTSD diagnosis, and military status. We chose a Pearson Chi-square analysis to compare whether student veterans, veteran spouses, and nonveterans with and without a self-reported diagnosis of PTSD resulted in differences in course delivery method. We compared PTSD and military status (Veteran with PTSD diagnosis = 1, Veteran without PTSD = 2, Military spouse without PTSD = 3, Nonveteran with PTSD = 4, Nonveteran with PTSD = 5) and course delivery method preferences (traditional = 1, online = 2, both = 3) to determine their relationship. We achieved a statistically significant relationship between our grouping variable and course delivery preference for this analysis, $X^2(12) = 36.06$, $p < .001$. Students having a PTSD diagnosis and a veteran status showed a course delivery preference for a traditional setting. However, veterans with and without PTSD show a strong preference for the traditional classroom. Therefore, we evaluated a subsample to see if a diagnosis of PTSD played a larger role in course delivery method. Refer to Table 4 for percentages.

Table 4. Chi-square Results for Traditional Versus Online Course Delivery Preferences *N*=42 Veterans and Service Member Students | *N*=11 Military Spouses | *N*=48 Nonveteran Students

Note. *N*=101. *N* denotes sample size, X^2 = Chi-square

Group	Traditional *N* (%)	Online *N* (%)	Both *N* (%)	Missing *N* (%)	Total *N* (%)	X^2	*p*-value
Veteran w/ PTSD diagnosis	**20 (74%)**	4 (15)	3 (11)	0	27 (26%)	36.06	< .001
Veteran w/o PTSD diagnosis	**12 (80%)**	2 (13)	1 (1)	0	15 (15%)		
Military spouse w/o PTSD	**7 (64%)**	2 (18)	1 (1)	1 (1)	11 (11%)		
Nonveteran w/ PTSD diagnosis	0 (0%)	1 (50)	1 (50)	0	2 (2%)		
Nonveteran w/o PTSD diagnosis	14 (30%)	**28 (61%)**	4 (9)	0	46 (45%)		
Total (%)	53 (52%)	37 (37)	10 (10)	1 (1)	101 (100)		

Course Preferences When Considering Combat Experience

We evaluated course preferences on a deeper level, in that, we focused on the course preferences of our military students who reported combat experience (n = 42). We chose a Pearson Chi-square analysis to compare whether student veterans (Veteran with combat = 1, Veteran without combat = 2) resulted in differences in course delivery method preference (traditional = 1, online = 2, both = 3). We failed to achieve a statistically significant relationship, $X^2(4) = 8.04$, $p > .05$. Veterans with or without combat experience preferred a traditional course delivery method over online course options. Refer to Appendix 4, Table 5, for percentages.

Course Preferences When Considering PTSD, TBI, and Veteran Status

We evaluated course preferences among a subsample of forty-two veterans with a PTSD and/or TBI diagnosis. We chose a Pearson Chi-square analysis to compare whether student veterans (Veteran with PTSD and TBI = 1, Veteran with PTSD only = 2, Veteran with TBI only = 3, Veteran with neither = 4) with and without a self-reported diagnosis of PTSD and/or TBI resulted in differences in course delivery method preference (traditional = 1, online = 2, both = 3). We achieved a statistically significant relationship between our grouping variable and course delivery preference for this analysis, $X^2(6) = 6.95$, $p < .001$. Veterans with PTSD, TBI, or neither diagnosis continued to prefer a traditional course delivery method over online options. Refer to Appendix 4, Table 6, for percentages.

Age Analysis

Based upon the digital divide factor, we were interested in identifying the effects of location, socioeconomic status, race, and age upon all students' course format preferences (N = 101; see Dahlstrom et al., 2011). Because our sample is drawn from a rural, low-income area, we focused our next analysis on the effect of age. We chose a Pearson Chi-square analysis to compare whether age

resulted in differences in course-delivery-method preference. We compared the relationship between age (18-24 = 1, 25-34 = 2, 35+ = 3) and course delivery method (traditional = 1, online = 2, both = 3). Yet, we failed to achieve a statistically different result for this analysis, $X^2(3) = 7.03$, $p > .05$. The results indicate that the majority of students in all three age groups preferred a traditional classroom setting. Refer to Table 6 for frequencies detailing practical significance.

Table 6. Chi-square Results for Traditional Versus Online Course Delivery Preferences

N=42 Veterans and Service Member Students | *N*=11 Military Spouses | *N*=59 Nonveteran Students

Note: *N* denotes sample size, X^2 = Chi-square

Group	Traditional *N* (%)	Online *N* (%)	Both *N* (%)	Missing *N* (%)	Total *N* (%)	X^2	*p*-value
18-24	**23 (47%)**	20 (41)	5 (10)	1	49 (48%)	7.03	NS
25-34	**11 (44%)**	**10 (40)**	4 (16)	0	25 (25%)		
35+	**16 (72%)**	5 (23)	1 (5)	0	22 (22%)		
Missing	3	2	0	0	5 (5%)		
Total (%)	53 (52%)	37 (37)	10 (10)	1 (1)	101 (100)		

In Table 7 (below), we present the results of a survey of veteran and service member students' and nonveteran students' course format preferences, either brick and mortar or online. These themes were generated by evaluating students' comments in regard to an open-ended survey question regarding their course format preferences, whether brick and mortar or online or both and why. Additionally, see Appendices 2 and 3 for a presentation of specific student comments related to the thematic rationales concerning veterans and nonveteran students' course format preferences.

Table 7. Themes Identified from Survey Comments of Veteran and Service Member Students and Nonveteran Students Concerning Their Course Format Preference

N=42 Veterans and Service Member Students | *N*=59 Nonveteran Students

Note: Some participants fall under more than one theme, and others did not specify their rationale for selecting a course format and so are not included in the themes.

Themes Tied to an Identified Course Format Preference for Brick and Mortar Courses Based upon Students' Survey Commentary		
	Veteran	Nonveteran
Student Rationale		
A. Direct and Immediate Communication with Teacher	*n* = 15	*n* = 31
B. Sense of Greater Teacher Accountability	*n* = 2	*n* = 2
C. Perceived Offering of Better Instruction	*n* = 11	*n* = 2
D. Matches Military Life Scheduling and Educational Course Format	*n* = 3	*n* = N/A
E. Better Interaction with Classroom Peers	*n* = 11	*n* = 14

F. Accommodates "Hands-on," Visual, Auditory, or Other Learning Style	*n* = 18	*n* = 28
G. Does Not Require as Great a Need for Digital Technology Literacy	*n* = 1	*n* = 0
Themes Tied to an Identified Course Format Preference for Online Courses Based upon Students' Survey Commentary		
	Veteran	Nonveteran
Student Rationale		
H. Convenience of Location	*n* = 5	*n* = 10
I. Accommodates Family and Work Schedule	*n* = 4	*n* = 37
J. Can Work in the Comfort of Home and on Own Timeline	*n* = 5	*n* = 4
K. Provides Additional Course Options, Including for Those on a Schedule to Graduate	*n* = 1	*n* = 1
L. Lessens Symptoms Associated with PTSD Regarding Being Around Others or Social Anxiety	*n* = 2	*n* = 3

Findings

Rich Morin (2011) found that the veteran transition process, especially for those serving in combat, depends on many individualized aspects of the person's experience. To extend this literature, we wanted to evaluate which type of course delivery method would possibly result in an improved student matriculation rate. We discovered that 67 percent of veterans (*n* = 32) surveyed preferred traditional courses, whereas 70 percent of nonveterans (*n* = 34) liked online classes or enjoyed both traditional and online formats. According to the student veterans' survey comments, they believed that traditional classes could better facilitate their individual learning style, as well as provide a superior connection with the instructor and peers.

For instance, one 32-year-old, male, Choctaw Army combat veteran and English major had joked, "I don't like online dating, online shopping, or online learning. You never know what you're going to get. I need to be front and center, or it can get boring." Similarly, in another example, a 26-year-old female Choctaw, former Marine, and Criminal Justice major stated, "The only thing I don't like about being on campus to take classes, and be with my teachers and the students, is that I don't get to take my gun. That's hard for me." Contrastingly, nonveteran students identified the online course's capability to accommodate their family and work schedules. For those student veterans who took online courses, at least upon occasion, many specified in their survey comments and interviews that this was only as a last resort, as these students could not change their work schedules. In one instance, in an interview, a veteran even mentioned emailing his professor to "apologize for having to take the class online," as opposed to in person. Together, these findings suggest that veterans prefer a traditional classroom environment because the majority of their military training was completed in a face-to-face setting, they want instant feedback, and they are more likely to connect to the material when they have in-person discussions about the content. This finding is important, as it can guide administrators and faculty formulating course delivery options.

Next, Robert Ackerman and others (2009) found that veterans diagnosed with PTSD and other impairments may need extended time for testing or assignments, a repetition of the course content, clear deadlines, and auditory and visual aids to increase their ability to navigate academic life. Moreover, Marta Elliott and others (2011) found that veterans with PTSD possess an increased risk of having a negative college experience and transition; therefore, we investigated whether students, who were diagnosed with PTSD, were interested in different course delivery methods when

compared to those without PTSD. Our findings show that 77 percent of all students with PTSD (n = 20) preferred a traditional class setting. This finding reveals an important difference between the groups, in that, students without PTSD reported an equal interest in either traditional or online delivery methods. Next, we evaluated this outcome's results more deeply to investigate whether student veterans with PTSD were interested in a different course delivery method when compared to both veterans without PTSD and nonveterans (Hudson, et al., 2014). Consequently, we found that 74 percent of veterans with PTSD (n = 20) and 80 percent of veterans without PTSD (n = 12) preferred traditional, on-ground course delivery. Comparatively, 61 percent of nonveteran students (n = 28) preferred online courses. This finding needs further investigation, as a larger sample of nonveterans with PTSD would need to be included to reveal any possible additional differences. Regardless, our results consistently demonstrate that veterans prefer a traditional class setting.

Then, we investigated the relationship between PTSD, TBI, and veteran status, as we found that 78 percent of veterans with PTSD and TBI (n = 11), 69 percent of veterans with PTSD and without TBI (n = 9), and veterans without any diagnosis (n = 11) preferred traditional classes. The results reveal that veteran students, who have been diagnosed with PTSD, TBI, or neither report a preference for classes taught in a traditional classroom setting. In fact, one veteran with PTSD and TBI commented on his enjoyment of traditional courses, even though he is "adverse to crowds." In conclusion, our empirical analyses continue to demonstrate that veteran students prefer a traditional classroom environment.

Subsequently, we evaluated the digital divide's effect on our students' course preferences, as the majority of our students live in a rural, low socio-economic area with limited internet access (Dahlstrom et al., 2011). We hypothesized that in addition to these factors, that age could result in an additional element associated with the digital divide that might account for why older students preferred traditional learning environments. Interestingly, we found that factoring in age did not produce a statistically significant relationship; however, the findings do lean in support of our hypothesis. In fact, the majority of student veterans from every age category reported a stronger preference for face-to-face classes. Forty-seven percent of emerging adult (18-24) students (n = 23) and 44 percent of young adults (25-34) (n = 11) preferred traditional classes, and the rest liked having online courses or classes in both formats. This finding supports previous research suggesting that these students have a moderate level of digital literacy, resulting in a fairly open preference for traditional or online course options. When evaluating older adults (35+) (n = 16), the results are also fairly split, but we see that 72 percent (n = 16) prefer a traditional, on-ground learning environment. These results suggest that our dataset has not been affected significantly by the digital divide and that our students choose traditional classes for various other reasons. Indeed, only one student veteran, aged 41, commented on his inability to navigate the technology tied to online classroom formats.

Forming a Community with the Teacher and Other Students in the Traditional Classroom

In evaluating the results located within Tables 7 and 8, we identified that forming a community with the teacher and other students represented the first and third elements in the veterans' selection of a traditional course format. First, the most important issue in choosing courses for veterans (n = 15) was having "direct and immediate communication with their teacher." Otherwise, student veterans and service members felt that traditional courses (n = 11) offered "better interaction with classroom peers," including nonveteran students. This finding is especially relevant, since some sources argue that veterans have trouble fitting in on campus and even dislike their traditional peers. Veterans may feel separated from others due to PTSD, and they also may feel alienated from other students due to their backgrounds and age difference (Elliott et al., 2011). In

interviews and course papers, students elaborated on the themes identified in the survey. For example, one student veteran, identified having personal contact with his teachers and peers as being an important factor in his course selection process, William (all names are pseudonyms), a 38 year old Choctaw, explained in his interview how he began his university coursework as a veterinary major but switched to an English major after taking two courses with one of the authors.

In a paper, he described his decision to attend college and take in person classes. His schedule led him to drive an hour and a half one way to campus, five days a week, even though he also managed a ranch and had eight children under the age of 18. William wrote, "I didn't think I was a good writer at all. But now I discovered that I can write. I found that my teacher and the other students were interested in my stories [about being a veteran], too." Even when he had a knee replacement surgery during one class, William still refused to be absent for more than a week. "I want to see everyone. I don't want to miss anything," he explained upon reflecting in another paper on how the semester was progressing. Additionally, William mentioned that his presence in the class led the international students attending to contemplate their countries' own experiences with war, including one student who had left Serbia as a child. Although, in an interview, William had revealed his lack of interest in education in high school, which led him to drop out at age 16 to join the Army's infantry, he mentioned that he remained committed to doing well in college, as well as helping others with their own academic paths.

Also relevant to the combat veterans' preferences for taking traditional classes, others, as revealed in the survey, saw themselves as assuming special roles in the classroom by helping other veterans, as well as the general student population. A combat veteran mentioned, "I try to [find and] watch for the other vets [on campus]. It's a vet's job to take care of everyone. Wherever we are, we do that [including at college]. However, vets take care of vets first, and then everyone else. We don't leave any [vets] behind." Some veterans "did not mind" taking classes with a general population, as another shared, because they felt they played "special" roles. This combat veteran joked, "It would be nice if there were one other vet, so someone else could watch the perimeter, but being the only soldier has helped me have perfect attendance in some classes, so that's good." A third gave this view: "[Usually,] we can't be together. [But] it's best to have a vet in every classroom because that person acts as the [teacher's] translator [for the other students]. Nobody wants anyone else to fail."

Similarly, in her course papers, a student veteran in one of the authors' Professional and Technical Writing classes, a 47-year-old Caucasian business major named Allie, explained how she assisted other students in the class with generating ideas for their résumés, while they in turn helped her to create a blog about her veteran experiences. In a reflection paper about the semester's course, Allie explained how she would email any students in her group, who happened to be absent, and they in turn shared their notes with her if she were gone for the day. "One student and I even decided to take other [in person] classes together, so we could encourage each other," Allie explained in a subsequent interview. Although Allie described in a separate paper, concerning her transition process to college, how she needed to sit by a window in class in order to be in her comfort zone, and she also represented another of the many students who drove an hour to campus each way while working full-time, Allie preferred traditional classes.

As a last point, veterans explained that they talked about their service when the opportunity came up, even if this is not true in some other studies, and that being in the traditional classroom gave them such chances. Remaining silent is a valid strategy for representing oneself (Thompson, 2014), and many veterans simply want to "blen[d] in" (DiRamio et al., 2008, p. 88). Others may not desire to write about war (Leonhardy, 2009). Still, in what is called the "silence paradox" (Castro, Kintzle, & Hassan, 2015), many veterans want to be "acknowledge[d]" and "understood" by instructors and

classmates (Leonhardy, 2009, p. 89). According to the related "modesty paradox," combat veterans do not look for acclaim for their service.

Still, they do not want it to be ignored (Castro, Kintzle, & Hassan, 2015), and the conspiracy of silence about speaking of one's military experiences can affect a veteran's ability to process these events (Lloyd et al., 2014). Conversations about ethics and death, or the requirement to discuss their military experiences may cause veterans to react personally, and they may also display hostility toward those without a combat background. However, as our study found, many student veterans desire assignments permitting them to reveal their experiences (see Shea, 2010). Finally, students also report the benefits of their having engaged combat, including learning to value life and one's time (2010), and students in our study wished to discuss these benefits with others in the classroom as part of what they could share about themselves.

As a final example, Leonard, a 27-year-old Choctaw, earning a safety degree, described in a paper responding to a short story about soldiers' building of camaraderie during war how he had enjoyed being in a class where he could talk about his veteran background and what it meant to him, even if it was with nonveteran students. In a subsequent interview, he explained, "In class, I can see everyone's face, and I see that the other students are actually interested when I talk about being in the Navy…At home, my girlfriend says, 'You should go the American Legion if you want to talk about that stuff.' But I don't go there. I'm not that old." In an online class, students like Leonard might not be able to scan the other students' expressions so easily, however, in order to decide whether they feel safe enough to discuss their military backgrounds.

Accommodating One's Learning Style and Additional Preferences

Overall, the second reason that veterans wanted traditional courses was to accommodate their preferred learning style, including hands-on, visual, and auditory. Here, oftentimes, students' learning styles were aligned with the authors' and other instructors' learning styles through the teachers' emphasis on catering to students' multiple learning styles. In one example, students utilized hands-on learning by participating in an outdoor experiment involving the collection of trash on campus. Conversely, according to their syllabi and course outlines, many faculty teaching online did not implement hands-on teaching activities, record their lectures, or offer other auditory-based elements to cater to students' learning preferences. In the survey and interview, the particular course activities that student veterans, who preferred on-ground courses, did like and believed work best in this format included group work; locating sources for research topics while in the computer lab and at the library with the instructor; exploring assignment guidelines, with the opportunity to ask questions and brainstorm for ideas; and engaging in individual or class presentations. Of course, many instructors offer these same activities in online courses and can learn to implement them in ways that function well for distance learners, too.

Tying for third place as a rationale for preferring traditional classes, was the veterans' perception of their "offering of better instruction." For example, one 40-year-old, male, Caucasian, former Marine had changed his major from English to Education after attempting to take an online theory course, which he had not wanted to do, but would have had to have waited another year to take in person instead. Although Russ, like William, represents another student veteran, with small children, who owns a ranch located an hour away, he explained, "As a future high school teacher, I want to be with my teachers in person." In separate cases, three veterans mentioned their withdrawing from or failing courses, including online classes, due to instructors' unwillingness to accommodate them or an ignorance of state laws granting military leave.

One student changed her major three times to find a department (aviation) willing to assist her. In her interview, this Choctaw Army combat veteran, aged 29, explained how she had had to

write letters to faculty members, who had given her zeroes on assignments she had missed due to being called up, in which she had "appealed to their patriotic sense in order to make them change their minds." Accommodations for PTSD symptoms, including more absences, longer timespans for testing or assignments, and having someone who comprehends their context, are also vital strategies to aiding student veterans undertaking the college navigation process (Ackerman et al., 2009).

Additionally, some veterans preferred to take in-person classes despite hearing impairments and the pain involved in walking to class or sitting at a desk. In an interview, one Choctaw, combat Marine, aged 52, who had a disability, mentioned how he choose to enroll in in-person classes located in one of the university's oldest buildings, even though the elevator had not been working, because he liked "the teacher's personality and how he wrote on the board, which you would miss in the online class." In the survey, another veteran mentioned his gratefulness that the university provided a note taker in his classes and that the instructor utilized a microphone.

Limitations and Future Directions

In this study, most students, including those of all ages, preferred traditional courses, with the student veterans reporting that the traditional format gave them a better connection with their teacher and peers, as well as accommodating their learning styles. Of the groups, traditional nonveteran students desired the availability of online courses at the highest rate. The student veterans in our study preferred a traditional course format, regardless of combat experience, PTSD, TBI, and age. These findings focus on veteran course preferences, yet due to the students' life circumstances, some report enrolling in online courses additionally. Therefore, we see an important discrepancy between veterans' preferences and their actual enrollment. Furthermore, our veteran sample within this study is adequate for our initial analyses; however, future studies could benefit from analyses including a larger number of students, who have experienced PTSD, TBI, and other medical conditions, to compare their course preferences. Some of our analyses include small sample sizes, which should be evaluated with caution. Future studies could benefit from a more comprehensive investigation of students' preferences, actual enrollment, and matriculation outcomes.

As a limitation, we did not study the course preference types of veterans enrolled in community colleges, where many attend, but future studies might do so. Moreover, we did not apply Hollie Carlson's (2016) Military Experience Scale, assessing particular events that could trigger greater stress levels. Such a scale might provide a method of gathering information about the stressful events that combat veterans have experienced, according to a continuum. Future studies may also investigate in greater depth the course format preferences of military spouses.

Conclusion

Among Post-9/11 veterans, 44 percent report that returning home is arduous (Morin, 2011). Moreover, veterans may encounter conflicts in beginning an academic lifestyle after experiencing a traumatic event (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Some service members have been deployed four or more times, raising their experiencing of combat stress, and many come back with health-related issues (Moore & Penk, 2011). Overall, veterans suffering from PTSD are more likely to report their transition process as being complicated than those without it (34 percent compared to 82 percent) (Morin, 2011). The psychological issues that some veterans face impact not only they themselves but also their families and communities (Elbogen et al., 2010) and may present obstacles to the former's educational endeavors. Little research has been conducted on how cumulative combat stress affects one in a learning environment (Belasco, 2009). Nonetheless, post-deployment stress can cause veterans to pay less attention in the classroom and affect how they communicate with nonveteran peers and faculty (Ellison et al., 2012; Sayer et al., 2009). Additionally, veterans with

PTSD feel more isolated on campus, have greater struggles with personal relationships, and have higher alcohol use (Elliott, 2011). Because PTSD may not develop until veterans return from their service, they may not understand that they are dealing with a psychological disorder (VA, 2017), with symptoms causing college attendance to be difficult (Sayer, 2009).

Regardless of the course format that student veterans select in order to pursue a college degree, the university must be ready to help military-affiliated students both identify the format that will meet their needs best and succeed in it. Some may argue that since many veterans are taking online courses anyway, teachers and administrators should reconsider how they design them, as well as how students are prepared to take them. It is hard to predict not only how student veterans may deal with being in an academic setting but also if teachers will able to reach them (Zinger, 2010). Thus, faculty and administrators must offer student veterans a support system that will help them navigate college (Ackerman et al., 2009), whether via in person or online courses, as well as providing the information necessary for students about how to make the best choice in selecting a course format. As important pedagogical approaches for online courses, teachers can create video introductions as a way to make themselves more approachable, as well as scheduling a time each week in a synchronous meeting forum to answer questions or discuss a topic with whatever students are available. Additionally, some online programs offer discussion groups and mentor programs for current and former service members seeking advice and help (Haynie, 2013). Otherwise, before deciding on course format, students can speak to their advisor and peruse online information found on sites, such as Higher Education Resources for Veterans, to assist them in considering the pros and cons of traditional versus online classes.

In the meantime, researchers must share ideas and conduct studies that will offer colleges the feedback necessary to aid student veterans (Ackerman et al., 2009) in whatever course format they desire, and campuses offering veterans services should also consider what types of students constitute their veteran population (Kuh et al., 2005). For instance, at our institution, unlike other nonveteran students, who were similarly from rural areas, many rural veterans desired on-ground classes, even though they possess adequate digital skills and the equipment necessary to engage with distance learning. Thus, this study points to the value of retaining on-ground classes, for student veterans and others, in rural locations at a time when some states are trying to save money by moving those students to online programs. Veterans, representing a student population with special needs, require assistance from program providers and teachers especially (Ackerman et al., 2009; Mangan, 2009; Shea & Fishback, 2012). For veterans, their time of transitioning home is important, as they are rekindling existing relationships and developing new ones (Castro, Kintzle, & Hassan, 2014). Thus, it is important for colleges to determine what needs their particular veterans possess and to address them, such as through students' course format preferences.

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[i] Findings for veterans' graduation rates differ. Presenting lower numbers, some researchers report that more veterans enroll than civilians, but fewer graduate from the same institutions (Cunningham, 2012; Perskey & Oliver, 2011). However, Chris Cate (2013) finds that 65 percent of veterans finish their associate or bachelor degrees. Moreover, according to a study by the Pat Tillman Foundation, student veterans average 25 credits annually and graduate in four to five years. Additionally, the average veteran enters college with 28 credits, and student veterans' high persistence rates may be due to the growing concern of state governments, colleges, and community partners, helping to facilitate the transition (Lang, Harriet, & Cadet, 2013).

[ii] A nontraditional student may present any of these characteristics: 1) waiting some time after high-school graduation to enroll in college, 2) attending part-time, 3) working full-time (35 hours or more), 4) being financially independent, 5) being a parent, and 6) having a GED instead

of a diploma. Overall, 75 percent of undergraduates represent nontraditional students (National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 2016). However, the definition of nontraditional or adult learners can prove overly broad (Jenner, 2017), since in the context of the U.S. Department of Education's study, approximately 74 percent of students demonstrate at least one nontraditional characteristic (NCES, 2015).

[iii] Fifty-six percent of students over 24 years of age identify themselves as employees first and students second (NCES), with only 18 percent who do not work (Berker & Horn, 2003). Students who define themselves as career-minded are more likely to be married (NCES, 2016).

[iv] With the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq (OEF/OIF), an increased number of veterans have been affected. Nineteen percent have TBI (National Center for PTSD, 2009), at least 20 percent have PTSD and/or depression, and seven percent have both TBI and PTSD (RAND, 2008). Indeed, PTSD rates are higher than in previous conflicts, and PTSD is the third highest psychiatric diagnosis among veterans. PTSD distribution amongst branches for OND, OIF, and OEF are as follows: Army, 67 percent of cases; Air Force, nine percent; Navy, 11 percent; and Marines, 13 percent (Congressional Research Service, 2010). Relevant to this study, factors increasing the chance that OEF/OIF veterans will have PTSD include a longer deployment time, more severe combat exposure, more severe physical injury, TBI, being in the National Guard or Reserves, being single, having family problems, having prior trauma exposure, and being female (Morin, 2011; National Center for PTSD, 2009).

[v] The Student Veterans Association found that 46 percent of veterans had contemplated suicide, contrasted with six percent of nonmilitary students, according to a 2010 survey by the American College Health Association (Boodman, 2011).

[vi] Deployments lasting longer than six months and multiple deployments increase a veteran's mental health issues (Department of Defense, 2007).

[vii] Nonetheless, as a note, in our study, no student veteran participants mentioned taking online courses while on active duty.

[viii] In 2018, the undergraduate enrollment at the first university represented almost 21,000 students, and at the second, 3,200 students, all mostly state residents.

[ix] At the regional university, 56 percent are first-generation students.

[x] See Cook and Kim (2009) for veteran-college-enrollment divisions.

[xi] Through a case study, one can evaluate a programmatic approach holistically and fully in order to generate a comprehension of it and its relation to participants, and to describe the case (see Baxter & Jack, 2008).

[xii] In filing data, we gave participants pseudonyms and kept the list of pseudonyms and associated names in a password-encrypted file.

[xiii] In the data collection stage, we utilized other strategies for gathering information, too. In analytical memos, we offered our initial conceptions of the study and noted our emerging findings (Strauss, 1987). Likewise, we wrote in a reflective journal to follow and reflect on the study's progression, as qualitative research can "reflect the participant's perspective" (Merriam, 1998, p. 116). We also created documents about items of potential interest before evaluating them.

[xiv] On the computer, we created separate files for each code, yet we also placed information for a participant in its own file to produce distinct pictures or narratives of people and events (Bricki & Green, 2007).

[xv] An analytical framework suggests that information from all participants, with their diverging views, may be relevant (Strand et al., 2003).

[xvi] Fifteen percent of college students are aged 23 and younger, 31 percent are aged 24 to 29, 28 percent are aged 30 to 39, and 25 percent are aged 40 and older (NCSL, 2014).

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Appendix 1: Selected Survey Questions for Veterans and Service Member Students

1. What kind of academic writing assignments do you like best? Least? Examples might be research papers, personal narratives, summaries, and scientific reports.

2. What kinds of writing do you do for work? Please list everything that comes to mind.

3. What kinds of writing do you do for personal reasons or entertainment? Please list everything that comes to mind.

4. Do you use social media? Blogs? Facebook? Twitter? Other? (please specify)

5. What kinds of writing did you do for the military? Please list everything that comes to mind.

6. How is writing for the military different than writing for college? Please explain.

7. Why did you decide to become a college student, and what do you want from college? Please explain.

8. Do you prefer online courses or in person courses? Why? Are any of your reasons related to your military identity, such as a need to attend drill?

9. If a section of this course restricted for veterans were to be offered, would you have rather taken it? Why or why not? Please explain.

10. What was your reason for joining the military? Please explain.

11. What do you wish that instructors knew about veteran students? Please explain.

12. What do you wish nonveteran students knew about veteran students? Please explain.

13. If you do or did wish to share your status as a veteran in this class, did the assignments give you an opportunity to do so comfortably? Please explain.

14. If you are a veteran, do or did you want others in the class to know this status? Why or why not? (No one will reveal your status as a result of this survey.) Please explain.

15. What is or was your specialization or occupation while in the military?

16. What kind of occupation do you have currently?

17. What is your major(s)? minors?

18. What kind of job are you seeking after you graduate?

19. What can this university do to help you as a student?

Appendix 2: A Presentation of Thematic Rationales Concerning Veteran Students' Course Format Preference

N=42 Veterans and Service Member Students

Course Format Preference Themes for Traditional Courses	Veteran and Service Member Commentary
A. Direct and Immediate Communication with Teacher	-If I have a question, I can ask immediately and get a response immediately. -I tend to second guess myself, and the ability to actually ask my questions face to face eases that issue. -I prefer to see my instructors. Also, if I have a question, I'd like the answer pretty much "now." I've taken online classes and had an instructor not email me back when I emailed her a question about an assignment. -Face to face because sometimes I do not understand the coursework, and the instructors aren't able to respond fast enough or well enough over email. -Personal, one-on-one time with professor. -Face to face, the interaction with the teacher offers a much richer and more complete learning experience and much more. -I hate online courses. They are so cut and dry. Read this, write this, take a test. I honestly have taken a few classes and felt like I learned nothing at all. This isn't true for all courses, but I prefer face to face interaction.
B. Sense of Greater Teacher Accountability	-I may tend to prefer the face-to-face courses due to a need for accountability.

C. Perceived Offering of Better Instruction	-I definitely prefer in person to online courses. I have taken a few distance learning courses while I was enlisted, and I can confidently say that there is no substitute for in-class instruction and class interaction provided by the classroom. This is simply a matter of my preference. -I am struggling with my online course. -Used to be online, but coming back to campus this semester has been a good experience.
D. Matches Military Life Scheduling and Educational Course Format	-I definitely prefer in person to online courses. My time in active duty may have reinforced a sense of "needing to be in a certain place at the appointed time."
E. Better Interaction with Classroom Peers	-I was an infantryman. The guys the movies are made about. So it's easy to say we did a lot of boring, soul-sucking, stupid tasks. I think having face-to-face time in classes relates to that stress. In the military, you are never alone to face anything, and I think having other students struggling with you in a class helps to fill an unnecessary void or stress in civilian life. -The interaction with the other students offers a much richer and more complete learning experience.
F. Accommodates "Hands-on," Visual, Auditory, or Other Learning Style	-I am a hands-on learner. -I prefer hands-on interaction. -Depends on the subject matter. Some classes are easier face-to-face to understand to subject matter. -I prefer to see my instructors. -I think that I learn easier when I hear the instructor teaching what we have to learn instead of trying to read and hope I am taking the right notes for the tests.
G. Does Not Require a Great Need for Digital Technology Literacy	-I am computer illiterate as far as someone from my generation is concerned.

Course Format Preference Themes for Online Courses

H. Convenience of Location	-With a full-time job and kids, the hour drive to go to campus is impossible.
I. Accommodates Family and Work Schedule	-I prefer online classes as they are done at my pace and when I am able to get to them. I am working full time and have 5 children; it is not as easy for me to get to the college for classes.
J. Can Work in the Comfort of Home	-They allow me to be in the comfort of my home.
K. Provides Additional Course Options, Including for Those on a Schedule to Graduate	-I will take a course this summer that is online for two reasons. First, I will continue to be paid by the VA for college. Secondly, I can get finished with my degrees faster.
L. Lessons Symptoms Associated with PTSD Regarding Being around Others or Social Anxiety	-I definitely prefer in person to online courses. There is some cognitive dissonance though--having been exposed to certain events makes people like me averse to being around large groups of people. This makes it very difficult for me to connect on a personal level with my fellow students. -I have really bad social anxiety. -I preferred online at first to avoid people but then took traditional classes when I got to classes in my major. I had wanted cohort classes with other veterans to make coming back easier.

Appendix 3: A Presentation of Thematic Rationales Concerning Nonveteran Students' Course Format Preference

N=59 Nonveteran Students

Note: Some participants fall under more than one theme or rationale, and others did not specify their rationale for selecting a course format and so are not included in the themes.

Course Format Preference Themes for Traditional Courses	Nonveterans
A. Direct and Immediate Communication with Teacher	*n* = 33 -I have had some amazing online professors, but the connection you make with your professor in person is something you will never experience with your online class. -I get more out of it because there is more one on one going on which allows for me to ask questions when there is something that I'm having an issue with.
B. Sense of Greater Teacher Accountability	*n* = 2 -I do prefer in class style classes when the professor is engaged with the students and actually cares about their success.
C. Perceived Offering of Better Instruction	*n* = 2 -I have only had a few classes that I was glad they were in person and that's because the teacher was very active and involved. Too much of the time, I feel like we are reading straight from a PowerPoint.
D. Matches Military Life Scheduling and Educational Course Format	N/A
E. Better Interaction with Classroom Peers	*n* = 15 -I also like to have discussions with my peers, and as great as discussion posts are, it just isn't the same as face to face interaction for me. -I have to agree that online courses can be convenient for distance learners, but personally I prefer in person courses, in an environment that I can freely interact with peers and instructors.
F. Accommodates "Hands-on," Visual,	*n* = 29

Auditory, or Other Learning Style	-I like in person courses mostly. I am a visual learner and I think for certain courses it's hard to learn behind a computer screen.
G. Not computer literate for online class ability.	*n* = 0
Course Format Preference Themes for Online Courses	
H. Convenience of Location	*n* = 11 -The one thing that I do love about online courses is that I do not have to actually go to class. I am not a morning person, and 8 a.m. comes just way too early for my taste.
I. Accommodates Family and Work Schedule	*n* = 38 -Online classes are best suitable for me. I am able to maintain full time job, be a mother, and continue my education. -I prefer online classes because I have a beautiful 3 year old boy, and I am a single, working mother. Online classes give me the chance to do my work after my son goes to sleep; therefore, I get more time with him.
J. Can Work in the Comfort of Home	*n* = 5 -I like online classes better simply for the convenience. I enjoy sitting on my couch at home doing my work rather than going to class. -Online. I can work at my own pace. Save money and some wear and tear on vehicle. I can work on things in my pajamas if I choose to. -I am very easily distracted, so when I sit in a classroom, it gets difficult for me to stay focused, so that's where another advantage to having an online course comes because I don't feel that pressure on me like I do in a classroom, to feel behind if I missed a few sentences of what a professor is saying.
K. Provides Additional Course Options, Including for Those on a Schedule to Graduate	*n* = 1 -I would prefer online courses, so I can still work enough to pay the bills, but I'm going for my CPA, and they only allow so many online courses. After you have a certain percent of online courses, you might have to take a course again in person for it to be counted.

L. Lessons Symptoms Associated with Social Anxiety	*n* = 3 -I prefer online courses. I am very shy so being in person gives me anxiety. I get nervous raising my hand or even getting up to use the restroom.

Appendix 4: Small *n* Statistical Analyses of Veteran Preferences

Table 5. Chi-square Results for Traditional Versus Online Course Delivery Preferences

N=42 Veterans and Service Member Students

Group	Traditional *N* (%)	Online *N* (%)	Both *N* (%)	Total *N* (%)	X^2	*p*-value
Veteran w/combat	**24 (77%)**	3 (10)	4 (13)	31 (74%)	8.04	.09 *NS*
Veteran w/o combat	**8 (80%)**	2 (20)	0 (0)	10 (24%)		
Missing	0	1	0	1 (2%)		
Total (%)	32 (76%)	6 (14)	4 (9)	42 (100)		

Table 6. Chi-square Results for Traditional Versus Online Course Delivery Preferences

N=42 Veterans and Service Member Students

Note. N=42 military veteran students. *N* denotes sample size, X^2 = Chi-square

Group	Traditional *N* (%)	Online *N* (%)	Both *N* (%)	Missing *N* (%)	Total *N* (%)	X^2	*p*-value
Veteran w/PTSD & TBI	**11 (78%)**	1 (7)	2 (14)	0	14 (33%)	6.95	< .001
Veteran w/PTSD diagnosis only	**9 (69%)**	3 (23)	1 (8)	0	13 (31%)		
Veteran w/TBI diagnosis only	1 (50%)	0	1 (50%)	0	2 (5%)		

Veteran w/ neither diagnosis	**11 (85%)**	2 (15%)	0	0	13 (31%)
Total (%)	32 (76%)	6 (14)	4 (9)	0 (0)	42 (100)