



# Seven Connotations of the Word “Transition” in Student Veteran Literature

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RESEARCH

VIRGINIA TECH.  
PUBLISHING

## ABSTRACT

When used to describe the experience of specific student subgroups, the word “transition” has become complicated by varied underlying connotations. Through the analysis of the language used in a sample of the literature (n = 23 articles) focused on student veterans, the authors identified and examined seven prevalent connotations. The intent of the analysis was to include illustrative examples of the various connotations rather than a comprehensive survey of all student veteran literature. Connotations are perceived through review of author word choice, carrying a set of assumptions about the students and their experiences. This may lead a reader to assumptions about the authors’ research perspective as well as influence the analysis of research findings. Discussion of the nuance and the implications of viewing student veterans as transitioning is included. A suggestion is made to avoid the generic use of the term “transitioning” to apply to student veterans, due to the lack of specificity as well as the underlying assumptions that are inherent in several of the connotations. Researchers and those who work at institutions serving student veterans are encouraged to make explicit the connotations adopted in their work and/or choose more specific terms to provide clarity to the phenomenon of study.

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## KEYWORDS:

transition; student veteran;  
higher education; college

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Schultz, K. M., Caterino, A.,  
Fox Garrity, B. K., & Daly, D. D.  
(2022). Seven Connotations  
of the Word “Transition” in  
Student Veteran Literature.  
*Journal of Veterans Studies*,  
8(1), pp. 15–28. DOI: [https://doi.  
org/10.21061/jvs.v8i1.273](https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v8i1.273)

Student veterans transitioning from the military to college is a common theme in the literature, as researchers and practitioners alike work to ensure the success of student veterans and military-aligned students in the achievement of their educational goals. However, our ability to understand and assist them may be hindered by the lack of precision of the meanings of the terms “student veterans” and “transitioning.” The use of the two terms together can lead to inconsistent research findings and design of incomplete or unsuccessful support mechanisms for students.

The term “student veteran” has been applied to people who are/have been active-duty military, reservists, members of the National Guard, or those who have been involved in other uniformed services (e.g., Public Health Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration). On some campuses, the children and surviving spouses of military members who have earned governmental education benefits may be included in the definition of student veteran. Methods to parse the various groups and guidance on how to delineate those who can be included in a study or on a particular campus are encouraged to provide clarity when this general term is used (Daly & Fox Garrity, 2017).

Similarly, the term “transitioning” may be less precise than desired in reference to college students. Theories of student transitioning have been the focus of scholars in higher education for decades. However, as these theories have been applied to an ever-growing expanse of subgroups of students, the term has become less precise, having multiple connotations which must be explicitly addressed to ensure consistency. This article will provide an analysis of the term “transitioning” as applied to student veterans in a sample of 23 peer-reviewed research articles published between 2009 and 2021. Seven distinct connotations are presented. This article is not meant to be an exhaustive list of all connotations used in all literature related to student veterans in college (nor is it meant to imply any one connotation is more accurate than another), but rather it is meant to be an illustrative example of how a general term such as “transitioning” may have multiple connotations, even within the same article. An accurate and effective dissemination of knowledge through the research process demands precise and consistent application of definitions and variables. The goal of this work is to encourage thoughtful analysis and clear explanations of transitioning (or more precise terms) in future work.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The researchers employed a social constructionist epistemology as the lens through which to guide their conclusions. This approach relied on the dynamics of human

interaction through written forms of communication and a resultant systematic analysis on the recurrent elements of discourse. This theoretical approach was chosen because it was a personally interesting way for the researchers to engage in the issue and, according to Kilduff (2006), that is the “route to good theory” (p. 252). Viewing the issue through a social constructivist lens paired well with the researchers’ inherent bias toward the thought that reality is created, maintained, altered, and can be destroyed via the process of human interaction (Gordon & Pellegrin, 2008).

This research is informed by the theory of social constructionism, which suggests that one’s self-identity is created (not fixed) and evolves based on interactions with society (Burr, 2018). Identity development theories have been popular in student affairs literature for over 80 years. Current trends include considering the whole student; acknowledging fluidity in the dimensions; and studying how technology, the environment, and globalization are influencing self-identity (Torres et al., 2009).

Social constructionism is a theory that subscribes to the basic understanding that people simultaneously construct their worlds while those worlds help to shape them, which emphasizes the fundamental role of language and communication in this process (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Self-identity is built from “cultural raw material” like language and symbols and is partly derived from our exposure to messaging from agencies such as schools and mass media (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 626). Social constructionist theory is based in the belief that “language does not mirror reality; rather, it constitutes it” (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010, p. 174). A common way in which identity is regulated is through the development of social categories (or groups) to which people are ascribed (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). In Becker’s (1963) discussion of the related theory of labeling, he states that students’ images of themselves can become intertwined with the label that is placed upon them.

There is an intuitive understanding that the words we use can affect our judgement as well as our behavior. In addition, word choice can affect how a message is framed, influence the creation of shared mental schemas, and facilitate the creation of ideologies (Farrow et al., 2018). So, if a student is labeled as someone who is transitioning or needs to transition, that is how the institution perceives them. But if that is not their reality, is that the correct term? Farrow, et al. (2018) point out that within such a framework, individuals perceive what is expected of them (what is proper, what is forbidden, the words they use and how they are used, and the decision as to who they spend time with). People then regulate their behavior around the conception of who they are, who they think they are, and who they think they are expected to be. While the main

focus of this study is to examine the term “transitioning,” we suggest that the moniker “student veteran” could also be an example of a term that ascribes a set of beliefs that may or may not be generalizable to the entire population of study.

## METHODOLOGY

The authors selected articles that utilized the word “transition” in reference to student veterans attending college. The authors sought articles that included both anecdotal and qualitative evidence in order to utilize quotes that could be used to illustrate the student veteran experience and the reasoning behind the careful selection of the language used to discuss this population. Search terms included: “student veteran,” “student veteran higher education,” “student veteran transition,” “veterans in college,” “student transition from military,” “student veterans on campus,” “student veteran theory,” and “college transition theory.” The intent was to determine whether or not a common definition of the term “transition” existed and, if not, to uncover illustrative examples of various ways in which the term “transition” might be used within the literature. To limit variability, only journal articles were selected, and within that set, only those related to veterans from the United States were chosen. A total of 23 articles met the research criteria. Two authors separately reviewed each of the articles, noted their perceptions based within the theoretical framework of this study, and collected the data. They considered word choice, how word choice might affect how a message was framed, and then sought to develop some shared mental schemas (Farrow et al., 2018). The two authors then compared the results and discovered similarities in their perceptions had emerged, which resulted in the development of a common shared set of mental schemas. Because the word “connotation” is defined as a “suggestion” of the meaning of a word, the term was then used as the framework to label and define the resultant structure of the mental schemas presented in this study (Merriam-Webster, 2021a).

This methodology was employed because of the understanding that naturally occurring data has the benefit of being created completely free of any researcher influence (i.e., not being contrived; Potter, 2004). Qualitative research faces many potential problems such as concerns about the design of the research approach and data collection methods as well as the analysis of the results. According to Silverman (2006) there are four major approaches to qualitative research: observation, analyzing texts and documents, interviews and focus groups, audio and video recording. This current study employed the use of

document analysis and the potential benefits of “naturally occurring talk,” meaning that data was created without any research intervention (Silverman, 2006).

It is important to note that the analysis was intended to compare the words and language chosen by each author to frame the discussion. It was an exploration of the researchers’ perceptions of the connotations that were evident in the choice of words, not an analysis of the stated arguments in the articles. This is in keeping with the theoretical framework of the study.

## RESULTS

Seven distinct connotations of the term “transitioning” were found in either the authors’ discussions of transitions or in quotes from student veteran research subjects included in the studies. These connotations include: “assimilation,” “expectations,” “identity,” “lifestyle,” “ownership,” “task,” and “time.” **Table 1** provides a reference as to which connotations were perceived in each article, the distribution of connotations perceived within the entire sample, and the multiple connotations perceived in individual articles. **Table 2** provides excerpts from selected articles as an example of each connotation. It is important to note that connotations are perceived by the reader. Throughout this paper, the connotations presented are interpretations of the authors’ work and may not reflect the intention of each article’s author(s). In addition, the quotations from research participants included in the articles of study suggest that individual student veterans may be using different connotations of the term “transitioning.” This may explain the detection of more than one connotation in several of the articles. This also suggests the need for explicit descriptions of the intended connotation of terms such as “transitioning” in order to guide the readers, the institutions, and the student veterans themselves toward a shared understanding.

### CONNOTATIONS PERCEIVED

A brief review of the literature reveals no common understanding of the word “transition” as it pertains to research of student groups at the post-secondary level. The varied ways in which the word “transition” is defined, both explicitly and implicitly, may lead to confusion and/or miscommunication, and it may also lead to perceptions of the worldview and/or unintentional bias of the researcher(s). Each connotation may suggest to the reader how the researcher views the students, addresses the issue, and frames the research question(s). The conclusions or solutions suggested by each, as well as the choice of authors to cite and/or utilize the theoretical

| AUTHORS                   | ASSIMILATION | EXPECTATIONS | IDENTITY | LIFESTYLE | OWNERSHIP | TASK | TIME |
|---------------------------|--------------|--------------|----------|-----------|-----------|------|------|
| Ahern et al. (2015)       |              | X            |          | X         |           | X    | X    |
| Albright et al. (2019)    | X            |              | X        |           |           |      |      |
| Alschuler & Yarab (2018)  |              |              | X        | X         |           |      |      |
| Blaauw-Hara (2017)        | X            |              | X        | X         |           |      |      |
| Blackwell-Starnes (2018)  | X            |              | X        | X         |           | X    |      |
| Borsari et al. (2017)     | X            |              | X        | X         |           | X    |      |
| Burnett (2009)            |              |              |          | X         |           | X    |      |
| DiRamio et al. (2015)     | X            |              | X        | X         |           |      |      |
| Dobson et al. (2019)      |              |              | X        | X         |           |      |      |
| Griffin & Gilbert (2015)  |              |              | X        | X         |           |      |      |
| Hammond (2015)            |              |              | X        |           |           |      |      |
| Hunter-Johnson (2018)     | X            | X            |          | X         |           |      | X    |
| Jenner (2017)             |              |              |          |           | X         |      |      |
| Jones (2013)              | X            |              | X        |           |           |      |      |
| Lim et al. (2018)         | X            | X            | X        | X         |           |      |      |
| Livingston, et al. (2011) |              |              | X        | X         |           |      |      |
| Morris et al. (2019)      | X            | X            |          |           |           |      |      |
| Naphan & Elliot (2015)    |              | X            | X        |           |           |      |      |
| Olsen et al. (2014)       | X            |              |          |           | X         | X    |      |
| Osborne (2016)            |              |              |          |           | X         | X    | X    |
| Rumann & Hamrick (2010)   |              | X            | X        | X         |           |      |      |
| Vacchi (2012)             | X            | X            |          |           |           |      |      |
| Young & Phillips (2019)   |              | X            | X        | X         | X         |      |      |

**Table 1** The Distribution of Perceived Connotations Within the Sample.

| CONNOTATION  | EXAMPLE                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Assimilation | [Deterministic] “Several foundational steps can help campuses develop their relationship with veteran and service member community to include...” (Albright et al., 2019, p. 484).<br>“Role models are also an important component that can help student veterans understand how to assimilate” (Morris et al., 2019, p. 195).<br>“Veterans’ trying to avoid being a burden to others is an explanation for why veterans may not self-identify: if no one knows the student is a veteran, there is no shame in asking for help” (Vacchi, 2012, p. 18).<br>“Others described how the nuances and cultural norms of military environments were different from those in a college setting and that they had to be intentional about interacting with others appropriately” (Olsen et al., 2014, p. 105). |
| Expectations | “Veterans may feel they must live up to a false expectation: not to burden others with their problems” (Vacchi, 2012, p. 18).<br>“... the mismatch between expectations that coming home would be a welcome return to “normal”, and the reality that what used to feel “normal” felt alien due to the changes in the veteran and changes at home,” (Ahern et al., 2015, p. 5).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Identity     | “Respondents were actively determining or integrating who they were pre-deployment with who they are now” (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010, p. 447).<br>“Finally, institutions cannot assume that all veterans need the same support and resources; scholars, practitioners, and institutional leaders alike must continue to examine within-group differences and seek to understand what individual students need based on their multiple identities” (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015, p. 95).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Lifestyle    | “Many universities utilize various strategies to help student veterans and service members transition back to civilian and student life” (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018, p. 48).<br>“In understanding the lived experiences of student veterans, it is crucial to understand that military culture relies on a starkly different set of expectations than civilian culture” (Dobson et al., 2019, p. 340).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Ownership    | “...expected that the combat veterans might have had additional stressors than those who had not served in combat zones” (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018, p. 49).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Task         | Some institutions highlighted the importance of developing mechanisms to identify and track veterans in larger institutional systems to facilitate better transitions, allowing them to report on their progress and better target services” (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015, p. 84).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Time         | “I know I always offend people. And then I just say ‘Oh, I’m sorry. It’s only been 90 days. It’s the crazy period.’ And then I always calm down afterward” (Ahern et al., 2015, p. 8).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

**Table 2** Article Quotations That Exemplify Each Connotation.

framework, may be related to the connotation adopted in that particular research. Just as the connotation guides the researcher or practitioner to an understanding of the problem, it also frames the search for an appropriate solution. This section will present a qualitative narrative analysis of a sample of 23 recent studies focusing on the subgroup of student veterans. It will identify, discuss, and describe the seven connotations of the term “transition” as identified and interpreted by the researchers.

## ASSIMILATION

Research that considers students in the context of a natural (and necessary) process of assimilation assume that there are certain behaviors and characteristics that they need to either learn or mimic in order to fully transition into a new life as a student. Furthermore, there are often tones within this connotation that suggest college culture is less open to variability and diversity, expecting those attending to fit a certain student persona (Blaauw-Hara, 2017; Borsari et al., 2017; Jones, 2013; Morris et al., 2019; Olsen et al., 2014; Vacchi, 2012).

Given this context, readers of this work might perceive student veterans as existing within a state of cognitive dissonance; students who find themselves struggling to adapt to a sense of disjointed realities. This dissonance will continue until the student comprehends the goals and expectations of the campus community and then adopts new behaviors before they can contribute in a meaningful way (e.g., Blaauw-Hara, 2017). The adoption of new expected behaviors is a key element to how the readers may perceive the assimilation process, such that the students achieve a more “normal” set of social mannerisms in order to successfully adapt to life as a college student (e.g., Olsen et al., 2014). This assimilation to a defined/perceived dominant campus culture is not only a natural process, but also might be expressed as a key function of higher education institutions. In fact, the assimilation process is viewed as a valuable proposition in which the student is engaged in a robust learning process. It involves the exposure to varied life experiences, unfamiliar viewpoints, and contrasting personalities, and carries the implication that it can provide positive benefits for the students beyond their college years (e.g., Jones, 2013).

Assimilation may not be a linear process, however, and there is an understanding that many students struggle to adapt to campus culture. Researchers might consider that when students struggle to achieve assimilation, they could hide (i.e., mask) their situation. This means that they are unable to disclose their true struggles and are unwilling or less likely to ask for help from peers or mentors (e.g., DiRamio et al., 2015; Vacchi, 2012). Within this context, it is up to the college administrators to identify the students’

needs, provide varied institutional support, and remove the barrier that stops them from completing the overall transition process. This deterministic view of the role of the institution implies that colleges need to guide the students to the finish line, helping them complete their transition so that they can operate smoothly in their new environment (e.g., Albright et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2018).

Researchers might operate under the idea that they can identify markers as to the varied stages of transition or identify when a successful transition has been achieved. Such a perception would lead to a focus on examining if/when/how these students re-frame their thinking, behaviors, and/or social interactions. In addition, researchers would then be predisposed to convey the outcomes with words such as “successful acclimation” and “reconditioning” (e.g., Hunter-Johnson, 2018). Once again, a deterministic approach is adopted, and it becomes the colleges’ duty to provide opportunities to help ease the transition of these students to the campus culture, with a particular emphasis on the role of classroom experiences and peer group interaction. The ability to integrate into the classroom culture is then viewed as a foundational step toward achieving a successful transition (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018).

If this connotation is adopted by those writing for an audience of university-level educators, it is possible that readers of this literature will believe that in order to help obtain successful transition, they should facilitate the blending of these students into the class and encourage them to simply act like other college students if they are having a hard time adjusting. Ultimately, if the word “transition” is defined as meaning “assimilation,” then the research may appear to suggest that there is a measurable process at play, and that there is some form of transitional achievement that can be obtained as one assumes the behaviors, norms, and social interactions of the aspirational group.

## EXPECTATIONS

Differing from the need to assimilate, the connotation of expectations refers to the use of the word “transition” to describe the process of a student taking stock of their expectations of others and adjusting them to coincide with the society in which they live. There is also an understanding that the process is reciprocal, and that members of a society (such as those in higher education) might need to adjust their expectations of the students. The authors may then frame their arguments as an interplay among expectations, realities, and the resultant student behavior. It may be perceived that these researchers consider the term “transition” in the context of individual feelings (Ahern et al., 2015; Hunter-Johnson, 2018; Lim et al., 2018; Morris

et al., 2019; Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vacchi, 2012; Young & Phillips, 2018).

Defining the term “transition” as a process of changing expectations includes the importance of self-awareness, meaning that the students make the conscious choice to examine the expectations that they hold of fellow classmates. Frustration can ensue when the behavior of an individual or group does not meet the expectations that have been established for them. It might be inferred that the ability to anticipate unfamiliar or even frustrating behavior of others could lessen student feelings of disruption (e.g., Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Within this context, a student’s feelings can either support or inhibit their ultimate adjustment to college and could hinge upon the congruence or incongruence between expectations and behaviors. In addition, students perceive the expectations that the institution has of them, and this can affect the ability of that group to engage and identify with campus culture.

When students come to college, they may have a set of expectations of what a transition to college will entail (i.e., how difficult it will be or what will be involved). Meeting these expectations is then of paramount importance for the institution of higher education, because when the students feel neglected or forgotten, a discrepancy between expectations and reality develops which can negatively impact their ability to succeed (e.g., Ahern et al., 2015). That is not to say that a college needs to consider all student expectations as reasonable, as students may certainly have unreasonable and/or unmet expectations. In addition, students might have incorrect assumptions of what is expected of them, which could result in incorrect behavior, and making it more difficult for them to adjust. There could also be an incorrect expectation of accessibility and/or availability of campus services, which could result in a significant obstacle to the student’s transition process (e.g., Vacchi, 2012). These obstacles might be viewed as feelings of dislocation or the inability to relate to other students on campus, and can be manifested in the way students adjust, the feelings they have toward the expected college experience, and the pressure they may feel to meet such expectations (e.g., Young & Phillips, 2019).

The college experience can be expressed in feelings of a hidden curriculum or set of rules, resulting in a disconnect between instructors’ expectations and student expectations. The hidden curriculum could include many components of academia and campus culture that may not be readily accessible, visible, or helpful for the student (Lim et al., 2018). If using the word “transition” to describe the need for students to adjust their expectations regarding variables like responsibility, acceptable behavior, and student life, there is a risk that all other aspects of a

successful and healthy integration into college culture will be overlooked or not considered at all. Adoption of this connotation would suggest that successful transitioning is a process that could be encouraged by discussion and adjustment of the student’s or institution’s expectations. Interventions and supports may be designed to encourage students and institutions to examine where dissonance occurs in expectations of each other. While becoming mindfully aware of what is considered acceptable, there are many other factors that must be weighed.

In addition to the seven connotations detected in the term “transition,” there were also nuances within some of the connotations. For example, it was perceived that some researchers use the connotation of expectations to discuss at least two different and possibly mutually exclusive viewpoints. One is the need for educational institutions to evaluate their expectations of students (an external consideration) and take a deterministic approach to address their transition. But others described it more as a shift or a change in expectations that happens solely in the minds of the students as they learn, adjust, and change (an internal consideration). It is apparent why it might be critical to be aware of the meaning carried by each different connotation as well as the multiple possible meanings inherent within the same connotation.

## IDENTITY

While expectations are considered either internally or externally sourced, the connotation of identity is thought to be internal only. A brief review of the literature reveals that the word “transition” is often used to describe a process of shifting a student’s own identity (Albright et al., 2019; Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Blaauw-Hara, 2017; Borsari et al., 2017; Dobson et al., 2019; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Jones, 2013; Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Research involving this connotation seems to consider student transition as a change or shift in identity and might consider the fact that students come to college with an established identity, one that has been developed and honed over time and has rarely, if ever, been influenced by the college atmosphere. Many students can find it challenging when they come to campus and discover there is an incongruence between their normal identity roles and their new role as a student. Aspects of being a student may not resonate with the current identity they have formed, and that can cause students to attempt an integration with their new lived experience as a student on campus (e.g., Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Many of the researchers discuss this as a process where a person moves from one step to the next, exiting one role to enter the new one. In order to accept the new role, the person must also separate from the initial role (e.g., Ebaugh, 1988; Naphan & Elliott, 2015). The

rationale given for individuals needing to disengage with a previous role is rooted in the fact that certain behaviors from one role may not be functional within another.

For instance, researchers or readers might view these students as struggling with a way to reconcile their new identity. This idea of new and old identities is a key element in framing the discussion. In this context, some students might attempt to hide their old identity, some might feel uncomfortable participating in the campus culture, and some might attempt to mimic the typical student by utilizing campus resources that reinforce this notion. The transitioning students might then shun any services or activities that associate them with their old identity. As a result, researchers and practitioners may find that student veterans (a term that implies two separate identities) avoid both self-identification on campus and use of resources, such as student veteran lounges or social organizations. One result of the adoption of this connotation can be a limited availability of campus support, which is viewed as a barrier that hinders a full and successful transition of the student to the campus population (e.g., Borsari et al., 2017).

While some research refers to the transition process in a defined step-by-step manner, other research discusses the transition not as an abandonment of the old and acceptance of the new, but rather as a shift in perspective. In this view, the transition is considered more likely to be successful if the student can blend the two identities rather than replace one with the other (e.g., Blaauw-Hara, 2017). Readers may infer that some consider this a natural and passive process, but some authors are careful to mention the need for the student to actively engage in the process and negotiate the push-and-pull of the two identities, which affects the eventual outcome. Within this chosen theoretical framework, identity is based on a lived experience (Jones, 2013). But is it necessarily true that transformation involves a person leaving one identity behind as they move on to a new one? Some research suggests that students balance multiple identities rather than having separate (mutually exclusive) states of identity (Hammond, 2015). In this context, if a student takes time to maintain one identity, one or more of the other identities could be neglected (e.g., Alschuler & Yarab, 2018).

## LIFESTYLE

Unlike identity and its focus on the internal view of the self, the connotation of lifestyle utilizes the word “transition” to describe a change in the way of life for student veterans. Students maintain a specific lifestyle while military personnel maintain a different one. The word “transition” used in this connotation implies that becoming a student veteran necessitates learning the characteristics of the

student lifestyle and applying those characteristics to their own life. Of the seven connotations, “lifestyle” appears to be the one that is most specific to the group (student veterans) under consideration for this study, and less generalizable to the population of all students.

Research that included the lifestyle connotation tended to assume that a person transitions back to civilian/student life after leaving military life, and that those two lifestyles are divergent and incompatible (e.g., Dobson et al., 2019). This research usually focuses on the struggle that students have as they adjust to their new lifestyle by learning new routines and habits required of daily life. Therefore, the process of transition includes an understanding that a person must separate from their prior lifestyle and accept the next. When they have adjusted to their new lifestyle, the complete transition has occurred (e.g., Alschuler and Yarab, 2018).

The idea of divergent and incompatible lifestyles can be seen in the words that are used to describe these students, who are frequently categorized as either civilian/student or military personnel. They describe the process of adjusting to the typical student lifestyle as an uncomfortable experience (e.g., Borsari et al., 2017). In this context, their transition is defined as a process of adopting a life or lifestyle of civilians, students, and/or campuses. This suggests not only that there are multiple lifestyles that a student veteran must adopt or adjust to when attending a college or university, but also that their military lifestyle differs greatly from their new life. This difference can result in culture shock, which occurs when the student is faced with a new lifestyle, often described in terms of an “academic life” or “campus community” (e.g., Blackwell-Starnes, 2018). Ultimately, the transition occurs when the student completes a shift between the differing communities and environments (Blaauw-Hara, 2017).

Articles that use this connotation consistently discuss life and culture in terms that compare military lifestyle with the traditional student lifestyle (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). This analysis appears to be one-directional, meaning that the military member transitions from a military lifestyle back to a civilian/student lifestyle in a single motion (Ahern et al., 2015; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Dobson et al., 2019; Livingston, 2011). The transition back includes social and cultural integration, which suggests that all military members share some form of common background and that if the process is completed successfully, the student can achieve academic success (e.g., Lim et al., 2018). The idea that military members share a common cultural background is further emphasized by characterizing them with terms such as “cohorts,” “unique,” or “non-traditional learners” (cf., DiRamio et al., 2015; Hunter-Johnson, 2018; Young & Philips, 2019).

This connotation suggests that it is necessary for all students to accept the qualities of a traditional student in order to succeed in a higher education setting. It also suggests that this dominant student lifestyle is the only acceptable lifestyle on a college campus. Adoption of this connotation encourages researchers and practitioners to design interventions to change habits and patterns of behavior to match those of students. The assumption of a shared military lifestyle may influence the design of support systems since adopting a new lifestyle is the focus of transitioning.

### OWNERSHIP OF TRANSITION

While the connotation of “lifestyle” implied that student veterans must adopt new ways of living, the connotation of “ownership” places the focus on individualized experiences. Many articles utilize terminology including “their transition” and “veteran’s transition” (e.g., Olsen et al., 2014; Osborne, 2016). Ownership is signified in the use of possessive words and phrases. In this context, every student transition is viewed as an independent event that is dependent on the specific person and their needs. Thus, the students own and manage the way they navigate their shift from the military to college.

Research utilizing the “ownership” connotation appears to be influenced by traditional theories of college student transition. One example is Jenner’s 2017 study, in which they discuss transitions of non-traditional college students in the terms of Schlossberg’s transition theory model, emphasizing terminology such as “student’s individual transition” (p. 2). This provides the reader with an understanding that there are differing individual variables at play with each person. Therefore, it can be determined that each transition is unique, which further emphasizes the idea of individual ownership of each experience (e.g., Jenner, 2017). Because each student transition is viewed as a unique process, researchers using this connotation find it important to explore the perceptions of the students in conjunction with the collection of individual characteristic variables, such as demographic data, household structure, and geographic location (e.g., Young & Philips, 2019).

Considering transitions as internal and owned by the student holds implications for success and failure. The role of the institution in the student’s success may be negligible, while the onus is on the student to complete the process to be successful. The connotation of ownership takes on an individualized and unique perception of the word “transition.” This connotation seems to be flexible since it does not place assumptions onto the experience of the student veteran. Acknowledging the differences that each student veteran may experience in their own transition may have further implications on the structure

of campus services. If the transitions of student veterans are all unique, then campus services should perceive the individualized needs of each student and provide the appropriate resources. Under this connotation, institutions should not be limited to a “one size fits all” mentality; they must be considerate of the experiences of student veterans when working with this population.

### TASK

The connotation of “task” defines “transition” as a mission that needs to be completed rather than the individual behind the experience. In order to be successful while attending school, this connotation implies that there are steps that need to be taken, and once these steps are achieved, the student can then be considered “fully transitioned.” This conveys the idea that only at the completion of a veteran’s transition to student life will they be able to succeed as a higher education student. Each step can therefore be viewed as having some form of a transitional barrier that must be overcome in order to move to the next phase. There is also an underlying assumption with the task connotation that there is a defined process involving a set of concrete objectives that pertain to all students attempting the transition (e.g., Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Research where this connotation was perceived tended to focus on the problems, obstacles, and challenges associated with completing various tasks toward the end goal of transition completion (e.g., Blackwell-Starnes, 2018).

Of all the connotations, “task” is the one that most clearly indicates a causal effect. If a student completes the steps and successfully makes it to the last stage of transition, then they will be more likely to succeed, lowering the likelihood of dropping out of school (e.g., Alschuler & Yarab, 2018). Articles using this connotation tended to imply that students who successfully complete their transition gain a set of skills that will help them perform better academically. Without the successful transition, however, the student is more likely to fall behind their peers (e.g., Burnett & Segoria, 2009). This differs from other connotations such as “time,” as the connotation of “task” implies a start and an end to transition. Specifically, the language used by these authors suggests that the experience of the student cannot be an ongoing and individualized experience. They must complete the steps early enough in their academic career so that they may be better equipped for the challenges of postsecondary education.

The concept of a series of steps that culminates in the achievement of an end goal is emphasized in the authors’ use of past tense words such as “transitioned,” “finished,” or “integrated,” and in their description of students as “successful” when they have reached the end goal (Borsari

et al., 2017; Olsen et al., 2014). In addition, the use of the phrase “full integration” implies that there are different stages of completion of a transition and that there is a possibility of being only partially integrated. It also suggests that transitioning takes place over phases and that there is an ultimate end state (Borsari et al., 2017, p. 171).

The implication of this connotation is that there is a need to encourage students to complete a list of tasks. Interventions may focus on the tasks that are perceived as keys to success with emphasis on encouraging students to move through these tasks in a timely fashion. Success is achieved when all tasks have been completed. If the task is not fully completed, the student veteran may be at risk of failing academically and/or dropping out of their college institution. This connotation may be misleading, as it does not leave room for personal factors. If utilizing the connotation of “task,” student veterans may experience their own steps and obstacles in their transition. This connotation portrays a harsh concept of either passing or failing in the academic realm, with no room for error or personalization.

## TIME

In this connotation, the word “transition” is used to describe the period it takes for a student veteran to adjust and adapt from veteran mode to civilian/student mode, rather than considering the tasks that were needed to transition. The connotation implies that the transition process takes a finite amount of time, with a clear beginning and end. During this time, researchers using this connotation seem to posit that the student veteran will initiate and complete all processes necessary to successfully become a part of the campus culture.

Research perceiving this connotation tended to use and measure the variable of time, occasionally describing it in concrete terms such as days or months. In this context, the transition is expected to be more successful if it occurs within a certain defined period when the student is exposed to the college campus (Ahern et al., 2015). There are resources a school can provide such as a transitional course that would presumably be offered to those who fall in the window of time where a transition to college campus is most likely to occur (e.g., Osborne, 2016). Research with this connotation also focused on variables such as the amount of time a student might spend with their college instructors, the pace of learning of their major/program, and the need to complete the transition when it is more likely to be beneficial (e.g., Hunter-Johnson, 2018).

Researchers and practitioners may consider students to be in their transition period or past their transition period when this connotation is adopted. Interventions may be designed for a specified period just prior to or immediately

after enrollment. Once the time period expires, students are considered to have completed their transition period. When using the word “transition” in reference to the time needed for a student veteran to adjust to life as a student on campus, caution is suggested. Placing finite limits on one’s definition of transition can pose a risk since not all student veterans experience this period in the same way. There are many personal and/or logistical factors that can vary between veterans which prevent this model from accurately guiding the understanding of the student veteran’s experience.

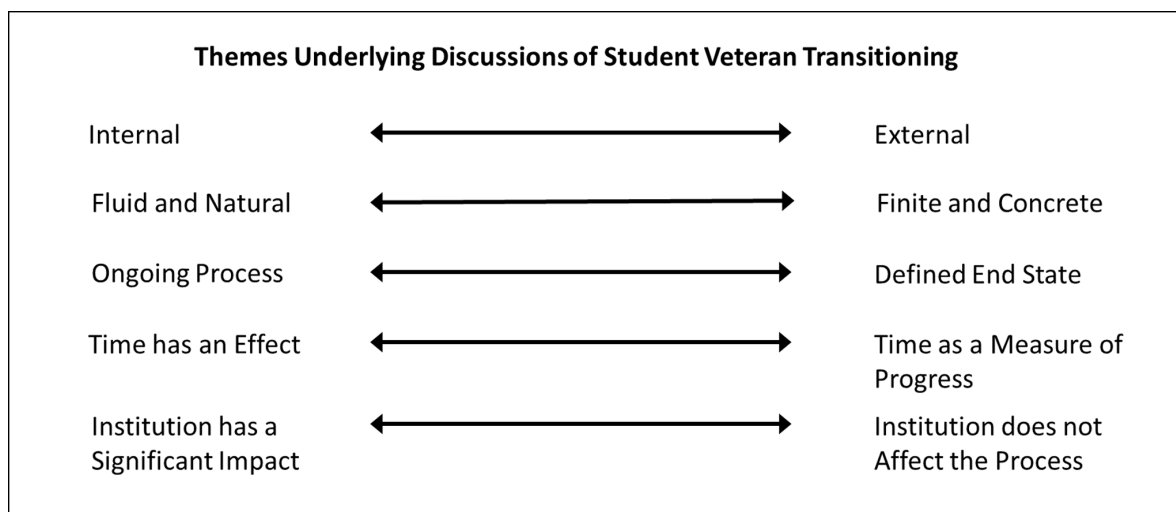
The seven connotations presented in this article suggest that there are varying views and beliefs about transitioning. These beliefs will influence researchers, practitioners, and the student veterans themselves both in how they view their entry into college as well as the types of interventions or supports that an institution prioritizes for their students.

## DISCUSSION

In the process of categorizing, labeling, and defining the connotations noted in this study, a series of unique connectors emerged. These connectors were combined and labeled as “themes,” because the word “theme” can be defined as a characteristic that embodies a distinctive quality (Merriam-Webster, 2021b). Each theme raises important questions about the implications of explicitly or implicitly adopting a particular connotation or subset of connotations. Each theme spans a range of positions (as shown in [Figure 1](#)) and includes whether one considers transitioning to be an internal or external adjustment, whether transitioning is fluid and natural or finite and concrete, whether it is an ongoing process of improvement or a defined end state, whether time has a real effect or if time is an attempt to measure progress, and whether the institution has a role in altering the outcome or not and how that role or outcome can be measured. Each theme exists on a continuum that is independent of the other themes. Analysis should consider each theme’s continuum independently.

These themes described in [Figure 1](#) detail a framework for analysis of the use of the term “transition” related to any group of students. It is important for all readers, authors, researchers, and practitioners to reflect on their own beliefs regarding these continuums to understand why they prefer certain responses to perceived student and/or veterans’ issues.

Judgement and behaviors are influenced by word choice (Farrow et al., 2018). Beyond just the words themselves, careful examination of the various connotations implied or inferred will lay bare the underlying assumptions that



**Figure 1** Continuums of Themes Underlying Discussions of Student Veteran Transitioning.

influence our beliefs and behaviors related to student veterans. These themes are provided as a framework for discussion to examine inherent assumptions. While answers to which interpretation is correct or incorrect are beyond the scope of this article, these questions are presented to encourage introspection and discussion among researchers and practitioners.

The consideration of whether a transition is internal or external is most evident in the “expectations” connotation, which includes internal adjustment of the student’s own expectations of others and self as well as adjustment of the institution’s external expectations of the students. In fact, the internal—external consideration can be further subdivided into the student’s expectations of themselves, the student’s expectations of the institution and others, the student’s perceived expectations that the institution holds of them, and the actual expectations that the institution holds of them.

“Expectations” is not the only connotation that raises the question of whether a transition is internal or external. “Identity” and “ownership” also suggest that the student experience is internal, while “expectations,” “task,” and “time” suggest an external orientation. This holds implications for how researchers discuss student transitions and the interventions provided by practitioners to support students.

“Identity” provides an interesting lens for the discussion of whether transitions are fluid and natural or if they are finite and concrete. Creating a balance between multiple identities suggests a fluid process with constant adjustments and shifts; however, if the position is that one identity must be abandoned in order to adopt a new identity, a transition is finite and concrete. “Assimilation,” “lifestyle,” and “task” also suggest that a finite and concrete assumption is appropriate.

This is connected to the question of whether transition is an ongoing process of improvement (continually transitioning) or defined end state of being (transitioned). Does one complete the process, or is this a continual balancing act on the part of the student? Most of the connotations, including “assimilation,” “lifestyle,” “task,” and “time,” suggest that transition is an end state, a goal to be achieved. For example, authors adopting the “task” connotation suggest that this must be completed by a particular point in time in order to improve the chances of success in college. However, as noted above, “lifestyle” suggests that the transition ends when students adopt the new student lifestyle. This is not reflective of many student veterans’ actual experiences, particularly those still on active duty or serving in the National Guard or Reserves. These students do not leave behind a perceived military lifestyle while enrolled in school.

“Identity” provides an illustration of fluidity between process and end state. Does a student reach the end state of their transition once they disengage from their old role and adopt the new role, or does the student work to balance and incorporate multiple identities, with each becoming more or less salient based on external stimuli? This raises the question of whether the term “student veteran” implies a blend of student identity and veteran identity, or if “student veteran” is a new identity unto itself, separate from the identity of veteran. As language shapes reality, it is important to examine how this term is being used.

The effect of time is another important question raised in these connotations. Does time have a real effect, or is time used to measure progress toward a goal? Is there a specified period of transitioning as suggested in the “time” connotation, or is time a method to measure distance from the point of entry which provides a gauge of the magnitude of the shift in expectations?

The varying connotations —and the questions they raise— hold important implications for the perceived role of the institution in altering student outcomes. Are there meaningful activities or support mechanisms that an institution can engage in that will assist students, and if so, what are those activities? How would the effect of those activities be measured (e.g., internal perceptions of the student veterans, completion of certain tasks, passage of time, adoptions of certain behaviors and norms)?

The perception of multiple connotations used in single articles about student veterans is worthy of note. The underlying assumptions, descriptions, and/or potential interventions suggested were somewhat muddled by the many connotations detected by the readers. In some cases, it was unclear whether the readers should perceive the transition as a finite and predictable timeline that is complete when a student abandons their role of soldier/veteran and assumes the role of student, or whether this is accomplished when the student veteran completes a task to be performed by the student, experiences a change in lifestyle, assimilates to campus culture, or takes steps to change their own expectations of their fellow students and campus.

Limitations of this study include the number of articles reviewed, along with the limited publication dates (2009–2021) and a focus on student veterans at specifically US-based institutions. A full survey of the literature may reveal additional connotations and themes that were absent in the sample of 23 articles included in this study. Further research focused on non-US-based institutions or on articles from outside the years of 2009–2021 may provide important points for comparison to this study. In addition, this study holds the potential for researcher bias, as it employed the use of a specific theoretical framework and was influenced by individual researcher perceptions of implied meanings of words and phrases.

Future research is encouraged to refine and challenge the list of connotations presented in this paper, as well as future research that thoroughly analyzes the full body of work by a particular author to determine if the use of various perceived connotations are consistent across time. Additionally, replication of this process using literature related to other student groups (e.g., nontraditional age, first generation) is suggested. A particular focus on similarities and differences in the connotations applied to various student groups is encouraged, as it is important to generate a clear picture of the inherent assumptions present in thoughts and behaviors related to subgroups of students. For example, the terms “lifestyle” and “identity” in the student veteran literature are focused on the lack of nuance in the assumption of shared experiences, lifestyles,

and culture while serving in the military. These connotations may be less likely to be perceived in writing about other subgroups of students, as they are based on an incomplete understanding of the vastly varied experiences of military members. Other connotations (such as “assimilation,” “expectations,” and “task”) may be more prevalent in discussions of many subpopulations of students. Emphasis on certain connotations for specific populations and the identification of additional connotations should be explored thoroughly in future research.

## CONCLUSION

Language shapes our reality, both from the internal aspects of identity formation and from the expectations that we place on ourselves that are gauged from our peers. Language also guides the way we perceive issues and the solutions we construct to address those issues. The adoption of widely varying connotations of the term “transitioning” when applied to student veterans will influence both the students’ perceptions of the appropriate actions and markers of identity as well as the interventions that institutions design to assist these students. It is imperative that all researchers and practitioners delve deeply into their underlying assumptions which influence and are influenced by the selection of various connotations to emphasize in our work. The connotations adopted by or perceived by researchers and practitioners hold important implications for how students with military experience are assisted, described, and supported as they enter or reenter college. Introspection and analysis of the underlying assumptions that are apparent and connotations that are adopted are important for both researchers and practitioners.

Researchers and practitioners should use caution when the word “transitioning” is applied to student veterans, due to the many connotations and definitions of the term. We encourage future research to apply this framework to the literature related to other groups of students, as well as future work to refine and expand the framework of connotations presented in this article.

The seven connotations present a base for researchers and practitioners working with student veterans to reexamine the ways in which we consider and discuss student veterans and their experiences in college. Reconsidering “transitioning” and adopting more precise and clear explanations of the intended meaning will enhance our understanding of student veterans’ experiences and the role of institutions in encouraging their success.

## ETHICS AND CONSENT

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the home institution of the researchers does not require submission or approval for research that does not involve human or animal subjects. A human subject is defined as: “a living individual about whom an investigator conducting research obtains (1) data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or (2) identifiable private information.” This research did not include human or animal subjects, therefore, review board approval was not required.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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**TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Schultz, K. M., Caterino, A., Fox Garrity, B. K., & Daly, D. D. (2022). Seven Connotations of the Word “Transition” in Student Veteran Literature. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 8(1), pp. 15–28. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v8i1.273>

Submitted: 04 June 2021   Accepted: 21 September 2021   Published: 17 January 2022

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