



Exploring the Salience of Veteran Identity for US College Students

MAKAYLA SCHROEDER 

ROSEMARY J. PEREZ 

**Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*

RESEARCH

VIRGINIA TECH.
PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

This descriptive qualitative study examined the factors that inform veteran identity saliency among a compositionally diverse group of 15 student veterans attending a predominantly white, land-grant, research institution in the Midwest region of the US. Our findings suggest six factors interact with each other in a way that may strengthen or weaken veteran identity saliency: (a) fulfilling their duty, (b) multiple social identities, (c) sociopolitical context when service ended, (d) family connection to military, (e) connectedness to military community, and (f) duration of service.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

MaKayla Schroeder

Bellin College, US

makayla.schroeder1@gmail.com

KEYWORDS:

veteran; identity development;
identity salience; military
connected students

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Schroeder, M., & Perez, R. J. (2022). Exploring the Salience of Veteran Identity for US College Students. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 8(1), pp. 54–66. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v8i1.289>

Research on student veterans has steadily increased over the years. Many studies have taken into account how student veterans interact with their collegiate environment both inside and outside of the classroom (Ackerman et al., 2009; Bryan et al., 2014; Campbell & Riggs, 2015; DiRamio et al., 2008; Kirchner, 2015; Morris et al., 2019; Nyaronga & Toma, 2015; Romero et al., 2015; Vaccaro, 2015; Wheeler, 2012; Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017), but a limited number of scholars have examined how this population comes to develop an internal veteran identity. The topic of veteran identity has received increased attention in the past few years (Blackwell-Starnes, 2020; Hinton, 2020), yet is still an area needing additional research. Veteran identity is an important concept to understand as it informs individuals' use of support services and engagement in veteran-centered communities. Gaining more insight into veteran identity has the potential to help campus communities and student affairs professionals better understand student veterans and in turn to more fully address their needs.

That is not to say that researchers have not considered some components of student veterans' identities. Since student veterans are complex individuals that enter post-secondary education with different lived experiences than traditional college students who enroll directly from high school, there has been attention to student veterans' academic and social transitions to college. Additionally, 62% of veterans are first generation students (Enrollment Management Report, 2016) and they may not be able to draw upon familial knowledge related to navigating college. Acknowledging that many student veterans are non-traditional students and may also be first-generation college students, support services have been specifically designed to target veteran students' needs as they navigate postsecondary education. In turn, much of the current research on student veterans relates to how support services can be utilized to aid in transitions to college and success (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Kirchner, 2015; Morris et al., 2019; Wheeler, 2012). However, to truly understand how student veterans utilize campus support services and acclimate to the college environment, educators must take the time to understand what comprises veteran identity, how individuals come to view themselves as a veteran, and the salience of students' veteran identity. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2021), the word salient can be described as something that is "very important or noticeable."

The development and salience of veteran identity may also be complicated by whether or not students are assigned veteran status based on externally defined criteria. Under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, if students meet the criteria established by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, then they are granted access to receive

educational benefits, regardless of if they choose to *identify* as a veteran (Green & Van Dusen, 2012). Vacchi and Berger (2014) argued that defining the term "veteran" is vital to determine who will receive benefits; however, there is "no universally agreed-upon definition for who a veteran is" (p. 105). Given the varied and contested definition of the term veteran (Vacchi & Berger, 2014), it may be challenging for student veterans to understand where they fit, since they may be deemed a veteran in some spaces and may not qualify in others. The varied external definitions of veteran status could impact the internal development of students' veteran identity and how salient it is to them, which may in turn influence engagement with student veteran services and veteran communities.

Given the need to better understand US college students' understandings of their veteran identity and the salience of this identity, we examined the following research questions: *How do college student veterans describe the salience of their identity as a veteran? What affects the salience of a veteran identity for college student veterans?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

US STUDENT VETERANS' EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES

According to the US Department of Veterans Affairs, 893,725 individuals received educational benefits in 2018 totaling \$11,671,893. Historically, discourse related to college student veterans has centered on their increased access to higher education after the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, more commonly known as the GI Bill was passed (Thelin, 2011). The creation of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill (Green & Van Dusen, 2012) has led student veterans to receive increased attention as their enrollment numbers in post-secondary education grew. With that being said, there are different guidelines that are used to determine if a veteran meets the correct requirement to receive benefits. Specifically, there are discrepancies if National Guard, Reserves, and active duty members fit the status of a veteran (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Vacchi (2012) expanded the federal definitions of veteran to include "any student who is a current or former member of the active-duty military, the National Guard, or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience, legal veteran status, or GI Bill use" (p. 17).

Given the increased access to US higher education for veterans, much of the current research centers on how support services aid in transitions and success (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Kirchner, 2015; Morris et al., 2019; Wheeler, 2012). Notably, many campuses have created veteran services offices as a central hub of support for student veterans. Ackerman et al. (2009) found that

some combat veterans had positive experiences with their campus veteran service offices, while some spoke of negative experiences. Nonetheless, scholars have noted that veteran service offices provide student veterans with a safe space to interact free of judgment with those who have had similar experiences and who may share similar backgrounds (Kirchner, 2015; Summerlot & Parker, 2009). For those who hold veteran status and identify as such, these targeted services offices may be a safe space. However, those who do not meet the government criteria to be assigned the status of a veteran, who had negative or hostile experiences in the military, or those who may not internally identify as a veteran may feel less comfortable utilizing these services if they choose to use them at all.

In addition to examining student veterans' use of support services, scholars have examined how grade point average varies based on military-connected student experiences (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017), how the type of military involvement influences overall college experience (Nyaronga & Toma, 2015; Vaccaro, 2015), and how student veterans' personal strengths impact their capacities for success on college campuses (Olsen et al., 2014). That being said, researchers have given increasing attention to veterans' mental health, since 25% of veterans who have served overseas are subsequently diagnosed with a mental illness, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (McCaslin et al., 2013). However, veterans are less likely to seek out support for mental health services on a college campus, due to the stigmatized sign of weakness that asking for help commonly is associated with in the military (Romero et al., 2015). Accordingly, researchers have also examined how psychological symptoms affect student veterans' academic performance (Bryan et al., 2014; Campbell & Riggs, 2015; Nyaronga & Toma, 2015; Romero et al., 2015).

VETERAN IDENTITY AND SUPPORT FRAMEWORKS

In 2011, the literature on student veterans began to shift and started to attend to veteran identity (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Lancaster et al., 2018; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) combined three frameworks: (a) Moving In, Moving Through, Moving Out (Schlossberg et al., 1989); (b) Identity Development Model (Marcia, 1966); and (c) the Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) to create their own model of veteran identity. Their model places students into a typology based on different levels they may be at in their identity development. The helix-like structure they developed has a core that is referred to as the "unified self" (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 59). Different societal dimensions such as gender, race, culture, and sexual orientation influence

the unified self and the societal dimensions influence the student differently depending on their importance to them. Acknowledging the relevance of identity salience, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) characterized student veterans' identities into one of four types: (a) ambivalent, (b) skeptic, (c) emerging, and (d) fulfilled civilian self. While this model provides insight into the development of veteran identity, it has yet to be empirically tested.

In one of the few empirical studies of veterans' identity, Lancaster et al. (2018) used the Warrior Identity Scale (WIS) to "examine the factor structure and convergent validity of the WIS in a large sample of military veterans" (p. 36) in the Chicagoland area of the US. The WIS examined factors thought to be relevant to veteran identity such as identity exploration, identity commitment, public regard for the military, private regard for the military, military centrality, military as family, and military connection (Lancaster, et al., 2018). Ultimately, Lancaster et al.'s results highlighted "the multidimensional nature of military-related identity, as the relationship between functioning and identity differed both by the valence of functioning and the dimension of identity under study" (p. 41). While their work validated that military identity was multidimensional, it did not speak to how these factors interact and affect how individuals make meaning of their veteran identity. Moreover, the WIS has yet to be used to examine veteran identity development among college students and there may be additional factors to consider given these individuals' educational and social contexts.

In contrast to models and measures of veteran identity, Vacchi and Berger (2014) created a conceptual model for student veteran support. This conceptual model focused on "the individual student veteran as opposed to a linear institutional paradigm, applies veteran-friendly propositions, and suggests four cornerstones to support pathways to successful completion" (p. 128). As they expanded on earlier studies, they realized that the retention and persistence of student veterans was an intermediate goal; the end goal for both student veterans and higher education as a whole is degree attainment. Synthesizing emerging and existing research, Vacchi and Berger (2014) found four key areas or cornerstones that best support student veterans in their college environment: (a) services provided to student veterans, (b) faculty interactions, (c) transitional support both entering and throughout college, and (d) support that students receive from peers and organizations. Whereas most research takes into account student veterans as a whole, this conceptual model acknowledged that each student veterans' experience is affected by how they interact with the cornerstones surrounding them. Yet, it did not fully attend to how identity relates to engagement with these campus cornerstones.

While the extant literature has highlighted factors that affect student veterans' transition to college, their collegiate experiences, and their college outcomes, there is limited research that has empirically examined how student veterans conceptualize their veteran identity. As such, this study sought to refine our understanding of how individuals' make meaning of being a student veteran and the factors that affect the salience of their veteran identity. Previous veteran identity frameworks (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Lancaster, et al., 2018) have focused on how veterans' environments have impacted them and describe a more ideal or achieved form of veteran identity. In contrast, we sought to understand individuals' veteran identity salience and did not assume that a "better" or singular veterans' identity existed.

METHODOLOGY

Given the aims of this study, we used a basic or descriptive constructivist design since we sought to "*understand* how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 24, emphasis in original) as student veterans. Descriptive qualitative methodology is well suited for conducting research on a topic that has not been largely theorized yet (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Sandelowski, 2000). When conducting this research, we were not guided by any "pre-existing theoretical and philosophical commitments" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 337), which increased our desire to utilize a descriptive qualitative approach versus another methodology.

The result of a descriptive qualitative study is to provide an in-depth, descriptive summary of the research topic that "best contains the data collected and that will be most relevant to the audience for whom it was written" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 339). Because of this, Sandelowski (2000) noted that many times descriptive qualitative research provides the early foundation for subsequent grounded theory or phenomenology studies. Our research was designed to examine a topic that has had little attention placed on it, and then to utilize that information to better inform the work of scholars and practitioners who work with student veterans daily. A descriptive qualitative approach to this inquiry allowed us to meet our aims in the most effective way.

POSITIONALITY

As scholars engaged in constructivist research (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), it was imperative that we acknowledge how our identities and lived experiences influenced our work. The lead author is a white woman who does not come from a military background. She worked

alongside student veterans while enrolled in her graduate program and these interactions sensitized her to the varied experiences and needs of those who use veteran support services. The second author is a second-generation Filipina American woman, who has limited experience working with student veterans. Although she is not military connected, she has several family members and friends who served in various branches of the military, which sensitized her to experience of serving in and of leaving the armed forces. Though we had some relationships with student veterans, we entered this research as outsiders and worked to attend to assumptions we had about this group of students, their identity salience, and their experience throughout the design and execution of this research.

DATA COLLECTION SITE

Our study was conducted at a large, predominantly white, land-grant institution in the Midwest US. Summerlot and Parker (2009) found that US land-grant institutions have more positive campus environments surrounding veteran students. Due to the nature of our research study, we received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Iowa State University, Institutional Review Board approval #17-388.

According to the US Department of Veteran Affairs (n.d.), 806 students at the institution were utilizing GI Benefits at the time of data collection. Due to the large number of veterans this campus supports, the veterans' services office has implemented programs to support the transition, academic success, and matriculation of veterans. For example, the veterans' services office provides academic support, educational workshops, and tutoring funds for those in need. The staff in the office also works to build community by hosting a weekly dinner to allow students to connect with fellow veterans and their families. The veterans' services office also sponsors student organizations and peer-led support groups that veterans can take part in to aid in the transition from military to civilian life.

PARTICIPANTS

We worked with the veterans' services office at our data collection site to recruit participants from the veteran community. We recruited participants by asking the director of the veterans' services office to forward an email to the veterans' student list-serv inviting them to participate in the study. Although students were not asked to share any personal information when they emailed to express interest in the study, some shared the branch they served in and their student type (i.e., graduate or undergraduate student). If students shared demographic information about themselves (e.g., race, gender) we

took this information into consideration when selecting participants.

Ultimately, 15 individuals were purposefully selected to create maximum variation within the sample (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) with respect to military branches, student type, and socially constructed identities. The final sample of 15 participants was compositionally diverse (see **Table 1**). With respect to racialized identities, 13 participants were white, one was Hispanic/Latinx, and one was Black. Twelve participants were men and three were women. Nine participants were graduate students and six were undergraduate students; they ranged in age from early 20s to late 60s. Participants also represented multiple branches of the military including: Navy (2), Air Force (4), Air National Guard (1), Army National Guard (1), Army (2), and Marines (5). Eleven participants had been deployed during their service and four had not.

DATA COLLECTION

Participants engaged in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews that varied from 20 to 90 minutes. The interviews explored how significant the veteran identity was in participants' social circles (e.g., family, friends, veteran community), how it was affected by their military experiences (e.g., length of service, branch, role), and how other identities related to being a veteran. To understand how individuals made meaning of their veteran identity,

all participants were initially asked, "What does being a veteran mean to you?" Subsequently, we asked questions:

- "Where, if ever, is being a veteran most salient to you?"
- "How do you view your veteran identity when you are surrounded by other individuals who have served in the military?"
- "In what ways, if at all, do you feel other identities affects your view of being a veteran?"

Each participant was compensated with a \$15 gift card to the campus bookstore. The interviews were audio-recorded then transcribed by a professional transcription service.

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze the data collected during the interview, we coded each interview to identify common themes. During open coding (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), we reviewed the transcripts to identify factors that influenced the extent to which participants felt like a veteran. Factors we identified during open coding included things such as being in a military family, deployment status, and gender. After each interview was open coded, our insights were documented in a memo that recorded our observations about a particular participant's veteran identity salience and the specific factors that influenced this salience. We recorded our insights across interviews and memos in

PSEUDONYM	ACADEMIC STATUS	BRANCH	YEARS IN MILITARY	NUMBER OF DEPLOYMENTS	RACE	GENDER
Ashley	Graduate	Navy	10 w/ROTC	2	White	Woman
Brayden	Graduate	Air National Guard	9	1	White	Man
Carl	Undergraduate	Air Force	6	0	White	Man
Charlie	Undergraduate	Marines	12.5	2	White	Man
Chaz	Graduate	Air Force	5	1	White	Man
Christopher	Graduate	Army National Guard	6	0	White	Man
Henry	Graduate	Air Force	4.5	1	White	Man
Jack	Graduate	Army	3	0	White	Man
Jim	Graduate	Marines	4	2	White	Man
Kevin	Undergraduate	Marines	5	3	White	Man
Lydia	Undergraduate	Navy	4	3	White	Woman
Rick	Graduate	Marines	5	2	Hispanic	Man
Shelly	Graduate	Marines	8	1	White	Woman
Shivers	Undergraduate	Air Force	6	1	White	Man
Victor	Undergraduate	Army	5	0	Black	Man

Table 1 Participant Demographics.

a coding workbook with illustrative quotes, which were then used to identify key factors affecting veteran identity salience across participants.

We then utilized axial coding to relate categories to their subcategories, while at the same time testing the relationships against the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Jones et al., 2014). For example, we found that many participants spoke of not feeling like a “true” veteran at some point during their interviews that we eventually categorized as the extent to which they felt they had fulfilled their duty as a veteran. Subsequently, we engaged in selective coding which allowed us to move to larger core categories that explained the “central phenomenon” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 14) of the study, namely veterans’ identity salience and the factors that affect it. During the selective coding process, we reached saturation and identified the core concepts related to our research questions (Jones et al., 2014).

Throughout the coding process, we regularly discussed our insights to enhance the trustworthiness of our research (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These conversations allowed us to discuss the coding process, data we struggled to make meaning of, and what factors we thought were most prevalent across participants’ interviews. When we had different interpretations of the data, we returned to the interviews and discussed our insights until we came to a shared understanding of the findings. Thus, the trustworthiness of our work was enhanced through pooled judgment (Jones et al., 2014; Krefting, 1991).

LIMITATIONS

This study provides great insight into student veterans’ identity salience, but it has limited transferability (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). We interviewed 15 participants at one predominantly white, land-grant institution in the Midwest US, and recognize that while we are theorizing about the factors that influence student veterans’ identity salience, our findings may not be relevant to those in other national and institutional contexts. They may also have limited transferability for racially minoritized or LGBTQIA veterans given the composition of our sample. Furthermore, we only interviewed participants one time. We were able to ascertain the factors that influenced veteran identity salience at the time of the interview, but our research design did not allow us to examine if and how this salience shifts over time. Thus, the findings to follow highlight factors that influenced student veterans’ identity salience in a static way but did not attend to the dynamic way these factors may shift in relevance for participants over the course of the life span.

FINDINGS

Our findings suggest six factors impact US veteran identity saliency: (a) fulfilling their duty, (b) multiple social identities, (c) sociopolitical context when service ended, (d) family connection to the military, (e) connectedness to military community, and (f) duration of service. The extent to which these factors appear depends on each individual’s experience in the military and after completing their service.

FULFILLING THEIR DUTY

The first factor we found related to the extent veterans felt they had fulfilled their duty while serving in the military. To each veteran this fulfillment looked different, but it appeared to be tied into deployment. Even if a veteran had been deployed, the length and number of deployments ultimately impacted this factor. Along with deployments, participants also discussed how the overall mission of the military during their time of service heavily influenced if they felt they fulfilled their duty.

During his interview, Victor spoke about the discomfort he felt in hearing civilians say “Thank you for your service,” or accepting offers to pay for his meals since he had not been deployed. Victor shared, “If I deployed, I wouldn’t say I’d be more willing to accept it, but I’d be more grateful.” Christopher, who had never deployed, shared his concerns as well:

It’s not something I’ve experienced, so I would say in some circles, people would maybe look at me as maybe less of a veteran, which in some ways I can see that because I haven’t had that significant experience that they’ve had.

Even veterans who had been deployed, shared concerns related to this factor. For example, Kevin did not seem to view his deployment in the same way he viewed the deployment of those who had been in combat:

I was part of the generation, or, am part of the generation that didn’t get to go to Afghanistan and see actual combat even though I served in the infantry for five years to be trained for essentially what ended up being nothing. All of our deployments were training and being so close, but not quite ever actually getting to do our jobs.

In many of the interviews the topic of US holidays associated with veterans came up and the discomfort that develops during these days. There seemed to be an

element of feeling as if they did not do enough to deserve the benefits provided to veterans on these days. Lydia said, “I don’t go out for Memorial Day or Veteran’s Day. I don’t indulge in those benefits ... that’s for those guys that do the hardcore stuff.” Lydia’s comment suggests that she did not feel as though she had earned the rights to the same benefits as veterans who do the “hardcore stuff,” which may have referred to being deployed and engaging in combat.

MULTIPLE SOCIAL IDENTITIES

The second factor that impacted participants’ veteran identity salience was the social identities that they held in addition to being a veteran. Many participants spoke about how their sex, gendered, and racialized identities related to how they understood themselves as veterans.

Racialized Identity

As participants reflected upon how being a veteran related to their racialized identity, there were varied responses. For the few racially minoritized participants in our study, regardless of their veteran status, their race was made most salient to them. Victor, a Black man, described how others attended to this race before his veteran identity:

Then with race, especially in this day and age, still no one looks at my veteran status or sees me as a soldier first. It’s oh he’s a Black guy on campus. They might be someone with the athletics department ... So I know my unit said like you’re always a soldier first. And to me I have to laugh at that because in my reality I’m Black first, then I’m soldier second, and then I’m American third. That’s like, I don’t want it to be that way, but that’s how it’s seen.

Victor’s quote highlights the reality of being a Black man in the military and in the US where whiteness is normalized. For Victor, race was central to how he was viewed in the world and as such, it would always supersede his veteran identity and nationality. The dominance of whiteness in the US dictated that as a Black man, Victor had limited control of how he was seen, which in turn shaped the internal salience of his veteran identity.

In contrast, Charlie, a white man, did not view race as relevant to his veteran identity because he did not have to:

One other thing that they teach us, or they instill in us, is race kind of just bleeds away. Yeah, you can be of a certain skin tone. But at the end of the day, for us all that matters is you wear a green shirt underneath your superman uniform ... Everybody is equally worthless, you’re all garbage until proven

otherwise. Everybody is on equal footing regardless of race, gender, sex, creed. So it didn’t matter.

It is important to note the contrasting quotes between Charlie and Victor based on their racialized identities. As white man, it was easier for Charlie’s race to “bleed away” since whiteness is normalized in the US, whereas Victor did not have the privilege to not be cognizant of race. As such, being a Black man remained at the forefront of who Victor was before his veteran identity.

The notion of race being absent in the military was common among our white participants. Kevin, a white man said, “that was kind of cool about going to the military is nobody cares about what your race is.” His perspective mirrored Charlie’s and his identity as a veteran was evasive of race. Compared to those that had served more recently, Henry, also a white man, shared a unique perspective on diversity and race as someone who served in the 1970s. Reflecting upon his experiences, Henry said, “There was absolutely no emphasis on diversity. Outside in the military, I worked with all races, creeds, colors, no problem.” For Henry, the presence of people of different “races, creeds, colors” meant that diversity was not an issue, yet for those hold minoritized racial identities like Victor, race does matter and affects how they conceptualize themselves as a veteran.

Some white participants acknowledged the impact that minoritized identities might have on veteran identity. Shivers, a white man, shared:

I can see how those [minoritized identities] affect other veterans, being a female veteran or being a Black female veteran or being a Black veteran or anything like that. Me being a white male ... I think it will just get the general consensus.

As someone who does not hold minoritized identities, Shivers was able to see how being a white man may have benefited him in the military since he was part of the “general consensus.” In other words, he was considered to be the norm in the military. Jim, also a white man, addressed the impact race and gender have in the military:

How can you say that your race and gender don’t, in some way, shape your perception of the world? Certainly, with the military, the Marines especially, there’s a contradiction. I served in the infantry unit ... there’s absolutely a lot of masculinity, a lot of gendered language, gendered behavior, but at the same time, and even to some extent in some cases, some racial behavior.

Jim recognized the contradiction of race and gender evasive thinking in the military since he observed “gendered language, gendered behavior ... and ... some racial behavior.” While he did not directly address race, he was aware that the traditional, conservative, masculine norms of the Marines could affect women or those who did not uphold and enact those views.

Gendered Identity

Many participants discussed gender as being relevant to their veteran identity. During Christopher’s interview, he equated the military to a “boys’ club” and said, “being in the military maybe just heightens my masculine identity.” Whereas Christopher felt affirmed as a man, all of the women in our study shared a story or experience of feeling as if they were on the “outside” of being a veteran because of their gender.

For example, Ashley said, “the biggest thing that defined me [in the military] was gender.” She called herself a “square peg in a round hole” as a woman in the military since the environment reflected the “boys’ club” Christopher described and that sense of otherness continued after her service. Ashley lamented, “I frequently feel at odds with the generally accepted identity of what a veteran is ... if I do read articles, or I do read research about veterans, it doesn’t feel like it applies to me.” As Ashley continued, it became apparent that she felt a disconnect with being a veteran due to the way society has crafted the image of veterans as she shared, “I mean, in society in general, they assume guys are veterans.” Since people assumed veterans were men, the work Ashley read about veterans signaled to her that she is not the norm and perhaps that she was not a “real” veteran.

Given societal assumptions that veterans are men, women participants shared powerful stories of situations where their veteran identity was erased because someone assumed the men around them were veterans, not them. Lydia’s experience came when she was out for Veterans Day with her family:

This last Veterans Day, my two cousins and I didn’t know it, but my dad had ordered a little cake thing ‘cause of Veterans Day. It said, “Happy Veterans Day,” and he [my dad] was going to give it to me ‘cause I’m the only veteran in my family. So, he’s super proud of me. He ordered it and they came over and they handed it to my cousin who’s a guy and they’re like, “Happy Veterans Day.” And then my dad’s like, “Oh.” And then they’re like, “Are you the veteran?” And they handed it to my dad, and then I’m like, “Actually, that’s me,” and they’re like, “Oh, okay.” I mean obviously I was just like okay, like you

know, no big deal, but at the same time it was kind of like, that sucks.

These women received messages that erased or minimized their veteran identity since they were not men. These women were given the message that since they did not fit the societal view of a veteran, they were less than or unworthy of the title. For Lydia, a day that was supposed to be celebratory minimized her veteran identity by ascribing it to the men in her company. While she said it was “no big deal,” it erased a part of who she was, which in her words, “sucks.”

SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT WHEN SERVICE ENDED

The third factor that influenced participants’ veteran identity salience was the sociopolitical context of the United States. The sociopolitical context seemed to make the most impact as a veteran’s service was ending and they were getting reconnected with civilian life. When speaking to sociopolitical context, many participants referred to politics in some way. In particular, participants were sensitive to the leadership in the country at the time of their service and how it influenced their experiences discussing their connection to the military.

Jack, a white man, shared that politically he leans more to the left, but felt he “had to hide that all the time in the military,” since many people around him were more conservative as was the administration under which he served. Specifically, Jack was concerned that President Trump took the same oath he did as a military member. He said, “I remember being incredibly infuriated ‘cause I knew it didn’t mean anything to him.” Similarly, Victor voiced concerns about serving during the Trump administration:

If there’s a protest against like Donald Trump for example, I can’t go out and protest with them even if I don’t believe in half his policies because he’s technically my boss ... So keeping that in mind, especially the history of Black soldiers in the military, getting the double-edged sword because on the one hand we did all these great things but then we come home and we had a history of still having to go through different social issues.

While Victor did not agree with all of President Trump’s policies and viewpoints, he did not feel as though he could voice dissent as a member of the military. In effect, participants who did not agree with their Commander in Chief could not express disagreement, and for some tensions with the President’s political ideology made it more difficult to feel connected to the military. For Victor,

that fear of expressing dissent was compounded by being a Black man who was aware that veteran status did not exempt Black veterans from experiencing racism.

A few participants shared their frustration that society has the automatic assumption that veterans hold the same political views as the president. Shivers stated, “People associate Trump with military or people see the military then associate that with the government. And so people who hate the government, hate the military.” This quote highlights the challenges that come with being a member of the military and the potential backlash that veterans may experience within a sociopolitical environment that they perceive to be anti-military. In turn, identifying as a veteran or at least stating so publicly may also be a challenge when veterans have the sense that people dislike the government and in turn that they do not like the military.

Thus, the sociopolitical context also extends beyond political climate and attends to the varied response society has to veterans. Views of and responses to the military can change throughout time, and ultimately have an impact on how comfortable these individuals feel in disclosing they are a veteran. Rick served in the 1980s and compared his experience with those of more recent veterans, “Because the new generation, they get welcomed, they get discounts. We got jack shit when we got back.”

Henry who served in the 1970s in the wake of the US anti-war Vietnam war movement, had a similar experience to Rick. Looking back, Henry said, “It was uncool to be in the military” when he served. Henry added an important contextual comparison of how views of the military have changed over the past few decades. When he and Rick left the military, being a veteran was “uncool” and it was not lauded as it is for those who served more recently. Given the public disdain for veterans at the time of their service, Rick and Henry may have been less likely to discuss this identity or their experiences in the military than the peers who served more recently.

FAMILY CONNECTION TO THE MILITARY

The fourth factor that impacted participants’ veteran identity salience was family connection to the military. Those who had family members who had served described a strong connection between family and their veteran identity. When Jack spoke of coming from a military family he said, “I guess there’s some shared experience there that we can talk about.” Jim and Ashley both talked about the “bonds” they now have with their dads due to their shared military experience. For others like Brayden, this family connection is what ultimately influenced his decision to join the military. Brayden said, “He [his father] brought me out and showed me the jets when I was really young, and

I knew that was what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.” This interaction Brayden had with his dad at young age had a lasting impact on his future and the direction his life ultimately took.

CONNECTEDNESS TO MILITARY COMMUNITY

The fifth factor that shaped veterans’ identity salience was their degree of connectedness to the military community. The phrase “shared experience” was used continually throughout interviews. Rick said, “Those guys are my family. That’s what being a veteran is to me. It’s probably because of the shared experience you have.” In addition to the shared experiences that participants spoke of, there was a general theme of comfort discussed when they mentioned being around other veterans. Jim described his feelings when in the presence of other veterans, “You feel a different kind of comfort.” In some regards, a shared experience meant that participants did not need to explain themselves to other veterans and that they felt understood.

While participants did not always define their “shared experience,” it was evident that for many, this shared experience comes from participating in the “misery” together as Charlie called it. Kevin and Lydia also shared similar thoughts as Charlie. Lydia mentioned, “it’s like that hardship that bonds you. Those guys will forever be my family.” Kevin agreed, “Every memory I still have of the military isn’t necessarily the great ones but it’s the ones where we just kind of were miserable together.”

Rick illuminated the unbreakable connection that comes within the military community. He knew the exact date that his service ended and it was evident that that date held immense power in his life. Rick emotionally shared:

The day I got out of the Marine Corps ... I cried. I absolutely cried and it was really weird. It’s probably because you’re leaving the family. ... There’s nothing else like it. You’re leaving the family, for better or for worse. You’re leaving that ... intensity. You’re leaving a family that’s closer than your mom and dad. Closer than brothers. Closer than your wife and I’ve been married 34 years. People don’t realize that. People don’t care.

Rick’s quote highlighted the lasting connection that serving in the military has, and the unbelievable strength of the bonds he formed during military service. Rick was in the military for five years, yet he said the bond he has with those in the military is stronger than that of his wife who he has been married to for 34 years. It is clear the relationships formed in those 5 years were not something that is easily forgotten.

Although the strength of the military community was very strong for most participants, Victor shared a slightly different perspective. He said:

For me I feel a little out of place generally because on this campus a lot of individuals [who use the veterans' services office] have already deployed ... And for someone who's never deployed who's on the way younger side of things and they're not my race, some of the conversations, they're not ill conversations, but they're definitely ones where I feel like I can't participate in. ... I still feel very isolated because of my other demographics I identify with.

For Victor, his race, youth, and lack of deployment influenced his connectedness, or lack thereof, with the military community. Although the veterans' services office on campus was designed to create community and to provide services for student veterans, Victor felt "a little out of place," since he was not the norm in the group. In some regards, his feelings of isolations were compounded rather than diminished by his efforts to connect with the veteran community on campus.

DURATION OF SERVICE

The final factor that impacted participants' veteran identity salience was duration of service. As Charlie put it, "Whether it's 3 years, 36 months, or 30 years you've served, when you lose that [speaking of the structure of the military], everything changes for you." Chaz, who is currently an active-duty service member, shared that that the longer he is in the military the more he could see it becoming "a much larger part of who I am." Chaz associated more years in the military with a stronger veteran identity that would become increasingly salient. For others such as Jim, the duration of time came in the form of recognizing how the service has impacted him long after it has ended. Jim said, "I hit the point where I had been out longer than I had been in, that was a moment of sadness for me." For Jim, it appeared that the more years he spent out of the military, the more removed he may have felt from his veteran identity, which seemed to cause some sadness and evoke a sense of loss for him.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this research was to gain insight into the development and salience of veteran identity among US student veterans, separate from their assigned veteran status. We believe the findings are useful for veteran

communities and student affairs professionals. This research is particularly insightful for those who do not come from a military background but hope to better understand the experiences veterans encounter. Previous models of veteran identity (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Lancaster et al., 2018; Vacchi & Berger, 2014) focused on student veterans' transition to college, their collegiate experiences, and their college outcomes, but little on how veterans come to conceptualize their veteran identity. Our findings add to educators' understandings of how individuals' make meaning of being a student veteran and the factors that affect the salience of their veteran identity. The salience of veteran identity may in turn influence how students experience and engage with their campus environments (Ackerman et al., 2009; Nyaronga & Toma, 2015; Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

Notably, our findings highlight the fluidity of veteran identity. In contrast to DiRamio and Jarvis (2011), there was not an ultimate end goal to attain with one's veteran identity since we found it was flexible and ever changing. Each interview addressed moments where the participant felt closer to their veteran identity and moments where they felt further away from it, sometimes within seconds of each other. For example, Ashley felt a stronger tie to her veteran identity when she was with her family since several members of her family had served. In contrast, she was more distanced from her veteran identity when reading literature about veterans since is centered men and did not speak to experiences like hers.

Our findings reinforce that veterans' assigned status may not necessarily align with their internal veteran identity. Veteran status is assigned based on criteria from the government and does not hold this same sense of fluidity, whereas an identity holds the ability to quickly change and evolve based on social situations, multiple identities, and the sociopolitical environment. In this regard, we add to the literature by framing veteran identity as one that is socially (re)constructed by individuals as they make meaning of their experiences rather than one that is assumed to be static and assigned.

In addition to drawing attention to the difference between veteran identity and status, this research adds to the literature with empirical evidence. Scholars had conceptual models (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Vacchi & Berger, 2014) that were not supported strongly by empirical evidence. Our research examined veterans' experiences and how they relate to their veteran identity, which has not been explored in depth. Although our study adds to educators' understandings of veteran identity, additional research is needed. Given the relevance of socially constructed identities (e.g., race, gender) on veterans' identity, scholars should consider examining identity

development among women veterans and individuals who do not hold traditional, masculine identities. Since we only interviewed participants once, it would be beneficial for researchers to engage in longitudinal studies to examine how veteran identity saliency shifts and changes over time, particularly as veterans get further away from their military experience. Lastly, future research should explore the impact of geographic area on the development and salience of veteran identity. Our participants attended a large, land-grant institution in the Midwest known to be military friendly, and this may have helped veterans feel more comfortable sharing their veteran identity. The salience of veteran identity may shift if participants were living in an area with a smaller population of veterans or if there the campus and local community were not perceived as being supportive of the military. Veteran identity may also hold different meaning in countries where service is required of eligible citizens rather than in nations like the US where military service is currently voluntary.

Our findings also inform how student affairs educators may support the development of veteran identity, and each factor may be used to improve practice. The first factor, fulfillment of duty, is important to note as educators refer and connect students with veterans' service offices. If student veterans do not feel like *true* veterans who have not earned this identity, they may not utilize the mentorship, academic assistance, and overall support systems designed to support veteran student success. They could view the veterans' services offices as a place for those veterans who went through the "hardcore stuff," as Lydia called it. That being said, it is imperative for educators to reinforce the idea that all veterans deserve and are welcome to engage in programs and services designed for military connected students.

If student veterans perceive themselves as being worthy and welcome in spaces designed to support them, this may enhance their connectedness to military community, another factor that influenced identity salience. Many veterans vocalized the strength that comes in being surrounded by others who have a shared experience of being in the military. For many of the participants, the strength of this community was felt even stronger than that of the bonds with their siblings or partner. The two factors are closely tied together because in order to connect students with the military community, educators first need to understand how their ideas around fulfilling their duty as a service member may prevent them from engaging with that community. Accordingly, institutions should engage in ongoing evaluation to understand veteran students' needs and the factors that may support or detract from

their inclination from engaging with veterans' support services. In particular, educators may need to do targeted outreach to those who are designated veterans but who do not engage in the campus military community to better understand their needs, interests, and experiences.

We also urge educators to attend to multiple social identities since experiences based on racialized and gendered identities can affect the salience of students' veteran identity. Many participants noted the masculine norms of the military and the subsequent invisibility of women veterans. With this in mind, veterans' services offices should develop specific mentoring, community building, and support structures for women veterans whose needs may not be met in environments that reinforce masculine norms and patriarchy. Similarly, the United States and its military normalizes whiteness despite claims that race does not matter. In turn, veterans who are racially minoritized may not feel welcome in veteran communities that do not acknowledge their racialized experiences or they may be explicitly excluded since they do not fit the norm. Accordingly, veterans' services offices should consider creating specific programming and mentoring opportunities for veterans of color.

Furthermore, educators should consider developing partnerships across offices to ensure adequate support for veterans' who hold multiple marginalized identities. For example, veterans' support services can partner with women's centers, multicultural affairs, and LGBTQIA centers to ensure students' multiple identities and needs are acknowledged, validated, and supported. Those who do not feel safe entering into veteran spaces that uphold and center whiteness, patriarchy, and heteronormativity may benefit from these coordinated services. Concurrently, students may also benefit from identity-centered services that recognize being military connected also affects their experiences on campus.

Finally, educators should consider how sociopolitical context affects student veterans' identity salience and subsequent behavior. Student veterans may be viewed positively based on their service, but they can also be marginalized or stigmatized based on their military affiliation. These perceptions may influence students' inclinations to use veterans' support services and if they disclose this identity to others. Additionally, US military policies such as Don't Ask, Don't Tell and trans exclusion have shaped veterans' service and how they conceptualize their veteran identity. In sum, educators need to be cognizant of shifting views of the military and of the dynamic nature of veterans' identities if institutions are to holistically support their development and success.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

MaKayla Schroeder  orcid.org/0000-0003-1305-8570
Bellin College, US

Rosemary J. Perez  orcid.org/0000-0002-4005-4172
University of Michigan, US

REFERENCES

- Ackerman, R., DiRamio, D., & Mitchell, R. L.** (2009). Transitions: Combat veterans as college students. *New Directions for Student Services*, 1(126), 5–14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.311>
- Blackwell-Starnes, K.** (2020). Introduction. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 6(3), 10–11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i3.221>
- Bryan, C., Bryan, A., Hinkson, K., Bichrest, M., & Ahern, D.** (2014). Depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and grade point average among student service members and veterans. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, 51(7), 1035–1046. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1682/JRRD.2014.01.0012>
- Campbell, R., & Riggs, S.** (2015). The role of psychological symptomatology and social support in the academic adjustment of previously deployed student veterans. *Journal of American College Health*, 63(7), 473–481. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2015.1040408>
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A.** (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13(1), 3–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00988593>
- DiRamio, D., Ackerman, R., & Mitchell, R.** (2008). From combat to campus: Voices of student-veterans. *NASPA Journal*, 45(1), 73–102. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2202/1949-6605.1908>
- DiRamio, D., & Jarvis, K.** (2011). *Veterans in higher education: When Johnny and Jane Come marching to campus*, ASHE Higher Education Report, 37(3). Jossey-Bass. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/aehe.v37.3>
- Green, L., & Dusen, R. V.** (2012). Welcome home: understanding and serving veteran transition and identity development in college. *Ideas and Research You Can Use: VISTAS*, 1(1), 1–8. Retrieved from https://www.counseling.org/resources/library/vistas/vistas12/article_4.pdf
- Hinton, C. E.** (2020). “I Just Don’t Like to Have My Car Marked”: Nuancing identity attachments and belonging in student veterans. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 6(3), 84–100. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i3.211>
- Jones, S. R., & McEwen, M. K.** (2000). A conceptual model of multiple dimension of identity. *Journal of College Student Development*, 41(4), 405–414.
- Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J.** (2014). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education* (2nd ed). Routledge.
- Kirchner, M.** (2015). Supporting student veteran transition to college and academic success. *American Association for Adult & Continuing Education*, 26(3), 116–123. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159515583813>
- Krefting, L.** (1991). Rigor in qualitative research: The assessment of trustworthiness. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 45, 214–222. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.45.3.214>
- Lancaster, S. L., Kintzle, Kintzle, S., & Castro, C. A.** (2018). Validation of the Warrior Identity Scale in the Chicagoland Veterans study. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, 18(1), 34–43. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1080/015283488.2017.1410157>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2017.1410157>
- Marcia, J. E.** (1966). Development and validation of ego-identity status. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 3(5), 551–558. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0023281>
- McCaslin, S., Leach, B., Herbst, E., & Armstrong, K.** (2013). Overcoming barriers to care for returning veterans: Expanding services to college campuses. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, 50(8), 7–14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1682/JRRD.2013.09.0204>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J.** (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Merriam-Webster.** (2021). *Salient*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/salience>
- Morris, P. A., Albanesi, H. P., & Cassidy, S.** (2019). Student veterans’ perceptions of barriers, support, and environment at a high-density veteran enrollment campus. *Journal of Veteran Studies*, 4(2), 180–202. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v4i2.102>
- Nyaronga, D., & Toma, R.** (2015). Student service members/ veterans’ mental health: Who is at a greater risk for posttraumatic stress symptoms on college campuses? *Military Psychology*, 27(4), 223–231. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/mil0000079>
- Olsen, T., Badger, K., & McCuddy, M. D.** (2014). Understanding the student veteran’ college experience: An exploratory study. *The Army Medical Department Journal* (pp. 101–108).
- Romero, D. H., Riggs, S. A., & Ruggero, C.** (2015). Coping, family social support, and psychological symptoms among student veterans. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 62(2), 242–252. <https://content.apa.org/doi/10.1037/cou0000061>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000061>

- Sandelowski, M.** (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing & Health*, 23, 334–340. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X\(200008\)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G](https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X(200008)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G)
- Schlossberg, N. K., Lynch, A. Q., & Chickering, A. W.** (1989). *Improving higher education environments for adults*. Jossey-Bass.
- Summerlot, J., Green, S., & Parker, D.** (2009). Student veterans organizations. *New Directions for Student Services*, 1(126), 71–79. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.318>
- Sutton, H.** (2016). Ensuring veterans' success on campus by starting before enrollment. *Enrollment Management Report*, 19(11), 3–5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/emt.30141>
- Thelin, J. R.** (2011). *A history of American higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- US Department of Veteran Affairs.** (n.d.). GI Bill Comparison Tool. Retrieved January 23, 2020, from <https://www.va.gov/gi-bill-comparison-tool/profile/11901115>
- US Department of Veteran Affairs.** (2018). *Education*. <https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/abr/docs/2018-education.pdf>
- Vaccaro, A.** (2015). “It’s not one size fits all”: Diversity among student veterans. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 52(4), 347–358. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2015.1067224>
- Vacchi, D. T.** (2012). Considering student veterans on the twenty-first century college campus. *About Campus*, 17(2), 15–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/abc.21075>
- Vacchi, D. T., & Berger, J. B.** (2014). Student veterans in higher education. In M. B. Paulson (ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (29th ed, pp. 93–151). Springer. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8005-6_3
- Wheeler, H.** (2012). Veterans transition to community college: A case study. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 36(10), 775–792. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2012.679457>
- Williams-Klotz, D., & Gansemer-Topf, A.** (2017). Military-Connected student academic success at 4-year institutions: A multi-institution study. *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(7), 967–982. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2017.0078>

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Schroeder, M., & Perez, R. J. (2022). Exploring the Salience of Veteran Identity for US College Students. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 8(1), pp. 54–66. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v8i1.289>

Submitted: 26 July 2021 Accepted: 20 October 2021 Published: 19 January 2022

COPYRIGHT:

© 2022 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

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