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Los Angeles

Veterans' Perceptions of Mattering and Marginalization on Community College Campuses

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Robert Sambrano

2021

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Veterans' Perceptions of Mattering and Marginalization on Community College Campuses

by

Robert Sambrano

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor William A. Sandoval, Chair

With troop withdrawals in Iraq and the recent U.S. peace treaty with the Taliban in Afghanistan, community colleges can expect more veterans on their campuses in the near future. Many institutions are eager to serve these students but are not certain how to meet their needs. Veteran students contend with a range of issues, from the bureaucracy of veterans' benefits to physical and emotional disabilities. The goal of this study was to understand the experiences and needs of student-veterans as they transition from military service to postsecondary education. The findings are derived from structured interviews with 20 student-veterans attending an urban, mid-sized, California community college. Questions explored how well the school's veterans resource center (VRC) was meeting the needs of the student-veteran participants, what gaps existed between these needs and what the VRC (and campus) offered, what would increase their sense of mattering, and what factors contributed to their marginalization.

The VRC was cited as a helpful resource by a majority of study participants, but most also mentioned limitations, including a lack of veteran-specific resources, deficiencies in general campus resources, and lack of help with the military-to-college transition. Most participants spoke of at least one aspect of their college that made them feel that they mattered, but the same number shared experiences of how they felt marginalized on campus. Belonging was the greatest contributor to feelings of mattering. While some veterans found belonging among faculty, staff, administration, and the general student population, most derived this sense from other veterans on campus. Perceived marginalization came from encounters with the college at large, reacclimating to school, feeling (or being) excluded, and feeling different from other students.

From these findings, institutions can glean the needs of today's college veterans and better understand how to support students who have made the transition from military service to college. The findings add to the currently very limited body of knowledge concerning veterans attending community colleges. As such, they will help VRCs and community college campuses as a whole to more effectively utilize their resources and ensure the success of this important student population.

The dissertation of Robert Sambrano is approved.

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2021

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EXPERTISE   Accomplished community college professor with significant campus and district-wide leadership experience.

EDUCATION   **Educational Leadership Program (Ed.D.)**
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Master of Business Administration
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Professor - Computer Science & Information Systems Department
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- Coordinate Department Lecture Series.
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- AFT 1521 Executive Board Representative.

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Online Education Coordinator
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- Provide instruction in Computer Applications and Office Technologies.
- Coordinate Department Lecture Series.
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- Managed faculty internship program (selection, training, and intern placement)
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Instructor - Computer Software and Career Planning
Vallecitos Center for Employment Training - Hayward, CA
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CHAPTER 1:

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In 2009, Congress passed the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill in an effort to expand benefits to veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. Since then, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (the VA) has provided over $20 billion in educational benefits to 773,000 veterans and their family members (Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, n.d.). In 2017, 18,503 veterans utilized education benefits at California community colleges (the third highest number of G.I. Bill users nationally) across its 116 campuses (N. Gross, 2018). That number swells to 54,368 when combining veterans, active duty servicemembers, and members of the Active Guard Reserve or National Guard (Montgomery et al., 2018). Veterans who enroll in community colleges cite lower barriers to matriculation as well as lower costs that fit their G.I. Bill benefits without requiring them to take on additional debt as their primary reasons for doing so (Jacobs, 2012).

With troop withdrawals in Iraq and the recent U.S. peace agreement with the Taliban in Afghanistan, community colleges can expect an increase in the number of veterans on their campuses in the near future. Many institutions are ready and willing to help these students successfully transition back into civilian life, though they aren't always sure how to meet veterans' needs, which are distinct from those of other students (Richman, 2017). These unique needs arise from a range of fears among veterans. These include: going to college; feeling lost once at college; not knowing how to relate to other students in their classes; feeling like they don't fit in with other students; isolating themselves from other students or interacting only with other veterans on campus; dealing with the red tape that comes with their veterans' benefits; experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that interferes with their studies; coping with

service-related physical disabilities; and learning to turn their minds back on after having shut them down in combat situations (Coll, Oh, Joyce & Coll, 2009). Student-veterans also encounter issues familiar to other non-traditional students, such as being older than traditional-aged students as well as juggling college with family life and jobs (Marcus, 2017).

Importance of the Research

Many veterans have limited employment options upon their return to civilian life due to the recession and to an inventory of skills that does not serve them well outside of the military world. For these reasons, a college education becomes an important tool. Community colleges are particularly helpful, as they can ease the transition to a 4-year institution or create a faster track to employment for those who want to acquire technical skills without a bachelor's degree (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2011). Unfortunately, some veterans return with skills that cannot bring them success at the college level. In community colleges, this manifests in low placement test scores in English and mathematics, which can be attributed to either a lack of preparation or (for some veterans) the extended amount of time since they were last in a classroom environment (Persky & Oliver, 2010).

Also important to consider are the very specific needs that veterans have when they matriculate at any college. As mentioned briefly above, numerous issues affect academic and social support services for reservists and veterans, including feeling different from other students, partners, and families (including children); receiving GEDs in the military and, as a result, needing remedial courses or tutoring for some basic skills in writing, math, and so on; high rates of trauma leading to PTSD; traumatic brain injury (TBI); depression; and substance abuse (Hammond, 2017; Rumann, Rivera & Hernandez, 2011)—all of which are typically invisible conditions. Falkey (2016) underlined these unique needs in her study, emphasizing the

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difference in structure with which veterans struggle in their transition from military to campus culture.

The difficulties encountered by veterans in community colleges are suggested by outcomes data. These students are graduating at a lower rate than non-veteran students. In 2015–2016, veterans accounted for approximately 5% of all undergraduate and graduate enrollment in Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) institutions nationally (Bond Hill et al., 2019). According to the National Veteran Education Success Tracker, 53.6% of the 853,111 veterans who enrolled in fall of 2009 graduated within 6 years, 28% dropped or stopped out, and only 18% were still enrolled (Marcus, 2017). Seventy-four percent of G.I. Bill beneficiaries took 8 years to complete a bachelor's degree (Molina & Morse, 2017).

Recognizing these issues, in April 2012 President Obama issued an executive order establishing principles of excellence for educational institutions serving service members and veterans or their spouses and other family members. President Obama's main concern was to provide safeguards to veterans and others who utilize educational military benefits at institutions of higher education. As such, the executive order established principles that

> …should ensure that these educational institutions provide meaningful information to service members, veterans, spouses, and other family members about the financial cost and quality of educational institutions to assist those prospective students in making choices about how to use their Federal educational benefits; prevent abusive and deceptive recruiting practices that target the recipients of Federal military and veterans educational benefits; and ensure that educational institutions provide high-quality academic and student support services to active-duty service members, reservists,

members of the National Guard, veterans, and military families. (Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, 2012b)

Of particular interest to this study are the "high-quality…student support services" and the requirements that colleges must "designate a point of contact for academic and financial advising (including disability counseling) to assist veteran students…with the successful completion of their studies and with their job searches." Abuse has been reported in this area, including colleges aggressively recruiting veterans with "serious brain injuries and emotional vulnerabilities" (Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, 2012b, para. 2) but not providing the necessary support services to help them succeed in their academic pursuits.

Overview of the Study

Whereas Obama's executive order outlines general requirements to improve program offerings to college veterans, the current study identified veterans' specific needs in order to help colleges in their efforts to provide the appropriate student support services and policies. Colleges that do not have veterans programs may be asking: What would a student resource center that helps veterans (especially combat or Iraq/Afghanistan deployed veterans) in a community college environment look like? And what program elements would satisfy the needs of these students? Even colleges that do have veterans' programs need help refining their efforts to make them more successful and relevant to their campus veterans. This study addressed these questions and concerns about meeting veterans' needs. More specifically, the following research questions guided my inquiry:

1) What campus resources do veterans use to help them with the challenges they face when they attend community college?

2) What resources do veterans identify as missing on their campus that would help them with the challenges they face when they attend community college?

3) What college resources, programs, and policies do veterans identify as increasing their perceptions of "mattering" on their community college campus?

4) What college resources, programs, and policies do veterans identify as increasing their perceptions of "marginality" on their community college campus?

The research focused on veteran servicemembers attending a California community college to understand how their school's veterans resource center (VRC) is or is not fulfilling needs specific to them as veterans. The study was conducted at a community college within the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area, Urban Community College (a pseudonym). I chose this site because it maintains a VRC for its students, has a student population over 15,000, and was likely to yield a sizable veteran student population from which to draw study participants.

Demographics also influenced the selection of the college site. African Americans and Latinos comprise 17% and 12%, respectively, of the U.S. Armed Forces (Parker et al., 2017). African Americans and Latinos are also more likely to access postsecondary education at a community college. Urban Community College's enrollment is approximately 6% Black/African-American and 54% Latino. Student-veterans are also older (Cate & Davis, 2016), and the demographics at this campus skew in that direction—the average age of an Urban Community College student is 30.3 years.

Based on the study findings, institutions can glean the needs of today's college veterans and better understand how to support students who have made the transition from military service to college. The findings add to the currently very limited body of knowledge concerning veterans attending community colleges. As such, they will help VRCs and community college

campuses as a whole to more effectively utilize their resources and ensure the success of this

important student population.

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and Afghanistan created a boom in college

enrollment as veterans returned home and began to use their G.I. Bill benefits (Sander, 2012).

The needs of veterans in college are different than traditional students matriculating directly

from high school, however. Colleges must prepare to meet the needs of Iraq and Afghanistan

veterans by addressing their unique concerns, including PTSD, TBI, depression, substance abuse,

psychological disorders, fear of college, feeling isolated from traditional students, and a sense of

dislocation (Coll et al., 2009).

Community colleges are a top choice for returning veterans utilizing G.I. benefits

(Sander, 2012). Unfortunately, however, veterans graduate at lower rates than other students, and

those who do graduate take longer to do so than their non-veteran counterparts (Carr, 2010).

Research on veteran college students highlights the myriad issues that veterans present with

when they matriculate at their chosen campuses. These issues must be adequately addressed by

colleges, primarily through campus VRCs, in order to increase the likelihood of academic

success for these students.

Thus, this study was grounded in an understanding of community college VRCs and their

program offerings as well as the unique needs and issues of community college student-veterans.

The framework for research was provided by Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering and

marginality. This theory states that students may experience a sense of not fitting in, which can

lead to self-consciousness, irritability, and depression—all of which can affect academic

outcomes. Conversely, those who do feel that they matter to an organization or institution, in this

case their college, will be more involved, more motivated, and have greater success in achieving their goals.

Sections of this chapter review research on veterans as community college students (including factors affecting socialization, integration, and academic performance) as well as student resources available on campus that are both general and veteran-specific. I first briefly review the influx of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans on community college campuses, and then discuss the various factors at play in their transitions from combat to the classroom. I then examine campus resources with an eye on their utility for these war veterans.

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans on Community College Campuses

Troops have returned from the Iraq war, and de-escalation in Afghanistan is nearly complete. Presently there are upwards of 2.6 million post-9/11 veterans in the United States, and that number is expected to grow to 3.5 million (Perkins et al., 2020). By way of comparison, there were 3 million veterans produced by the Vietnam War (T. Gross, 2013). Although our servicemen and women receive extensive training during their military service, it is often highly specialized and focused on skills that are not easily transferable when they enter the civilian job market (Lighthall, 2012). Federal unemployment statistics show that veterans between the ages of 18 and 34 are more likely to face unemployment than civilian workers (Sander, 2012). They therefore turn to their G.I. Bill benefits to fill the education gap and make themselves more marketable.

Through 2011, more than 924,000 veterans had used the education benefits offered through the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill (Sander, 2012). The majority of these veterans chose to use their benefits at public institutions, including community colleges. In California, which claims the

most Post-9/11 G.I. Bill recipients, half of student veterans are enrolled in community colleges (California Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2012).

Although budget cuts have strained many community colleges, their main concern is not simply the influx of veterans matriculating. It is, instead, the special needs of student-veterans that campuses must address. These needs, if not properly addressed, can become "risk factors to student veteran retention and post-secondary completion rates" (Cate et al., 2010, p. 19). Both general and veteran-specific campus services that address these needs could be strained as student veterans utilize them (Cate et al., 2010).

Student-Veterans' Advantages and Challenges

Veterans are able to overcome one of the most daunting obstacles that average students have to face: finding funding for their college education. Although the G.I. Bill has been through several iterations since it first appeared after World War II, the Post-9/11 version continues to support veterans seeking postsecondary education by providing financial assistance. Full benefits amount to "36 months of tuition up to the cost of the most-expensive public college in his or her state" (Sander, 2012). The housing allowance benefit varies by the veteran's location and rank. For example, a sergeant with a family would receive $2,835 in Queens, New York, but only $1,362 a month in San Antonio, Texas (Sander, 2012). Depending on the cost of the chosen institution, tuition, fees, books, and supplies, and living expenses could all be covered by the G.I. Bill.

Aside from financial resources, veterans enrolling in community colleges bring with them a wealth of positive personal attributes that can help them succeed academically. Through their military experience they have developed self-discipline, responsibility, maturity, and self-awareness. They are skilled in time management and goal setting (Ackerman et al., 2009). They

also have the potential to be great resources to their campuses and classrooms. They bring a world view through their experiences in foreign countries and cultures (Cate et al., 2010). They have leadership experiences and have faced challenging situations (Ackerman et al., 2009). They understand sacrifice, are respectful, and, in general, are good role models (Lighthall, 2012). Returning war veterans do have many things going for them when they arrive on campus, but they may also carry many issues that can present challenges and obstacles in their efforts to succeed academically.

Following their retirement, veterans face many transitions—being a parent again, a husband or wife, a son or daughter, a neighbor, a friend, and, for many, the transition from combat veteran to college student. In a study by Ackerman et al. (2009), many participants cited this transition as the most difficult one to make, as underscored by Jones (2017). Learning to negotiate the bureaucracy of the VA, which handles educational and medical benefits, is part of the difficulty of transition. Furthermore, not all campuses have functioning programs in place to assist veterans who have become students.

The average new student may arrive on campus with some trepidation. A new environment, new people, new standards to achieve, and navigating new structures, both physical and organizational, can all be daunting to the newly enrolled. Add to this the specific stressors that come from being a first-generation student, a minority student, a student in need of remediation, a student requiring financial assistance, a student with a disability, and so on. Moreover, combat veterans arrive on campus with their own unique additional needs that can create specific anxieties known only to them. In this section, I discuss some of the most important factors at play in the transition from the military to the classroom.

Mental Health

By January 2008, over 120,000 Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans had been diagnosed with a psychological illness by the VA's mental health services (Glantz, 2010). These veterans were coping with depression, PTSD, and other service-related mental health issues. Studies vary when reporting statistics regarding mental health problems: Hoge et al. (2006) suggested that 20% of veterans had mental health problems; Seal (2007) reported that 30% of veterans received mental health or psychosocial diagnoses. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Defense Task Force on Mental Health (2007) reported that 27% of returning veterans reported significant depression, 24% reported alcohol abuse, and 43% reported problems with anger. These percentages rose among veterans who experienced deployments longer than 6 months and those who served multiple deployments.

Unfortunately, these numbers may underrepresent the problem, as troops often withhold information regarding their well-being during exit interviews because admitting to emotional or mental problems during end-of-combat-deployment debriefing creates a risk of delaying a return home. As a serviceman in the Ackerman et al. (2009) study stated, "They kind of implied to us that if you have problems, you're going to stay longer; nobody wanted to stay longer" (p. 9). Likewise, mental health issues among veterans are often associated with employment issues, such as underemployment and lower wages. For example, Kukla et al. (2015) reported that veterans with PTSD earn less than veterans without it.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

To the layman, PTSD is the most well-known mental issue related to combat service. Once called "shell shock" or "battle fatigue," PTSD emerged in medical terminology after the Vietnam War as veterans returned with "severe and ongoing emotional reactions" to their

combat experiences (Cate et al., 2010). Between 15% and 50% of post-9/11 veterans (320,000 and 800,000 troops) suffer from PTSD (Glantz, 2010). Many student-veterans report experiencing several PTSD-related behaviors at least weekly (Cate et al., 2010; Huang & Kashubeck-West, 2015).

Lighthall (2012) described the physiological events that create PTSD. It arises when the amygdala, the part of the brain that processes emotions, experiences shock. In the case of combat veterans, the shock usually occurs when a person witnesses or experiences combat injuries, or it can come from the stress and anxiety of being "on guard" or in anticipation of a traumatic event. These trauma-induced emotions will "flood the brain with chemicals and commands that leave behind physical imprints that can cause long-term physical, psychological, and emotional distortions" (Lighthall, 2012, p. 87). It can be months or years before a combat veteran stops receiving these signals of danger and the brain's chemistry normalizes (Huang & Kashubeck-West, 2015).

A diagnosis of PTSD can have many ramifications for student-veterans. Some have pointed to PTSD when talking about difficulties they experience at college. Many student-veterans reported experiencing several PTSD-related behaviors at least weekly (Cate et al., 2010). Ackerman et al. (2009) reported that veterans complained about not being able to sit in class for long periods of time, having a limited attention span, experiencing an inability to focus, feeling unable to concentrate, and being impatient. The discipline these students possess is negated by these problems, as they feel unable to accomplish the tasks at hand.

Deployment-related PTSD can also include physical manifestations, such as insomnia, loss of appetite, migraines, racing heartbeat, and hyperventilation (Barry et al., 2012). Even in isolation, any one of these symptoms can disrupt the life of a college-going veteran. Insomnia,

which was reported among the participants in DiRamio et al.'s (2008) study, can by itself cause fatigue, poor concentration, decreased alertness and performance, muscle aches, depression during the day and night, and an over-emotional state resulting in tension, anxiety, irritability, and/or depression.

PTSD can wreak havoc with emotions and moods, resulting in night terrors, flashbacks, anger, fear, nervousness, jumpiness, and hopelessness. Several of the veterans in the Ackerman et al. (2009) study talked about anger and stress that they carried over from their time in combat. Lighthall (2012) pointed to anxiety or injury-related disorganization as a cause for tardiness and absences. Conversely, she suggested that a student-veteran may arrive several minutes early to claim a strategic spot in class that affords them the view of the room that best mitigates their sense of physical threat. Fear can put a veteran student in a state of constant alert, creating an unending source of anxiety and stress (Ackerman et al., 2009). Finally, Barry et al. (2012) found that PTSD symptoms were negatively associated educational self-efficacy, or the student's own perceived academic capability. In addition, PTSD was linked to lower grade point averages (GPAs), greater academic amotivation (lack of interest in educational pursuits), and lower persistence rates.

One serious by-product of PTSD is suicidal tendency. A national study on student-veterans' emotional adjustment revealed that nearly half had contemplated suicide (Sander, 2012). Among those who had been deployed during the Iraq war, having a diagnosed mental health condition was associated with a greater risk of suicide (Ilgen et al., 2012). A study by Rudd et al. (2011) looked at psychological symptoms, symptom severity, and suicide risk in a nationwide sample of 628 student-veterans. They found that 35% of participants experienced "severe anxiety," 24% had "severe depression," and almost 46% felt significant symptoms of

PTSD. Most importantly, there were large numbers of participants who had contemplated suicide (46%).

The aforementioned physical, emotional, and behavioral reactions to PTSD are serious obstacles to academic success. PTSD and its effects may lead some students into a feedback loop where the stress from their traumatic combat experiences creates reactions that impair academic functioning, which compounds their original stress, further reducing academic functioning (Barry et al., 2012).

Substance Use and Abuse

Veterans rely on different coping mechanisms to help them deal with their emotional reactions to combat experiences. Use and abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs have become coping mechanisms for many of them (Barry et al., 2012). Jacobson et al. (2008) found "significantly increased risk of new-onset heavy drinking and…other alcohol-related problems" (p. 270) among veterans who faced combat duty compared to those who were not deployed in combat situations (see also Brito et al., 2008). This is corroborated by a study by Barry et al. (2012) of 250 combat-experienced college students in which PTSD was positively associated with symptoms of problem drinking.

In addition to abuse of substances, the side effects from medicines used to treat physical pain or mental health diagnoses could affect a veteran's ability to concentrate, take notes, and remain alert (Church, 2009). According to data obtained through the Freedom of Information Act by the Center for Investigative Reporting, "Prescriptions for four opiates—hydrocodone, oxycodone, methadone and morphine—have surged by 270% in the past 12 years" (Glantz, 2013, para. 8). In fact, Glantz noted, the fatal overdose rate among veterans is twice the national average.

Separation Anxiety and Survivor Guilt

The word *separation* is used by the military to denote the experience of leaving the armed forces. It is used generally, whether a person retires or is fired. For the vast majority of student-veterans being studied here, separation reflects retirement and the end of their service. Many retired military personnel experience a deep void as they lose their "friendships, purpose, identity, structure, and income" (Lighthall, 2012, p. 82). For college veterans, this feeling is compounded by a new social structure that lacks the clear hierarchy of the military, new colleagues and peers who cannot relate to their military experiences (and may even resent them), and a largely alien environment (Lighthall, 2012).

Returning from a war zone and escaping physical injury can also lead to psychological problems when friends do not return. This survivor guilt follows veterans whose friends have been killed or injured (Olson & Gabriel-Olsen, 2012). Losing friends who were killed or who were injured and evacuated is particularly difficult. Military leaders often speak of unit members in family terms, such as "my soldiers" or "my Marines." It's their responsibility to take care of these "adopted family members." When comrades are injured or killed, "survivor guilt piles on the unconscious thought that luck is part of a zero-sum game. To have good luck is to deprive another of it" (Sherman, 2011, para. 8). The pain associated with the guilt is a subconscious way of sharing the suffering (death or injury) that the survivor was able to escape.

Physical Injuries

The mental and psychological wounds suffered by war veterans often lie hidden, invisible to the average classmate of a student-veteran. Physical injuries cannot be so easily hidden. Loss of limbs, sight, or hearing can alter a veteran physiologically in ways that require difficult physical therapies and challenging adaptions. Technological advances in medicine, protective

body armor, and vehicle construction, as well as implementation of drone technology, have raised the odds of survival for many wounded or injured soldiers (Cate et al., 2010). While Vietnam War veterans experienced a 70% survival rate from the injuries, 90% of Iraq War injuries will be survived (Klocek, 2008).

Nevertheless, surviving an injury is not the same as being made whole or experiencing a full recovery. "These injuries may affect a person's ability to work, exercise, perform routine household duties, and pursue their educational goals…[depending on] the nature, the number, and the severity of the injuries.…Three common physical injuries sustained by soldiers of the Iraq War were loss of an appendage or limb, severe burns, and traumatic brain injury" (Cate et al., 2010, p. 8). External injuries, such as the loss of a limb or appendage or burns from improvised explosive devices (IEDs), require lengthy periods of recovery and therapy as well as time to adjust to adaptive technologies, such as prosthetics or assistive devices. The time necessary to make use of adaptive technologies can be discouraging, and veterans' self-esteem may be negatively affected (Cate et al., 2010). Furthermore, research has found that veterans who have been wounded are more likely to develop PTSD (Koren et al., 2005).

Unlike burns or the loss of an appendage, TBI cannot be seen without medical imaging equipment. "A severe blow to the head, either by a physical object or a concussion blast…causes the brain to impact against the interior of the skull leading to physical scarring of the brain" (Cate et al., 2010, p. 9). Unlike a common concussion's symptoms, which last about a day, the effects of TBI can linger for years or throughout a person's life and cause changes in behavior, cognition, memory, focus, hearing, vision, balance, and spatial orientation. A student who has experienced TBI may not be able to remember what a professor just said, leading the student to becoming "frustrated, irritable, impatient, and angry" (Cate et al., 2010, p. 9). If not for the

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brain's plasticity and the will of veterans who have experienced TBI, it would be nearly impossible to overcome the challenge of a college education. Clearly, it is still quite challenging considering the many possible negative effects of such trauma on the learning activities of college veterans (Lighthall, 2012).

Isolation and Lack of Socialization

Ackerman et al. (2009) suggested that the same service-related leadership experiences and challenges that make veterans potential resources for their campuses can also serve to harden many of them. The emotional maturity they've developed during deployments, plus their chronological maturity, hinders many veterans from creating social connections with fellow students (Cate et al., 2010). Some student-veterans find little common ground with younger classmates whose lives have more in common with those of high school teenagers than war-tested soldiers (Boodman, 2011; Jones, 2017; Hammond, 2016).

Socializing may also be hampered by an "anti-military" or "anti-veteran" environment on campus or in the classroom. Student-veterans have reported discomfort in classes where professors appear to be anti-military as well as verbal confrontations they have experienced with other students when they disclose their veteran status (DiRamio et al., 2008). DiRamio and colleagues also reported that veterans revealed upsetting comments made to them by fellow students: "These wars were atrocities and a waste of human life," "I don't get why you're having so much trouble—you volunteered, right?" and a common question, "Did you kill anyone?" Although veterans may be able to chalk these comments up to immaturity, they can nonetheless be hurtful (Lighthall, 2012). Well-meaning professors may also create discomfort for veterans when calling on them to espouse their opinions about world affairs or their feelings about the war they fought in or about war in general (Lighthall, 2012).

It is worth noting that combat veterans come from an environment of camaraderie, where they are understood by those they served with, where they feel competent and well-trained, where they have important responsibilities, and where they have created intense bonds of friendship and trust (Lighthall, 2012). Lighthall quoted a military saying: "War may be hell, but home ain't exactly heaven either" (p. 86). Creating bonds between student-veterans can mitigate feelings of isolation, especially when connections are between newly arriving veterans and student-veterans who already know how to navigate the system (Lighthall, 2012). Having a role model, guidance, and reassurance can help incoming veterans realize that this new "battlefield" has its own terrain, requiring a different set of skills and navigation system. They need to hear someone say, "I've made it work and you can too." From a shared sense of alienation, they can also form bonds to alleviate that feeling (Lighthall, 2012). Interestingly, Jones (2017) found that none of his study participants reported socializing with other student-veterans; he cited several studies that corroborate this phenomenon. Indeed, at some point it is valuable for student-veterans to bridge the gap and learn to socialize with all students, otherwise their isolation will only lead to the formation of cliques. Gaining a few veteran friends first is a good way to establish a foundation that will help with their persistence.

Feeling Changed

When veterans return home, their lives feel different. They are no longer with people to whom they can relate; their responsibilities may be less challenging or important; they may feel their lives no longer have the same meaning. No longer facing death every day, they become bored. Adapting to a more sedate lifestyle and environment following the heightened level of living in a war-zone deployment can be difficult. This is one reason so many veteran soldiers choose a path in law enforcement or take up extreme sports (Lighthall, 2012). They long to

replicate the adrenaline rush from their combat experience in their lives back home. For some veterans, this opportunity of interest is elusive, if not impossible, due to physical injuries incurred in combat or psychological issues that make law enforcement work a bad fit (Brito et al., 2008). Beyond the lost adrenaline rush, however, some veterans feel that they have changed intrinsically and can't recognize themselves, or they believe that others find them changed. One Army veteran in the Ackerman et al. (2009) study revealed an aversion to large groups of people, saying that he was "no longer a very social person, and…always looked mean."

Remediation

With deployments averaging 9 months, and many veterans experiencing multiple deployments, the time between a veteran's high school graduation and enrollment in college may be long. Student-veterans may need to revisit basic knowledge following assessment or placement tests on their campus. Similar to other students needing remediation, veterans may experience a delay in the time it takes to complete their degree, which may discourage them from continuing their education (DiRamio et al., 2008). Student-veterans may also need to devote time to redeveloping study skills that have atrophied during their military service, again discouraging them in their pursuit of a college degree (Cate et al., 2010). As an Army reservist in the Ackerman et al. (2009) study put it, "It's kind of like I forgot how I studied. Prior to leaving, I had a 3.4 GPA, and when I got back, it just went down" (p. 10). In that study, several students suggested implementing a college orientation program for veterans only.

Hidden Curriculum

Lim et al. (2018) found that college faculty often operate from a hidden curriculum of unexamined principles and expectations that are fundamentally at odds with military values. In a qualitative study of 20 male student participants and nine faculty/staff working with the veteran

student population, these researchers applied the well-known concept of the hidden curriculum to student-veterans. Using semi-structured interviews and group interviews, Lim et al. found a gap between faculty/staff perceptions of student-veterans and the students' own self-perceptions. For example, faculty expected successful students to ask for help when needed; conversely, veterans had been conditioned to see help seeking as a sign of weakness; they prized self-sufficiency and saw it as a sign of respect to meet objectives without handholding. Student-veterans and faculty also had different ideas about what constitutes leadership. This cultural divide presents one more hurdle for student-veterans to navigate.

Veterans' Administration Issues

After being unexpectedly cut off from his housing allowance during a semester break, a college veteran in Maryland experienced homelessness, sometimes sleeping on friends' couches and sometimes in his car (Sander, 2012). This is not a rare phenomenon. Problems with the VA have been well documented in national news stories. Much attention has been given to VA medical benefits and treatment and the shortcomings of health facilities, but problems concerning the payment of educational benefits have surfaced as well. One Air Force veteran in the Ackerman et al. (2009) study lamented, "It took eight or more weeks to receive benefits."

Aside from monetary benefits, information can also prove difficult to access. For example, the Army/American Council on Education Registry Transcript System provides transcripts of military training, but Ackerman et al. (2009) found that several veterans were not aware of this, did not know how to obtain a copy, or did not know whether their campus granted credit for military training. In another study, 11% of Virginia Commonwealth University student-veterans noted issues with credit transfer (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012).

Campus Resources

The literature reveals a large number of problems, issues, and concerns that veterans carry with them as they enter college following their separation from military service. Campuses have varying amounts of resources available to help veterans address their problems. With budgets shrinking, at community colleges especially, it is critical that existing resources be utilized optimally, as funding for new programs can be difficult to find. In this section, I describe the range of resources available, including the challenges in connecting student-veterans to them.

Veterans' Affairs Offices and Veterans Resource Centers

The veterans affairs office (VAO) is a fixture in nearly every postsecondary institution in America. Based on the name, one might think that this office would be similar to an academic affairs office and be responsible for ensuring student services and support for the success of college veterans. Unfortunately, most VAOs limit their duties to assisting veterans with the college application process and helping them process their educational benefits at the beginning of each school year (Cate et al., 2010). That is generally the extent of services they offer, although some act as a concierge or clearinghouse and refer veterans to other programs offering additional services on campus and off.

The influx of veterans into higher education has prompted many colleges, some with more zeal than others, to create veteran-specific programs and services beyond VAOs (Sander, 2012). About six in 10 colleges and universities have established VRCs to help student-veterans successfully transition to college (Altman, 2012). In VRCs, campus staff and student-veteran peers provide information, offer crisis support, and refer student-veterans to other campus and community support programs and agencies (Cate et al., 2010). Most of these resource centers have only one paid staffer. Even so, having a one-person office to specifically address veterans'

needs is beneficial. Cate et al. (2010) found that community college and university administrators who show commitment to veterans by creating target programs help college veterans succeed in their academic endeavors, and that veterans utilize and benefit most from programs created specifically for them.

Ackerman et al. (2009) found several veterans expressing varying opinions on the services and support offered by their campuses' VRCs, however. On one of the three campuses studied, students had formed close working relationships with staff in the VRC. These staff members went beyond the basics of benefits processing by helping students make connections and tap into the network of services and support outside of their office. The second campus received mixed reviews attributed to past leadership of the center; a new program director had been recently appointed. On the third campus, the VRC received only criticism; most student-veterans from that campus were unaware of any services available to them through the office.

Campus Counseling

Counseling services on college and university campuses range from academic and career counseling to group and private counseling. Personal counseling for psychological concerns (depression, substance use and abuse, and relationship issues) is also commonly available on postsecondary campuses. Special programs, such as crisis hotlines, may also exist to provide stress reduction and alleviate test anxiety (Cate et al., 2010). These programs may exist under an umbrella counseling center or they may be separate and distinct offices with little coordination between them.

As a result of the myriad psychological and emotional issues arising from veterans' war experiences, colleges are contending with adjustment problems and serious disorders far different from those for which their staff has been trained: TBI; combat-related PTSD;

depression and substance abuse; and military sexual trauma. Boodman (2011) found that staff in many counseling offices have not been trained to address these types of issues, nor do the offices have a veteran on staff. Boodman interviewed a clinical psychologist at the Center for Deployment Psychology, which is part of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Maryland, who said, "It can be tough for a civilian provider to understand what vets have gone through" (para. 7). Boodman suggested the influx of veterans was putting a strain on campus mental health services, which were already overburdened. He quoted Chris Brownson, the vice president of student affairs and director of the Counseling and Mental Health Center at the University of Texas at Austin: "There are more students presenting to college mental health centers year by year, and those students have more severe mental health issues at a time that budgets are shrinking and cost savings are being implemented" (para. 12). The addition of more veterans to the ranks of students seeking mental services can only make the situation worse. Barry et al. (2012) concluded that it is important to recognize that combat-tested student-veterans have experienced events that set them apart from service members without combat experience as well as their civilian counterparts. Moreover, they concluded, these combat-related experiences are likely to be related their health behaviors and academic functioning.

Disabled Student Services and Programs

Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibits public colleges and universities from denying qualified individuals with disabilities an equal opportunity to participate in any program, service, or activity offered. In addition, reasonable accommodations must be provided, when necessary, to allow students with disabilities the opportunity to participate in the school's educational programs, services, and/or activities. Postsecondary institutions have developed on-campus services and programs designed to help students with

learning difficulties. They are usually offered by a Disabled Student Services/Programs (DSPS) office which may operate under other names—Office of Special Services (OSS), for example. The DSPS office helps students, faculty, and administration accommodate a student's individual learning differences or adaptive needs (Cate el al., 2010).

Disabilities may be temporary or permanent and either physical (e.g., hearing impairment, vision loss, lack of mobility) or mental (e.g., learning disability). Available support through DSPS can involve instruction (e.g., one-on-one or lab-based tutoring, counseling); classroom aides (e.g., note takers and transcribers), and adaptive/assistive equipment (e.g., voice recognition software, listening systems, close-captioning of video) These accommodations are individualized and based on specific disabilities (Cate et al., 2010). DSPS services are available to all students. They have not been developed specifically for veterans but for any students needing accommodations for their disabilities. For example, DSPS offers assistance technologies to hearing impaired students, regardless of whether they were born with this disability or whether they lost their hearing through exposure to an ear-shattering IED blast. As such, DSPS very rarely has veteran-specific staff to help student-veterans through the unique experiences that created their disabilities.

Solutions and Suggestions

It is clear that veterans who enroll in college have unique needs and problems when they arrive on campus. In the same way that colleges meet the needs of other special student populations through targeted services and programs, there need to be VRCs providing support services designed especially for them. The responsibilities given to veterans' services officers must be thoroughly considered. In planning those programs and services, there must be an effort to know the student veteran population (Kuh et al., 2010). Becoming veteran-friendly is a

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worthwhile challenge for any campus. Personnel, policies, resources, and programs must reflect

sensitivity to and understanding of the needs of veterans. "Supporting the troops should be an

action plan, not just a happy slogan" (Ackerman, 2009, p. 13).

There is an urgent need to share best practices, to exchange ideas, and to conduct

research that will provide campuses with the information needed to promote the academic

achievement of veterans who are students (Vacchi, 2012). Postsecondary schools show a lot of

room for improvement. "Fewer than 11 percent of institutions require faculty- and staff-wide

training on veterans' issues, and 43 percent had no such training available even for staff

members who would participate voluntarily" (Altman, 2012, para. 11).

Community colleges must take steps to support student-veterans through policies,

programs, strategies, and services. Campuswide training for faculty, staff, and students to raise

awareness of student-veterans' potential needs in college should be developed, similar to the

Green Zone Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012). Raising

awareness makes addressing student-veterans' needs the responsibility of all, not just one staff

member or a handful of faculty members with military backgrounds or affiliations (Rumann et

al., 2011).

Colleges should also develop ways for student-veterans to connect and interact with other

veterans on campus. Student veteran organizations can do the job, but "this is an area in which

community colleges may be lagging behind" (Rumann et al., 2011, p. 56). Partnerships can also

be created in the community (e.g., Veterans of Foreign Wars) to organize programs and services

to serve student-veterans. Further, opportunities should exist to help student-veterans dispel the

misperceptions and misinformation that can lead them to feel socially disconnected from their

campus peers (Persky & Oliver, 2010).

O'Herrin (2011) explained the challenges of serving veterans, given the diversity of experiences they bring with them:

It is impossible to take a one-size-fits-all approach to serving them. Thus, one of the most important steps that campus leadership can take is to gauge the specific needs of veterans at their institution before devoting resources to new initiatives. Both student veterans and campus administrators have spoken to the success of efforts that have been crafted with direct input from the enrolled student veteran population and have emphasized this is the best approach to designing supportive programs. However, it can be very difficult to solicit input when there is no method to track or contact student veterans. Many institutions have revised admissions forms to include a mechanism to track incoming students with military experience and have followed up with these individuals as they make their way to classes. (para. 10–11)

Unfortunately, some students purposefully choose not to disclose their veteran status on college applications (Livingston, 2009).

Closing the Information Gap

Generally speaking, veterans have voiced their concerns on the news, at roundtables, in conferences, during focus groups, and interviews, but the voices of student-veterans at community colleges have yet to be heard clearly. Historically, studies addressing education have been largely limited 4-year institutions and concentrated on reenrolling students (DiRamio et al., 2008). In one exception, Wheeler (2012) examined how veterans manage the transition from soldier to first-time community college student, though her sample of nine Iraq war veterans was relatively small for a campus with approximately 37,000 students (380 of them veterans). She revealed three categories of information: academic experience, personal connections and

interactions, and benefit bureaucracy. One topic was noticeably missing: mental health and physical disability. That raises a few questions. Was the sample size so small that not one student-veteran mentioned mental health or physical disability? Were the questions not directed toward those answers?

Conversely, DiRamio et al. (2008) studied 25 student-veterans at three research universities, and health issues did emerge as an important topic, including students with disabilities and mental health problems, such as PTSD. However, this study did not include community colleges. Cate et al. (2010) included community college students in their quantitative study (an online survey). The sample size of 26 included only five student-veterans from community colleges. That does not give the appropriate weight to the voices of student-veterans attending community colleges, given that they comprise a larger portion of the college veteran pool. More recently, community colleges are commanding somewhat greater attention. Both Jones (2017) and Hammond (2016) examined the experiences of veterans who transitioned to community colleges and highlighted the struggles they faced as they tried to integrate into campus culture.

The current study explored both the challenges faced by veterans who enrolled at community colleges and their perspectives on mattering and marginalization on their campuses in a way that yields deep and rich information. The research design discussed in Chapter 3 includes an interview protocol that explored what college resources, programs, and policies veterans identified as increasing or potentially increasing their perceptions of "mattering" on their campuses. This study adds to the very limited body of knowledge with respect to veterans attending community colleges. In the process, it helps VRCs and community college campuses as a whole to utilize their resources more effectively.

CHAPTER 3:

METHODS

The preceding chapters presented the challenges that student-veterans experience as they transition from the military to college. Community colleges may be ready and willing to help these students make successful transitions back into civilian life, but beyond setting up a VRC, they may not know how to meet the distinct needs of veterans—needs that are different from those of other students. Accordingly, the goal of this study was to ascertain what veterans experience as they move from military service into community colleges. Specifically, the research aimed to assess their perceptions of their campus VRC and the campus as a whole, including aspects such as school policies, campus culture, mattering, and engagement. On a macro level, this study expands the body of knowledge regarding college success among student-veterans. The hope was that having a clearer understanding of what makes veterans feel they matter can guide to colleges in making adjustments to resource offerings for veterans and to veteran-specific policies.

Research Design

This study used qualitative methods to gather the data needed to understand what campus culture promotes the best outcomes (academically, socially, and otherwise) for veterans. Since the study sought perceptions of student-veterans and knowledge of their specific experiences, this was the best approach to gather the data. In particular, the research questions were geared toward eliciting information about what resources, programs, and policies would increase a sense of mattering to student-veterans in order to determine their needs. Second, I explored veterans' perceptions of their campus and the VRC with respect to meeting those needs. Third, I identified the gaps between what veterans need and what their VRC (and campus as a whole) delivered.

While it is possible for a quantitative study to uncover this information, qualitative methods can yield more highly detailed perspectives. Quantitative methods, such as surveys, may yield different information and are more suited to testing theories, examining relationships among variables, or controlling for alternative explanations (Creswell, 2009). Even so, a survey with a comprehensive needs assessment could be developed and survey participants could share whether they had any of those needs and to what degree those needs were met. What that survey would lack, however, is the richness of information and depth of insight into student-veterans' perceptions that individual interviews deliver. It would not yield the details of individual experiences that were sought in this study. Furthermore, even the most comprehensive list of needs developed for a survey might not include all of the actual needs that student-veterans identify. Thus, a qualitative approach can better capture student-veterans' stories, allowing for greater insight into their experiences from which the institution can learn how best to support them toward successful completion of their goals.

Research Site, Population, and Sampling

This study focused on the extent to which veterans attending a California community college believed their campus was fulfilling their veteran-specific needs. Since most campuses that attempt to fulfill veterans' needs do so through dedicated VRCs, it was vital to select a site with such a facility. Campus size also factored into site selection, with a preferred size between 12,741 and 15,631 FTES (full-time equivalent students) and a minimum of 100 veterans as identified by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Five of the campuses in the target district met this criterion, with veteran populations between 111 and 146. One of these campuses with a dedicated VRC housed on campus—in 200 square feet not shared with other programs or groups—was chosen as ideal for the study.

Merriam (1998) made the case for a purposeful sample as most appropriate for qualitative research, stating that "the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 61). In this case, a purposeful sample involved finding and convincing campus veterans to participate in the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Beyond knowledge and experience, the availability and willingness to participate and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions were important (Bernard, 2002; Spradley, 1979). With that in mind, some of the most valuable potential participants were student-veterans who were familiar with and had used the VRC. Having made the connection to the center, I thought they might be more likely to participate in a survey that aimed to improve its effectiveness; anecdotal evidence from the site suggested that, at the time of the study, 12 to 20 veterans regularly visited the campus VRC. While it is likely that those participating in the study would have already visited their campus VRC, prior experience with or knowledge of the VRC was not necessary for inclusion in the study.

The community college district housing my site had an internal review board. Before beginning recruitment, I contacted the appropriate district administrator to request permission to do the study at the site. Once permission was granted, in fall 2020, I sent a message through Canvas to all students to request a response from student-veterans who were interested in participating. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, all students were online and using Canvas; I received approximately 200 responses.

In keeping with purposeful sampling, student-veterans self-selected for the study based on their interest in the research and their willingness and availability to commit to an in-person interview or focus group. To guard against a homogeneous sample that can result from this sampling technique, I sought a full spectrum of participants in order to capture the widest variety

of experiences. Specifically, to the extent that it was possible, I strived to include female veterans, veterans of different races and ethnicities, and representation from each branch of the military. With 40% of all active-duty military coming from racial and ethnic minorities and 15% of active-duty military being female, it was important to draw their perspectives (Parker et al., 2017).

It is important to define the term *veteran*, as there can be confusion about who it includes, even among those who have served in the military. Some think they aren't included because they only served for 2 years; others because they did not serve in combat. For this study, "veterans" includes all military service men and women who served honorably and separated from the military, regardless of deployment location or discharge status. While the federal government considers only honorably discharged service members as veterans, it is important to acknowledge that those with other discharge statuses still transition to college with many of the same needs as those with official veteran status.

Data Collection Methods

I conducted individual interviews with veterans, since they afforded more privacy than focus groups, ensuring participants would feel most comfortable sharing personal experiences. Before the interviews, I emailed a preliminary survey to all participants in order gather basic data, such as branch of military in which service was rendered, length of service, units of college enrollment, familiarity and utilization of the VRC, and so on.

Next, the aim of the individual interviews was to elicit information that participants may not have felt comfortable divulging in a group setting such as a focus group; with veterans, many such topics of discussion exist and will vary from veteran to veteran. It was understood that some student-veterans would find it difficult to share what they were experiencing with regard to

sensitive issues, such as combat-induced mental illnesses like PTSD; others might feel reluctant to discuss finances or home life. Even the topic of mattering is a sensitive one. With the prominence of Black Lives Matter, some participants could have associated the study's theoretical framework with that movement. With all of this in mind, I chose to do individual interviews in order to foster a safe space in which they could share their perceptions. (The interview protocol is Appendix A.) I utilized Zoom to conduct the interviews since I collected data during the COVID-19 pandemic and no one was vaccinated at that time. I conducted interviews with a total of 22 student-veterans, 20 of whom were ultimately included in the sample.

Profile of Participants

Potential participants were eliminated if they did not meet the criteria for the research because the research site was not their primary home campus, they were faculty or staff veterans, they had been out of the military for too long, or they had not yet visited the VRC; ultimately, 20 qualified participants were included in the study. These veterans were community college students who had experienced on-campus instruction before the COVID-19 pandemic and who had utilized the VRC on their physical campus. All students were enrolled at the same campus.

Of those interviewed, 16 identified as male and four identified as female. This ratio was in line with national data for active-duty military in which 16.5% of veterans are female. In terms of race/ethnicity, participants included seven White veterans, three Black, five Latino, and five Asian American/Pacific Islander student-veterans. None of the students were traditional college age (18–22 years). This would be expected as the minimum age to enlist in the military is 17 and the most common active-duty term of service is 4 years. Thus, students

would be at least 21 years old upon separating from the military. Of the 20 interviewees, six were in their twenties, 10 were in their thirties, and four were in their forties.

Among the 20 participants in this study, 14 had previous college experience, while six had none. Those with none had gone directly into the armed services from high school, coming to college after separating from the military. Half of them were in their 20s, suggesting they served shorter terms. Most who had previous college experience had completed anywhere from two to six semesters, with a few completing their bachelor's degrees and one completing an MBA. Three of the four students in their 40s had completed some college, with two of them earning degrees. The majority of participants enrolled at their current campus immediately following separation from the military. In the chapters that follow, I refer to the respondents as "Vet 1" through "Vet 20." While I occasionally note one or more aspects of individual demographics, I primarily use these identifiers to maintain respondents' anonymity. Some identifying information has been concealed. See Table 3.1 for more detailed participant characteristics.

Table 3.1

Participant Characteristics

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Race or Ethnicity	Education Level Prior to Enrollment at Current Campus	Enrolled Since
Vet 1	Male	40s	Black	Some college (3 semesters)	Fall 2019
Vet 2	Male	20s	White	High school	Fall 2019
Vet 3	Male	30s	White	High school	Fall 2019
Vet 4	Male	40s	Latino	Bachelor's, MBA	Spring 2019
Vet 5	Female	30s	***	High school	Fall 2019
Vet 6	Male	30s	White	Some college (4 semesters)	Fall 2018
Vet 7	Male	20s	Latino	Some college (4 semesters)	Fall 2019
Vet 8	Male	30s	White	Bachelor's	Spring 2019
Vet 9	Male	20s	AAPI	High school	Spring 2019
Vet 10	Male	30s	Latino	Some college (1 semester)	Spring 2018
Vet 11	Male	20s	Latino	Associate degree	Fall 2019
Vet 12	Male	20s	Latino	High school	Fall 2015
Vet 13	Male	30s	AAPI	Associate degree	Summer 2019
Vet 14	Male	20s	AAPI	Associate degree	Fall 2018
Vet 15	Male	40s	White	High school	Fall 2018
Vet 16	Female	30s	Black	Some college (2 semesters)	Fall 2018
Vet 17	Female	30s	Black	Associate degree	Fall 2018
Vet 18	Male	30s	White	Associate degree	Spring 2018
Vet 19	Male	40s	White	Associate degree	Summer 2018
Vet 20	Female	30s	AAPI	Some college (3 semesters)	Spring 2019

Data Analysis

Individual interviews were audio recorded and written transcripts of the sessions were created. I analyzed these transcripts to discover themes and topics that were discussed. I reviewed each transcript three times. The first review consisted of examining the responses to the research question for themes, compiling a priori and emergent codes, and conducting a comparative analysis across all participant transcripts. I color-coded themes and compiled them into separate "buckets"; I sorted by number of responses in order to give weight to each type of need discussed by the student-veterans. Doing so will benefit the campus and the VRC at the site, since the most commonly cited needs can now provide guidance as to what should be addressed first.

In the second review, I further refined the analysis and generated additional codes. Here I identified individual quotes that most closely reflected the major themes and subthemes identified during the coding process, resulting in core categories to discuss (Merriam, 2009). Once I had identified common themes, I conducted a thematic analysis to explore patterns among participant experiences and responses.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

From the initial contact with campus administration until the sharing of findings at the study's completion, my goal was to conduct the research process with transparency and consideration of all concerned. It was vital that I build a high level of confidence among both the student-veterans and the college administrators who had permitted the study. To this end, I piloted the individual interview questions with four student-veterans who had recently graduated from community college and who would have met the criteria for selection had they still been enrolled. Their participation was limited to piloting the questions. This created an opportunity to

vet (pardon the pun) the questions prior to their use by the study participants. I then refined and edited the questions and prompts to ensure they were free of bias, clear to the participants, and would yield the responses necessary to answer the research questions.

I opened each interview with the statement of purpose for the study and let the participant know that the study would benefit most from their candid responses. They were advised that there was no "right answer" to the prompts or questions; their true experiences and concerns were the only "right answer." The aim was to gain a deeper level of emotional access to the respondents.

As an employee of the campus where the research was conducted, it was possible but highly unlikely that I would have known a participant, as I had taught only a handful of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans in my classes. To guard against that possibility and any other potential issues that might have arisen from that situation (reactivity, bias, etc.), potential participants were asked to complete the short demographic questionnaire before the interviews, allowing me to exclude students I knew. As noted, the questionnaire gathered background data about the vets that served to qualify them for the study.

Generalizability was a concern in this study on a few different fronts. The sample size was limited to one community college campus in Southern California. Moreover, the number of veterans' perspectives solicited cannot yield the full breadth of needs and experiences of the institution's or the nation's veterans. Furthermore, it is important to note that only six in 10 colleges nationally have VRCs, and wide gaps exist in program offerings across campuses that do have veterans' resources available. For example, some veteran-centric campuses, such as those near military installations, offer many robust and varied programs; other campuses might maintain only a small office staffed by one person for limited weekday hours. The voices of

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veterans on campuses without VRCs were not heard in this study at all. Therefore it will be up to the reader to determine the extent to which the findings from this study apply to other community college campuses and settings.

<div align="center">**Ethical Issues and Limitations**</div>

The greatest ethical issue in this study was maintaining confidentiality. Not only did the college in the study need confidentiality—and so its name has been concealed with a pseudonym—but more importantly, it was vital to protect the study participants. These veterans divulged very personal information, especially sensitive information regarding their mental health, and it was essential to keep any identifying information confidential. Therefore, I substituted numerical codes for participants' names. In some cases, I redacted specific information, such as specific classes taken, time served in the military, specific deployment information, and so on because, in combination, the information could be used to deduce a participant's identity. Participants were also asked to sign an informed consent form before engaging in the research. I explained the importance of the research, but students were not coerced into participating. They were explicitly told they could opt out of the study at any time or choose not to answer any questions with which they were uncomfortable.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

This qualitative study was designed to collect data to shed light on student-veterans' perceptions of mattering and marginalization on their community college campus, and the role of VRCs in those perceptions. Through interviews with 20 veterans who are currently students at a community college that has a VRC, I was able to explore what resources are most useful, what resources are missing, and what factors contribute to these student-veterans' sense of belonging or marginality on campus. I describe these findings next, in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4:

FINDINGS

During the fall semester of 2020, I engaged veterans in conversation about their experiences as community college students. Specifically, I sought to uncover what influenced their feelings of mattering and marginalization on campus as well as the extent to which they found campus resources either helpful or limited. In this chapter, I present the findings in four major categories that correspond to the study's four research questions: helpful resources, missing resources, mattering boosters, and marginalization boosters. Within each major category, subcategories provide a framework for interview excerpts so that we can better understand the veterans through their own words and experiences.

Helpful Resources

The first research question explored the campus resources that veterans use to help them with the challenges they face when they attend community college. Eighteen of the veterans mentioned at least one resource that had helped them on campus. Overwhelmingly, these resources were related to the VRC on their campus. The remaining resources were general services available to all students at the college (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1

Helpful Resources Mentioned by Respondents

	# Respondents
Resources within the VRC:	
VRC staff	10
Connection to other veterans	6
Physical space for work and study needs	5
Information	4
Resources outside of the VRC:	
Office of Special Services (OSS)	3
Library	3

Veterans Resource Center

Veterans accessed the resources provided specifically to them through their campus VRC. The study participants mentioned the VRC most often when citing resources that help them with their challenges. Fifteen of the 20 interviewees offered examples of how the VRC helped them. These can be broken down into VRC subcategories: VRC staff, connections to other veterans, information, and physical space for work and study needs.

As with most campus services, student satisfaction with VRC services was highly dependent on personnel. Half of the respondents mentioned VRC staff as particularly helpful. This was best expressed by Vet 6:

Literally, anything we needed help with, whether it comes to enrolling in classes, whether it comes to sorting out paperwork or scheduling classes or needing to get in touch with someone, or even working with one of our professors— If there was an issue with trying to enroll in class or trying to get our records straight or something like that, they were all on top of the game, and I have nothing but praise for them. (Vet 6)

Six of the student-veterans cited the VRC's ability to connect them to other veterans. This was sometimes expressed as the common connection veterans shared:

I don't think I would have continued with my education had I not discovered it, the Veterans Resource Center. That's because you go in there, and first of all, you know right away you're with people that are at your level. They're peers. They know what you've gone through. They know that you've been in the military, and there's no discrimination there. Someone could be younger; someone can be older, and it doesn't matter there. That doesn't matter there. We are all brothers and sisters there. At least that's the feeling that I get. (Vet 10)

An extension of this connection referred to psychosocial issues and the need for veterans to have peers who can understand the unique military experiences that may shape their mental health:

We all have issues, and it's easy to go, and you talk it out, and someone will explain to you. And then, after you calm down, they get to talking to you and explain. We just need a place because we're all scarred. My beautiful scars, but we're all scarred. And we need a place to go when we're having a bad day. (Vet 2)

Four student-veterans cited VRC information as especially useful. They often needed information related to the VA—ultimately, they would need to contact the VA directly, but the VRC could provide information to help them plan their visit. This could include information related to medical benefits, physical and mental therapies, or topics related to the G.I. Bill. The latter generated questions about access, eligibility, years of support, distribution, and qualifying coursework, to name a few. Student-veterans typically sought advice for preserving their G.I. Bill education benefits to ensure their long-term educational needs were met:

They've been very helpful with me, helping me understand my benefits from [the] G.I. Bill. Actually, financial aid, because I'm not even using my G.I. Bill right now. I'm using financial aid so I can save my G.I. Bill for the more expensive school. I plan to transfer to [California State University Northridge]. And rather than pay for that out of pocket, I would rather pay for community college, which I'm not even doing because I got financial aid. So, the VRC helped me understand that. And then also we understand how I can further my education after the fact to go for even higher, go for like a master's [degree]. Finding resources and getting information I need was no problem. The people in the VRC know everything. (Vet 3)

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Of course, the VRC was also an educational destination. Couches, tables, computers, and other office equipment created a space where they could focus on academics. As such, it was essential to veterans' work and study needs. Vet 10 was among the study participants who took advantage of the physical resources at the VRC:

> As soon as I got out of class, I'd go there because they have computers and all that. It just provided a safe environment to be at. They have resources, like a study room and all that. The one at my school has that. That's what helped me out a lot. Of course, the Veterans Center—they help out with a lot of stuff. They'll help you with books if you need books, and you're not receiving any VA benefits.

Resources Beyond the VRC

Veterans also availed themselves of campus resources beyond the VRC. These are the services offered to all students: admissions, financial aid, wellness center, and the like. Half of the veterans interviewed found resources helpful to their challenges in these agencies. The Office of Special Services (OSS), the department charged with providing accommodations, was mentioned by three of these veterans as accommodating conditions stemming from their military service. For example:

> I wound up going to OSS instead. There, I found more of a sense of unity, community, services. I'm giving them a letter from the VA stating that I've got PTSD, and I have issues around anxiety, test anxiety, and stuff like that. (Vet 13)

> OSS is dope. The lead counselor has been really amazing and has gone above and beyond to try to reach out to my teachers to explain certain things that I may need or would help me be able to do better in my courses. Lucky for me, my OSS guy reaches out to my

teachers and lets them know: "Hey, this guy was in a coma for 3 years. It takes him double the amount of time." (Vet 1)

The library was another campuswide service mentioned as a helpful resource. Three of the veterans spoke of it during their interviews. Vet 15 found it useful in a traditional way, giving him access to a vast source of information.

> The library was really good. I used it with the internet and in person a lot of times. I liked it a lot. It was incredible because I had access to millions of different volumes of books that I needed for assignments that I had to do. You did it from at home with just logging in with my username and password for the school. I thought, "Man, this is awesome," because I could get to where I could find anything I wanted to do my assignment with. Then at the school itself was millions of volumes, too, that you have access to and a lot of computers. I used their computers a few times there. Was really, really handy.

The library also had another useful feature as a quiet space, something veterans more generally rely on to reflect or escape memories of traumatic experiences (Hollingsworth, 2015). Vet 1 shared that "a lot of us have severe PTSD and can't be in large groups, and it's our place to go…to the library or to the VRC."

Missing Resources

The second research question, like the first, relates to resources. However, it asks about resources that veterans felt were missing on their campus that would have helped them with the challenges they were facing as community college students. Their responses fell into five major categories: VRC limitations, transition helpers, veteran-specific mental health counseling and programs, enhanced benefits for veterans, and general campuswide services, programs, and policies.

Table 4.2

Resources Cited as Missing by Respondents

	# Respondents
VRC limitations	11
Transition helpers	7
Veteran-specific mental health counseling and programs	4
Enhanced benefits for veterans	4
General campuswide services, programs, and policies	5

VRC Limitations

While the VRC was viewed as helpful by 15 student-veterans, making it the most mentioned helpful resource, it also garnered 11 responses from participants who felt its services were either inadequate or missing. These deficiencies fell into two subcategories, service and staffing issues (mentioned by 10 participants) and facility issues (mentioned by six).

Among the ten student-veterans who noted VRC service and staffing issues, seven of them commented on inadequate staffing levels and five commented on insufficient hours of operation. Vet 18 hit upon both:

There is only one veteran service counselor there. There were, I think, two or three volunteers working in the shop with them. It was limited. First of all, at the time, I couldn't find the office. Remember, I told you they were transitioning? I couldn't find the office. When I could find the office, the counselor was either out at a meeting or with another student, or I couldn't get there during the times that they had. Most people work 9:00 to 5:00. I work from 7:00 AM to 3:00 PM, and then I have to drive an hour to get home. By the time I get anywhere, it's 4:00, 4:30. Everybody closes at 4:00 or 4:30, just so they can get their stuff together and get ready for the next day.

Authoritative information was a important element in student-veterans' expectations for the VRC. Veterans are accustomed to military settings where information is delivered succinctly and correctly. Four veterans felt that the VRC staff lacked information in key areas such as G.I. Bill benefits, specific academic programs, veteran experiences and mindset, and OSS accommodations. Vet 7 explained it as follows.

My plan is to go into the dental hygiene program, but there's a lot of questions regarding that. It doesn't seem like there's a very clear understanding of whether the G.I. Bill would cover that. And it would be nice if the administrative person was more informed about the types of things that you could use your G.I. Bill [for].

While some veterans saw the VRC as a helpful resource regarding the VA, others saw the VRC's resources as more limited, in part because the center did not have any authority in VA-related protocols:

They're limited in that they're not really a part of the VA. They can give me pointers. They can show me directions or anecdotal like, "Hey this is what I did. This is the guy that I talked to," kind of advice. But they're not really connected to the VA. They don't have direct impact on what the VA does or doesn't do. It's not like I can get somebody on a conference call and get something moving on the VA. It's pretty much, you're still navigating that [the VA] by yourself. (Vet 4)

VRC facilities issues were noted by six veterans, with four of those comments associated with its location in the far northwest corner of campus. Vet 17 wanted the VRC to be closer to other campus services:

It doesn't have to be in the student services building, but having it either in the student services building, in the administration building, or in the student union building, one of

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those three would be much more beneficial than having it all running outside of campus. We have to go to student services, and we have to go to the administration building or the new administration building for various stuff, [to] pay for things and all those stuff or whatever.

Of interest is Vet 17's comment regarding the locations where other student groups are housed. This concern has also been voiced in other student-veteran circles, such as the Student Veterans Association and the California Community College Veterans Summit. Veterans at these conferences have shared concerns about where VRCs are located and their size in comparison to those of other student groups. Vet 17 perceived it this way:

It's almost like those who are college age, and by college age I mean between the ages of 18 and 24, are allowed in the student services [building] because they'd just be kids there. Anybody who's beyond the normal college age of 22 on up are relegated to the sticks and whatnot.

Also related to facilities, cold temperatures, spotty Wi-Fi, and computer resources were mentioned by one student-veteran each. Computer resources is particularly worth mentioning, as some veterans require specific hardware in order to complete their homework:

A lot of us, we did film stuff, right? All we needed was like one Mac computer or something, one computer that had the stuff that we could do because the film students and stuff like me. I couldn't do a lot of my homework there. I couldn't do editing or anything like that because they didn't provide even one (Mac) computer. They had so many computers in the lab. They couldn't give us one computer so that the students like me could be able to do our work, or the design students, graphics, a lot of different people, you know? All we needed was one. (Vet 1)

Transition Help

Based on their own initial campus experiences, seven veterans felt the campus should provide newly enrolled student-veterans additional assistance to smooth the transition between military and academic life. Most of the veterans interviewed had experienced a gap between their last educational experience and their current enrollment, so they felt early intervention was warranted to increase the chances of academic success. Vet 13 had several specific suggestions:

They're not given any sort of orientation, like, "Okay, these are the things that you need to do in the next 24 hours in order to maximize all of your benefits. I think [what] would be really great is that if you know that someone's entering this college and it's a veteran, whether they're on benefits or not, like, "Hey, here's a checklist." I think that it might be a good idea for them to have some sort of an orientation. An orientation that involves, "These are the things that you need to do in order to have a successful experience. Here's a veteran that can navigate you through that or somebody that's going through these programs already. This is a person that you can contact for the next 4 weeks with any questions that you have. If you don't do these things, then you will have an unhappy experience." I feel like veterans, if they're told, "These are the things that you need to do," generally, all of them will do it. The difference between [the Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum] and [California State University] transfer, I would encourage somebody to figure out how to explain that to somebody that's walking in the first time from school. Show them like, "These things need to be followed. If you want to transfer to any of these three different systems, you need to follow these patterns. If you want to just get an AA degree, you need to learn how to follow these grids and check

things off."…Those are the things that nobody ever taught me, and I found that nobody's teaching anybody.

Five interviewees considered packaged information for veterans to be in short supply. They expressed a desire for more information on G.I. Bill benefits, veteran-affiliated scholarships, educational financing beyond the G.I. Bill and scholarships, premature exhaustion of one's G.I. Bill benefits, and veteran entitlements outside the G.I. Bill. To that last point, Vet 16 had the following to say:

Tell us from the jump what we are entitled to as far as programs. That would help immensely. Like, "Hey, we have this program and once you finish your AA, you can go through this program. Oh, once you get your bachelor's—"

Finally, four student-veterans said that events for veterans were missing. These activities were considered important for sharing experiences among veterans and also to communicate veteran experiences to the campus population at large. The underlying need to be satisfied is that of being seen, heard, and understood. Vet 15 spoke to this topic:

I think it would be really handy if they could do it. To say, "We're going to have some guest speakers at just a gathering type thing or a veterans appreciation day. We're going to have certain ones do some little speeches like I did telling you things." Then people could understand things better. If they could understand that the way we think as a real veteran, not a liar saying what we did, they could understand the real veterans and say, "I know now what a real veteran's like. What I met was a bunch of liars." Maybe they do know some real veterans. The real veterans are pretty quiet. It's like I said, it's hard to find and hard to see. They don't go running around asking for praise. That would be cool.

Not to get praise and thanks, but just to be able to tell your story is a big deal. If not, all

your work just goes down and you're gone without no story or nothing.

Veteran-Specific Mental Health Counseling and Programs.

While most campuses offer a health and wellness center for all students, four veterans

sought services expressly for veterans that would address their unique needs. They felt that

psychological counseling at most campuses would be capable of handling issues that the general

population experiences but might not be able to address the unique needs that arise from serving

in the military, especially needs arising from combat duty.

It's a struggle that we all have blending in with everyone else. It's a challenge, and it

would be nice to have someone available to talk to like, "Hey, I almost had a nervous

breakdown in the library," or like, I don't know, just any type of resource that helps us

deal with adjusting to being around people, because we're only used to being around each

other for so long. (Vet 15)

General Campuswide Services, Programs, and Policies

Five of the veterans interviewed cited deficiencies in campus services, such as the library

("there were so many people using the computers"), bookstore ("they wouldn't even have the

books until right before class started"), and administrative offices (a need for longer hours); they

offered criticism of the school's ability to notify students of events in a timely manner ("you

don't hear sometimes from an event or something until like, 'Oh, this event is happening right

now'"). One veteran identified a need for uniformity of course descriptions and prerequisites

among colleges in the district in order to ensure equitable outcomes for students, regardless of

their home campuses. Vet 1 requested longer due date allowances (similar to additional time for

tests, but for assignments); this type of accommodation might help students who need more days to complete their assignments, such as those who have suffered TBI.

Four veterans expressed the need for outside-the-box items, ones that are not common at most community colleges in California. Vet 8 shared a policy he encountered at the University of Phoenix in which they created a different "swim lane" for student-veterans across all services (admissions, registration, disabled student services, etc.). Vet 12 was interested in preferred or priority status for veterans' spouses, similar to what veterans enjoy in registration. Vet 19 expressed a desire for a veteran-specific Metro card and a discount on books.

Mattering Boosters

The third research question sought to identify college resources, programs, or policies that had increased veterans' perceptions of mattering on their campus. Recall that *mattering* is defined here in terms of appreciation, attention, importance, ego-extension (others taking pride in one's accomplishments), and dependence (Schlossberg, 1989), as well as the more general term, *belonging*. Nineteen of the 20 veterans mentioned at least one item that boosted their perception of mattering.

Table 4.3

What Made Respondents Feel Like They Matter on Campus

	# Respondents
Belonging	19
Attention from students, faculty, administration, or staff	9
Feeling appreciated	5
Dependence	5
Feeling important	5

Belonging

Although belonging is not one of the five named aspects of mattering in Schlossberg's (1989) theory, it is often mentioned alongside it, as belonging plays an important role in developing one's sense of mattering (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020). Nineteen of the 20 veterans interviewed mentioned at least one way in which they felt they belonged on their campus. Eleven of those veterans felt they belonged due to the connections the campus had created for student-veterans, the sense of feeling welcome:

Yes, I've had that where our [college] president before the president that we have now, she, or her staff, they made us feel welcomed. Because whenever we would go up to the president's office, "Oh, you're a veteran. Thank you, blah, blah." It seems like they're especially more open, and open to catering to veterans. "You need this, you need that." With the rest of the students, they're good with other students, but they seem to put a little bit more effort with the veterans, and that president as well. I haven't met the new president, but our other president was good with veterans—really good, really great. (Vet 10)

For nine of the veterans, the sense of belonging came from being with other veterans and finding their "veteran family" on campus, usually at the VRC. Vet 10 put it this way.

You know right away you're with people that are at your level, they're peers. They know what you've gone through. They know that you've been in the military, and there's no discrimination there. Someone could be younger, someone can be older, and it doesn't matter there. That doesn't matter there. We are all brothers and sisters there. At least that's the feeling that I get. It makes you feel like that was my home away from home. That was my safe spot that I would go to. I lived at the Veterans Center forever. Once I

started getting more comfortable with my peers there, that I saw that I wasn't the only veteran, the only one that felt out of place, it made it easier for me to go and attend my other classes. Like, "Okay, I can do this, and I can go back to the Veterans Center and feel more comfortable." They did a lot of events that would help you normalize. That helped me a lot. That helped me get through a lot.

Because they've spent time in the military, veterans are older than students coming directly from high school. This age difference can help create a sense of belonging with their instructors, who are also older. Vet 18, for example, had this to say of the faculty:

I'm more of an adult than I was when I was 18. It's a lot easier for me to connect. A lot of times, I see my teachers as peers. It makes it a lot easier for them to engage me in conversation. Students, when they go to class, when you're 17, 18, 19 years old, you're still a little nervous. You still got that clique thing going on. You're not sure who you should talk to and who you shouldn't. When you're an adult, it's free rein. You talk to who you need to talk to to get the job done. And teachers feel much more— In my opinion, they feel much more relieved to have somebody in the class who is able to articulate what they need, what they want, how things are going. I don't know. It'd be like if you were teaching a class and somebody in the class is one of your friends or who had been through the same experiences as you and, similarly, has a little bit more world experience.

A surprising source of belonging was being treated like any other student. Some veterans didn't want to be singled out for their military service, as they thought it was a double-edged sword. Instead, they preferred to blend in with the other students and be treated no differently. Four veterans voiced this opinion. Vet 6 related his experience this way:

I don't think they look at us any differently as students, because they have to look at us from an equivalent point of view. Now, did they have to deal with individual needs, such as if someone has a disability or some kind of mobility issue? Sure. In terms of academically, they have to treat every student and teach every student the same. Do other students need help with, help taking notes or need some kind of recording after the class? That's on a case-by-case basis in my opinion, or my experience, rather. I was treated the same as anyone. I was given the same expectations and treatment as any other student, which is, again, something that I prefer to anything else.

Attention from Students, Faculty, Administration, or Staff

Feeling that one is noticed by others is the basis of attention. Mentioned by nine student-veterans, attention most often took the form of either curiosity, in which students wanted to know about veterans' personal experiences, or respect from fellow students, as described by Vet 10.

As far as students go, they tend to try to be a little more respectful because they know that you didn't just come to school. You went through some other shit. You've been around the world or whatever, and now you're there. They ask questions: "Oh, how's this? How's that?" or whatnot. From my experience, other students have been respectful and more respectful towards one.

Attention from faculty, administration, and staff is less about respect or curiosity and more about acknowledgement of veterans' military service, whether in general or specific terms. According to the participants in this study, veterans are adept at identifying other veterans. Vet 13, for example, mentioned his interactions with campus sheriffs, who identified him as a veteran:

As far as the cops there, I'm happy to say hi to them, introduce myself to them, talk to them about being a veteran, finding out that some of those sheriffs deputies are also veterans, get to know them. Then after a while, I feel like, "Oh, yes, now I know all the veterans on campus."

Feeling Appreciated or Being Depended Upon

Five veterans spoke about feeling appreciated by students, teachers, and staff. Most of this appreciation was manifested in others' acknowledgment of the veterans' service, as Vet 12 experienced: "When I was doing the actual classes on campus, a couple of them [students] offered to buy me food. I'm like, 'No, that's cool. I got it.' They're not negative or, 'Oh, let me help you do this type of thing,' or just, 'Thank you for your service type of thing.'" Appreciation also acknowledged what veterans brought to the classroom. Vet 18 pointed out, "I wasn't nervous to say things and speak up like a lot of kids are, and the teachers love to see that. They care so much more when you care more. So that shows."

In the context of mattering, dependence speaks to being needed, having others depend on you. Feelings of mattering arise from believing that others rely on you. Thus, you matter because you are depended upon by them. Most of the five veterans who cited this aspect of mattering spoke of experiences with other non-veteran students who sought guidance or leadership from them. Vet 3 shared this:

I think some of them [faculty] even appreciate the fact that I have a sense of leadership from the military. Because I've put together a few study groups here and there and [I] involve the other students and help them get better grades and prepare for tests. I think they [faculty] appreciate that; it takes a load off them, too. I had four guys in my English 101 class in the fall of 2019. They were the hooligans of the class, like the class clowns.

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They were sitting right behind me, and I was able to convince them that this was important, and they need to focus… I think that kind of gave them some perspective about like, "Shit, this guy's being real with me. He made mistakes and I don't want to make those same mistakes."

Feeling Important

People feel important when they believe that others care about them. This aspect of mattering was mentioned by five veterans. In all cases, it was in relation to faculty showing that they care about veterans. Vet 3 experienced this as follows:

Professors and faculty, they're there to help if you need it. I mean, they're there to help everybody. I've seen them help everybody. But they do show, I think, more support towards veterans because they know that for us it's way different, to go back into this normal society. I've had a couple of professors that have been willing to take extra time out of their day to ensure that I know what I'm doing for an assignment or upcoming test. They do, however, understand if you're going through, like, some sort of mental— If you have [a] mental breakdown or issues, sometimes they'll let you turn in a paper late based off that. I was in a meeting the other day with veterans in the Veterans Resource Center, and one veteran said that his professor let him turn all his homework in late, his homework and assignments at the end of the year, because of something he's going through right now because of this transition. He was already struggling in class, and now it moved to online. And I find online is more difficult. So, they were just willing to work with him just because of what he's going through, not I think they would have done that for anybody.

Marginalization Boosters

Nineteen of the 20 veterans interviewed identified at least one college resource, program, or policy that increased their perceptions of marginality on campus. On average, each veteran mentioned six items. I grouped these sources of marginalization into four major categories: marginalization from feeling or being excluded, marginalization from feeling one's differences from others, marginalizing encounters with college policies, and marginalization from the transition back to school. Within each of these four categories, subcategories are explored.

Table 4.4

Marginalizing Factors Cited by Respondents

	# Respondents
Feeling/being excluded	18
Feeling one's differences from others	14
Marginalizing encounters with the college at large	11
Reacclimating to school	3

Feeling or Being Excluded

At its core, marginalization is feeling that one doesn't fit in. Eighteen of the veterans interviewed directly spoke to feeling different from non-veteran students. They spoke of differences driven by their own military mindset, being older, having low expectations of non-veteran students, and others' preconceptions and misconceptions. I discuss each of these subthemes in turn.

First, the military mindset, based on the interviews conducted for this study, consists of self-sufficiency, perseverance, professionalism, and, often, holding one's tongue. These qualities, in contrast to non-veteran students, were mentioned by 13 of the veterans. Vet 18, for example, spoke specifically about self-sufficiency:

Veterans are usually pretty flexible about a lot of things. If you come out of the military and you go back to school, you've already got the wherewithal to figure things out on your own, especially because you're no longer 18 years old and you've had a little bit real-world experience.

While in the military, veterans were prone to have a common method of communicating. It was direct, opinionated, and open. Veterans did not shy away from argumentation and discussion; they felt safe to do so in the company of their military "family" who had a shared experience. Once they arrived on campus, these student-veterans were more guarded. Based on his observations of fellow veterans, Vet 4 explained why he thought they often kept opinions to themselves and were less likely to engage with non-veteran students in class:

> You might be speaking the same language, but there's some disconnect with some of the kids, which tends for us to keep our mouths shut. And for some veterans, it's pretty hard to keep our mouths shut. But we still try to because it ends up in no-win arguments. I got 8 years with the Navy and 12 years with the Army. I've always thought that we tended to use arguments as a way to let off steam in the military. In a way, I haven't seen it done anywhere else like that. We tend to verbalize stuff and be vocal with your stuff. And anything that can be made fun of, they will make fun of you for. And you just get used to it, and it's kind of like a back and forth, and it's all good. Here, if you verbalize what you're thinking in your head, you'll catch hell for it, so you try not to do that.

Some veterans in this study felt differently because of non-veteran students' preconceptions and misconceptions of them. Nine veterans brought up this concern. Vet 18 related how veterans' opinions and experiences surrounding wars and guns might differ from what might be expected of them:

Some people have voiced their concerns against fighting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and things like that. If I had ever talked to them about it, I can assure you and 100% honestly tell you that I told them, "Dude, honestly, I didn't want to go to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan." If you think you hate it, imagine how badly the dudes who are sitting there in their little huts and doing whatever, cleaning their weapons, cleaning their boots, making sure they get enough water, imagine how much they hate going. They never made me feel unwelcome, but mostly because I'm very open-minded and I can accept when people do not agree with the things that I agree with. A lot of people in California have a thing about guns, firearms. I was born and raised in California.

Even though 40% of California community college students are 25 and older, the expectation that college students come straight from high school weighed on the minds of some veterans. As such, nine of the study participants mentioned feeling different because of their age. Vet 20 presented it as follows:

I'm an older veteran. I entered into the military later than typical. Once I did my 5 years, I was already almost 29, 30, coming back into community college to finish a degree. It was hard to stay focused when everyone around me was so much younger. When vets go back to school, they're older than the population that's already there, and for me, I felt so behind. I saw all these young 20-something-year-olds already at their sophomores in their degree. And I'm in my late 20s, on the same page as them. If you don't have that motivation, you won't stay in, you won't continue school. You'll find a reason to drop out.

When asked if they felt welcome, some veterans responded by saying they didn't feel *unwelcome*. That distinction is part of veterans' low expectations of non-veterans. Eight veterans gave this sort of response. Vet 4 was one example:

When it comes to negative inputs, I tend to be a little dismissive of it. If somebody doesn't like me in someplace, that's their problem, not mine. I don't take that to heart.

Vet 8 conveyed a similar attitude. Rather than expect a certain level of civility from other students, he was prepared for negative input and planned to ignore it:

If it's just some random student, I can't think of anything they could say to me to upset me, like verbally. You can call me whatever you want. You can say whatever you want. In my mind, I'm just like, "You know what? It doesn't register."

Finally, Vet 16 focused on fair treatment from others on campus and had low expectations for receiving it:

I just accept it for what it is. That is life. Everyone isn't going to treat you fairly. I'm absolutely used to that. Everyone isn't going to be in tune with something that they have no knowledge of or any connection to. I'm okay with that as well.

Feeling One's Differences from Others

Fourteen student-veterans talked about external forces that created an environment that led them to feel marginalized and to notice their differences. Subcategories were related to resources, level of care and support, being welcomed and included, and attitudes and environments. Specifically, 10 of the student-veterans cited either inadequate or unequal resources as a reason for feeling marginalized. Some felt that resources were distributed unequally among student populations. In relation to this issue, four participants mentioned the

location of the VRC—an issue addressed in a different context earlier. Vet 17 described it like this:

> When VRC was located more centrally, it was extremely beneficial because everything that we needed to do could be done in, relatively speaking, one area, just jumping floors. Then, if we had to go to the admin building, it's just like across the street. It didn't take very long. When they moved it over to where it is currently is located, it did become much more difficult. There was definitely a drop in people coming to the VRC. I guess a lot of the regulars still found and made time to be there because, again, it is a good place to just be able to do work or just hang out between classes and stuff like that. It being so far out of the way when we needed to do so many things for our benefits, it just made it to where it was inconvenient, and we don't like inconvenience. It felt like they were pushed off to the side after that point. If the other services that are on campus such as those for the foster kids and AB12 kids and the TRIO and the other scholars, and all the other programs that are on campus can be in the student services or the student union building, why not the VRC when they did the exact same thing just for veterans? What's the difference of there being a safe space for veterans to be able to go in and hang out, to do homework, to mediate, to just get away from the rest of the campus when we need to, and stuff like that? Instead, we're put all the way over onto the other side, like this excess type stuff or whatnot.

Participants were asked whether the college cared about veterans and whether the campus was welcoming to them. Twelve of the student-veterans described experiences where they felt the college didn't care about, support, promote, understand, or welcome veterans. Vet 10 was one of six who felt the campus was not accommodating or welcoming:

You just get lost in the mix. No one's saying, "Oh, you're a veteran. Welcome. Thank you for your service." Nothing like that. Nothing. There's none of that. It doesn't make a veteran want to go to this school. The only thing that would make you want to go is if you found out that they have the programs that you want. That's it. But nothing saying to a veteran, "Okay, I'm welcomed there. I can go there. They want me there." Nothing.

Similarly, when Vet 20 was asked whether the school cared about veterans, she said "not particularly." She continued:

Not the school administrators. I feel like the individuals that work in the Veterans Resource Center care about veterans, but I don't feel like outside of the Veterans Resource Center. It's not really acknowledged.

Veteran status also fell into this subcategory. In particular, the narrow definition of "veteran" was a key issue for Vet 1:

At most other colleges I have gone to, if you are a veteran, you have priority. At this college, you have to have been discharged within 2 years, which is ridiculous because a vet is vet, is a vet, is a vet, is a vet. Rather, I'm a vet for a day or I'm vet for 20 years. It doesn't matter if I'm still getting my G.I. bill or whatnot. I don't feel like it's right for them to be like, "Well, you don't get priority." I do get priority because I'm disabled, but I don't get priority because I'm a veteran, because I've been out longer than 2 years. But I was in a coma for 3 of those years. So, does that count? Does that make that fair?

Specific to the faculty, Vet 5 offered her understanding based on advice given to her by her fellow veterans:

I heard some other veterans say some professors are not really fans of veterans, and that if a veteran has some issue with their health or they need to go to appointment or

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something like that, the professor does not give them time to submit the assignment or allow them to not attend the class meeting or something like that. They said, "As a student, you have to be able to maintain your class."

Four veterans felt the college didn't understand veterans or know what they needed. Concerns included professors who didn't know how to communicate with veterans and, from Vet 17, a desire to see scholarships, internships, and recruitment events that catered to their years of military experience:

All of the career fairs and job fairs were Safeway and Winco—for lack of a better term, with no disrespect intended—dead-end jobs that you can get straight out of high school, and you don't actually need a degree for, type of thing. None of the people that I saw at the career fairs on college campuses, at this campus anyway, seem to be intended for students with growth potential. They seemed more towards the "entry level" with no actual upward movement positions that anybody can do. They need the bodies filled. They want somebody with intelligence, but they don't need a degree of any sort to do.

Though colleges strive to create inclusive campus environments, some veterans felt that "inclusive" did not include vets; others experienced anti-veteran attitudes and environments. Six veterans spoke of these issues; Vet 4, for example, addressed inclusivity:

I got in, not an argument, but discussion—actually, it was a pretty congenial discussion, wasn't an argument—with a kid, a student, at college there. He felt it was okay to punch somebody as long as they were Nazis. And I was like, well, you don't have the right to punch anybody short of self-defense. You don't get to inflict bodily harm upon anybody short, again, of self-defense. That's my opinion. Long story short, he actually called me a Nazi sympathizer, and I'm like, "Wait, that's nitpicking in a really bizarre way." Well,

you hear words like "inclusion" and "diversity" and stuff, and that's great. But if you

don't fit into certain categories, you have to keep your mouth shut, or else you're going to

get way too much attention that you don't want.

Vet 16 recounted exchanges she had with non-veteran students that could be construed as

anti-veteran:

Other students treat me differently? Yes. I don't care, if that makes any sense. They're

invisible to me; they're just there. I don't want a rapport with them. So, I really don't care

about how they feel. I've had several approach me and tell me "Oh, this, this, that and the

third. How could you do this and how could you do that?" It's like, "How could you

not?" Every now and again I run into that, every now and again, like, "Oh, you're a baby

killer." "I don't recall killing any children, but if you say so." It is what it is. I have

family members that don't talk to me. I don't care about a stranger.

Marginalizing Encounters With the College at Large

More than half of the veterans experienced marginalizing encounters with the college.

These included administrative processes and policies, experiences with how the college

addressed their physical and/or mental health issues, and physical access to campus resources.

Among the six veterans who mentioned administrative processes and policies, their complaints

took various forms, such as being charged non-resident tuition, experiencing unassisted

enrollment, and not receiving proper academic credit for training accomplished in the military.

Vet 10 spoke to the last item:

I worked in the hospital, and I'm doing basically what a nurse is doing, but I just don't

have the license. When I get out, I get no credit for that, and I was doing that for 4 years.

All I got was a physical education training…two units total. And it's like, "Wow, so my

training didn't count for anything." And we know stuff. We know a lot of stuff. Yes, I

think it'd just be better if they could do something about getting our training more units

so we don't have to take as many classes, so the financial burden will not be so much.

Because we're taking all these classes that we already know about. They could do a better

job about that.

The college's handling of physical and/or mental health issues created feelings of

marginalization for five of the student-veterans. Even though they said that it was helpful to have

this resource, some respondents contradicted this in their remarks. PTSD and anxiety were

indicated in all but one of these veterans. Vet 16 spoke to the lack of understanding of these

health issues within the college at large:

It would be nice if there were veteran counselors in some of these schools because,

especially when you're freshly separated, you don't feel comfortable around civilians

whatsoever, and they don't understand that. Sometimes we have PTSD, sometimes we

have anxiety being in large crowds, because large crowds equal "You're going to get

blown up." I was adjusting to large crowds. There's no one to talk to, which is awful. It's

absolutely awful. I would like that to change for veterans moving forward. I've seen the

therapists and counselors on my own from the VA to deal with it, but I don't ever want

anyone to feel that way again if I could help. It was just an awful experience.

Physical access to campus resources proved marginalizing to four veterans. The VRC's

move to another part of campus was again one of those issues; this was raised by Vet 18:

The colleges were under construction at the time. A lot of the people working there, the

student volunteers and whatever else didn't know where certain things were. A very

specific example would be the Veterans Service Center was moving, but nobody could tell me where it was moving to or when it was moving.

Four veterans also mentioned a lack VRC resources in this category. These were evenly divided between not having authoritative responses to questions and simply being understaffed. Vet 12 spoke to the latter.

Just speaking to the veteran counselor (is difficult), and that's not a completely hard part. The counselor would only be available certain times, and it just happened that's when I was at work; that's when I was busy. Each time I had to set up my Ed plan, it would take like a week or two to just get a time that we could both work together. Do you know what I mean? Because it'd be like, "Oh, I'm available 3:00 to 5:00. I'd be like, "Oh, I have work from 1:00 to 8:00. That doesn't work for me today." Then the next day I'm off and the next the counselor's doing other interviews. Do you know what I mean?

The last item in this subcategory pertains to accessing G.I. Bill benefits or financial aid. This was mentioned by three veterans. Vet 1 explained his frustration with the college on this front:

So, for my first two semesters, the school sent all of my money to an account that was not my account, some fraudulent account that got set up by somebody else, and they kept telling me they weren't going to send it to this account. I don't know, they mess[ed] me over for the first couple of semesters. All my money, my loans went to that account that I never got access to those funds. I never received a penny of that money. So, yeah. And that's money for college I never received. Gotta love it. I was fighting with— They kept telling me they weren't going to do it. I was talking to, like, upper people at the school,

different people, and they really screwed me over. Big time. They still haven't done anything to make it right. It just is what it is.

Reacclimating to School

A transition into a new role is itself a source of marginalization. Even students going directly from high school to college experience this as they go from dependent minors to independent adults. For veterans, taking on the role of student created marginalizing situations as they encountered difficult courses, work with non-veterans, and interactions with students at different life stages than themselves. These challenges were mentioned by totals of two, four, and eight veterans, respectively. Speaking to the disparities in their stage of life versus younger students, Vet 10 offered the following thoughts:

Feeling out of place, extremely, because I'm older than most of the kids there. There's that. Afraid to ask questions and stuff because I'm older, and I'm doing air quotes. I'm supposed to know more, but that's not the case. I'm at the same level as the youngsters. That's about it. It's like you go there and you're older. You feel out of place because everybody's a lot younger than you. You're afraid to ask questions because you don't want to seem dumb. Because society, as a whole, sees older people like they're supposed to know more. I know I do. Being afraid to ask questions and whatnot, that was difficult.

After serving in the military, many of the veterans became accustomed to the military way of life. The military was their job, and the way the military operated was their norm. With that as a reference point, working with non-veterans was challenging for some student-veterans, as it exacerbated their feelings of being different. Vet 10 related an experience of this nature:

My first experience was the most awful experience I've ever had. They were civilians, first of all. No shade to civilians, but they have no idea how structured we are. If I'm

coming to you for something, I need you to know that information. If you don't know that information, I rather you tell me you don't know that information than have me on a wild goose chase looking for something that doesn't exist. I've had that happen several times. There was a person in the front. What I needed could have been finished in maybe all of 30 to 45 minutes. I was there almost 3 hours. That person took several personal calls—and not just calls, just talking to family about the day—and I was just confused as to why this happening to me.

Summary

In exploring these college veterans' perceptions and campus experiences, the study showed that nearly all participants had both positive and negative comments and experiences to share. For example, the VRC was cited as a helpful resource by a majority of study participants, but it was also mentioned by more than half of the veterans as a campus resource with limitations. Also, there were more overall negative comments and experiences shared than there were positive ones. Case in point: Nineteen of the 20 veterans spoke of at least one aspect of the college that made them feel that they mattered, but the same number shared experiences of how they felt marginalized on campus. Notably, the veterans spoke with greater frequency about feeling marginalized than they did about feeling that they mattered.

Mattering, which was the core of the third research question, was experienced by student-veterans in four of the five aspects that Schlossberg (1989) described. Veterans described experiences (to various degrees) of attention, appreciation, dependence, and importance with students, faculty, administration, staff, and fellow campus veterans. Belonging was the greatest contributor to feelings of mattering among these student-veterans. This aspect of mattering is highly dependent on others, whether individuals or groups, and on making social connections

that reinforce a sense of acceptance or association with like-minded people. While some veterans found belonging in faculty, staff, administration, and the general student population, most derived this sense from their fellow veterans on campus.

Marginalization was the focal point of the fourth research question. The veterans experienced marginalization via encounters with the college at large, due to reacclimating to school, because they felt or were excluded, and because they felt different from other students. The last two describe situations where college veterans felt marginalized both from within and outside of themselves. The overwhelming majority experienced external factors that made them feel excluded, which in turn created feelings of marginalization. Veterans also felt intrinsically different from other student populations on campus, leading to an internalized form of marginalization.

CHAPTER 5:

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examined student-veterans' relationship to campus resources and the factors that influence their feelings of mattering and marginalization while attending community college. Based on analysis of the structured interviews of 20 veterans who were enrolled at a common community college, I was able to identify several factors as influencing their feelings of mattering and marginalization. I also explored the challenges that veterans encounter in attending college and the success of campus resources in helping them overcome their challenges.

This chapter begins with a summary of the findings and a discussion of how these findings relate to the literature that was reviewed. Next, I offer conclusions, followed by implications for the study site and higher education institutions serving student-veteran populations. This chapter concludes with a plan to disseminate the findings and my own reflections on the research process.

This study contributes to the existing body of literature on the success of military veterans attending college in several ways. Unlike other studies related to the topic of student-veteran success that have been conducted at large, 4-year, majority-White colleges and universities, this study is unique in terms of the institutional type, size, location, and specificity of the participants. This qualitative study offers personal insights into the experiences of veterans attending an urban, mid-sized, California community college with a majority-minority student body. These factors are important to validate the relevance of existing theoretical frameworks constructed from studies conducted at larger, less diverse institutions. Most other college veteran studies reviewed have relied on Tinto's (1975) student integration model of attrition, despite the fact that veterans are recognized to be non-traditional students, are more likely to attend colleges

that fall outside traditional 4-year public institutions (such as community colleges), have higher proportional representation of minorities within their population, and have higher than normal proportions of students requiring accommodations. I applied Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering and marginalization, which is has greater applicability to a wide variety of institutional populations and thus avoids the specificity of previous studies of student populations.

Summary of Findings

The findings presented in the previous chapter began with a look at resources—first, veteran-identified resources that helped them navigate the challenges they encountered in their college environment were laid out. I found that veterans overwhelmingly turned to the college's VRC for relief from their challenges, but they also found a handful of general student resources helpful, such as the Office of Special Services and the library. They identified missing resources that could have helped them with their challenges; some of these missing or inadequate resources were later identified as sources of feelings of marginalization. Veteran-specific resources, deficiencies in general campus resources, and lack of help with the military-to-college transition were the most cited missing resources.

After exploring resources, I focused on factors influencing perceptions of mattering and marginalization among the veterans who participated. The biggest boost to mattering came from fellow college veterans who contributed positively to feelings of belonging on campus. Student-veterans also felt they mattered on campus as a result of the attention they received from other students, faculty, and staff. Marginalization, on the other hand, was largely influenced by college resources, either because they were deemed inadequate, inequitable, unhelpful, or because they lacked an understanding of veterans' needs.

Discussion

In Chapter 2, I articulated that this study was based on the theoretical framework of Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering and marginalization. This framework provides a foundation for understanding how marginalization can occur as a result of a major life transitions. This theory applies well to student-veterans, as most of them transition directly from the military into college. It also speaks to their experiences with regard to mattering, the various experiential aspects of mattering, and the entities on campus that bolster their perceptions of mattering.

I anticipated finding data similar to the constructs that the theory referenced. The literature cited factors that would increase the study participants' perceptions of mattering, such as feeling appreciated, experiencing attention, having a sense of belonging, feeling needed, and feeling important. The interviews bore this out in ways that were specific to veterans and their unique experiences as college students. Further, I anticipated I would find transition-induced marginalizing factors, such as feeling excluded, feeling different and, feeling discord between their old roles as military servicepeople and their new roles as college students. To a large degree, what I found was aligned with the literature, especially as it relates to the larger theoretical framework of mattering and marginalization—but there were also few differences.

Differences in Findings From the Literature

Previous studies identified challenges that veterans face and offered solutions, usually under an umbrella of resources spawned from the suggestion of implementation of VRCs. Most of the challenges referenced in those studies were issues that veterans faced prior to enrolling in college—issues that were usually a result of their military service, such as PTSD, physical disabilities, and family separation and reintegration. Some of those challenges did surface here,

often influencing veterans' feelings of marginalization. But new factors also emerged that were different from what the literature exposed, and these different factors were discovered after the veterans entered a college environment. They included denial of problems and challenges, benefits expiration concerns, and an underlying knowledge that they are intrinsically different from other students.

What Challenges?

Veterans behave differently from other populations in that they are very self-sufficient; they are also less likely to complain about their circumstances. According to the participants in this study, these two traits were acquired or learned during their military service. As a result, study participants explained, college veterans tend to adhere to established campus policies and accept college norms for what they are, even when they do not serve them or when they create negative environments for the veterans. Rather than buck the system, they will grin and bear it.

This was evident with some participants who initially stated that they had not experienced any challenges in college. Over the course of their hour-long interviews, those participants did eventually identify challenging experiences on campus, but also were dismissive of them. They were reluctant to engage with the underlying issues, especially when based on interpersonal dynamics between student-veterans and non-veteran students. Whereas other students may have sought administrative help or counseling support to address these issues, veterans were more likely to simply take their challenges in stride as just part of the college experience. Related to this was their tendency to have lower expectations of the college environment due to its lack of structure and efficiency compared to the military as well as lower expectations of non-veteran students, whom veterans considered less resourceful, less self-sufficient, and less focused than themselves.

Save Your Benefits

On the topic of benefits, other studies were troubled by the ability of college veterans to access the G.I. Bill. The concern was that veterans would arrive on campus and have problems tapping into the G.I. Bill's educational benefits or that there would not be a smooth handoff between the military and their college. Some study participants did mention access issues, but those who did were experiencing situations that appeared to be outliers caused by aggravating circumstances, such as hospitalization or exhaustion of benefits during previous college enrollments.

A far more common issue with benefits pertained to student-veterans using other sources to fund community college expenses so they could reserve their 36 months of education benefits from the G.I. Bill as a safety net—for example, if their AA degrees took longer than expected or if they wanted to pursue a bachelor's degree or graduate study. This finding is unique because current literature on the subject claims that veterans have problems accessing benefits and rarely mentions the idea that veterans are discovering the need to preserve their benefits for future educational plans, such as graduate school.

Veterans Accept That They Differ From Other Students

Schlossberg's (1989) model identified "not fitting in" as a factor that would push students to feeling marginalized. The participants of this study felt they didn't fit in, but they were not drawn to finding ways to do so, such as finding common ground. Instead, there appeared to be an acceptance of the fact that they did not fit in and that there were justifiable reasons that their military experiences made that feeling immutable. At a base level, veterans felt that the structure of military life made them different from those who had never served. At a secondary level, veterans who had experienced deployments in combat zones felt an added level

of difference that regular civilian populations could not understand or relate to. In both cases, the attitude was less about *feeling* that they were different than it was about *knowing* they were different and accepting it.

Similarities in the Findings With the Literature

There were also factors that emerged from this study that support the existing literature. These factors include veterans gravitating towards other veterans for support, trying to blend in rather than fit in, choosing to enlist in large part for the education benefit, finding common ground with older constituencies on campus due to their maturity, and the importance of acknowledging veterans by establishing a VRC.

Veterans Connect with Veterans

As other studies suggested and as was repeatedly voiced at the veteran conferences I attended, veterans search for other veterans wherever they go because they believe that only other veterans can truly understand them. Some of the veterans in this study had a knack for finding other veterans simply by noticing their dress, demeanor, class participation, and haircuts. The college made the process easier by creating a space where veterans could gather. The study participants expressed that their sense of belonging at their college was largely due to their connections with individuals within the campus veteran community.

Blending In

As in other studies (e.g., DiRamio et al., 2008), I found that many veterans thought it best not to divulge their veteran status to faculty or to fellow students. They preferred to blend in rather than fit in. The reasons offered included feeling uneasy about being treated differently, wanting to avoid drawing negative attention to themselves from non-veterans with negative preconceptions of veterans, and wanting to distance themselves from difficult memories and

experiences from their military service. Socially, these students had to learn to develop new friendships in a new environment.

Consistent with Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, student-veterans harnessed resilience and tapped into their social and navigational capital. The participants demonstrated the use of social capital when they gravitated towards associating with students with a common background—the fellow veterans they knew from the VRC or from the times they extended their social network by getting involved in veteran activities on campus. Peers became an integral part of influencing the successful transition to college. Participants shared stories of great reliance on their peers to provide academic advice and support, and, most importantly, a source of understanding. Their rationale was that their veteran peers had shared experiences and that relying on someone to whom they could relate was comforting. These participants relied on their military brothers and sisters to stay the course when stressors presented themselves, and they were at the ready to pay it forward.

Educational Benefit, the Final Outcome

The most common reason military personnel give for enlisting was a desire to serve their country. Among the practical reasons for doing so, access to a college education was near the top. In this respect, the commitment to accomplishing the goal of a college education is an extension of their commitment to successful completion of their military service. As such, commitment was incredibly high for participants in this study and illustrated what Yosso (2005) described as resistant capital. These students came to college with a purpose and endeavored to finish what they started when they first enlisted in the military, in spite of any challenges they might face on campus. Highly motivated by their arduous and sometimes traumatic military experiences and a desire to achieve more in life beyond their rich military service, the

participants revealed their desire to either break the stereotypes promoted by society at large regarding veterans, or, more commonly, ignore what non-veterans on campus thought about them altogether. Either way, they overcame the challenges they encountered on campus and shared their insights with fellow veterans so that others would benefit from their experiences.

Veterans Are Non-Traditional Students

The participants in this study echoed the complaints of veterans in previous studies regarding the low maturity level of fresh-from-high-school students and the feeling of having little in common with those traditional students to bridge the gap. Yet, they did find common ground with other non-traditional students and felt they could relate to their professors not simply because of their age but also because faculty were more conservative in their viewpoints, valued their military experience, and sought to employ student-veterans' leadership traits in the classroom.

A VRC Acknowledges Veterans on Campus

As other studies have suggested, a VRC can be useful as a one-stop shop where veterans can congregate socially and have their concerns addressed. A benefit of VRCs that surfaced in this study but was absent from previous studies is the idea that simply having a VRC can make veterans feel seen. It led this study's participants to feel that the institution cared about them—not specific constituencies, such as faculty, administrators, or non-veteran students, but the college itself. This may also be why veterans felt so strongly about the location of the VRC. A remote and inconvenient location was a signal that the college cared less about them and gave more importance to more favorably housed student organizations.

Implications and Recommendations

College for the veterans who participated in this study proved to be more challenging than they would initially admit, and these challenges contributed to their feelings of marginalization. Nevertheless, they found a sense of mattering on campus when they connected to their veteran family in college along with those students and professors who made them feel noticed, respected, and valued. They found that they were comfortable in their own skin and could own the fact that they were different from other students as a result of their military experiences. They did not feel a need to fit in but welcomed policies from the college that would demonstrate a desire to include them. The lived experiences shared by the participants present implications for institutions that serve veterans, non-traditional students, and students requiring accommodations. Institutions should be mindful of the needs and issues that confront this population. This study brought to light the challenges experienced by the participants with the lack of understanding of their military experience, entering an unfamiliar educational environment after a long period away from school, and meeting the demands of academic rigor.

I offer several key recommendations designed to equip postsecondary institutions to better serve the student-veteran population. First, a network for mentoring should be created by establishing a peer mentoring program; next, a seminar on benefit preservation would benefit student-veterans; and finally, institutions such as the study site should strive to make it a priority to track retention and persistence of student-veterans and to offer transition helpers. The recommendations offered can be implemented not only by the study site but also by institutions serving similar populations of students.

Veteran Peer Mentor Program

Students who are veterans will not readily reveal their military experience to everyone on campus. While their aspirational capital is high and their social capital is strong, this study demonstrates that student-veterans rely on each other to navigate college. Efforts should be made to match first-year student-veterans with peer mentors who are strong academically and quite familiar with navigating the institution to serve as resource guides. This can be achieved through a veteran peer mentor program that would highlight the presence of other students who are succeeding in college and create a climate of support (Arana et al., 2010; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004).

A veteran peer mentor program can be achieved by recruiting second-year student-veterans who demonstrate high academic achievement and are student leaders in co-curricular activities to serve as resource guides for first-year student-veterans. This can be a 1-year commitment to provide adequate time for the support of the first-year student-veterans being mentored to transition and adjust to college. Veteran peer mentors would receive leadership training and, if possible, a stipend. The mentor program can be semi-structured, whereby veteran peer mentors would check in with their first-year student-veterans on a monthly basis to provide advice and support on adjusting to college.

The impact would be great for both mentors and mentees. It would meet the need of a student population who would no longer have to figure things out on their own and would give current student-veterans an opportunity to expand their affiliation to the institution by giving back. As mentioned earlier, belonging, an influencing factor in veterans feeling that they matter on campus, was largely delivered through interactions with fellow veterans. So, in addition to helping new veterans make a smoother transition into college, a veteran peer mentor program

would also generate more opportunities for first-year veterans to build their sense of belonging, thus contributing positively to their feelings of mattering.

Seminar on Benefit Preservation

The findings of this study revealed that veterans often have aspirations beyond completing a 2-year degree. Their G.I. Bill educational benefits give them a great advantage towards completing their educational goals, but they are limited to 36 months of college enrollment. Rather than utilizing their college benefits at a community college—where tuition and fees are relatively inexpensive—student-veterans can find other funding sources for their time in community college and reserve their benefits for their transfer colleges, where the cost of a semester will undoubtedly be greater. External sources range from scholarships and grants that do not entail repayment as well as student loans. While student loans may seem to be counterintuitive for veterans who come with benefits in hand, the low interest incurred on a relatively small loan for tuition and fees is better choice than taking loans at a more expensive 4-year college after their 36-month benefit expires.

Transition Helpers

Veterans come to college with a major achievement under their belts. They are aware of what they've accomplished and, for the most part, are very proud of their military experience. Unfortunately, upon their arrival on campus, unfamiliarity with the environment and feeling out of place can undercut the confidence they gained from their military service. The military does a decent job of informing soon-to-be veterans of their benefits and helping them with the process of separating from the military, but they don't spend much time informing them of what they can expect when they transition to college, when they actually set foot on their campus. Institutions can further empower veterans by educating them on this transition.

Student-veterans should be made aware of the demands of college, the challenges of returning to school after a long separation from it, and the adjustment necessary when transitioning from a rigid military environment to an unstructured one where they are, for the most part, influencing if not determining every aspect of their academic journey. Upon admission, it would be incumbent upon a college institution to continue the education process for these veterans, to inform them of the college culture and what the academic experience will be for them, and to encourage involvement in student life, at minimum with other student-veterans. A seminar or workshop could feature current student-veterans sharing their lived experiences as college students. They could describe their transitions from the military to college, their adjustments, and the challenges of the campus, and offer suggestions to help prepare veterans on how best to accomplish their educational goals. This would demonstrate institutional support to veterans in understanding the unique transition they are making.

Track the Retention and Persistence of Student-Veterans

Institutions must make it a priority to track the retention and persistence of student-veterans because these data can inform and shape the objectives and outcomes of the services provided and enhance retention rates. Presently no record tracks the retention and persistence of students by veteran status. As such, the institution is unable to produce information regarding retention and persistence data for student-veterans. Creating a database to track this information would be helpful in determining the institution's effectiveness in meeting the needs of its veteran population. Cracks in the pipeline can be determined quickly if the institution can pinpoint aspects of the student experience that trigger departure, such as G.I. Bill benefit access, accommodation issues, military service credit, and so on.

Dissemination of Findings

Veterans' resources can vary from one college campus to another, even within a district of affiliated colleges. This variability goes beyond implementation of programs. Often, the specific programs offered at one site may not match the resources at another college. Although conferences such as the California Community Colleges Veterans Summit have begun to create an information-sharing environment, many successful programs have not been duplicated or shared across campuses.

Early and influential studies of colleges and veteran populations suggested a lower rate of VRC implementation than currently exists. The process of implementing VRCs on college campuses was also discussed in student-veterans' conventions that I attended in 2016, 2017, and 2018. Along with earlier studies, these discussions were focused on the potential benefits of bringing VRCs on board. Rather than the 60% national college implementation mentioned in past studies, California community colleges are approaching a rate of 80% with regards to campuses that have resource centers specifically serving veteran populations (CA Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2021). Thus, this study does more to examine what works for veterans vis-à-vis VRC offerings and where veterans find shortcomings. To their credit, VRCs have become a go-to resource for veterans seeking help acclimating on their campuses. On the other hand, they have also become the main source of veterans' complaints. This is to be expected as veterans learn the ropes that specifically cater to their needs and as they identify the resources that are missing or inadequate.

Regardless of the differences in program offerings, the underlying mission of VRCs is presumed to be student-veterans' success. Knowledge of veterans' needs, as expressed by veterans themselves, can have a positive impact on the success of campus VRCs. Thus, the

findings from this study can shape program offerings of college VRCs to directly address their customers' needs. Whether addressing specific disabilities or general concerns, having this information can arm these centers to help soldiers make successful transitions to student life (Mangan, 2008).

With all of this in mind, the findings from this research will be shared through various platforms. A copy of the dissertation will be shared with each of the participants in this study and with the college president, vice president, dean of institutional effectiveness, and dean of student services at the study site. Additionally, an executive summary of the findings will be provided to the faculty and other college administrators on campus. Although this study did not include faculty or administrative perceptions, the information will be presented to them as the basis for further dialogue with campus VRC support staff. Toward the same goal, this study and its accompanying data will be presented in a meeting with the director and staff of the VRC on the campus where the study was conducted.

The final recipients of the study are the leaders of the college district within which the campus resides. Sharing the study at this level can facilitate duplication of the study itself or its findings at the other campuses within the college district. At a later point in time, the study can be shared at annual statewide and at national conferences, such as the California Community Colleges Veterans Summit or the annual conference of the Student Veterans of America, in an effort to improve the resources available to veterans in California and the nation at large. The study will also be useful to organizations outside of the academic world that build community among veterans and help them transition from deployment to student life, such as Boots to Books. Finally, the findings will add to the literature related to nontraditional students, students with disabilities, students with mental health needs, and marginalized students in general.

Institutions can glean from this study the needs of today's college veterans and further understand how best to support students who have made the transition from military service to college.

Reflections

The opportunity perform this study has been a dream come true. I thoroughly enjoyed conducting the research and hearing these veterans' stories as it afforded me insight into the interesting, challenging, accomplished, and complicated lives of student-veterans. They divulged very personal stories about their time in the military, how it shaped them, changed them, and gave them an identity—one that they don't casually discard upon college matriculation in order to fit in. Though this study focused specifically on student-veterans, I observed that my participants had much in common with other student constituencies, such as students with disabilities, students of color, and non-traditional students, and it underscored the fact that students are not to be compartmentalized or narrowly defined. Students can find common ground with others if they take the time to share their experiences and commit to being curious about the other-labeled students around them.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. The purpose of this interview is to gain information about the role of college campus resources, programs, and policies as they relate to student-veterans' needs and perceptions. This interview will take 30 minutes to an hour. I have a copy of the study information sheet, which contains the informed consent form that was emailed to you in advance for your review. This interview is confidential, meaning neither your name nor any information that could potentially reveal your identity will be shared from this recording. Before we begin this interview, do you have any questions about the consent form? (Wait for response.) Please indicate your consent to participate by saying either, "Yes, I consent" or "No, I do not consent." (Wait for verbal acknowledgement). Okay, great. Thank you.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1) I'd like to start by asking some background questions.

   a. What was the highest level of education you completed before you joined the military?

   b. Have you attended any other colleges prior to enrolling at this college?

      i. How many semesters or units did you complete before enrolling at this college?

   c. How many semesters have you been enrolled at this college?

CAMPUS EXPERIENCES

2) What, if any, challenges have you faced since you enrolled at this college?

3) What, if any, campus resources have you used to help with those challenges?

   a. For each resource you've used, please tell me…

   * how you used the resource

* how that resource helped you

* how that resource was limited

4) What additional resources, if any, could the college offer to help with these challenges you've faced?

5) How connected do you feel to campus events and activities?

6) Do you feel that the campus cares about veterans?

   a. What are some of your experiences that make you feel that?

7) How welcome do you think you and other veterans are on campus?

8) Do your instructors treat you differently than other students when they find out you're a veteran? How so? In what way?

9) Do other students treat you differently when they find out you're a veteran? How so? In what way?

10) Have you ever had an incident where someone on campus made you feel like you weren't welcome because you're a veteran?

11) Have you ever had an incident where someone on campus made you feel especially welcome because you're a veteran?

CLOSING

12) What could the college do to improve veterans' experiences at this college?

13) What advice or information would you give to service members wishing to enroll at this campus that would improve their experience?

That was my last question. Is there anything that you feel is important to this study that I have not asked? If not, thank you again for your time. I wish you well in your all your pursuits.

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