The Lived Experiences of Graduate Student Veterans Enrolled in CACREP-Accredited Counseling Programs: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Gerald Spangler entitled "The Lived Experiences of Graduate Student Veterans Enrolled in CACREP-Accredited Counseling Programs: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Counselor Education.

Melinda M. Gibbons, Major Professor

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The Lived Experiences of Graduate Student Veterans Enrolled in CACREP-Accredited Counseling Programs: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

A Dissertation Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Gerald D. Spangler

December 2020
Dedication

I would like to recognize and dedicate this work to several people. First and foremost, I dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Donna. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Without you, this journey would have been impossible. You make the tough times and hectic situations bearable. You keep our family going and make our house a home. Your support helped me get through the military and my journey to become a counselor and counselor educator. You bring out the best in me and lift me up when I am down. Thank you for all you have done and continue to do. I love you.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my family. To mom and dad, thank you for giving me the tenacity to see things through. Your love, support, and devotion made me the person I am today. To Jason and Jessica, thank you for always offering me words of support and keeping me focused on my dreams.

Jerald “Jerry” Spangler Sr.
June 4, 1945 to January 29, 2019
United States Air Force Veteran
1963-1985
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Finally, I would like to recognize the veterans that made this study possible. As counselors or educators, your willingness to participate provides a better understanding of supporting our future veterans that pursue graduate education. Thank you for your sacrifices, military service, and focus on the veteran community. I look forward to potentially working with each you as counseling colleagues. I wish the best of luck to you all in your future endeavors.
Abstract

Student veterans (SVs) are a population of students studied extensively at the undergraduate level. These students possess military traits and characteristics that influence their academic experiences. Existing research focuses on these experiences to better understand and assist in fostering academic persistence. However, there is a gap in literature that explores the lived experiences of graduate SVs. This literature is even more pronounced when narrowed to graduate SVs enrolled in Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Therefore, this study sought to address this gap and gain a better understanding of graduate SVs and their academic experiences that lead to persistence. This study used Moustakas (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach to interview, code, and analyze the experiences of nine graduate SVs. I used the research question, “What are the lived experiences of graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP counseling programs?” to guide the research topic. This study found that graduate SVs experienced acknowledging identity, balancing life, pursuing goals, feeling supported and connected, resolving challenges, and maintaining perspective were important factors while persisting in their graduate counseling programs. This study found that acknowledging identity and balancing life were constant considerations for graduate SVs that involved resolving intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges. In addition, this study offers recommendations that graduate SVs noted as considerations or experiences that led the pursue and complete their counseling programs.

**Keywords**: Student veteran, identity, balance, culture, goals, support, flexibility, connection
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Chapter 1. Introduction

Student veterans (SVs) are defined as any veterans enrolled and taking classes in an institute of higher education. The last ten to fifteen years of research efforts have provided a better picture of SV composition and experiences, however, there is still more to be learned. This is due to the large literature base that is focused on SVs enrolled in undergraduate programs and the challenges they encounter. Therefore, this study found the importance of understanding graduate student cultural identity by exploring their lived experiences and its impact on their retention.

As of 2012, an estimated 2.6 million American service members served in either Iraq or Afghanistan, and of that 2.6 million, nearly 1.6 million separated from the military and are now veterans (Koblinsky et al., 2014). Researchers also estimated that nearly 500,000 veterans used education benefits (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012) and this number was expected to increase (Cate, 2014).

Based on the statistics, it becomes apparent there is a need to increase counselor knowledge of the military and veteran community. Research also reflected the demand to provide counseling services to service members, and their families, as they return from war or military service (Ness, Middleton, & Hildebrandt, 2015). In addition, researchers noted the increased need to provide counseling services to veterans as they transition to civilian life and college (Borsari et al., 2017). Regardless of the focus, these counseling efforts need to be met by counselors who are competent in military culture.

To address the shortage of military competent counselors and also meet Department of Defense and Veteran Affairs standards, mental health counselors are required to graduate from a masters-level CACREP accredited program (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for
Human Resources Management, 2018). Within those graduating classes may be student veterans (SVs) seeking to become counselors. An effort has been made to understand graduate students enrolled in CACREP accredited programs in general (Jensen, Doumas, & Midgett, 2016; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). However, there is insufficient literature across the field of higher education concerning graduate SVs and none within the counseling field to understand graduate SV academic experiences. Therefore, this study seeks to qualitatively explore the lived experiences of graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP accredited counseling programs and the factors that lead to persistence using Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model of institutional departure.

**Student Veterans**

SVs possess two distinct identities, their veteran identities and their nontraditional student identities. Their veteran identities reflect their previous careers as service members. As nontraditional students, their identities include factors different from traditional students. Therefore, to understand SVs is to recognize the convergence of these two identities and how it affects college retention.

SVs are recognized in various ways. Within the literature, the term is defined as “any student who is a current or former member of the active duty military, the National Guard, or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience, legal veteran status, or GI Bill use” (Vacchi, 2012, p. 17). Other research termed students with military backgrounds as student service members and veterans (SSM/Vs) (Ness et al., 2015). Literature defined these students as “veterans, active duty, or National Guard/Reservists of the U.S. military” (Ness et al., 2015, p. 448). Lacking from both definitions, but implied, are students enrolled in the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC), which requires National Guard or Reserve service. In an attempt to clarify existing definitions, the current study defined SVs as students federally
recognized as *veterans* (Veterans’ Benefits, 2011, p. 5) and enrolled in an institute of higher education.

SVs are also a subset of nontraditional students. Nontraditional students are defined as older students with additional family or employment responsibilities (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Definitions also included underrepresented or first-generation considerations (Gonzalez et al., 2015; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). When applied to SVs, research (Cate, 2014; Radford et al., 2016) revealed that SVs met two or more nontraditional student criteria.

**Tinto’s Theory of Student Retention**

Researchers noted that SVs struggle with academic persistence (Barry et al., 2012; Hammond, 2016a; Heitzman & Somers, 2015). Tinto’s Theory of Student Retention (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993) is an applicable theory to gain a better understanding of how to increase student academic persistence. While critiqued and analyzed, Tinto’s model has been used extensively to understand student retention for the last 40 years.

Tinto posited that students encountered pre-entry (separation), transition, and integration experiences in a longitudinal process that determined dropout decisions (Tinto, 1975, 1993). During pre-entry experiences, students move from familiar norms and expectations to an academic institution with new norms and expectations. After matriculation, students experience academic and social transitions (Tinto, 1975, 1993). These interactions are the core of Tinto’s model as he argued that students use these experiences to determine views of integration (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Broader literature highlighted the efficacy of Tinto’s model to understand student persistence at the undergraduate (Bai & Pan, 2009; Hlinka, 2017; Shepler & Woosley, 2012;
Zomer, 2007) and graduate level (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Jensen et al., 2016; Vaquera, 2007; Warnock & Appel, 2012). These studies point to the applicability of Tinto’s model to explore graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP counseling programs.

Researchers noted the impact of pre-entry, transition, and integration considerations on SVs’ persistence. For instance, goals (Gregg et al., 2016), financial support (Hunter-Johnson, 2018), and pre-college skills (Lim et al., 2016) were significant factors for SVs. Studies also found that transition and integration experiences, such as faculty interactions (Lim et al., 2018), peer interactions (Grimes et al., 2011), identity adjustment (Osborne, 2014), and age (Boettcher, 2017), influenced SV sense of connection. Furthermore, literature highlighted the importance of external commitments. For example, studies (DiRamio et al., 2008a; Jones, 2017) noted that employment and existing military commitments were challenges for SVs and SSM/Vs. Although the literature has not yet considered SV graduate students in counseling programs, prior research supports the applicability of Tinto’s model to SV college persistence.

Statement of the Problem

Studies (Cate, 2014; DiRamio et al.; Mentzer et al., 2015; Radford et al., 2016) reflected that veterans reported joining the military for education benefits and post-service assistance. Trends point to a continued increase in SV enrollment in postsecondary education (Cate, 2014; Radford et al., 2016). As a result, academic institutions will encounter students with unique characteristics and factors with little understanding of persistence factors. While there is an emerging literature base on SSM/V undergraduates, little is known about SV graduate students and factors that lead to academic persistence. There is no published research that describes the lived experiences of graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP counseling or counselor education programs. The only existing related research focused on SSM/Vs enrolled
in various graduate programs (Phillips, 2016), however, retention was not the focus. Instead, the study focused on the connection with graduate peers and undergraduate SVs. In addition to connection, Phillips also noted that views of finances, institutional influence, and identity were different for graduate SVs. Therefore, more research is required to broaden the knowledge concerning SVs enrolled in graduate-level programs and graduate-level CACREP-accredited counseling programs.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. Specifically, this transcendental phenomenological study focused on factors that influence academic persistence. The study adds to the current research on SVs enrolled in post-secondary education by exploring the lived experiences of graduate SVs enrolled in graduate counseling programs. The results of this study will help researchers gain a better understanding of the experiences of graduate SVs and factors that influence their persistence in graduate-level counseling programs. This information could help improve programs, policies, and procedures that would assist counseling programs to meet the needs of graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP counseling programs. This study was grounded in Tinto’s Model of Student Persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

**Research Question**

The research question focused on views, perceptions, and experiences of SVs enrolled in CACREP counseling programs and factors that led to persistence. The question relied on Moustakas’ (1994) approach to phenomenological interviewing and included the following:

1. What are the lived experiences of graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP counseling programs?
Definitions of Terms

1. Integration – Integration is the process in which a student normalizes the transition experiences and assimilates into the academic and social systems (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993).

2. Non-Veteran Peer – Non-veterans, also recognized as civilian students, are student peers with no military affiliation.

3. Pre-entry Factors – Pre-entry factors are factors that include family background, pre-entry skills (e.g. leadership, problem-solving), and prior schooling (Tinto, 1993).

4. Student Veteran - A student that meets the federally recognized definition of veteran (Veterans’ Benefits, 2011) and is enrolled and taking classes in a post-secondary institution.

5. Student Service Member/Veteran – Are “veterans, active duty, or National Guard/Reservists of the U.S. military” (Ness et al., 2015, p. 448)

6. Transition - Transition is the process that includes a student separating from an established and familiar system and negotiating experiences within a new system (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993).

7. Veteran – A “person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable” (Veterans’ Benefits, 2011, p. 47)

Delimitations

Delimitations are intentional factors that narrow the scope of the study. The scope of this study includes graduate SVs with no service obligations remaining, focusing on those enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs, and the use of Tinto’s theoretical framework. This
study focused on SVs with no remaining service obligations as this perspective brings distinct factors (such as deployments or weekend drills) to the experiences being explored. Focusing on only CACREP-accredited counseling programs will provide additional clarity to the research as this provides unique considerations for counseling programs and SVs. Lastly, the use of Tinto’s theoretical framework provided additional research connecting this theory to the graduate-level, as well as provide additional literature concerning SVs enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs.

**Organization of the Study**

Chapters Two and Three follow this chapter. Chapter Two consists of an extensive literature review of Tinto’s model of student retention and studies that applied his framework. This chapter also includes a literature review of the SV population, statistical trends and demographics, and research that applied Tinto’s model to study SVs.

Chapter Three explains the research process and provides details concerning the transcendental phenomenological methodology. This chapter also includes processes for the data collection and data analysis as suggested by phenomenological methodologists. Lastly, this chapter includes ethical and trustworthiness procedures to ensure research credibility.

Chapters Four and Five provides the findings and discussions related to the study, respectively. Chapter Four provides an overview of each participant and the six themes identified during the study. In addition, Chapter Five provides a discussion of those themes, along with, implications and limitations specific to this study.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

In very general terms, student dropout is viewed as the departure from an academic institution. However, notable figures, such as William Spady and Vincent Tinto, agreed that defining student dropout is challenging as there are factors, such as individual or institutional perspectives, that influence how dropout is understood (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1987). As Tinto (1987) suggested in his continued research, a focused effort on a common understanding of student dropout would facilitate a better understanding of the academic variables that influence persistence and provide a more consistent means of measurement. This chapter reviews and describes the current literature on student retention based on Tinto’s (1975, 1987) model along with a review of the literature on student veterans as related to academic retention and persistence.

Student Retention

A review of the literature highlighted a relatively new and rapidly adjusting view of student retention. Research in the last 50 years has led to a better understanding of student retention. The study of student retention began in the 1960s with the work of William Spady and was followed shortly by Vincent Tinto. This marked increase in gaining a better understanding of student retention in the 1970s can be seen as the result of economic challenges (Wright & Ramdin, 2013) and a war-oriented country trying to understand and retain a student population.

Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski (2011) offered a historical overview of the types of student retention theories, student retention practices, and additional approaches to improve student retention. Their review efforts reflected a constantly changing view of how the field of higher education adjusted their perspectives to increase student retention. They highlighted the changing perspective from pathology to greater understanding of social and educational
psychology considerations (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Reflecting the sentiment to better understand student retention, Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski (2011) highlighted the significance of Vincent Tinto’s work and its impact on higher education.

Tinto’s Contribution

Vincent Tinto’s original longitudinal model of institutional departure served to address several areas of student dropout (Tinto, 1975). The first was the nature of the departure process as it occurred in college. Tinto identified external factors that applied to and influenced student decisions while enrolled in college, but his focus was on factors that influenced the college experience (Tinto, 1975). The second goal was related to the “voluntary” (p. 112) nature of the withdrawal decision, which placed the focus on the individual. Lastly, his model considered the various social and academic interactions a student experienced and the influence on goal and institutional commitments (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto’s Influences

Tinto’s longitudinal model of institutional departure resulted from several social research and theoretical foci. Tinto incorporated and furthered the efforts of Emile Durkheim, Arnold Van Gennep, and William Spady (Tinto, 1975). Leveraging the thoughts and processes found within each author’s work, Tinto formed his model by integrating elements of their work to reflect the longitudinal and interactive process of institutional departure. Tinto also included the concept of cost-benefit analysis, which he borrowed from the field of economics of education (Tinto, 1975). Each of these influences are briefly described below.

Emile Durkheim. Both Spady and Tinto recognized that institutional departure was a social interaction. At the turn of the 20th century, Emile Durkheim’s research on suicide would unknowingly provide the framework in which college persistence would be grounded.
Durkheim’s (1897, 1997) research focused on suicide and the root causes that led to suicide. Durkheim posited that there were four types of suicide, with egoistic suicide as one type. According to Durkheim’s findings, egoistic suicide was the result of an inability to socially or intellectually integrate into society (Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975). Durkheim’s work established the understanding that social integration was viewed as the daily interactions with others within society and intellectual integration was the ability to share common values with those in society (Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1987). From a college perspective, Spady and Tinto both used this understanding to form the basis of the college social and academic system and adapted it to approach the understanding of student integration.

**William Spady.** Tinto also used the theoretical work of William Spady to support his model. William Spady (1970, 1971) was instrumental in providing a sociological perspective and theoretical frame to better understand the phenomenon of student dropout. Spady began this process by conducting a literature review of college dropout. Spady’s literature review led him to believe that much of the research on college dropout lacked a theoretical basis to provide a better understanding (Spady, 1970). Spady’s research led him to produce the first conceptual model of student dropout that consisted of family background, academic potential, normative congruence, academic potential, friendship support, intellectual development, grade performance, social integration, satisfaction, and institutional commitment, which he posited influenced a dropout decision (Spady, 1970). In that same study, Spady also provided a conceptual framework, his Explanatory Sociological Model of the Dropout Process, which he applied in his quantitative study a year later.

A year after his review, Spady later conducted a quantitative study at the University of Chicago (Spady, 1971). That study provided Spady with undergraduate students and an
opportunity to operationalize his model. This was significant as it was the first empirical study to consider sociological factors that influenced student dropout (Spady, 1971). While his findings loosely reflected his categories within his model, Spady realized that his findings were challenging to analyze because they lacked a frame of reference (Spady, 1971). The frame of reference he required was an established understanding of operationalized variables and the influence of gender in the dropout process (Spady, 1971). This study was also significant as it served as the basis for future studies and models on college retention.

**Arnold van Gennep.** Tinto incorporated the work of Arnold van Gennep to provide the process of institutional departure. Van Gennep postulated that life experiences consisted of social transitions (van Gennep, 1960). These transitions were experienced at various stages of life and included three distinct phases. These phases include separation, transition, and integration (Tinto, 1987). While Tinto did not use van Gennep’s phases to describe the college adjustment process, he did recognize the significance of the transition process and used *longitudinal* as a defining term. As such, Tinto (1985) applied this focus in his theoretical framework to reflect the process of transition from one setting to another.

**Cost-benefit.** Lastly, Tinto used cost-benefit analysis to refer to the ongoing evaluation and analysis of personal experiences and expected benefit return that students conduct prior to and after matriculation (Tinto, 1975). The first evaluation is pre-arrival to college. Tinto (1975) argued that students enter the college process evaluating their college goals and institutional commitments. Both Spady and Tinto recognized that students were influenced by their background, pre-college academic experiences, and skills and abilities (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975). These experiences influence how the students view themselves and evaluate their experiences prior to arrival. The second evaluation occurs after matriculation. Spady considered
this process as part of the students views of social integration and college satisfaction (Spady, 1970). However, Tinto viewed this process as the evaluation of academic and social integration that leads to a re-evaluation of goals and institutional commitments (Tinto, 1975), which influenced a dropout decision.

**Tinto’s Distinction**

Based on those influences, Tinto combined these considerations to form the conceptual framework of his model. Tinto’s original model (Appendix A) was distinct from Spady as he used Spady’s components to provide a microlevel delineation of factors and components and organized those factors and components to describe the process (Tinto, 1975). Tinto’s model (1975) also clearly identified three components that included external influences, internal influences, and component analysis. However, the primary focus of his model was the interactional nature of academic and social components (Tinto, 1975) and the process by which it occurs.

The first phase Tinto identified was the external factors that exist prior to a student’s arrival at the school (Tinto, 1975). This phase could be equated to van Gennep’s (1960) separation phase in which the student transitions from familiar to new settings or experiences. Like Spady’s model (1970), these factors consisted of the family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling (Tinto, 1975). This differed from Spady’s model as Tinto considered the family background as an influential factor that combined the academic potential and normative congruence found within Spady’s work. Tinto also included a pre-matriculation institutional goal and commitment phase. Tinto (1975) viewed commitment as an individual’s “level of expectation and the intensity with which the expectation is held” (p. 93). Tinto viewed the level of expectation as deciding between a two or four-year degree (1975). Tinto suggested
that family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling shaped individual goals and institutional commitment as the student compared familiar experiences with new experiences. Tinto’s view of institutional commitment culminates as the student’s pre-matriculation commitment to the institution (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto’s next area consisted of internal factors that comprised the academic and social system and was the focus of his longitudinal model. This stage also marks the beginning of the process that Tinto viewed as the interaction between the self and others. The difference between Spady’s and Tinto’s models was Tinto’s clear distinction of the academic and social factors and their perceived influence on a student’s academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975, 1987). Spady’s model suggested that social integration was the result of grade performance, intellectual development, normative congruence (values), and friendship support, which influenced a student’s sense of satisfaction. Tinto also placed emphasis on the formal and informal nature of the experience (Tinto, 1975). Tinto argued that formal experiences, such as classroom interactions and social events, and informal experiences, such as casual conversations in the hall, were “interdependent” (p. 108) and influenced other parts of the social and academic experience (Tinto, 1975).

The last phase of Tinto’s model consists of reflection and evaluation on goal and institutional commitment, which determine dropout decisions (Tinto, 1975, 1985). Based on the student’s academic and social experiences and their ability to achieve their commitments, Tinto argued that students evaluate whether they remain or depart an institution. Tinto’s model slightly varied from Spady’s model in that Spady added the consideration of satisfaction as an independent factor, which ultimately affected the views of institutional commitment and departure decisions. Tinto incorporated the consideration of satisfaction in the commitment
analysis and argued that evaluating satisfaction was part of the institutional commitment and goal commitment process (Tinto, 1975). Tinto furthered his views by adding that if both views were equal and positive in nature, students would persist in their academic environment (Tinto, 1975). However, if one factor was incongruent with the other, such as doing well in school, but not socially integrated, then decisions such as institutional transfer or institutional departure might occur (Tinto, 1975).

From this model, Tinto intended to provide institutions with an ability to identify factors and considerations that would affect student persistence. While Tinto did not empirically test his model like Spady, his efforts have led others to use his theoretical lens and test his components. In addition, his initial work also provided the foundation on which other theorists have based their work.

**Theoretical Evolution**

Tinto continued his efforts in his book, *Leaving College* (1987, 1993). In this publication, Tinto expanded on his thoughts and added additional details that were noted in his original work. This publication reflected his continued efforts on understanding dropout and offering institutions a means to approach the problem. In addition, Tinto’s effort also provided theorists and researchers a model to use in their efforts.

**Leaving College - 1987.** In his 1987 book, Tinto made noteworthy modifications which reflected his expanded views and descriptions of the longitudinal process (Appendix B). Most identifiable was his refinement of what could be considered stages or phases of progression. Tinto (1987) added clear stages of the dropout process that reflected the longitudinal and interactional nature of a dropout decision (p.115). These stages were identified as pre-entry
attributes, goals and commitments, institutional experiences, personal and normative integration, and outcomes (Tinto, 1987).

While his pre-entry attributes remained the same, Tinto modified his considerations to accommodate additional factors. For instance, Tinto (1987) modified his original individual attributes to now reflect skills and ability. Another modification was his identification of prior schooling. While prior schooling was originally referred to as pre-college schooling (Tinto, 1975), he later acknowledged that prior schooling accounted for all forms of educational experiences a student might have encountered prior to their college arrival (Tinto, 1987).

Tinto also modified goals and commitments. This modification included and described the factor of intentions in the process. Tinto (1987) described intentions as the reflection of “aspirations and expectations” (p. 110) and posited that it shaped future institutional dropout decisions. This was a change for Tinto as he originally loosely described the importance of goals and commitments and their relevance to the dropout process (Tinto, 1975). Tinto’s shift in thought demonstrated that he became more intentional about pre-entry factors and their influence on the interactional process.

Of the stages that Tinto (1987) modified, his modification of institutional experiences was particularly significant. While his academic and social systems remained the same, his changes were in what comprised those systems and the formality of those experiences. For example, his original work consisted of grade performance and intellectual development (Tinto, 1975), which were a direct connection to William Spady’s process (Spady, 1970, 1971). However, Tinto later revised his work to align academically and socially related components. Tinto’s academic system included academic performance (formal) and faculty and staff interactions (informal) (Tinto, 1987). He also revised his thoughts on social systems which
included extracurricular activities (formal) and peer-group interactions (informal). These changes bolstered the argument for the interactional nature of his model and attempted to specify the spectrum of formality experienced in the process.

Tinto also placed more emphasis on personal and normative integration (Tinto, 1987). While this was not a new concept, it reflected the emphasis and description of personal attributes and values that students experienced during the pre- and post-integration process. While Spady (1970, 1971) considered these areas as important factors in student dropout, Tinto (1975) considered these as part of an ongoing process. However, Tinto did not originally consider academic and social integration as a stage in the process. Tinto’s (1987) model revision illustrates an effort to label the background and values of an individual into a clearly recognized stage that marks integration.

Tinto also revised the integration stage of goal and commitment (Tinto, 1987). Tinto (1987) modified this stage to reflect the intentions, goals and institutional commitments, and external commitments of an individual following reflection on academic and social integration. Tinto incorporated intentions as his views considered the future-oriented evaluations of the overall experience. These intentions were evaluated with the goal and institutional commitments of the student. However, Tinto further added the consideration of external factors. This was a major shift in his model as Tinto recognized the significance of external factors. The importance of this shift is that Tinto posited that external commitments also influenced student dropout throughout the evaluation process (Tinto, 1987). Tinto argued that if external commitments were greater than institutional affiliation, then the chances of student dropout or transfer was greater (Tinto, 1987).
Tinto’s revision reflected his emphasis on the interactional nature of his model. Through his first revision, Tinto (1987) continued to incorporate and modify his model to account for variables and factors that led to student dropout. Tinto’s modifications also demonstrated that he wanted to organize the process and categorize the factors into a clear and structured approach.

**Leaving college - 1993.** Tinto continued to evolve his views and understanding of student integration. Tinto’s (1993) second edition of *Leaving College* reflected subtle changes to his views and philosophy regarding student integration and its related interaction.

One notable change in this second edition was the consideration of external community (Tinto, 1993) (Appendix C). Tinto integrated the role of external community into the longitudinal process. This was different than his previous work as Tinto’s first edition focused on “external social systems” (Tinto, 1987, p. 108), whereas his second edition reflected his focus on the “external community” (Tinto, 1993, p. 109). His views stabilized in that the integration and affiliation with both systems were a major part of the dropout decision (Tinto, 1987, 1993). However, as Tinto’s work progressed, he provided detailed explanations and influences of those systems and how it was illustrated in his model.

**Continued efforts.** Tinto’s work on student attrition continued to evolve over time. His original publication in 1975 led to numerous publications with in-depth reviews and theoretical views. These publications consisted of gaps and limitations in attrition literature (Tinto, 1982), the stages of student departure (Tinto, 1988), focusing on the first-year experience (Tinto, 1999), future research and practices (Tinto, 2005), administrative practices and approaches (Tinto, 2012), and student persistence (Tinto, 2017). Student persistence highlights the most recent endeavors in Tinto’s efforts.
Tinto noted that, until recently, studies have focused on the institutional practice of retaining students (Tinto, 2017). He most recently reevaluated his work and approached student attrition from the perspective of the student (Tinto, 2017). He noted that while universities attempted to retain, students attempted to persist (Tinto, 2017, 2017). Tinto posited that persistence was a reflection of motivation (Tinto, 2017). In his reflection and reconceptualization, Tinto offered a framework that explained the components and temporal process of understanding student persistence. His conceptual model illustrated a similar longitudinal nature as his previous work but was simplified to three components. Those components were goals, motivation, and persistence (Tinto, 2017). However, Tinto (2017) expanded the motivation factor to include self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perception of the curriculum.

Even with the transition and evolution of Tinto’s focus, there are still similarities across the various models. For instance, Tinto discussed the importance of the first-year experience and the significance of the academic and social interactions (Tinto, 2017). He also discussed how goals influenced a student’s persistence (Tinto, 2017). Lastly, Tinto highlighted the implication of commitment (Tinto, 1987, 1993), but rephrased the concept to reflect it as a sense of belonging (Tinto, 2017).

Tinto’s evolution of thought reflects another attempt to understand the concept of student attrition. His initial efforts focused on institutional actions and experiences that resulted in student attrition by considering the interactional and longitudinal nature of the dropout process. Tinto’s recent work reflects an attempt to broaden that understanding by including student perceptions. These efforts reflect similarities of his previous work but simplify the process to provide a clearer understanding of factors that lead to student persistence.
Supporting Research

For purposes of this study, supporting research will be divided into two categories. Those categories are the separation stage and the transition and integration stage. Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) used the longitudinal process to parallel the three distinct stages. However, a review of the literature revealed the tendency to study separation stage as one category and transition and integration as another. Therefore, dividing these three areas into two categories reflected persistence research in the most accurate manner. The review below begins with the pre-entry, or separation, stage and concludes with the transition and integration stage.

Theory Pre-Entry Stage

Studies into Tinto’s pre-entry, or separation stage, document the important attributes that influence a student’s transition and integration (Chrysikos et al., 2017; Elkins et al., 2000; Grosset, 1991; Kees et al., 2017; Shepler & Woosley, 2012; Sichivitsa, 2003; Stewart et al., 2015; Warnock & Appel, 2012; Woosley & Shepler, 2011; Zomer, 2007). Tinto’s model recognizes that family background, personal skills and attributes, and pre-college education are critical components in the separation process. The following empirical studies reflect the efficacy of these attributes and their influence on student integration and persistence.

An early study supported the significance of external commitments on student persistence. Grosset’s (1991) quantitative study focused on the pre-entry attributes of 498 college students. These students were studied using traditional and nontraditional student criteria and enrolled at varying academic levels. She recognized the importance of pre-entry attributes in the integration process. However, Grosset’s results are unique in that external commitments were studied before Tinto released his second book in 1993. In this revised book, Tinto noted that external commitments were a factor throughout the persistence process (Tinto, 1993). Grosset’s
(1991) results noted the difference in external commitments between younger and older students. She found that older students with more family requirements tended to persist more than their younger peers. Grosset (1991) reasoned this difference existed because older students were forward thinking beyond the present-oriented academic demands. In addition, she noted that students with increased employment demands did not academically persist compared to peers that did not work as much. This early work seems to predict and substantiate Tinto’s first revised model.

Tinto posited that pre-entry factors were significant in student persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Studies, such as Stewart, Lim, and Kim (2015) support this notion. Their two-year quantitative study of 3,213 first-time college students focused on students enrolled in remedial courses compared to those whom were not. Stewart et al. (2015) found that pre-entry considerations, such as pre-college education, did affect college persistence; academically prepared, traditional-aged students were more likely to persist than those students that were not. They also found that financial status was another consideration that influenced dropout decisions (Stewart et al., 2015). Viewed as a component of family background, Tinto (1975, 1993) argued that family background and pre-college education influenced academic and social integration. These factors, along with skills and attributes, result in persistence or leads to a dropout decision.

Elkins, Braxton, and James’ (2000) quantitative study of first-year college students empirically supports Tinto’s persistence model. Their study used 689 student records to determine how pre-entry attributes affected overall student persistence. Their findings suggested women and Caucasian students received more pre-entry support than racial and ethnic minority students (Elkins et al., 2000). They also found that persistence increased when institutional commitment was higher and connection to values and attitudes of their home community were
lower. These findings also support Tinto’s position that institutional commitment in the separation stage plays a significant role in the perceived integration of first-year students.

Woosley and Shepler’s (2011) research efforts were unique in that they focused on two populations of students. Their first study focused on first-generation students and their early integration into college. Woosley and Shepler (2011) surveyed 804 participants that met criteria as first-generation and first-semester students and found that pre-entry concerns for first-generation and first-year students influenced integration in the same manner as other college students. Their findings also suggested that commitment, college environment, and academic behaviors provided a better understanding of academic integration (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). To broaden their understanding of first-year experiences, Shepler and Woosley also conducted another quantitative study with students with disabilities.

In their 2012 study, Shepler and Woosley surveyed 120 students registered with student disability services enrolled in the same institution. They suggested that commitment to persistence failed to correlate with academic integration. They posited that students committed to college completion would integrate with their institution (Shepler & Woosley, 2012). Similar to their previous study (Woosley & Shepler, 2011), they found that college environment, academic behaviors, and academic involvement, along with commitment, were better predictors of integration than just involvement and commitment. By conducting these studies, their findings demonstrated the efficacy and reliability of using Tinto’s model to better understand student attrition. Their efforts also provided a consistent means and standard of studying pre-entry factors with various student populations and considerations.

Tinto’s model of persistence also applies to students in graduate programs. Warnock and Appel’s (2012) research used Tinto model to study graduate students of various social class
levels. Their study used a mixed methods approach to focus on pre-entry and integration experiences with students of different income backgrounds (Warnock & Appel, 2012). They surveyed 324 participants enrolled in 28 various graduate-level sociology programs, using Likert-scale questionnaires and closed-ended questions. Warnock and Appel (2012) found that pre-entry attributes, such as family background, influenced graduate student support. Their qualitative findings also suggested that the lack of pre-entry support resulted in diminished social and academic peer connections (Warnock & Appel, 2012). Furthermore, their findings highlighted the correlation between personal identification of class status and pre-entry attributes such as family background and pre-college education, that influenced the integration process.

Tinto’s position on institutional goals and commitments have also been explored. For instance, Chrysikos, Ahmed, and Ward (2017) conducted a quantitative study of 901 students to determine how pre-entry goals and commitment, academic and social integration, and integration goals and commitment influenced student persistence. While 901 students were surveyed, only 171 students were computing majors. This allowed the researchers to compare their research focus of computer major students with a larger student population. Their population focus centered on first-year undergraduate computing students enrolled in a United Kingdom (UK) college (Chrysikos et al., 2017). Their most significant finding suggested that pre-entry goals and commitments led to student persistence. They noted that students from family backgrounds with higher levels of education tended to have higher levels of goals and commitments. Lastly, they also noted that students with higher levels of pre-entry goals and commitments had the same higher levels of commitment in the integration stages (Chrysikos et al., 2017). These three findings were consistent with Tinto’s views that pre-entry considerations set the foundation for student integration and persistence within the first year of college.
Empirical research has also focused on exogenous (external) and endogenous (internal) pre-entry factors in music majors (Sichivitsa, 2003). External pre-entry factors included parental background and influence and internal factors included values and views as they related to musical interests. These external and internal factors aligned with Tinto’s (1975, 1993) argument that pre-entry attributes affect integration and persistence. Sichivitsa (2003) surveyed 150 students, from various academic levels and diverse backgrounds, using a mixed methods approach. She found that a student’s value of music was the best predictor of intentions to continue with music (Sichivitsa, 2003). While family background and pre-college education were important, the internal component of values was most important in whether students remained committed to their music goals.

Research supports the importance of Tinto’s pre-entry attributes of family background, skills and attributes, and pre-college education. Tinto argued that these separation stage factors set the foundation for transition and integration stage experience. Literature strengthens the notion that to understand student integration and persistence, academic institutions have to acknowledge a student’s origins, background, and educational abilities.

**Theory Transition and Integration**

Prior studies explored the importance of academic and social transition and integration. Tinto (1975) posited that, while family background, personal attributes, and pre-college education were important, student transition and integration were established from the start of their college experience. These research efforts support Tinto’s (1993) argument that institutional action in the first year is the optimal point to increase retention and integration.

Several studies researched the effectiveness of programs and initiatives of first-year college experiences (Bai & Pan, 2009; Hlinka, 2017; Jensen et al., 2016; Newman, 2016).
Literature reflects that studies often focused on four-year (Bai & Pan, 2016) or two-year community colleges (Hlinka, 2017; Newman, 2016) students. For instance, recent research reflected that early interventions approaches facilitated integration and reduced attrition (Bai & Pan, 2019). Bai and Pan’s (2019) longitudinal quantitative study of the effects of institutional retention initiatives over a three-year period revealed important findings. Their research efforts followed over 1,300 participants enrolled in four intervention types, which included advising, academic assistance, first-year experience programs, and social integration efforts (Bai & Pan, 2019). Their results noted that social integration efforts increased retention rates of female students in their first-year, positively influenced retention rates of students enrolled in select colleges, and led to older and male student retention over a three-year period. These findings align with Tinto’s stance that institutional practices of early involvement and engagement increase student overall student persistence (Tinto, 1993).

Other research supported the value of focusing on transition and integration programs for first-year students. For example, Newman’s (2016) quantitative study compared students enrolled in an Appalachian community college who participated in an orientation course and those that did not. Data from 1,402 full-time and first-year students identified that full-time students enrolled in the first-year orientation course reflected higher retention rates compared to students that did not enroll in the same or a similar course. Newman’s findings supported Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) position that facilitating integration is important during the first-year of college. Newman’s study also demonstrated that Tinto’s principles can be applied to academic institutions other than four-year institutions and with unique cultural considerations.

Published a year later, a similar qualitative study used Tinto’s retention model to study a separate Appalachian community college (Hlinka, 2017). Hlinka grounded her study in Tinto’s
model but added cognitive and social class concepts to the model. Augmenting Tinto’s model allowed Hlinka to account for the cognitive development and social class considerations that Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) loosely discussed in his pre-entry, or separation, stage. Hlinka focused her study on a two-year community college in rural Kentucky and selected participants who were first-time and first-year students. Using Tinto’s (1993) institutional integration factors, Hlinka (2017) conducted seven group interviews of institutional faculty and staff. In addition, she conducted individual interviews with 13 students enrolled at various stages of the two-year academic career (Hlinka, 2017). Her findings revealed that external commitment, such as family and community connections and obligations, strained academic responsibilities. In addition, family background influenced retention as most student participants were first-generation students. These findings aligned with Tinto’s views in that pre-entry factors such as family and pre-college education impact student integration (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Tinto (1987, 1993) also recognized the effect that external commitments have on student dropout decision, which was reflected in his later work.

Outside of two- and four-year degree academic institutions, other research found similar results. Jensen, Doumas, and Midgett (2016) used a qualitative approach to interview 24 first-year graduate students enrolled in a school and addictions counseling program. While their participants were mostly female and Caucasian, findings were consistent with other studies (Bai & Pan, 2019; Newman, 2016). These findings included the importance of peer and faculty connections, classroom academic involvement, and social interaction activities (Jensen et al., 2016). However, they also noted the lack of relationship between mentoring efforts, program satisfaction, and the intent to persist (Jensen et al, 2016). The significance of this research is the
emphasis on establishing the sense of connectedness and its applicability at all levels of education.

Research supporting Tinto’s model outside of pre-dominantly white (PWI) academic institutions is limited. However, the scarce research that does exist supports Tinto’s views. For instance, Booker and Campbell-Whatley’s (2019) study used Tinto’s academic and social components to explore sense of inclusion at a historically black college. They used a qualitative approach to invite 16 participants from diverse cultural and degree-level backgrounds, which included two graduate students, to participate in focus groups and individual interviews to explore their college experiences (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019). As Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) had asserted, Booker and Campbell-Whatley identified that faculty interaction, peer-group connection, and extracurricular activities were important factors in facilitating inclusion on campus. However, they also noted that communication was just as important as this created awareness for inclusion opportunities. In his latest version of his theory, Tinto (1993, p. 151) recommended that colleges create diverse and collaborative groups to coordinate and share information to facilitate integration, which he argued would increase retention.

Research also included the applicability of Tinto’s model at a Hispanic serving institution (HSI). Vaquera (2007) studied the transition and integration experiences of doctoral students in the early program stages that influenced retention. Her quantitative study surveyed 295 students to determine factors that influenced student decisions (Vaquera, 2007). She concluded that academic integration was the most significant factor for Hispanic doctoral student persistence. She also noted that social integration, paternal education, and age were important in persistence. However, Vaquera (2007) also noted that racial climate was just as important in the persistence
process. With the exception to age, these results indicate the applicability of using Tinto’s model to study doctoral students.

Age does pose a significant factor in student retention. Research reflects that Tinto’s model is typically associated with understanding traditional college student retention (Bai & Pan, 2009; Hlinka, 2017; Newman, 2016). Deil-Amen’s study of older, nontraditional students enrolled in several Midwestern community colleges represents a shift in that focus. Of the 238 participants, 125 were selected to provide variability and diversity of experiences (Deil-Amen, 2011). Deil-Amen’s multi-method qualitative data collection included surveyed responses and interviews to capture information to document these experiences. Her findings confirmed that academic and social interactions were critical components in the integration process (Deil-Amen, 2011). Her findings also highlighted the importance of communication, which coincided with Booker and Campbell-Whatley’s results.

Studies (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Longwell-Grice, Adsitt, Mullins, & Serrata, 2016) also suggested that first-generation students benefit from transition and integration efforts. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) explored first-generation students enrolled in undergraduate programs. Their first qualitative study focused on white, working-class male students enrolled in their freshman year (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). They found that students who identified as working-class and first-generation viewed faculty as intimidating, which influenced perceptions of faculty support. They suggested that academic institutions focus on faculty and student relationships to increase rapport and support (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). A unique aspect noted in their study was that all four participants stopped out of college at the end of the semester. The conclusion is that negative transition and integration experiences influenced participant retention. In a later study, Longwell-Grice et al.,
(2016) found that identity development for first-generation Latino students was a common challenge among graduate and undergraduate students. Their qualitative research method used semi-structured and focus group interviews to identify narratives that were unique to each student across different academic levels. They concluded that student academic experiences influenced the participants identity development into bicultural beings. Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) also noted that student relationships with external social supports, such as family, influenced their identity transition. The authors noted that these findings were an important element in understanding how to best support first-generation students with unique considerations that experience identity transition while enrolled in higher education.

In summation, Tinto’s approach to understanding student academic transition continues to be an applicable model that provides a foundational understanding of a student’s longitudinal progression in college. While some approaches also explore transition processes, such as Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, Tinto’s model offers a perspective that acknowledges the aspect of time and competing obligations that influence the transition experience. Therefore, to better understand a SVs academic and social experience, an understanding of academic factors, such as those posited by Tinto, provides a more inclusive framework to study this phenomenon.

**Student Veteran Population**

A student veteran (SV) consists of two definitions, which include veteran and nontraditional student (NT). United States Code (Veterans’ Benefits, 2011) defines a veteran as “a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable” (p. 47). This definition covers all active duty military and does not consider war or combat veterans status.
Student veterans are also viewed as NT students. Federal government and independent research defined NT students as one or more of the following: (a) students older than 24 years of age, (b) family requirements, (c) single parents, (d) financial independent, (e) part-time enrollment, (f) employment considerations, (g) underrepresented student, and (h) first-generation college students (Gonzalez et al., 2015; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). When combined, SV and NT student definitions reflect a complex and distinct view of the SV population.

Researchers noted the challenge of understanding student veterans (Vacchi, 2012). The majority of the literature categorized SVs in one of two ways, student veterans (SV) and student service members & veterans (SSM/V). Vacchi defined SVs as “any student who is a current or former member of the active duty military, the National Guard, Or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience, legal veteran status, or GI Bill use” (Vacchi, 2012, p. 17). Ness, Middleton, and Hilderbrandt (2015) defined student service members and veterans (SSM/V) as “veterans, active duty, or National Guard/Reservists of the U.S. military” (p.448). This definition was limited to one article but broadly covers the wider use of the term. For purposes of this study, SVs will be defined as a students that meet the federally recognized definition of veteran (Veterans’ Benefits, 2011) and are enrolled in a post-secondary institution.

**Student Veteran Educational Influences**

External factors that influence SV college experiences are a key component in understanding their college-going process. There are two historical factors that provide the trends used in present research. The first is the GI Bill, which allows veterans to attend college for reduced costs. The second is government legislation that authorized more clarity, action, and cooperation in understanding SV education.
The GI Bill, formerly known as the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, is a well-established program that allows veterans to receive college education with limited financial output (Zhang, 2018). Started after World War II, this act provided the means to address the education needs and reintegration of veterans returning from war. This effort not only provided skills and education for returning veterans, but also enabled the economy to prosper in the following years (Zhang, 2018).

While improvements to the GI bill occurred over the years, the most significant was the Post-9/11 GI Bill. This bill increased educational benefits to service members and authorized additional living stipends that reduced the financial hardships of students attending college. This bill also served those veterans that served after September, 2001 (Radford et al., 2016).

Veterans that served from September, 2001 to present are known as Gulf War era II veterans. As of 2016, almost 3.9 million veterans had served in the armed forces and were eligible for Post 9/11 benefits (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). While statistics are not available to provide the percentage of those veterans who enrolled in college, 74% of veterans surveyed in 2014 viewed educational benefits as an important factor in joining the military (Gonzalez et al., 2015). Furthermore, 66% of veterans surveyed intended to give their educational benefits to family members. These statistics provide evidence that veterans are considering the military as a means of paying for their educational advancement or the advancement of their family members.

For those veterans with educational benefits, improvements in the GI Bill led to a brief increase in SV college attendance (Cate, Lyon, Schmelling, & Bogue, 2017; U.S. Department of Labor, 2017; Zhang, 2018). With the increase in SVs, characteristics emerged that highlighted their similarities with NT students. For example, trends suggest that SVs are slightly older than
their traditional student peers (Cate et al., 2017; Zhang, 2018). As of 2017, 70% of SVs had completed their degree or were working toward degree completion (Cate et al., 2017) with the majority at the Associate’s degree level (Rolen, 2017). Narrowing the information down within specific fields, more specifically graduate-level and counseling, proved challenging. However, research does reflect that 10% of students choose health related fields (Cate et al., 2017).

The second historical factor was Executive Order (EO) 13607, passed in 2009, which provided the means and authorization to gain an increased understanding of SV education (Cate et al., 2017). As a result, studies such as the Million Records Project offered an in depth review and statistical analysis of SV education (Cate, 2014). This EO allowed administrators and researchers alike to better understand how SVs are progressing and succeeding in their college endeavors.

While Executive Order 13607 assisted in research endeavors, such as the Million Records Project, it also paved the way for additional research into SV education (Cate et al., 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). For instance, the Department of Labor not only considered the educational success of SVs, but they also focused on the employment rates of veterans (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). Agencies, such as the Veterans’ Affairs, also focused on SV education by providing a critical review of SV education progress (Gonzalez et al., 2015). Their research efforts analyzed and provided recommendations to committee members to best support service members transitioning from the military. However, the most significant step in this process is timely reporting. Cate’s National Veterans Education Success Tracker (NVEST) provided a means to retrieve, analyze, and publish data within two years as opposed to several years. Cate noted that this project allowed key stakeholders, such as educational
institutions and veteran support agencies, to gauge the educational outcomes of SVs more effectively (Cate et al., 2017).

**Student Veterans as Nontraditional Students**

A wider perspective reflects that SVs share similar trends with NT students. For instance, NT student college enrollment is increasing (Bureau of Labor and Statistics, n.d.). Statistics from a 2011 education report noted that 4.7 million students ages 25 to 34 years were enrolled in post-secondary institutions and were projected to increase to 5.7 million by 2021 (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). The same report also noted that enrollment for NT students 35 years and older would increase from 3.7 million to 4.6 million in the same timeframe (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). When compared to SVs, later studies reveal that NT enrollment trends will continue to increase in the foreseeable future (Hussar & Bailey, 2013).

Research also recognized the challenges of understanding NT student needs (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). Studies demonstrated that with the increase of NT students, research into NT student needs were often overlooked or neglected (Chen, 2017; Sims & Barnett, 2014). In addition, these studies highlighted that additional research was required to gain a better understanding of NT student experiences (Chen, 2017; Sims & Barnett, 2014).

**Demographic Description**

Demographic trends are required to better illustrate the connection with nontraditional students. This connection provides researchers and academic institutions with critical information needed to better understand SV. Student veteran trends and demographic specifics have recently been published in several key research efforts, which are briefly discussed below.

**Student veteran trends.** Two large-scale studies provided the demographic details on SVs. The first was the *Million Record Project*. Cate’s research was the first study to thoroughly
review and analyze SV academic achievement (Cate, 2014). His study spanned eight years, 2002 to 2010, and included over one million records, which is a considerable achievement. His research provided evidence that SVs shared many characteristics of NT students (Cate, 2014). His research methodology was also significant because of a veteran only inclusion criteria, which filtered and excluded veteran dependents. Cate, Lyon, Schmelling, and Bogue’s (2017) later research provided greater clarity of SV accomplishments through the National Veteran Education Success Tracker (NVEST). This project provided transparency of SV performance and stakeholder investment returns, which was the first study to accomplish this.

The second study was produced by the Department of Education, which profiled student Service Members and Veterans over two time periods (Radford et al., 2016). These time periods included 2007 to 2008 and 2011 to 2012. This study was significant in that the views, definitions, and profiles established by the Department of Education reflected a slightly different perspective of SVs. To illustrate, their trends included active duty, National Guard, and Reserve service member students (Radford et al., 2016). However, this study did coincide with the Million Record Project (Cate, 2014) in that the data on SVs reflects relatively similar findings and demographic profile characteristics. When combined, these two studies provided several demographic areas that are worthy of discussion.

The first was the aspect of SV first-generation college student status. The U.S. Department of Education defined first-generation students as “undergraduate students whose parents had not participated in postsecondary education” (Cataldi, 2018, p.2). Kim and Cole’s (2013) study found that the majority of SVs were first-generation students and that more awareness was needed based on this factor. This was significant considering that prior research
noted that first-generation students were less likely to persist in college than students whose parents have a college education (Choy, 2002).

Other considerations included age and family obligations. Research highlighted that SVs enrolled in two-year, four-year, or trade school programs are typically older than traditional students (Cate, 2014; Cate et al., 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2015; Radford et al., 2016). Results reflected that SVs ranged in age from 24 or older. Data also reflected that SVs were more likely to be married or have family obligations (Cate et al., 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2015; Kim & Cole, 2013). Age and family requirements were also reported as challenges in SV literature. Literature highlighted that over half of survey respondents stated that family obligations and connection with peers were challenges while enrolled in college (Kim & Cole, 2013). In addition, SVs also have external employment responsibilities outside of college. Data indicates that 43.1% of SVs had work requirements that competed with academic obligations and reduced opportunities to socialize with college peers (Kim & Cole, 2013).

Gender differences were also noted within the SV population. Rolen (2017) highlighted that 18% of veterans that have served since 2001 were women. When compared to SVs, Cate’s (2014) Million Record Project noted that 21% were women. However, he also found differences between his research and the Department of Education’s data which reflected that 25% of SVs were women. Of interest, the Department of Education’s gender information figures aligned more with the findings of separate research, which noted that 27% of SVs were women (Kim & Cole, 2013).

Wide gaps in SV race categories were evident as well, which is also reflective of the military. The Department of Defense’s fiscal year 2017 manpower report reflected that of the two million service members, Caucasians were the majority at 70% while the next highest was Black
or African American service members at 17% (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2017). When narrowed to a specific service period, data revealed that 77% of veterans from the Gulf War-era II (2001 to present) were Caucasian, while African American, and Latino and Hispanic veterans constituted 16% and 14% respectively (Rolen, 2017). When compared to SVs, the same patterns emerged (Cate, 2014; Rolen, 2017). Nevertheless, SV racial composition improved in the last decade and additional long-term research is required to provide a better understanding of race and SV education.

**Student service members and veterans.** There are distinct differences between SVs and active military students. This study considers SVs as veterans enrolled in college with no current military obligations. Conversely, SSM/Vs include service members fulfilling military contract obligations and veterans. The combination of these two populations is important because of the change in reported findings. The inclusion of student service members, also known as military students, to the SV population alters averages significantly. Military students are defined as any veterans, active duty service members, National Guard, and Reservist enrolled in college (Radford et al., 2016). Limited comprehensive and longitudinal research exists for this population of students, which makes understanding military students challenging. However, the American Council on Education (Kim & Cole, 2013) and Department of Education (Radford et al., 2016) are two recent studies that focused on this population.

The American Council on Education focused on military students enrolled at four-year institutions (Kim & Cole, 2013). Kim and Cole’s (2013) study used data collected from 288,000 surveys at 584 institutions to study undergraduate SSM/Vs. Their findings noted the average age of SSMVs was 33. Their study also reflected that SSM/Vs were predominantly men at 73.3%. One noteworthy area was the consideration of race. As noted in later studies, they found that
68.2% of SSM/Vs identified as white, while 10.6% identified as African American and 7.8% as Hispanic (Kim & Cole, 2013). More importantly, Kim and Cole revealed that 61.8% of survey participants identified as first-generation students. While this study was significant, it did not consider all levels of post-secondary education.

The inclusion of military students enrolled in all levels of post-secondary education was accomplished by Radford, Bentz, Dekker, and Paslov (2016). Their Department of Education report provided a comprehensive profile of military students, which provided detailed characteristics (Radford et al., 2016). Their research encompassed trade school, two-year, four-year, and graduate-level educational institutions, and full-, mixed, and part-time students. The scope of this study not only increased the participant pool but also altered reported averages. A notable difference was the disparity in average ages (Radford et al., 2016). Their study noted that from 2011 to 2012, the average age for undergraduate students was 34 while the average age of graduate students was 39 (Radford et al., 2016). There were also differences between genders. For example, there were 77.7% male military students compared to 22.3% female military students. Lastly, distinctions in reported averages for family obligations were evident. When dependents (a non-spousal relationship and in the care of the military student) were included, 51.5% reported family obligations with 17.8% being unmarried. These numbers slightly changed when graduate level military students were reported. Data suggested that 59% of graduate military students reported dependent considerations with 13% being unmarried (Radford et al., 2016). The findings of this report demonstrated the importance of understanding military student populations and the subtle nuances that accompany the distinct differences between SV and students with service obligations.
Overall, trends reflected that SVs and SSM/Vs were older, Caucasian males. These students were also prone to be married or have family dependents at the time of enrollment. Student veterans and SSM/Vs were inclined to possess employment considerations that compete with academic responsibilities. Lastly, research noted that SVs and SSM/Vs were more likely to be first-generation college students.

However, to better understand SSM/Vs, it is essential to understand the connection to nontraditional students. The importance of establishing this connection provides a framework of understanding that SVs and military students are NT students in varying criteria. Provided below is a brief description of those areas.

**Adult learners.** Research into adult learning reflects that adult learners are becoming the norm in education (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020) However, defining adult learners is challenging as there are different perceptions of what constitutes an adult (Merriam & Brockett, 2011). Merriam and Brockett (2007) also point out that adult learning is a mental process specific to the learner. These characteristics reflect the different considerations that affect both the academic institution and adult learners.

The term adult learner could also apply to student veterans (SVs) as most SVs are older than traditional college age students. SVs are also perceived as career transitioning and responsible students. Therefore, SVs can also be viewed as adult learners based on views, perceptions, and age-related classifications

**Nontraditional students.** The most recent and comprehensive report on NT students was conducted by the Department of Education. Finalized in 2015, this study focused on the 2011 to 2012 timeframe and included over 95,000 undergraduates enrolled in academic institutions
authorized to distribute federal Title IV financial aid (Radford et al., 2015). Their demographic areas were strikingly similar to the studies of SVs.

One similarity was the age factor. NT students are older than traditional students, just like SSM/Vs. Overall, enrollment trends are expected to increase by 20% in the next two years for students in the age category of 25 to 34 years and 23% for student 35 years and older (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). For academic institutions, this increase requires an understanding of older students and their NT student attributes.

Nontraditional student gender findings provided interesting considerations that were different from SSM/Vs. For instance, data reflected that NT men and women were equal in full-time enrollment at 39% and 38% respectively and 42.8% and 43.9% when enrolled part-time (Radford et al., 2015), which was different from the male-majority SV and military students. Gender also factored into the number of dependents of NT students. For instance, female NT students were almost twice as likely than men to have one or more dependents. Furthermore, 20.7% of participants surveyed were single women with dependents compared to men at 7.9% (Radford et al., 2015). These numbers reflect that women experienced more family obligations that men as NT students.

In summation, the differences in the data between SVs, military students, and NT students were evident with the most noticeable being gender. When compared, male SVs constituted the majority in most of the studies conducted, whereas NT students were more likely to be more diverse with regard to gender and race. While not discussed, race was another differentiating factor as NT student statistics reflected more diversity than SVs. Overall, while most SVs are also NT students, they remain a distinct group that deserves separate consideration in research.
Population Research

The combination of types and trends of SV research demonstrated the need to better understand this distinct population. For purposes of this study, a comprehensive review of available SV literature was conducted to gain an understanding of research availability, common themes, and research focus. However, finding SV literature was challenging as there was limited availability (DiRamio et al., 2008; Hammond, 2016). Research efforts also reflected the paucity of peer reviewed literature with the majority in the form of gray literature (Borsari et al., 2017). Gray literature is defined as any literature outside commercial publication and includes dissertations and theses, reports, and government studies (Paez, 2017). As a result, the literature used to study this phenomenon is a combination of peer-reviewed and gray literature. This literature was then compiled and analyzed to identify theoretical and population findings and themes. The literature review below is the result of that process. Each subsection will follow the order of SVs and SSM/V.

Pre-Entry Literature

Literature concerning SV pre-entry, or separation, experiences are somewhat limited in nature. However, research reflected that finances, culture, applicable military skills, goals, and external commitments are factors for most SV participants. When Tinto’s framework is applied, studies reveal that pre-entry factors for SVs also include career social connections. The findings of these SV studies are described below to share the outcomes of those studies.

Some studies explored perspectives on the college transition for SVs. Research demonstrated that SVs experienced perspective adjustments before and during college. For instance, Gregg, Howell, and Shordike (2016) found that SVs experienced a shift in perspective on sense of purpose. Their qualitative study of 13 SVs noted that adjustments in perspective
allowed participants to identify new goals and manage challenges related to college (Gregg et al., 2016). In addition to these shifts, they also noted that transitions included transitions in their civilian identities. However, their study was unique in that SV participants viewed college as a job (Gregg et al., 2016).

As reflected in the trends of SVs, one study found that pre-entry considerations included finances (Hunter-Johnson, 2018). Hunter-Johnson’s (2018) qualitative study involved interviewing 11 SVs with diverse military backgrounds and noted that financial assistance, in the form of the GI Bill, provided education opportunities without the financial burden. Participants also viewed education as a means of increasing long-term income (Hunter-Johnson, 2018), which demonstrated that SVs used goal setting and commitment to persist.

Other studies have found that SVs sought careers similar to their military professions. Lim, Tkacik, Interiano, Dahlberg, and Nowell (2016) explored the academic experiences of 20 undergraduate students enrolled in a STEM program. Using qualitative methods, their interviews identified that participants chose the engineering field because of a perceived familiarity to military culture, which also provided a renewed sense of purpose, responsibility, and social connection (Lim et al., 2016). The findings from Lim et al. (2016) suggest that SVs approach academic programs with the pre-entry intent of completing academic programs that align with the structure and sense of worth experienced during military service.

Their later research included faculty members within an engineering program. Lim, Interiano, Nowell, and Tkacik (2018) used a qualitative approach to interview 20 SVs and 9 faculty members in a STEM engineering program. Their results identified the different assumptions and expectations students and faculty members perceived of each other (Lim et al., 2018). The most notable aspect was the different pre-entry identity and cultural expectations of
SVs. For instance, SVs view of leadership and authority were drastically different than that of faculty. SVs viewed leadership as an element of the faculty position, whereas faculty viewed SVs as requiring constant guidance. Another difference was the cultural shift of assistance seeking. SVs displayed a reluctance to seek assistance because it displayed weakness, while faculty members encouraged assistance seeking. Lim et al. (2018) also noted that SVs had negative perceptions of peer students. These differing perspectives demonstrate that SVs and faculty have different understandings of the pre-entry experiences, roles, responsibilities, and expectations of the other.

Grimes, Meehan, Miller, Mills, Ward, and Wilkinson (2011) used a qualitative approach to interview seven participants and found that pre-entry factors, such as family and friends, created a sense of belonging for SVs. These findings suggest that SVs seek connection with familiar social supports when they are unable to connect with younger non-veteran peers. Their study also recognized that SVs self-identified as nontraditional students based on age and life experiences. In addition, they noticed that most participants downplayed their veteran status for the sake of blending into their classes (Grimes et al., 2011). Lastly, Grimes et al. (2011) found that participants experienced greater transition challenges as SVs struggled with less guidance and structure.

Research noted that women SVs struggle with pre-matriculation separation and transition too. For instance, Iverson, Seher, DiRamio, Jarvis, and Anderson (2016) noted the challenges in cultural shifts women SVs experience transitioning from the military to college. Their research involved interviewing 12 women participants and found they entered college with an identity influenced by a male dominated culture (Iverson et al., 2016). Participants also had distinct views and expectations of authority, which created challenges in faculty and peer interactions.
Lastly, participants entered college with a self-reliant mentality that produced difficulties in assistance seeking (Iverson et al., 2016). Lastly, Iverson et al. (2016) found that participants highlighted the need to distance themselves from their veteran identity and hide their veteran status.

SSM/Vs

Literature specific to student veterans is limited, however, when SSM/V research is included, commonalities emerge. Outside of dissertations and theses, a review of the literature identified several studies that considered pre-entry factors that influence SSM/V matriculation. These were consistent with SV literature in that SSM/Vs were challenged by non-veteran peer connection and the impact of external commitments. For example, Jones (2017) study of SSM/Vs found that pre-entry characteristics of family considerations were a form of social support created prior to matriculation. His study also noted that external commitments, such as military service and employment, limited social interactions with their non-veteran peers and campus interactions (Jones, 2017).

Research concerning SSM/Vs highlighted their effectiveness at pre-entry goal setting and commitment. For example, Blaauw-Hara (2016) qualitatively studied six male participants about pre-entry skills they gained prior to entering the military. His findings revealed that SSM/Vs learned persistence, work ethic, and goal setting in the military (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). These findings were similar to SV literature in that service members also used pre-entry skills of leadership and future planning to approach and complete their college goals (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). These characteristics reflect that SSM/Vs, like SVs, consider the long-term implications of completing their college education.
Blaauw-Hara (2017) also found similar themes related to transition to academic life. His research found that participants maintained a strong sense of military identity which would later contrast with non-veteran peers and influence their sense of connection (Blaauw-Hara, 2017). The findings supported separate research (DiRamio et al., 2008) that noted SSM/Vs differing views of non-veteran students. In addition, results also noted that participants were frustrated that pre-entry military requirements, such as writing, assessing, and critical thinking, were unrecognized and uncredited in their college enrollment (Blaauw-Hara, 2017).

Identity was also noted by DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008). In their study, they noted that SSM/Vs experience an identity transition before college matriculation. DiRamio et al. (2008) interviewed 25 participants and found that feeling misunderstood, leaving friends behind (isolation), and identity adjustment were challenges that SSM/Vs experienced prior starting classes (DiRamio et al., 2008). SSM/Vs also feel the need to blend in during their transition, which may lead to a reluctance to connection with other people outside of their veteran background. Lastly, most participants noted the financial constraints they experienced, which directly influences their external commitments and requirements, such as employment (DiRamio et al., 2008).

Later research produced from the same study provided additional details, which included that pre-entry identity transition challenges were common from service to college. Their study found that stress was created as SSM/Vs moved from a profession of structure and organization to a system of self-direction and choices (Ackerman et al., 2009). Results indicated that SSM/Vs relearned academic responsibilities and approaches that were far removed from previous educational experiences (Ackerman et al., 2009). Key to this study was the consideration of mental health. Ackerman et al. (2009) posited that mental health considerations, such as post-
traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), had an effect on academic performance that influenced transition and integration.

However, literature also reflected that SSM/Vs, like their SV counterparts, struggled with the loss of purpose in their role transition. One qualitative study noted that participants perceived purpose as a service member, whereas they had none as a student (Boettcher, 2017). Boettcher (2017) found that participants lacked a sense of connection with the institution. Similar to other studies, participants recognized that age differences with traditional college student increased frustrations and sense of connection for SSM/Vs. Lastly, SSM/Vs felt compelled to hide their veteran identity because of perceived negative views of world events and service members (Boettcher, 2017).

Summary

Overall, pre-entry factors are important factors for SVs and SSM/Vs. As the literature reflected, most SVs and SSM/Vs recognized that identity, connection, and external commitments were important pre-entry considerations. Other research noted that these students also relied on pre-entry skills of planning and goal setting to achieve their college goals. Lastly, studies demonstrated that SVs and SSM/Vs recognized view of self as different from the younger traditional students.

Transition and Integration Literature

Transition and integration literature, specific to SVs and SSM/Vs, is also limited. The literature that does exist provides a glimpse into experiences and factors that are considered challenges and difficulties. Those challenges and difficulties include views of connection, finances, institutional support, and external commitments.
Student Veteran Transition and Integration

Research is consistent in that social connection in the transition process affects SVs. Zinger and Cohen (2010) conducted a qualitative study with 10 participants from a two-year college and found SVs struggled with non-veteran student connections and experienced feelings of isolation (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Participants also highlighted that navigating college programs and transitioning identities increased stress (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). However, Zinger and Cohen (2010) also found that institutional supports systems, such as counselors, were beneficial in college connection and completion. These transition concerns highlight that institutional support systems are effective means of addressing transition experiences for SVs.

Researchers, in general, recognize that SVs struggle with social connections during the transition phase. For instance, Durdella and Kim (2012) found SVs reported lower sense of belonging compared to their non-SV peers. This quantitative study reviewed the institutional data of 21,179 responses, which included 163 SV participants. While the results of the analysis showed a lower sense of belonging for SVs, it also reflected that SVs reported lower levels of extracurricular engagement and higher levels of work engagement. This lack of social connection is also reflected in the studies of SSM/Vs that focused on the importance of institutional support (Whiteman et al., 2013) and peer connection (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018), which will be reviewed later in this section.

However, other research found that social connections can be cultivated through intentional program practices. For example, SV peer groups fostered social connections (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018). Blackwell-Starnes (2018) analytic autoethnographic longitudinal study focused on SV peer groups and found that these peer groups led to a sense of belonging, created positive long-term benefits, and increased academic participation (Blackwell-Starnes,
The researcher also used adjusted group configurations to improve peer groups that included SVs and NT students. These results identified that SVs benefit from peer interactions based on time and background similarities.

While social connections were important for SV participants, research also revealed themes of assistance seeking and external commitments. To illustrate, Osborne (2014) utilized focus group interviews with 14 participants to explore ways to improve SV educational experiences. He noted that SVs maintained a strong military identity with the reluctance to seek assistance. He noted that participants described a military identity which minimalized assistance seeking (Osborne, 2014). Consistent with other research, participants described feelings of isolation due to a lack of non-veteran peer connection (Osborne, 2014). When coupled with family and employment responsibilities, participants noted the inability to connect or relate with younger non-veteran peers (Osborne, 2014).

Studies also have considered the impact of combat exposure on SVs and their transition experiences. Hammond (2016) demonstrated that SV participants viewed being a combat veteran as unique and produced experiences only a few would understand. His qualitative study of 19 SV participants found that SVs with combat experience viewed it as central to their identity (Hammond, 2016). In addition, his study noted that trauma exposure due to combat created social challenges that affected them during transition. Participants highlighted that these experiences created the desire to seek out other SVs with similar experiences, which were referred to as membership (Hammond, 2016).

Research concerning SVs with service-connected disabilities, such as physical or mental ailments, is limited. Nonetheless, one study investigated SVs with disabilities and their transition experiences. Bryan (2016) narrowed her lens and focused on 13 SVs with combat experience and
determined that trauma and mental health concerns impacted SV transition and connection. She also noted these considerations required additional institutional support and population awareness (Bryan, 2016). Participants noted that these supports were limited, and that campus outreach was lacking during their transition. Furthermore, participants also felt the need to hide their identity based on negative perceptions within their military experiences and institutional atmosphere (Bryan, 2016). Lastly, Bryan (2018) noted that participants had minimal connections during their academic and institutional transitions.

Separate research supports the influence of combat exposure on SV transition and integration. For instance, Rumann and Hamrick (2010) conducted a qualitative study with six participants and found that participants stated having a clearer perspective on personal and academic matters due to military experiences involving combat (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). These perspectives also had an impact on their goal setting and choices as they felt more confident in their decisions. Lastly, participants also reported a lack of connection with their non-veteran peers (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). This lack of connection could be the result of differing priorities that SV and non-veteran students, in addition to, the normally reported age and employment factors.

Lacking from the research was the transition experiences of underrepresented SVs. However, Cole-Morton (2013) discovered that race and veteran identity created challenges for her participant. Her qualitative interview of a single African American participant noted that challenges in race were connected to peer acceptance within his program (Cole-Morton, 2013). In addition, the participant noted the difficulties in finding SV support and faculty that were knowledgeable of military culture and needs (Cole-Morton, 2013). Lastly, Cole-Morton (2013) found that her participant recognized that age and lifestyle preferences contrasted with non-
veteran peers. However, she noted that her participant constructed his own academic and social network that assisted him during his program. This study is notable as it supports the need to increase research on SVs of color.

SSM/Vs

Student service members and veterans (SSM/Vs) experience similar transition and integration challenges. As noted within SV literature, SSM/Vs experience transition and integration challenges based on mental health concerns. Relatedly, research identified that SSM/Vs who experienced challenges in their academic adjustment had higher levels of mental health concerns. Schonfeld, Braue, Stire, Gum, Cross, and Brown (2015) used a quantitative cross-sectional design study to survey 173 SSM/V respondents across three academic institutions and posited that adjustment problems connected to mental health. Their findings noted that certain addictions, such as alcohol and tobacco use, were common for SSM/Vs (Schonfeld et al., 2015).

In addition, SSM/Vs reported challenges in adjusting to post-secondary roles and responsibilities (Schonfeld et al., 2015). These challenges were in the form of intra- and interpersonal change. These findings reflect that SSM/Vs experience considerable stress as they renegotiate identities during their student transition.

Smith, Vilhauer, and Chafos (2017) also explored the connection between transition and mental health. They studied the impact of trauma exposure to emotional adjustments of students attending community college and four-year academic institutions. Their longitudinal quantitative study analyzed the reported experiences of 61 SSM/Vs and 445 civilian students (Smith et al., 2017). Smith et al. (2017) found that SSM/Vs reported more instances of trauma than their non-veteran peers. However, when compared to SSM/Vs, civilian students were more likely to struggle with emotional adjustments (Smith et al., 2017). Another interesting statistic was the
participant composition that was majority female. However, statistics did not specify the gender composition of the SSM/V participants, which is commonly understood as being male dominated.

DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) employed a qualitative approach to study 25 participants and found that transition experiences included stress involving external commitments, such as finances, and peer social interactions. Concerns about financial processes and reducing financial hardships, such as reenlisting in the part-time military services, were consistent for most participants (DiRamio et al., 2008). In addition, their findings also noted that participants were challenged with social interactions with their younger non-veteran peers.

One difference in SSM/V literature was the importance of community. Recent research found that undergraduate SSM/Vs highlighted community as a key component in their college experience (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). The purpose of their study was to explore the transition experiences of SSM/Vs. Their qualitative approach surveyed 355 undergraduate students across 13 Midwestern educational institutions to identify factors and considerations that were important to undergraduate SSM/Vs. Their findings revealed that SSM/Vs transition experiences, such as institutional in-processing or the lack of academic community support, were consistent amongst SSM/Vs (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). Furthermore, they noted that academic reintegration following military service was a challenge as SSM/Vs navigated college atmosphere concerning military service and the importance of institutional support during their transition.

While the majority of the literature focused on academic support, such as community, other studies noted the differences of social interaction within the SSM/V community (Vaccaro, 2015). Vaccaro’s (2015) study noted that SSM/Vs viewed the understanding of the SSM/V
population as more complex. His qualitative study of 11 participants with various service backgrounds found that SSM/Vs recognized the differences between officer and enlisted, branches of service, and part-time versus active duty as important considerations. In addition, Vaccaro (2015) also noted that SSM/Vs interact with each other based on their similar age and education. The importance of this study is that even within the student veteran population, there are differences and that each consideration warrants further recognition, exploration, and understanding.

Similar to Vaccaro’s study, other research focused on graduate SSM/Vs experiences (Phillips, 2016). Phillip’s (2016) qualitative methodology provided another perspective of SSM/Vs that compared graduate to undergraduate students. He interviewed 11 participants with various service backgrounds and identified that transition and integration consideration, such as finances and community, were just as important for graduate-level students (Phillips, 2016). Interestingly, his research found these graduate participants also distanced themselves from their military background and viewed themselves more as graduate students seeking professional development and advancement. While participants did not state they hid their identity, they viewed themselves as having more of a connection with their non-veteran graduate peers and less with undergraduate SSM/Vs.

External commitments were prevalent throughout the existing research. For instance, Schiavone and Gentry (2014) found that feelings of connection and external commitments were common in participant experiences. Their qualitative approach used interviews to explore the transition experiences of six participants enrolled in a Midwestern university (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Their study revealed SSM/Vs experienced multiple external commitment stress factors such as employment and family considerations that affected SSM/V academics. The
findings were also consistent with the majority of the literature as participants attributed external commitments with the lack of non-veteran peer student connections.

Sense of belonging, or social connection, remained the most common area of research. The findings of Alschuler and Yarab’s (2018) study found that SSM/Vs reported a lack of connection with civilian student peers and institutional activities, which influenced their sense of belonging. Alschuler and Yarab’s (2018) two-part study used a mixed methods approach to quantitatively review 826 SSM/Vs institutional records (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018). From academic year 2009 to 2014, they interviewed and surveyed seven VAMS, also known as SSM/Vs, participants to yield several notable results. The first was that SSM/Vs reported positive interactions with their faculty and non-SV peers but had negative perceptions of their non-SSM/Vs peers (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018). SSM/Vs also stated that differences in age was a factor in this perception, which was also reflected in SV and NT student research (Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1993; Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017). Another notable area, and specific to this institution, was that SSM/Vs reported little involvement with campus or social events, which influenced their sense of belonging (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018).

To offer another perspective, researchers also considered the social supports that SSM/Vs and non-veteran peers received during academic transition and integration. Research found that SSM/V sense of belonging was a significant factor in academic experience (Whiteman et al., 2013). Whiteman et al. (2013) conducted a quantitative study of 238 participants who completed three waves of surveys over a one-year period. These participants consisted of SSM/Vs and civilian student peers. Their findings noted that SSM/Vs reported a lack of peer emotional support, which was counter to civilian student experiences that reported increased support. They recommended increasing peer support to enable sense of belonging within SSM/V populations,
reduce social interaction challenges, and increase SSM/V college persistence (Whiteman et al., 2013).

Lastly, research has also shown that military culture and identity create challenges for transitioning SSM/Vs. For example, SSM/Vs in one study noted the loss of a sense of purpose based on previous military responsibilities and their new student academic responsibilities (Boettcher, 2017). As with previous research, participants also found that connecting with college peers was difficult based on age. However, SSM/V participants also struggled to connect with non-veteran peers based on perceptions of narrow worldviews and limited life experiences (Boettcher, 2017). As with other studies, Boettcher (2017) also found that SSM/Vs relied on perseverance skills gained in the military to achieve goals and remain in college.

**SV Summary**

Commonalities within the overall literature reflects that SVs and SSM/Vs encounter stress and challenges in their pre-entry, transition, and integration experiences. In the limited available literature, it is evident that Tinto’s model is an applicable framework to apply to SV academic persistence. Available research also highlights the limited literature concerning SVs enrolled in graduate program. The literature gap is prominent as there is no literature that discusses or documents that lived experiences of SVs enrolled in graduate-level counseling programs. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by studying the lived experiences of SVs enrolled in graduate counseling programs.

The next chapter describes the methodology of this study. Chapter three will include an overview of the qualitative research, phenomenology, and research pertaining to phenomenology and SVs. Chapter three will also discuss my role as a researcher, participants, and research procedures.
Chapter 3. Method

Vincent Tinto posited that college students encounter a longitudinal process that includes pre-entry, transition, and integration experiences (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993) leading to decisions about persistence. His conceptual framework was tested and applied (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980) in multiple studies and settings, primarily with undergraduate students. The results of these studies found that Tinto’s model was effective at identifying factors that influenced student retention. However, there was limited research when this model was applied to graduate SVs. Furthermore, research did not exist when focused on graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. Therefore, the intent of this study was to answer the following question and fill the gap in the literature:

1. What are the lived experiences of graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP counseling programs?

The chapter provides an overview of the qualitative research paradigm of this study, phenomenology as the chosen methodology, and research pertaining to phenomenology and SVs. Furthermore, this chapter discusses my role as a researcher, and participant selection and recruitment. Lastly, this chapter will conclude with data collection and analysis procedures.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative investigation is the process by which the experiences of people are explored and gives voice to the experiences of people (Erickson, 2018). Erickson (2018) noted six principles of qualitative inquiry, which include views in social sciences, role of the investigator, those observed, research report intent, recipients of the result, and worldview perspective. These six principles provide the framework where “lived experiences” of people can be described and captured. Investigators begin the process by identifying their personal views of the world.
Known as a paradigm, this framework includes the ontological, epistemological, and methodological views that best supports the research philosophy of the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Creswell and Creswell (2013) noted five commonly used methodologies in qualitative research that record the lived experiences of people. Those five methodologies include phenomenological, grounded theory, narrative, ethnographic, and case study (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). These methodologies serve different purposes and support the investigative process based on the research philosophy of the investigator. I believe that phenomenological methodology provides the best means to explore and describe the lived experiences of graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP counseling programs and factors that lead to persistence.

**Phenomenology**

A qualitative phenomenological approach provided the best process to explore the lived experiences of graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP counseling programs. More specifically, a transcendental phenomenological (descriptive) method allowed the researcher to set aside biases and judgements to explore experiences as viewed by the participants. However, an overview of phenomenology strengthened its applicability to this study.

Phenomenology is defined as the process of capturing and describing individual experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). Grounded in the philosophical perspectives offered by Edmund Husserl, phenomenology has transitioned from a philosophy to a research approach by combining philosophical principles with research procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2013).

**Description.** Moustakas (1994) noted that meaning is an important element within phenomenology. Using the philosophical views of Descartes and Husserl, Moustakas (1994) highlighted that meaning is created when the present is “blended” (p. 27) with the imagined.
Therefore, the essence of phenomenology is how a person creates meaning as they encounter experiences from their “vantage point” in the present (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). Husserl also highlighted the importance of intentionality (perspective to the experience) and intuition, or knowledge gained free of biases and judgments (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) stated that intentionality was the relationship between the “act of consciousness and object of consciousness” (p. 28). He also described intuition as the starting point for obtaining knowledge of understanding “human experiences” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 32).

There are two types of phenomenology, descriptive and interpretive (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). Descriptive phenomenology is the process of describing the experiences as stated by the participant. Interpretive phenomenology is the process of describing the information from the understanding of the interviewer. The difference between the two approaches was the lens used to convey understanding of the experiences. This study uses transcendental phenomenology, a type of descriptive phenomenology, to explore the lived experiences of SV counseling students.

**Transcendental Phenomenology.** Transcendental philosophy includes perception, synthesis, and awareness of object interaction (Moustakas, 1994). Multiple realities exist based on individual perception, in the transcendental phenomenological approach to research. As such, this approach was unique as it required researchers to adopt a “disciplined and systematic effort” (Moustakas, 1994, p.22) to free themselves of judgments and perspectives with the explored phenomenon.

There are three steps to using transcendental phenomenology. Those steps include epoche’, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). The process begins with epoche, which includes placing prior experiences aside and
reengaging those experiences from an unbiased perspective. Moustakas (1994) posited that epoche’ was accomplished by reducing assumptions and “increasing knowledge” (p. 26) of the various forms of biases. The second step involved transcendental-phenomenological reduction. This process was the crux of the approach as it provided the steps necessary to explore and document lived experiences. However, this study chose to forego the Modified Setevick-Colaizzi-Keen method and Modified Van Kaam method offered by Moustakas. Instead, this study used Saldana’s (2015) coding and analytic approach. This chapter includes coding and analysis procedures in the data analysis section. The last step included using imaginative variation, which is understanding the whole experience. Moustakas (1994) noted that describing the complete essence of the textural and structural experience required a comprehensive grasp of the phenomenon which provided understanding. This step included the synthesis of information, which created knowledge (Moustakas, 1994).

**Goals and purpose.** This study used a transcendental phenomenological approach. To accomplish this, I used Husserl’s philosophy to aid exploration of the lived experiences of graduate SV enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. Moustakas (1994) noted that researchers were challenged by what an experience is (concrete) and its understanding (abstract) to form knowledge. Husserl believed that to explore experiences required removing biases and judgements (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl posited that an investigator required an open mind to accept experiences as it was presented by those with the experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

**Limitations.** There are several limitations to the phenomenological approach. The first limitation is researcher bias (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) noted that researcher bias is the preconceived judgement a researcher brings to the process. The process of epoche’ requires a regimented approach to setting aside prior experiences and focusing on the topic (Moustakas,
Throughout the research, I attempted to identify and reduce the potential for and impact of researcher bias through auditing and reflective journaling. Secondly, the phenomenological process is a step-driven process which is regimented or rigid. The regimented approach potentially limits the flexible and fluid nature of the human experience and conveyance of those experiences. This presented a challenge in the study as it hindered research flexibility. Lastly, trustworthiness and credibility could be questioned as there are multiple possibilities for bias influence. As a result, triangulation and member checking ensured that the literal, and not interpreted, understanding of the experience was reflected.

**Phenomenological Research Applied to Counselor Education**

Researchers have used transcendental phenomenology to explore retention-related issues in counselor education. However, much of this literature included dissertations that focused on doctoral students, not master’s students. Provided below are recent examples from the literature.

Breckner’s (2012) phenomenological study explored why doctoral students withdrew from CACREP counselor education programs. He used a semi-structured approach to interview nine participants who had withdrawn from various CACREP counseling institutions (Breckner, 2012). His study described several factors that aligned with Tinto’s model and included financial reasons, loss of faculty and peer connection, and loss of motivation to complete the program. While other methodologies might have produced similar results, his phenomenological approach used practices, such as epoche’ and triangulation with a qualitative methodologist, to limit the influence of biases and increase the trustworthiness of the study.

Other research demonstrated the effectiveness of a phenomenological approach when studying doctoral counselor education students. For instance, Burkholder (2012) interviewed six female students to explore experiences of departing and returning to CACREP doctoral
counselor education programs. Burkholder’s findings were similar to Tinto’s position in that faculty interactions, intrapersonal factors, and academic culture influenced departures and returns (Burkholder, 2012). His study also highlighted the phenomenological principle of bracketing prior experiences and assumptions prior to the study. The researcher also used an auditor to confirm his bracketing practices (Burkholder, 2012).

Lastly, other research efforts have used phenomenological methodology to explore the lived experiences of African American students enrolled in CACREP doctoral counselor education programs. Henfield, Woo, and Washington (2012) interviewed 11 African American doctoral students enrolled in a predominantly white institution and found that students experienced feelings of isolation, lack of peer connection, and lack of cultural understanding (Henfield et al., 2013). Like other studies, researchers bracketed their prior experiences and used external auditors to identify potential biases. However, this study was unique because it involved three researchers and instances of differing opinions (Henfield et al., 2013).

**Phenomenological Research Applied to Student Veterans**

Research demonstrated the effectiveness of phenomenological methodology when exploring student veteran (SV) experiences in higher education. For instance, Bryan (2016) used bracketing to set aside preconceived notions about veterans with disabilities to explore their lived experiences. His interviews with 13 participants with varying backgrounds noted that SVs struggled with transition concerns, institutional support, and community engagements (Bryan, 2016). While the author did not identify the study as a transcendental approach, he did acknowledge the intent to provide a descriptive account of the participants’ experiences (Bryan, 2016). Notable in the study was the explanation of textual and structural analysis, and synthesis of themes discussed by participants.
Other studies explored SV experiences using a phenomenological methodology. Gregg, Howell, and Shordike (2016) used a descriptive approach to interview 13 participants and found that prior military skills, social connection, and identity transitions were common experiences for veterans adjusting to higher education (Gregg et al., 2016). While their research did not use a transcendental approach, their descriptive study possessed characteristics such as bracketing, and textual and structural description.

The available literature reflected an applicability of transcendental phenomenology for this study. The reviewed studies demonstrated the utility of this approach as they reflected the importance of bracketing, textual and structural description, and trustworthiness provided through procedural adherence. However, there were notable gaps in the literature. Also lacking from the literature were studies concerning graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP counseling programs. Therefore, this study will only explore the lived experiences of graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs.

**Role of Researcher**

My role as a researcher encompassed several obligations throughout the duration of the research process. Those obligations included recognizing my position as a researcher and my experiences with the chosen topic. Other obligations included maintaining ethical standards that protect the participants, honoring participant experiences, and maintaining research credibility (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

**Researcher bias.** As the primary investigator, I recorded my relationship to the subject (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). I recognized that I have several connections to this topic. For instance, I am retired military veteran with over two decades of academic experiences. My academic experiences included online and resident programs. I attended higher education as an
active-duty service member and a retired service member. Lastly, I completed a CACREP-accredited Master’s level counseling program as a graduate SV. I also have potential biases in that I am a doctoral student enrolled in a CACREP-accredited counselor education degree program.

However, my position is unique in that I am from a military family. The majority of my life included military settings that included temporary support systems and distance family support. Therefore, I am familiar with the military culture and lifestyle. I am also married with no children, which when compared with the participants, I am in the minority. While I am not actively employed, I am financially stable with no significant financial responsibilities.

Therefore, I believe that I have several assumptions entering this research endeavor. The first bias were the perceived challenges that graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs might encounter. I found that my personal transition was challenging in that I had to adjust my professional identity from military culture to a counseling culture. Lastly, my biases included academic challenges that SVs with enlisted backgrounds might experience as they transition from the military to graduate-level coursework. I struggled in this transition as I did not have the academic experiences of my officer counterparts. Therefore, when compared to SVs that held the rank of officer, I felt as though I had to work harder to achieve the same result.

To address these considerations and improve trustworthiness, I identified and documented as many details as possible concerning my academic experiences. This process started by reflecting and writing about my academic experiences as a graduate SV. Secondly, I participated in a pre-study interview to describe these experiences, which a peer, doctoral student conducted. The interview identified other subjective elements not accounted for during initial reflections. Lastly, I used auditing with a committee member to review and analyze my
reflections and interview experiences. This information verified my research methods and increased my self-awareness within the study.

**Ethical Considerations.** O’Reilly and Kiyimba (2015) noted several ethical considerations for qualitative research. Those considerations include acknowledging participant choice, protecting client information, and disseminating information (O’Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). To begin, the voluntary nature of client participation was stressed throughout all phases of the study. The initial phase included pre-interview contact and informed consent discussion. The second phase included data collection and the member checking process where participants had an opportunity to edit information or withdraw from the study. This information consisted of content accuracy and information inclusion. Lastly, during data analysis and final member check, participants had the opportunity to edit information or withdraw from the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2013).

The next ethical area was protecting client information that included three factors. The first was protecting client anonymity. For this study, I controlled all information specific to each participant. These control measures included email, data storage, and security services. Security services included the use of the University of Tennessee’s Vault service, which facilitated data and process auditing with select committee members. These committee members consisted of the committee chair and methodologist. The second was providing pseudonyms for each participant that were annotated and protected by the primary investigator. Participant protected information too two forms. The first means of protection included separating participant identity information from pseudonym information. Pseudonyms used the third letter of their first name. To accomplish this, the participant’s authentic identity was stored on my personal computer while their pseudonyms were stored on a flash drive and secured in a personal file cabinet. In addition,
the storage of consent forms and demographic surveys involved a personal removable storage drive. The third and final consideration was protecting collected information. Data protection included storage in one of three methods using two layers of security. Those methods included password-protected external thumb drives, password-protected laptops, and removable storage drives. The first layer of security was password protection on all online drives and digital devices. Unprotected digital devices with password concerns were transferred to password-protected storage devices (e.g. laptops).

**Trustworthiness and credibility.** Creswell and Creswell (2013) noted the various views and opinions about obtaining and defining trustworthiness within qualitative research. They recommended that researchers “reference their validation terms and strategies” (p. 250) in the qualitative process. The authors also suggested that any study should incorporate two or more of these strategies (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). As such, this study will seek to establish trustworthiness in three ways: triangulation, member checking, and clarifying researcher bias.

**Triangulation.** Creswell and Creswell (2013) noted that triangulation involves comparing various “sources, methods, investigators, and theories” (p. 251) to identify potential biases or assumptions. This study approached triangulation by relying on peers, committee members, field notes, reflective journaling, and the researcher subjectivity statement to provide perspective, adjust analytic practices, and identify gaps in methodology processes or researcher subjectivity.

**Member checking.** Member checking is the process of requesting participant review and input of the accuracy of the data analysis and result (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). This study used member checking at the conclusion of each interview and before data analysis. In this
process, participants reviewed, clarified, or modified experiences in an attempt to add credibility to the study.

**Clarifying researcher bias.** Creswell and Creswell (2013) noted the importance of identifying biases, experiences, or views to prevent undue influence in the study. Clarifying researcher bias was integrated into the study by applying the phenomenological practice of *epoche*, or bracketing, from the outset. To identify biases, the researcher participated in a pre-data collection Zoom interview to identify and bracket potential judgements that might influence the study. The bracketing interview provided the researcher with areas that were potential biases. For example, I discovered that my educational and financial experiences were different from my participants in that I am doctoral student with minimal student loans or financial assistance. I also discovered that my family obligations were significantly different from the participants because I do not have children. Lastly, I discovered that balancing my intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences was drastically different from the participants in that I had minimal areas I needed to equalize while completing my doctoral program. Therefore, my graduate experience could be considered significantly less stressful or demanding when compared to the participants.

In addition to the bracketing interview, I also used journaling, auditing, and member checking. I recorded my reflections through continual journaling which enabled me to read and process my experiences following interviews, coding sessions, and analysis sessions. I also used auditing to help me identify potential biases. Auditing consisted of weekly meetings with my dissertation chair and regular meetings with my methodologist. Auditing sessions included reflections discussions, coding processes, and analysis findings. These discussions provided the researcher with additional perspectives and guidance concerning means and methods of
addressing researcher bias. Lastly, member checking enabled me to determine biases by providing participants with opportunities to clarify the content and context of interview transcripts. These member checking sessions ensured that the true meaning of their experiences were conveyed, which reduced researcher interpretation.

**Participants Recruitment and Overview**

The population for this study was graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. Recruiting efforts ensured participant diversity during the selection process by focusing on age, race, gender, service separation type, military branch, and length of service. The study intended to recruit 10 to 12 participants to achieve data saturation. However, data saturation occurred after nine participants.

**Recruitment.** Participant recruitment used networking and snowballing methods. Purposeful sampling included the following conditions: (a) student veteran status, (b) no current military service obligation, and (c) enrollment in a CACREP-accredited counseling program.

The first call for participant recruitment was April 23, 2020 and included a combination of networking and snowballing approaches. Networking approaches included recruiting through CSNET-Listserv, Military Government Counseling Association, counselor education alumni, and personal contact. In addition, I contacted several universities with known and potential student veteran populations by telephone or email (Appendix D). Furthermore, I used a snowballing approach that involved asking participants and universities if they would be willing to forward recruiting information to potential candidates. The intent with this approach was to maximize recruitment. The first recruitment resulted in ten responses. Of the ten initial participant responses, eight participants completed their informed consent (Appendix E) and demographics questionnaire (Appendix F).
A second call through CSNE-Listserv for recruitment occurred on May 6, 2020 and resulted in one additional participant. In total, the recruiting efforts of this study yielded nine participants, which included eight males and one female. Information concerning demographics and summaries for each participant occurs later in this chapter.

All participants included in the study signed and returned an informed consent and demographic questionnaire. The informed consent was an IRB approved form that provided a thorough explanation and expectations of the study. To conduct this study, each participant agreed to and understood the voluntary nature of their participation, study expectations, and protection of their identity and information. To accomplish this, participants read and signed an informed consent, which occurred before the scheduling of interviews.

Each participant also completed a 16-question demographics survey, which captured their individual backgrounds. This information ensured each participant met the focus on the study. The study identified one exception for recruitment. One participant did not meet the formally recognized definition of veteran due to a medical separation from a Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program which prevented advancement to contractual obligation with the armed forces. However, the participant’s selection, experiences, and length of service in the ROTC taken into consideration and the determination made to include their experiences in the study.

Data analysis happened concurrently with the active recruitment phase, which allowed for timely determination of data saturation. Data saturation became apparent by the eighth participant and confirmed by the nineth. The nineth participant provided a confirmation the study had achieved consistent themes between each participant. On May 19, 2020, a determination was made to conclude participant recruitment after achieving data saturation.
Participant Overview. The recruiting call resulted in nine participants. Initially, eleven people responded to the request for volunteers, however, only nine completed and submitted their informed consent and demographics survey questionnaires. In alphabetical order, provided below is a brief demographic summary and description of each participant.

Data Collection

Prior to participant recruitment, I completed several requirements. To ensure the study adhered to ethical and legal standards, I have completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training provided through the UTK IRB. This training provided researchers with training and knowledge that ensured ethical and legal compliance. In addition, weekly meetings with the committee chair and methodologist ensured sound ethical standards and practices. Following acceptance of the proposal, I completed and submitted a request to the IRB to begin participant recruitment.

Participant Recruitment. This study used networking and snowball recruitment approaches to identify participants and achieve data saturation. Creswell and Creswell (2013) noted that studies involving phenomenology can involve 3 to 15 people. Saturation is the process by which thoughts or ideas are frequent and new information reduced or extinguished (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). I determined saturation with nine participants. Saturation was determined when there were no new experiences offered or provided by the participants. The networking approach included contact with the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES), American Counseling Association (ACA), Military and Government Counseling Association (MGCA), Student Veterans of America, University of Tennessee alumni, and educational institutions within proximity of military populations. In addition, snowballing attempted to identify potential participants through current participants.
**Collection Process.** The data collection involved administrative and participant-related actions. These actions included steps to ensure ethical, legal, and participant care. To accomplish this, a participant tracker included participant pseudonyms, key tasks, and dates (Appendix G). This data collection process and tracking was an attempt to maintain trustworthiness and credibility, while ensuring administrative compliance (Flamez et al., 2018).

*Step 1.* Data collection started with IRB approval. The IRB request included details of the study and population. Unique qualities of this study included the distance of participants, types of organizations (online vs. resident), and potential triggering topics, such as combat experiences. Participant emotional safety included screenings and monitoring throughout the selection and interviews. Participant emotional safety also involved asking participants if they wanted to continue with the interviews if they expressed statements or displayed actions that reflected emotional discomfort. Precautions involved creating suicide hotline information and hotlines should participants require care. Following participant approval, I proceeded to Step 2.

*Step 2.* This step involved agency and individual contact. Agency contact was the contact with external organizations with access to SVs enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. This study relied on counseling organizations such as ACES, ACA, and MGCA. I also contacted individual counseling programs with known SV populations. Lastly, contact encompassed individual SVs with known CACREP counseling program enrollment (Appendix F).

*Step 3.* Volunteers that responded to the recruitment calls received an additional email which contained an informed consent (Appendix E) and demographics survey (Appendix F). I answered emails within 24 to 48 hours of receipt. The emails contained an informed consent and demographics survey. The informed consent provided an understanding of the details of the
study. The demographic survey gathered data that collected information concerning race and ethnicity, gender, age, military background, parent education level, counseling program and level, and relationship status.

**Step 4.** Tracking of each participant started after initial contact. Suitable participants included a signed consent form and a completed demographics survey. After receipt of both forms, a second follow-up email requested and identified potential interview dates. Data protection of personal and demographic information also started during this process. Participant consent forms involved signing and returning consent forms to each participant. Demographic information involved uploading responses to the participant tracker (Appendix G). After each update, the participant tracker and participant demographic information required storage on the primary storage device, which was the researcher’s personal computer.

Additional followed up with candidates that did not have completed document. Interview dates were set based on the preference of the participants. Adjustments to times accounted for time differences and work schedules. When each interview was set, participants received a follow-up emails with the details of the Zoom conference room to include data, time, room number, and password.

**Step 5.** All interviews used Zoom and were 60-90 minutes in duration and followed a pre-approved interview guide (Appendix H). Each interview started with addressing questions or concerns of the informed consent or study. The interview process started when participants reported no concerns with the study. From this point, interviews relied on an interview guide to assist in the process. At the conclusion of the interview, I informed each participant of their participation gift cards and member checking opportunities. I sent each interview for transcription with 24 hours of the interview session. I also sent gift cards at the conclusion of
each interview. Lastly, I used the participant tracker to remind, confirm, and track the overall process for each participant (Appendix G).

**Step 6.** The study used Temi transcription service to transcribe recordings. Temi is an online, password-protected, transcription service with a high degree of confidentiality and privacy (Appendix I). Temi uses a company-specific nondisclosure agreement which states that all transcribed and protected material involves the least amount of human interface as possible. As such, I created and maintained control of each file that was submitted and received through a password protected account. At the conclusion and verification of participants transcript information, I deleted their files from the Temi server.

I received transcripts within a 24 window. I also attempted to verify and correct each interview within one week of receiving each transcript. Transcript verification included comparing the returned transcripts with the Zoom recording to ensure accuracy. After transcripts were verified, I emailed transcripts back to each participant for member checking. I provided each participant with a two-week window to verify content accuracy or edit experience inclusion. As participants member checked their information, I began coding their information for analysis purposes.

Data collection also included journaling. I used journaling to capture observations, thoughts, or feelings encountered before, during, and after each interview. I also used journaling during coding and analysis. I used the notes to identity potential biases, thoughts, or experiences that were specific to each encounter. Reflexive and reflective journaling also provided me with the opportunities to triangulate information later in the analysis process.
Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) provided a step-driven approach to transcendental phenomenology that included epoche’, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation. Phenomenological reduction is the data coding and analysis step within that process. One of two approaches are associated with data analysis and include the Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen or Modified Van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994). Modified Van Kaam’s method includes bracketing the topic, horizontalization, thematic clustering, textual and structural description, and synthesis (Moustakas, 1994). For this study, I chose to incorporate Van Kaam’s method but incorporated Saldana’s (2015) coding approach to in lieu of thematic clustering, textual, and structural description. I determined that Saldana’s approach to coding and analysis offers a more thorough approach to coding, which influences the analysis process. The steps below describe my steps in integrating Modified Van Kaam’s method with Saldana’s coding approach.

Step 1. Bracketing. Moustakas (1994) stated that we bracket our concerns to capture how the phenomenon is experienced. In this step, I documented and set aside my ideas and assumptions aside. This was a continual process that included journaling, triangulation, and a pre-interview process where I served as the interviewee to my research process and questions to identify researcher biases and content themes.

Prior to the formal interviews, a pre-interview session was conducted where I assumed the role of the interviewee. This approach ensured that my pre-conceived biases and judgements were identified, documented, and bracketed. In addition, a pre-interview assisted in identifying potential themes that might align with or differentiate from the established theoretical lens.

Step 2. Horizontalization. Phenomenological reduction seeks to apply equal value to each experience through horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). During the data collection and
analysis process, I used horizontalization during the coding and journaling process. Adding horizontalization to the triangulation process ensured that those involved in the analysis process have a common understanding of equivalent terms and concepts.

**Step 3. First Round Coding.** This study used a manual coding approach (Miles et al., 2014), non-software assisted, to analyze interview data. Saldana (2015) posited that coding is a cyclic rather than linear process. He also stated that first round coding is a means to briefly label chunks of information (Saldana, 2015). To approach this coding technique, I reduced raw data into smaller segments to analyze their content.

This study used In Vivo coding as a first-round step to analyze raw data. In Vivo coding uses the spoken, literal word of the participants (Saldana 2015). This process required those analyzing the data to become familiar with the participant’s language in order to understand the meaning of their story (Saldana, 2015).

To assist in the coding process, I used auditing to verify the coding process and approach. I used the feedback to adjust coding process and narrow the methodology. I also used journaling to record the findings and discrepancies that occurred to add credibility in the analysis process.

**Step 4. Second Round Coding.** Saldana (2015) stated that second round coding is the process of grouping those small segments into categories. To accomplish this process, I used pattern coding. Pattern coding involved compiling the summarized sections of data into clear or assumed themes. I also verified these codes during auditing. I then assembled these codes in similar categories to narrow the analysis process. In addition, I used journaling to assist in the assembling of the coded patterns.
Step 5. Category Coding. At the conclusion of the first and second rounds of coding, I assembled the coded data into categories. Saldana (2015) noted that pattern coding identifies general commonalities that found within the coded text. I placed each participant’s coded experiences comparable groups. I adjusted the groups over time and refined them into common families. In addition, I occasionally adjusted pattern codes that narrowed the experiences of the participants. After journaling and reflecting on the categories, I started to organize the data into general themes.

Step 6. Thematic Overview. The last step involved the identification of broad themes that emerged from the data. Thematic analysis was a challenging process as it included updating and adjusting categories and coded information. Thematic analysis also produced a conceptual map that visually represented the data. As the thematic analysis unfolded, a picture emerged that described the essence of graduate SVs. Over the course of several months, the data produced six themes that gave life to this phenomenon. Chapter four includes the details of those experiences.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of qualitative research, transcendental phenomenology, and researcher role. Furthermore, this chapter identified steps to ensure ethical compliance and reduce biases that might influence the study outcome. Lastly, this chapter also provided the data collection and analysis procedures. The intent of this process was to ensure ethical compliance and sound results.
Chapter 4. Findings

“Perception is Reality” Lee Atwater

The study explored the lived experiences of graduate student veterans enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. To explore this phenomenon, the research question used in this study was, “What are the lived experiences of graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs?”. Nine participants were recruited from a wide range of counseling disciplines and academic programs. The results of this study demonstrated that cultural identity played a significant role in how graduate student veterans persist. The results reflected six areas that provided the essence of the graduate SV experience.

Dahlberg used the work of Husserl to focus on the aspect of “essences” (Dahlberg, 2006) and its occurrence in everyday life within research. As noted by Husserl (1913), an essence is an ideal based on facts. To accomplish this study, a descriptive phenomenological approach focused on each participant to determine the essence of their individual experiences. This approach allowed each participant to describe their lived experiences in a manner that highlighted their essence. The essence of each participant was compiled to create a comprehensive view of the explored phenomenon. Presented below is a brief summary of each participant and the details of those themes.

Participant Summary

This study utilized the experiences of nine total participants, eight males and one female. The participants possessed various educational and military backgrounds. Finally, all participants met the selection criteria of enrollment in a CACREP-accredited counseling programs. The participant summary lists each participant in alphabetical order and includes a demographics summary and themes identified during their interview.
Abel. Abel is a Caucasian, middle aged male and a second-year clinical mental health graduate student. Abel retired from the military and is currently enrolled in a CACREP-accredited counseling program as a full-time student. He stated that his program is a mostly face-to-face resident counseling program. Abel is married with four children and works full-time as he attends college. He used the GI Bill to attend college but had limited interaction with other veterans or the college’s veterans support center to competing factors. Abel discussed the constant balance required to complete a graduate program, his awareness of his unique background, and the desire to help the veteran and military communities.

Alexa. Alexa is a third-year graduate student enrolled in a clinical mental health counseling program. Alexa was medically separated from the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) before she could achieve a service contract. Alexa’s admittance to the study was due to her several years of military training and experiences as a ROTC cadet. She is in her mid-20s, a Caucasian female, and recently completed her last semester of her counseling program. Alexa is single with no children and employed part-time. Because of Alexa’s military circumstances, she did not qualify for military financial assistance or veteran support. Alexa highlighted experiences that involved her military identity, notable challenges, identified goals, and skills that she carried over from her military experiences.

David. David was a second-year student enrolled in a clinical mental health counseling program. He attended school in a mixed online and face-to-face program as a full-time graduate student. David separated from the military after several years of service. David is a Hispanic male in the 20-29 age category and a first-generation college student. David is single with no children. David uses his GI Bill education benefits to attend school and uses veteran’s services provided by the university. David highlighted the importance of his military identity, cultural
background, and overcoming challenges as a graduate student. David also noted how goal setting kept him focused as he pursued his goals.

**Ethan.** Ethan is a middle-aged, retired Hispanic male and a graduate student veteran enrolled in an online school counseling program. He was a fourth-year student attending school full-time. Ethan is married and has two adolescent children and a younger child. At the time of the interview, he was finishing his last semester with the counseling program and was employed full time. Ethan used his educational benefits to attend college but admitted having limited interactions with the university’s veteran’s support center due to its location. Ethan described how his faith played an instrumental role of pursuing a graduate degree in school counseling. Ethan followed his passion for counseling because of life experiences and his desire to help children. He reported that his military experiences and skills were important aspects of his transition into the counseling profession.

**Kent.** Kent retired from the military and continued service with the federal government. He was a first-year graduate student in a hybrid school counseling program. Kent identified having various STEM-related degrees prior to his enrollment as a counseling student. Kent was the oldest participant in the study. He is a Caucasian male and married with children, however, his children are adults. Kent did not have educational benefits as his benefits fell between education benefit plan periods. Kent reported the importance of interpersonal skills, social connections, and communication, gained in the military. Kent also focused on his military identity and his desire for continual learning and helping others.

**Robert.** Robert was a first-year graduate student veteran enrolled in a dual-track school and clinical mental health counseling program. He separated from the military early in his career and used his benefits to achieve an undergraduate degree. Robert was a full-time student and
transitioning from another profession. He was employed full time and did not use his educational benefits to attend college. Robert reported limited contact with other veterans but found social connections with older peers and similar backgrounds. Robert noted the balance required to attend college while working full time and maintaining family connections. Robert also focused on the importance of determination and social support.

**Steve.** Steve was a second-year graduate student veteran enrolled in an online clinical mental health counseling program. He recently retired from the military and was not employed at the time of the interview. Steve is Caucasian, middle-aged, and married with an adult son completing college. He used his educational benefits but had little interaction with the veterans’ resource center because of distance. Steve noted that his identity, military skills, and life experience were prominent aspects of his graduate experience.

**Thomas.** Thomas was a third-year doctoral student enrolled in an online counselor education doctoral program. He is an adult, Caucasian male and married with four children. Thomas attended school full-time but felt the need to complete his program because of personal reasons and funding. Thomas did not use his GI Bill to pay for college but did have access to other funding sources to pay for tuition. He highlighted the significance of identity transition, balancing life, and social connections with peers and veterans.

**York.** York is a middle-aged Caucasian male and a first-year graduate student in a face-to-face clinical mental health counseling program. He is married with children and was unemployed at the time of the interview. York attended school using his educational benefits and stated that his interactions with VA support and the veterans resource center were positive. York described that his decision to pursue a counseling program was based on career searching and class enrollment. He highlighted that his personal experiences, faith, knowledge of military
Thematic Overview

As it relates to the research question, “What are the lived experiences of graduate student veterans enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs and factors that lead to persistence?”, six themes emerged during the interviews. These themes included acknowledging identity, balancing life, pursuing goals, feeling supported, resolving challenges, and maintaining perspective. The exploration of sub-themes are provided below.

Acknowledging Identity

A significant theme that emerged was acknowledging identity. Acknowledging identity is the process by which student veterans (SVs) enrolled in graduate counseling programs recognize who they are as graduate students and veterans, and who they were as military members. There were four areas included in this theme. These areas included identity transition, military identity, counseling identity, and professional identity.

Identity transition. Identity transition is the awareness and process of change graduate SVs experience during enrollment. Most participants noted an awareness of identity transition throughout their academic programs. Identity transition was identified in two experiences which included intrapersonal and interpersonal. The details of these experience only focused on changes noted during matriculation.

Intrapersonal experiences are personal changes SVs experienced. For instance, Thomas noted transitions experienced while enrolled in both his doctoral and master’s programs. He mentioned two distinct identities. Thomas’ doctoral identity was described as being “…soft old men that are now are middle aged men…” and he had “…integrated as much as I can” of his veteran identity. York found that working through his own personal experiences after the military
enabled him to separate his identities. He stated that his transition experiences “...had, sort of already, mentally separated me from the military well before I ever started.” He described his personal transition as “amazing” and “transformation[al].” Alexa described her transition experiences as an integration of both professions. She found an “overlap” of similarities between the military and counseling use of cognitive approaches. This overlap allowed her to develop a “counseling style” that fit her military identity. Abel discussed his tendency to place “pins” in people. After his enrollment, he learned that his military identity was a “pin” while in the counseling program. He described his experience in the following, “…like all these pins that I’ve put on people…I realized I have a pin as well.” David detailed the identity shift from a collectivist to an individual mindset in the following, “The military does not nurture or enforce individuality because the whole conformity thing”.

Interpersonal transitions included recognized commonalities and interactions with faculty and peers. Participants noted that their identity transition included more commonalities with their peers based on exposure and time. For instance, Kent noted that his identity transition was not a challenge for him as he experienced mentors and supporters in the counseling profession prior to and during his academic experience. He stated that “it's a factor of how open you are in relating to the other people.” He added that, like his military experiences, “You get to learn, network, meet, and talk to people.” Thomas noted that his transitions were unique experiences. His experience in his master’s program was influenced by his military identity and his graduate assistantship. He noted that these experiences “made a weird dynamic there as far as like connecting with them.” Alexa’s interpersonal transition included relying on previous relationships, such as her cadet connections. She described her initial interpersonal transition experiences with faculty as challenging. She stated, “I always kind of felt like they never really
understood me.” She described other challenging experiences that caused her to question “…what am I doing here?” and “like, why am I here?” She eventually found support in faculty which she described as a “transition link between the two” professions that allowed her to persist.

Graduate SVs experienced various forms of identity transitions throughout their academic programs. These intrapersonal and interpersonal transitions highlighted the constant change and awareness of SVs as they progressed through school. These changes were notable as it reflected positive and negative experiences that caused SVs to question their purpose for remaining in their programs.

Military identity. The main area associated with acknowledging identity was military identity. Military identity included the traits and characteristics participants possessed due to their military service. Within these areas, determination was a significant factor. For instance, most participants reported that determination was a staple characteristic expected of and learned within the military. Robert highlighted the following regarding his military experiences. He stated that determination allowed him, “to make it through.” He added that determination, “really helped me, like dig in, and apply myself.” Participants also highlighted the importance of determination. As Abel stated, “…once a commitment is made, to follow through and to press forward.” Thomas reflected a similar view with, “…the fastest way out is just to go through it. And so just put your head down and go through it.” Yet other participants found their military experiences, such as deployments, helped them value determination. Robert stated that, “I think because of that value that I have from that time, and especially being deployed, like learning that perseverance that you gotta have.”

Another military identity characteristic was maturity. Graduate student veterans viewed
themselves as having maturity in the form of age and life experiences. Seven of the nine participants were 30 years of age or older, which classified them as adult learners or nontraditional students. Within the areas of maturity of age, two types of participants emerged. The first type was older student veterans with early separation from the military. For example, Alexa, David, Robert, Thomas, and York separated from the military at an early age. Thomas noted how his age was a factor. Thomas found it “hard to relate to a 23 year old that’s just starting their master’s program.” York also noted that “I’m the second oldest person in our program. I’m a lot more conservative, I think, than some…”

Similarly, older students that retired from the military and pursued a counseling degree, such as Ethan, Abel, Kent, and Steve, noted that age was a factor. For instance, Abel highlighted that “when you're the oldest person in the room…when you come from a background with the military. It really puts you on a fringe.” Other participants, such as Kent, noted that “no people like my age walking into the classrooms” but did not believe age affected his ability to connect with peers. Steve included introspective views of age that “being older could be a bad thing too, because people could be set in their ways.” Steve furthered his thoughts by adding that his age has provided more life experiences that he has found beneficial in his graduate program.

Maturity in life experiences was also notable. Several participants noted that life experiences prepared them for the counseling program. Robert found that his life experiences “puts me in a little different place” than his cohort peers. He included in his experiences his education and military background. Another participant leveraged their life experiences during their academic program. Steve noted that he was “surprised at how little a lot of the other students know about really anything” when learning counseling material. Other participants found that previous academic experiences influenced their graduate program experiences. For
instance, Alexa noted the discipline and expectations gained in her ROTC program “carried over” to her graduate program. This contrasted with David’s expectations of being able to excel in a graduate program as he recognized that the difficulty levels of each program was considerably different. David compared his easier undergrad and nursing experiences to his more challenging graduate experience and noted that “after that first five weeks, I realized I was very unprepared.” As a result, David highlighted that he experienced a shift in his expectations moving forward.

Military identity included the characteristics of determination, maturity in age, and maturity in life experiences of graduate SVs. These characteristics are staples of an identity that SVs rely on as they progress their academic programs. The importance of recognizing military identity within graduate SVs provides a better understanding of leverageable characteristics that lead to academic persistence and integration.

Counseling identity. Another factor in acknowledging identity was the establishment of a counseling identity. Counseling identity is the process of transition from who they are and who they want to be as counselors. These experiences include their military, personal, professional, and counseling involvements. This is the process of change whereby SVs bridge, or merge, common counseling experiences encountered in the military with their skills in a counseling program. For instance, several participants noted their counseling identity involved an integration of their military identity and skills during their identity transition. David noted that he used counseling approaches in the military without realizing it. David described the following, “So the one-on-one, having a specific time, having a person try to come up with their own goals, and then try to come up with solutions. We're already using a lot of solution focused brief therapy on them without really knowing that.” Alexa recognized the regimented structure of the
military provided her with a cognitive behavioral lens. She found that, “My personality, in general, is going to lean more towards the cognitive approach, but I think especially having the military training in the background has, kind of, solidified my way of thinking that way.” Others, such as Ethan, found transferable skills that he leveraged during his academic program. He recognized the importance of “building those relationships” and reading nonverbal language as reliable skills when deployed. He summarized his experiences in the following, “Reading somebody, nonverbals…you're saying this, but your body, your gestures, are saying this. Well that's something that we also did in the military.” These experiences reflect a merging of identity-based skills that SVs rely on as they learn counseling skills and integrate it with their counseling identity.

Participants described a transition process that included who they are as veterans and who they are as counselors. These experiences included a range of considerations that reflect a merging, or bridging, of these two worlds. Over time, these SVs found military identity traits they could leverage to bring these worlds together.

**Professional Identity.** Lastly, professional identity includes the characteristics and traits participants possess prior to or during a counseling program. These identity traits are different from military traits as they include experiences gained after military service. For example, Abel and Robert noted their professional identity gained through their profession or academic program. Abel discussed his responsibilities he experienced as a program manager and teacher for “leadership development” courses at for his institution. Similarly, Robert found that his first master’s, “helped me in my discipline while I was teaching” and as a graduate student in his counseling program. Kent noted that relying on respect and communication were important identity traits. He highlighted that, “friendly, respectful communication with people…encourages
them to come to you if they have issues and problems.”

Other participants remained focused on professional identity attributes after their graduate programs, such as licensing and certification. Steve described that post-master’s requirements were important in starting their careers. Steve detailed his plan that included the following, “I want to get licensed as an LPC in my state” and “My goal was to be involved and get the most out of the experiences I could.” Within the field of Counselor Education, Thomas knew what he wanted his identity to be. “I want to teach and to get into a teaching position, any substantial teaching position.” Thomas also felt his identity included contributing to the “intellectual discourse” of counseling related topics.

In summary, acknowledging identity is a significant theme for graduate SVs. Acknowledging identity was described by participants as navigating and resolving multiple identities that graduate SVs possess. Their experiences highlighted their identity transition process, integrating their military identities, forming their counseling identities, and linking their professional identities.

**Balancing Life**

Another theme that emerged was balancing life. Balancing life is defined as the constantly changing or adjusting of personal responsibilities and requirements that student veterans possess. The participants of this study revealed that life, work, family, social commitment, and funding were factors they balanced during their graduate programs.

**Life, Work, Family, Social Commitments, and School.** Like many graduate students, all participants noted aspects of balancing various aspects of their life and school. Life and school balance included course load and enrollment status. For example, David chose to remain a full-time student but with an increased course load. As David highlighted, “I realized that I still
like to still experience strain. I think I'm so used to adding stress to my life and I think that's a military phenomenon.”

Other participants found that balancing work and school with school was challenging. Abel detailed the balance of work and school. He identified “competing factors” which he minimized to employment, family, and school. He noted that he intentionally front-loaded course work to prepare for his practicum and internship requirements which would compete with his current employment. He recognized that he could “still work as long as possible before” entering those semesters and experiencing the financial impact. In contrast, some participants found that working and attending school were too much stress and chose to concentrate on school. For instance, York reflected that he was “not going to try to juggle both of those” after attempting to work and attend school full-time. At the time of the interview, Steve stated that he did not have to work as he had just retired from the military and chose to focus on school full-time.

For others, balancing family commitments were important. Kent, for example, offered a comparable experience by noting his reduction of miscellaneous commitments. He stated that, “I'm like not actively involved with anything because my commitment right now is work, school, and having time with the family”. Thomas described his need to complete his program because of the stress associated with his doctoral program. As he highlighted, “I just don't have time to screw around. Like I don't…I work full time, I have four kids now, I have a wife, I have this doctorate degree.”

Another component of balancing life was social and school. Participants noted that balancing their social connections and school commitment included considering the types of social connections they were involved in and the time spent with those connections. Abel described his social involvement as the following, “I don't take part in it really, just because I just
don't. It's another competing thing. I just don't have the bandwidth in my life right now to add in something.” David described the limited connections of his cohort peers due to external responsibilities they had to meet. He noted that “a lot of people already have full time jobs, so you don't see a lot of socializing…” Ethan found that balancing school and life, ”was a struggle at times, but I think for the most part everything seemed to stay pretty well balanced.” Ethan also noted that balancing school required finding additional internship sites that, “made it a little bit more challenging just because of the availability.”

However, other participants described social interactions, such as church involvement, that were important to them. For example, Ethan, York, and Kent discussed their degree of social involvement in their church and with church members. Ethan noted that he actively engages with church members as he views them as “family” because of the amount of time he has known them. York detailed how “I am involved in my church definitely, or at least was while we were still going physically, and still stay in touch with people from it.” Conversely, Kent noted that his social involvement with areas that he enjoyed, such as religious and civic opportunities, were reduced while in school. “I've had to extricate myself from things periodically because of getting too involved.” His considerations also included “the commitment with trying to do the schoolwork and the homework, on top of the regular full time job, and still be able to have quality time at home.”

**Funding and School.** Participants noted that balancing funding and school influenced their academic experience. The balance of funding and school was generally described as attending school with and without GI Bill financial support. To illustrate, Abel described his need to focus on his financial needs, “I mean, my family's always going to come first. I have four kids and they're very interesting. And they range over 10 years. There's a lot of interests there…And I
have to feed them.” Similarly, Steve, York and David noted that funding for school using their veteran education benefits was enough to sustain themselves. For Steve, there was little impact to his experience as he relied on his GI Bill and his retirement check to sustain his quality of life and enrollment. David had a similar experience as he used his GI Bill and also worked full-time. However, David adjusted his employment status to meet his academic studies as he realized “it’s a lot” when dealing with both.

Participants also discussed the lack of financial support, such as the GI Bill, for education. For example, Kent stated he did not have veteran funding to attend school. However, balancing his funding and school was not a significant strain on his finances as he relied on scholarships to attend his program. Kent’s situation was unique because he did not qualify for veteran education assistance due to the time period that he served in the military. Alexa’s situation was also unique in that she did not qualify for veteran education assistance due to her medical discharge from the ROTC program. She had to work full time to finance her education, which she had to balance throughout her program. Thomas also described the importance of financial assistance. “A big piece is having financial resources…If I didn't have financial resources, this would be a giant pipe dream.” He detailed the pressure he felt to complete his program as his veteran education assistance was used during his master’s program and his employment tuition assistance was ending.

To summarize, balancing school with life was important for graduate SVs. Balancing life reflected the traits of students with military experiences as demonstrates their ability to resolve challenges and integrate support systems while pursuing their goals. Furthermore, their experiences reflected a constantly adjusting process that required flexibility and commitment. Graduate SVs demonstrated flexibility in their ability to change their work, family, funding, and
social interactions while also balancing their funding considerations in their programs. Balancing life requirements also reflected their commitment to complete their programs as they remained focused on their goals and, as noted by York, finding ways “to make it work.”

**Pursuing Goals**

Pursuing goals was defined as the reason, desire, and prospects that student veterans (SVs) followed when completing their counseling degree. Pursuing goals was notable in that all participants described multiple experiences prior to program matriculation that involved motivation, ambitions, and opportunities.

**Motivation.** Motivation was viewed as the actions that SVs took to pursue a graduate degree. Participants noted several motivation factors, some of which connect to SV status and others that do not. The factors included previous life experience, personal counseling experiences, or chance encounters with counseling classes while contemplating career choices. Ethan noted previous life experiences, such as his family’s view of counseling, that motivated him to pursue a counseling career. He believed that he could show kids at a “younger age that counseling isn't what they believe it is or we're told that it is.” Similarly, several participants were motivated to counseling military service members and veterans. For instance, Abel described his motivation for pursuing a counseling career in the following, “…what attracted me to a counseling program…was the need that I saw for it in a higher OPTEMPO (operational tempo) unit” and “seeing the impact of that need not being met.” Alexa found motivation for pursuing a counseling program after her involvement with an equine therapeutic horseback riding group that assisted kids and veterans. Her personal experiences as a military member motivated her to focus on veterans and countering the stigma associated with mental health services. Kent described his motivation as the following, “it's about what do you really want to
do and what do you feel your skill sets are, and your interests.” He continued by adding motivation is, “…what do you feel you're being called to.” Steve was motivated to better himself. “You know, succeeding to the best of my ability.” He added, “Like I don't really need the accolades…I think it's an internal drive.”

The motivations for each participant possessed several factors that were influenced by life experiences, counseling exposure, and encounters with college classes. Their motivations fostered a sense of purpose and drive to pursue their goals. In addition, their motivations served as a connection between their ambitions and opportunities.

**Ambitions.** Ambition is the desire, supported by goals, that graduate SVs possess. Participant ambitions were described in several ways. Several participants noted the desire to assist others such as military service members, veterans, or children. Alexa noted the desire to provide counseling services based on her military experiences. She realized that her time in the military would have been better if, “we take[n] in more time to focus on the mental health aspect of it.” Yet others recognized the negative views associated with mental health and had the desire to counter the stigma. Abel’s ambition provided the exploration to consider counseling approaches that would, “help people get out of their own visualization of what they think counseling actually is.”

Participants also expressed the ambition to specialize in a counseling career based on personal experiences. For example, Steve noted the following concerning his personal experiences, “I guess that just, kind of, ignited a passion for me to get into the counseling thing.” Justin used these counseling experiences to provide talks with his unit members prior to his retirement. Kent offered this perspective, “…going into the counseling area, school counseling thing, helping out the kids with the academic, the career, the socio-emotional type stuff, that
resonated with me as something you could…it would be every day.” However, some veterans acknowledged the choices pursuing another degree can create. Robert described how his desire to help both children and veterans sometimes created internal tension. Robert summarized his experiences as, “I think sometimes that's a struggle” as he chose between working as a teacher and counseling veterans.

For graduate SVs, ambitions reflect the desire to achieve their academic goals. The experiences of the participants reflect their desire to assist the military and veteran community and, in some cases, children. For other participants, they noted the desire to provide a specific counseling specialty, such as trauma therapy.

**Opportunities.** Opportunity was defined as the potential to pursue academic goals, use military or counseling skills, or apply existing knowledge. For instance, several participants noted the opportunity to pursue their graduate degrees. Robert viewed his opportunity to attend his graduate program because of age considerations. As he noted, “I've been talking about it for a while, and eventually just got to the point where, you know, either you do it or you don't. So, jump in and start applying and see what happens.” Another participant found the opportunity through a chance encounter with his future program director. Abel stated his opportunity was, “a coincidence that I knew somebody who introduced me to the program director”, which resulted in his application and acceptance into the program. Kent also noted that his opportunity was viewed as more of a “calling” to the profession. He felt that his experiences and skills led him to the profession of school counseling. Others, such as a Thomas, found that his doctoral program would provide the opportunity to increase his academic engagement.

Another area that graduate SVs noted was the opportunity to use military and counseling skills. Participants found their previous military experiences provided valuable opportunities to
interact with people from diverse backgrounds. Steve described that his military and counseling experiences included working in diverse settings. “In general, the military culture is just made up of so many different people. So I think just the ability to deal with people from different cultures…[provided] that better understanding of some of the struggles that people from other cultures have.” Ethan discovered that military skills, such as reading people was, “…something that we learned on the job.” Abel discussed similar experiences in the following, “You always have that personal interaction and it's even more so overseas on constant deployments.” He also added that, “Being in a room for eight hours a day, hearing things and being present with a person” were leadership opportunities to better understand and care for the people he led. Kent also found that his leadership opportunities provided better ways to connect with and talk with people. His experiences taught him the “…need to respect people and they will help you if you respect them.” But he also realized the importance of those experiences. He followed with, “…where it really sinks in is when you practice it.” The use of these skills reflect the opportunities that military experiences provided for these participants.

Graduate SVs also discussed the opportunities to use counseling skills. For example, Ethan found that counseling students required skills, such as building rapport. However, he also found the using skills, such as silence, required additional time and work. David noted that goal setting came naturally for him in his counseling practices. He explained that he used, “a lot of SMART goal setting” in his counseling approach. Others, such as Steve, found that his military experiences required him to resolve problems, which was different from his counseling approach. He detailed the following, “I try to fix the problem sometimes, as opposed to helping them work out the problem.” He added that it was a challenge for him to change his approach when helping clients.
Lastly, participants described their opportunity to capitalize on their cultural knowledge of the military. As York noted, being a veteran with knowledge of the military is, “…such a rare commodity, that it would be stupid to waste it.” As a result, he found that it served as an opportunity to give back to the military and veteran community. Abel also found that knowledge of the military and its culture is important when treating service members, veterans, and their families. He explained the following about the military culture, “With the military, they’re representative of everyone, like a diverse background. They have commonalities of course, but I think issues that impact them are specific in nature. Especially when we talk about trauma or those types of things.” Ethan explained that his search for a master’s program was based on similar experiences. “I looked at a master's for crisis response and trauma. I was like, well that’s a lot of what I know. That's a lot of what I've seen in the military.” This resulted in Ethan pursuing a counseling program that focused on trauma and crisis treatment. However, he also noted the stigma associated with mental health counseling. He explained that his focus was to assist children and provide education at an earlier age to counter that stigma. Alexa also noted the opportunity to counter the mental health stigma found within the military. She reflected on her experiences with the following, “…just realizing how much better it could have been, probably if we take in more time to focus on the mental health aspect of it.” She continued by adding, “…so for me, it's just kind of pulling on that experience and seeing where we were lacking in wanting to help provide that, while also kind of having a connection with them.”

Opportunities for participants were reflected in several forms, which included the opportunity to pursue a graduate degree, use their military or counseling skills, or apply their cultural knowledge of the military. These experiences demonstrate the connection between pursuing goals while being supported with opportunities. For these participants, opportunities
were the chances that graduate SVs recognized and the actions they took to pursue their dreams.

In summary, pursuing goals included the motivations, ambitions, and opportunities SVs noted as reasons for goal achievement. Pursuing goals also revealed the many reasons that SVs used to choose their programs or counseling focus, along with, persist within their graduate programs. These factors demonstrated that graduate SVs focused on long term goal achievement while using their drive and initiative to meet their academic and career interests.

Feeling Support

Another theme noted by graduate SVs was feeling supported. Feeling supported was defined as the levels and sources of support and connection that graduate SVs experienced before and during their graduate programs. SVs experiences included recognizing the importance of support, internal program support, and external program support. In addition, the participants of this study also sought connection to augment or establish support systems.

Importance of Support. Participants noted the importance of support during their academic experiences. As Ethan stated, “I think that we tell people having that strong support network is important and people were like, “yeah, okay.” But, I mean, it's true. Having that is important.” Robert had similar views on the importance of a “good support system.” “I think it's important and I have that, I think, in multiple, different places and it makes it a lot easier to persevere.” Robert further explained that, “…knowing that if something happens, that I can reach out to them and I know that they're going to support me.” Kent found positive comments and support encouraging prior to his program. As Abel described, having a good support system is, “…always there to tell you you're an idiot when you're an idiot. But they're also there to support you, you know, when you're making those decisions as life changes.” Alexa also explained that, “the support system, number one, was probably one of the most important things,
just friend and buddy wise. And being able to, kind of, fall back on them and talk to them, and support me throughout the master's journey.”

Recognizing the importance of support provided an understanding of how graduate SVs viewed the influence of their support systems. While only a few participants discussed the support importance, it is evident that participants realized the elements the influence these systems bring to their academic experience.

**Internal Support.** Participants experienced internal program support in several forms. Those forms included support from faculty, peers, and institution. For instance, Abel explained that faculty members were supportive by accommodating for external responsibilities and his personal development. He found that faculty would “adapt to your individual needs to work with you” and his faculty was “genuine and authentic when it comes to really caring about the student.” He also felt their developmental support having, “their blessing that I'm competent enough…that they think I can move forward.” Likewise, Kent reflected on his support experiences in his program. Kent explained that his faculty, teachers, and peers, “…have all been extremely friendly and encouraging.” He continued by adding, “It's not like they're just a teacher. It's like we do our teacher-students thing, but we have good working relationships and we have good relationships outside the environment.” Robert also found that his program was extremely supportive. Robert detailed his support experiences during his program in the following. “They were incredibly flexible. This is impacting everybody differently and it's hard on everybody and they've been incredibly supportive and flexible.” York noted that feeling supported enabled him to continue in his program. “The department itself been a big support…we have a great program here. The faculty and the doc instructors really make it a point to be available to all of the masters students on both the personal and professional levels.” In most cases, the participants
focused on counseling program support rather than seeking out support from veteran-specific programming. For instance, Thomas found that while he felt supported by his faculty, he did not use the veteran support within his institution. “I assume there's like vet stuff…but I'm distance, so I only fly up like eight times a year.” While Abel admitted not using the veteran support center most of his program, he stated they have been helpful and supportive during his academic programs. Conversely, Alexa explained that she experienced support after a faculty member connected with and understood her unique background. “The professor, that I mentioned, was really supportive of me. She was able to kind of sit down with me and say, “Hey, here's, you know, a great book by someone who is a military veteran.”” Because of her medical discharge, Alexa also highlighted her lack of connection within the veteran resource center. She added that, “I didn't feel like it was something I could or should use.”

Institutional connections also provided graduate SVs with a sense of belonging and support within the program and academic institution. Ethan provided an example of institutional connection in his counseling program search. Ethan noted that his religious beliefs were important to him and, as a result, chose his school because it connected with his religious views. Others, such as York added that his institution had a, “…dedicated office to helping vets connect to resources to give them all different kinds of support.” This provided York with security knowing that his academic program would meet his needs as a SV.

Participants also described their social interactions with peer students that led to a sense of support. David noted, for example, that his social interactions were specific to the classroom which limited connections with his peers. “…here's the downside in the graduate program. A lot of people already have full time jobs, so you don't see a lot of socializing.” He continued by noting that, “It's more like what are their availability…and then you're in and out. So I think it's
very…I think it's very condensed and to the point.” However, David did not acknowledge that he was “finding more common ground” with his cohort peers when compared to his other academic programs. Alexa explained a mix of social interactions with her peers. For Alexa, she found connecting with faculty and peers challenging because of her military background in the following. “So, like I said…had the science degree coming in from a very different background. I don't think at the time I was here, I met anyone else who'd been in any kind of, like, veteran or military training within the cohort.”

To sum up, experiences involving institutional and social connections provided a sense of support for graduate SVs. Participants highlighted that connection experiences ranged from little to robust connections with their cohort peers. For some, such as online graduate SVs, their social connections were disrupted by distance or limited to in-person interactions. SVs attending resident programs noted their limited interactions were due to the priority they gave to other areas of their life, such as family or employment.

**External Support.** External support was viewed as the support participants received before and during their graduate programs from family, veteran, and religious networks. Family support was important and prominent for several participants. They found that family support before and during the program encouraged and assisted them in the graduate programs. Kent explained that he experienced, “A lot of support here in the house and my wife's supports what I'm doing.” Alexa described that she felt supported by her family prior to and during her program. She stated that her, “[my] family was super supportive of it all. I think a little confused at first. But once I kind of explained it, were super supportive of it and have been throughout this entire journey.”

Veteran support was described as the support that fellow veterans bring to the academic
experiences. For Abel, his external veteran support was described as a, “brotherhood of people that you've known over the last couple of decades that you just stayed close to.” Alexa also found that her previous unit members were important in her support system. She stated that serving in different units helped increase her veteran support system the she still relied on. Alexa described that, “having those buddies as well…I think for me, some of those people are still people that I talk to fairly regularly.” Others, such as Thomas, noted that veteran support agencies were important in his persistence. “I went to the vet center and they're like, “Yeah, come on in. We'll get you some therapy, dude.” So having, having that resource has been phenomenal. And that's what's…I think that's a big piece of continuing to go through the program.”

Several participants noted that religious support was important in their academic experience. Ethan explained that, “The people that I have here…I know mostly from church. I mean, I was close with guys when I was in the military and my unit, and so they were like brothers to me. But the friends that I have here…they're like my parents.” For Kent, religion remained a part of his life as he balanced life and school. York felt spiritually guided in his search for a graduate counseling program. “Like I mentioned, religion is important to me. Spirituality is, and was, just kind of thinking and praying, and meditating on it.” As he applied for the program, York believed that he was “called upon” to complete the program and persist through the challenges of a graduate program. He finalized this particular experience in the following words, “You know, it's going to challenge me. That's okay. I'm open to being transformed. As long as I know I'm doing what I should.”

Participants described external support as family, fellow veterans, and religion. Participants noted the effect that external support provided as they prepare for and entered their counseling programs. Graduate SVs also noted that external support was their main source of
support outside of institutional and program systems.

In summary, feeling supported was instrumental in the academic persistence of graduate student veterans. Participant experiences recognized the importance of support and the significance of external and internal support systems. These experiences provided a better understanding of support by identifying views and sources of support that allowed them to persist within their programs.

**Resolving Challenges**

Graduate SVs described challenges experienced in their academic programs. Resolving challenges was regarded as the obstacles encountered before and during their enrollment and the process SVs used to resolve each. These challenges were experienced in role acceptance, academic backgrounds, and learning approaches.

**Role Acceptance.** Role acceptance was viewed as the roles that SVs experienced as members of their programs. For instance, Abel noted all three roles as a military expert, older student, and parent. As the military expert, he discussed the tendency for him to answer military-related topics because of his veteran status. In addition, he explained that age was another role he accepted, “Regardless of the differences, there are still a lot of commonalities that kind of bind all of us together. And I think for a lot of them, I've become a mascot. Like I'm the old guy.” He also talked about his role as a provider for his family in that he had responsibilities to fulfill such as meeting family and employment. Thomas experienced several roles in his masters and doctoral experiences. As a postmasters’ student, Thomas’ found that his role as a counselor was influenced by his military experiences. “I think that there's like maybe a bravado that I still carried from the military…I was this male veteran and they were super happy to have me on the team because I didn't have a problem going into these dangerous situations…I kind of reveled in
that.” However, Thomas also experienced a change in views of his role. He found that his identity transitioned from a warrior to more academic in nature. As a result, Thomas experienced a shift in his professional roles that included advocating for veteran counselors and focusing on his future counselor educator responsibilities.

**Different Academic Backgrounds.** Possessing a different academic background was another challenge that SVs experienced. Most participants highlighted the various education or occupational specialties which were different from their military or civilian careers. All participants contrasted their counseling programs with their previous careers or college education. Most participants noted a change in regimented and structured ways of learning and doing to a more flexible and fluid nature of learning and doing. To illustrate, York noted that his previous technical field in the military required a checklist and manual-directed approach to task completion. “You literally have to put the section and page number of the technical manual that you were working from when you sign off a writeup. We did it as this book specifies and then no other ways.” Abel’s experiences involved deliberate exploration and preparation, “If there's time to think through things, I like to do some research and plan.” Kent’s time in the military was focused on a technically-oriented field which required a specialized science degree. “I got a masters and a BS in physics, a BS and meteorology, and I got a master’s in meteorology from years back, so it's been on the technical side all these years.” He added that, “it's kind of fun to be involved with a program that is like using the other half of my brain where it's more relational and interactive.” Likewise, Ethan explained that he wanted a change from his technical field in the military. “I thought I was gonna retire out and maybe get into contracting or something. I was pretty certain I didn't want to do Intel.”
**Different Learning Approach.** Student veterans also noted a shift in learning approaches experienced in their graduate programs. For example, Abel explained that, “The introspective time that you spend searching through the material that you're actually writing…It really is thought provoking having to produce that material.” His experience reflected a shift from a concrete way of thinking to more of a conceptualized means of conveying thought. “I was very logical thinking, you know…usually a very logical or linear thinking process. Whereas I think this program has expanded my ability to be able to think more. I'm just not so linear where there's not that end-state to reach but there's more of just an experience.” York explained a similar experience and used the phrase “shades of gray” to describe the process. York found that his previous military career as an aircraft mechanic and college education as an art major were drastically different from the counseling program. He felt his counseling experience, “feels more like reality” and it “seems like it describes the real world better to me” compared to the process-driven and structured requirements of his previous military career and education. In addition, Alexa found that her military experiences and undergraduate experiences in a STEM field was completely different from her counseling program. As Alexa described, her education experiences were less focused on emotion and more on the regimented method of resolving problems. In addition, Alexa found the counseling programs focus on emotions, “…was quite the challenge for me. I didn't necessarily feel like I fit very well in the program…just coming from the fact that I had a science degree, military training, and everyone else seemed to be some sort of psychology or sociology degree background.”

In summary, resolving challenges for each participant included different factors. For most, adjusting to and accepting roles was a significant factor. For others, different academic backgrounds were important as it included both military and college education that was different
from the counseling field. Lastly, navigating learning approaches highlighted the concrete and rigid nature of learning that SVs were exposed to in previous educational settings. Understanding these challenges helped foster the academic persistence of SVs enrolled in graduate counseling programs.

Maintaining Perspective

Maintaining perspective was defined as the approach SVs used to consider the broader picture associated with being a graduate student in a counseling program. Most participants recognized the complex nature of a graduate program and their relationship to that program. This theme identified the views of graduate SVs of their program and academic experiences.

Many of the participants described a favorable view of their program. For instance, Kent described his program as being “helpful and encouraging” throughout his enrollment. Robert described his views in the same manner, “I know it's not like a friend relationship, but they're definitely more understanding and more outgoing, and personable than some of my other experiences.” York highlighted the supportive nature of his program. He noted that his faculty and doctoral students supported him in “both personal and professional levels.” For other students, their perspective included tasks from their previous professions. These experiences were illustrated in Ethan’s academic requirements. Ethan detailed the academic requirements expected of him during his program. “Like, they want to see what we've done, like daily activity reports, which seems a little bit micromanaging. And my thoughts initially were, Okay, this seems a bit, I don’t, trivial I guess.” When compared to previous responsibilities, he thought, “I was, like, working at a top secret level with other government agencies doing all this stuff that most people will never hear and here I am telling you everything I did throughout the day.”
Participants also offered perspectives concerning their academic experiences about themselves or others. For example, Kent viewed academic process as, “…very stimulating and interesting” and “experiential…it was practicing what you would actually do.” David explained that he experienced an increase in his vulnerability. He viewed his experience as growth-oriented by, “…being more in tune with how I feel and how I approach things…what are my triggers and when do I start being defensive.” In the same manner, York viewed his experience as, “Really transformational for me…it's really given me a new direction in my life and a sense of purpose that really the military is the only other place I'd found anything like it.”

Others, such as Steve and Robert expressed views concerning their peers. Steve found that his views were different from his peers concerning the overall academic experience and expectations. “It's mostly adults that, you know, my age or around my age, like I can't believe how much they just complain…it seemed, handle the stress of the school.” Steve also had a challenging time understanding, “the end game” of some of his peers when it came to the desire of helping people. Robert expressed a similar view, “I think a little bit differently than some of the younger people in my cohort, cause they just…they haven't had the life experience with another career.”

In summary, graduate SVs held views based on personal knowledge such as life or military experiences. While amicable with their peers, SVs also recognized that these views impacted their connection with others. In addition, participants also described their perspectives that included views of program effectiveness and support. Thus, SV perspectives influenced interactions with peers and programs which led to decisions concerning enrollment and balancing life.
Graduate Student Veteran Essence

The essence of an experience highlights the qualities of a phenomenon and sharpens those qualities to increase awareness. Dahlberg (2006) described essence as the following, “The essence or structure is what makes the phenomenon to be that very phenomenon. That is, the essence or structure *illuminates* these characteristics of the phenomenon without which it would not be that phenomenon” (p. 11).

This study sought to illuminate the experiences of the participants and identify themes that brought focus to the essence of being a graduate SV. Therefore, the essence of SV experiences illuminates that graduate SVs are in a state of transition that requires continual adjustment. At the core of this essence is identity acknowledgement, which influences the continual balance of interactions between intrapersonal and interpersonal factors.

Thematic Relationship

The relationship between themes is reflected into three components, which include intrapersonal, interpersonal, and balancing life. Found within the intrapersonal component are the themes of resolving challenges, maintaining perspective, and pursuing goals. The interpersonal component includes feeling supported and establishing connections. Balancing life remains its own theme and component within the relationship (Appendix J).

These relationships are connected by, with, and through acknowledging identity that all of the participants noted as they progressed through their programs. This theme is central to graduate SV experiences and reflects the importance of identity for participants. For these participants, they recognized that their identity was the core characteristic that separated them from their peers. Most participants noted that as they transitioned into their student and counseling identities, they also sought ways to integrate their identities into their future selves.
This demonstrates that graduate SVs are continually resolving challenges associated with intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences as they balanced life.

Summary

To summarize, this chapter contains the analyzed results of the lived experiences of nine student veteran participants using a descriptive phenomenological approach. The content of their interviews was coded using In Vivo and pattern coding approach. The coded sections of text were then categorized and thematically organized to reflect the lived experiences of the participants. Twenty-six categories were noted during analysis process. These categories were then grouped into seven themes. These themes included acknowledging identity, balancing life, pursuing goals, feeling supported, resolving challenges, establishing connections, and maintaining perspective. A significant amount of time was dedicated to ensure the lived experiences of graduate student veterans were best explained. Chapter Five will provide the discussion and implications of the study and will connect previous literature to the current findings.
Chapter 5. Discussion and Implications

This study explored the lived experiences of graduate student veterans (SVs) enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs and factors that led to persistence. The research question used to explore this phenomenon was, “What are the lived experiences of graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP counseling programs?” This question was framed within a transcendental phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of graduate SVs. The significance of this study was to intentionally focus on graduate SVs and add to the limited literature concerning this phenomenon. This was accomplished through a thorough search of available literature that was then compared to the current population of SVs. This process identified a gap of limited literature that explored this experience. Secondly, a framework of retention was researched to determine an appropriate lens to best view this student population. These efforts resulted in the use of Vincent Tinto’s Theory of Student Retention. The combination of the literature review concerning SVs and student retention revealed the paucity of the research concerning graduate student veterans and their retention.

The next step of the process was the recruitment of graduate SVs that met the criteria of the study. Selected participants were interviewed, and their experiences coded and analyzed, to give life to the graduate SV phenomenon. The analysis of these experiences revealed a unique and interesting perspective concerning SVs enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs and factors that led to persistence. In Chapter Five, I intend to compare existing literature and Tinto’s longitudinal model of student persistence with the lived experiences of graduate SVs.

Furthermore, this chapter will attempt to provide researchers with an increased understanding of the experiences of graduate SVs by identifying limitations, providing
recommendations for future research, and suggesting considerations for institutional support, institutional practice, and counselor educators.

**Discussion**

The overall experience highlighted during this study was the acknowledgement of identity to accommodate for intrapersonal and interpersonal transition while balancing life. This study identified six themes that included acknowledging identity, balancing life, pursuing goals, feeling supported, resolving challenges, and maintaining perspective. I then compared each theme with existing literature and Tinto’s longitudinal model of institutional departure to determine if graduate SVs experienced the same process of student departure to that of undergraduate students.

**Acknowledging Identity.** Acknowledging identity was central to the experiences of the SVs interviewed as it highlighted who they were as counseling graduate students and veterans, and who they were as military members and veterans. This theme included identity transition, military identity, counseling identity, and professional identity. Surrounding this theme was the transition experience which included the changes and adjustments reflected in intrapersonal changes and interpersonal interactions while balancing life.

Most participants noted their veteran identity was significant in that their perspectives, life experiences, and military backgrounds were completely different from their cohort peers. However, for some participants their veteran identity was not as prominent as others. For example, two described the amount of time that lapsed between their military services that allowed more time for a professional or civilian identity to emerge. However, both SVs still recognized the impact the military had on their experiences in school, but it was less obvious.
For all participants, identity transition was common as graduate SVs recognized personal changes they experienced in their programs. Participants found their identity transition was in the process of change, or had changed, due to their counseling programs. For instance, they highlighted pre-entry change that was evident in intrapersonal shift experiences that eventually led to them pursuing a counseling degree. For others, they experienced changes after matriculation which fostered confidence and increased their counselor identity.

Student development theory involves understanding the academic experiences of students enrolled in postsecondary education (Patton, 2016). Patton noted that student development assists in the creation of policies and practices for institutions and programs. This philosophical understanding of student development offers a range of theories and models that are applicable to this study. For instance, within student development theory, there is the recognition that transition experiences influence student development.

Schlossberg’s Transition Theory involves the acknowledgement of actual or expected events that influence an individual’s “relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Patton, 2016). The actual events are described as anticipated or unanticipated experiences (Patton, 2016). For graduate SVs involved in this study, their transition experiences into a graduate counseling program involved both anticipated and unanticipated events. For instance, most participants anticipated attending counseling programs because it was a set goal. For others, their programs were unanticipated and impacted by their chance encounters within their counseling or academic experiences. This reflects a wide range of transition types that brought each participant to their counseling programs.

Schlossberg’s theory also provides a better understanding of transition coping approaches. The theory suggests that individuals consider situations, self, support, and strategies
to resolve transition challenges (Patton, 2016). This is effective in understanding how an individual resolves transition experiences as a graduate SV. However, the theory focuses on individual transition experiences that is counter to the multiple, or complex, experiences presented along the continuum of time. For example, participants involved in this study described multiple transition experiences that occurred over the course of their graduate studies. In addition, participants also considered and prepared for future experiences that required transition, such as preparing for licensure or employment. This reflects that the transition process was continual and cyclic in nature and involved occasionally moving from anticipated to unanticipated events. This process was best described as balancing life.

Lastly, student development theory also seeks to understand the factors that influence student development. One such area involves identity overlap, also known as, intersectionality. While not a theory (Patton, 2016), intersectionality is the acknowledgment of the multiple identities that people possess and the points where those identities intersect (Patton, 2016). This study revealed that graduate SVs experienced many points of intersectionality throughout their academic experiences. Each experience was unique but occurred simultaneously with other transition experiences. This made graduate SVs distinct from their cohort peers because of the multiple identities they processed over the course of their studies. The benefit of understanding intersectionality of graduate SV identities is acknowledging the stress and challenges of academic experiences.

When compared to Tinto’s model of student departure and existing literature, graduate SVs had similar identity experiences. For graduate SVs, these experiences influenced their sense of belonging with their peers or programs. Previous research identified that identity change experienced during matriculation increased stress (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). DiRamio et al.
(2008) also found that identity and identity transition created challenges for SVs. Participants in this study noted that stress and challenges were reduced by balancing life requirements. For graduate SVs, balancing life requirements provided the space and time needed to allow identity change to occur without overwhelming their sense of self or competing identities. Interestingly, most of the participants in the current study did not seek assistance when navigating their identity transition. This phenomenon was revealed in external research in that SVs minimized assistance-seeking during challenging situations (Osborne, 2014).

In addition, a unique aspect of the current study confirms previous studies that noted that male dominated aspect of the military. Radford et al. (2016) and Cate (2014) noted the demographic composition of the military and SVs which reflected a male-dominated culture. This study noted the impact of that male-dominated and it impacts on identity development. The study of Iverson et al. (2016) found that female SVs identities were influenced by male-dominated culture. The participants of this study noted several instances where gender was noticeable. For instance, Alexa, as the lone female participant, described the difference between working in a male-majority culture and her transition into a cohort that was majority female. She also described the influence this experience had on her identity. These experiences demonstrate that SVs experienced awareness of the cultural and professional shift from a male-dominated profession.

This study found that acknowledging identity was different from undergraduate SV research based on transition experiences. This study found that graduate SVs were aware of their identity as veterans but were equally aware of changes to that identity. Notable in transition experiences was the shift from being a military service member to that of a counselor. These reasons included gaining new skills in school, connecting with counseling professionals in the
field, and increased awareness due to reflective exploration. Furthermore, participants also noted the personal identity changes that included reincorporation of cultural values, views, and beliefs that are different from academic and military experiences.

**Resolving Challenges.** Participants also discussed the challenges found within their academic programs. The challenges involved role acceptance, academic backgrounds, and learning approaches. Resolving challenges, much like balancing life, was a continual process for SVs, however, this process involved maintaining perspective and pursuing goals. These intrapersonal experiences highlighted that perseverance and determination were a quality found within SVs.

Graduate SVs described the roles they brought with them or accepted within their programs. The majority of participants discussed the challenges they encountered during their programs. For instance, several noted that distance from their programs were minor challenges in terms of communication concerns or establishing peer connections. Participants also noted the challenges they experienced because of their military background. However, these challenges highlighted traits such as determination and persistence of the participants that graduate SVs used in their programs.

Participants described challenges they experienced throughout all phases of their academic experience. For those enrolled in their programs, challenges were also noted in balancing life and course loads. For most of the participants with family responsibilities, balancing work, school, and family created stress which they continually had to adjust. Graduate SVs also noted that connecting with cohort peers was challenging as different life experiences, academic backgrounds, and professional exposure often separated them from their peers. As participants noted, resolving these challenges required perspective taking to account for the
differences that existed in order to remain in their programs.

Lastly, participants noted the difference in learning approaches that were different from their previous careers. These differences include concrete ways of learning tasks that were different from the abstract way of learning material in counseling courses. In addition, graduate SVs noted the different hard science fields they entered from were drastically different from the fluid nature of the counseling field. This change created challenges as this reflected a move from a structured and methodical ways of learning to an abstract means of learning and doing.

Tinto’s model considers that students continually assess and evaluate their experiences. From the pre-entry, or separation, stage, to the integration stage, students cost-analyze their overall experiences to determine if they are achieving what they set out to do. Resolving challenges for graduate SVs is a similar process. Previous literatures identified challenges that SVs experiences. For example, the studies of Ackerman et al. (2009) and Grimes et al. (2011) found that SVs struggled with less guidance and structure. Lastly, research also found that SVs adjusting to post-secondary roles and responsibilities encountered challenges that were different from their military careers (Schonfeld et al., 2015).

Previous research also noted that the lack of interpersonal connection and different life experiences created challenges for SVs (Jones, 2017; Iverson et al., 2016). Research also highlighted that different life experiences, such as combat, challenged SVs, too (Hammond, 2016). Earlier research trying to gain a better understanding of SV demographics found that SVs were more likely than their peers to have challenges created by managing family obligations (Kim & Cole, 2013). These studies all align with graduate SV experiences, however, lacked details of how SVs addressed these challenges. This study revealed a few ways that SVs overcame these challenges that included balancing life and maintaining perspective.
Resolving challenges was a unique aspect of this study. Previous research concerning SV post-secondary education discussed challenges SVs face but was limited in how SVs resolved those challenges. For graduate SVs, resolving challenges included navigating new roles as SVs, emerging counselors, and older students. Like existing research, this study found that graduate SVs entered their graduate programs from completely different career fields held in the military or previous careers. Lastly, and unique to this study, graduate SVs noted resolving and adapting to different learning styles that included transitioning from concrete ways of thinking and doing to abstract and a more conceptual means of learning and doing.

**Maintaining Perspective.** Maintaining perspective involved the SV views of their program, peers, and academic experiences. The main perspective described by SVs was the views of their programs. Participants provided descriptions of their peers, programs, and experiences which highlighted how SVs viewed themselves within their environment. For instance, they highlighted the flexible nature of their programs that accounted for external responsibilities or regarded program and faculty as understanding and focused on their professional competencies and development. For others, they viewed their programs as growth-focused in a manner that was comfortable and safe.

However, not all participants had similar views. For instance, a few participants viewed their program as lacking understanding of the military culture. Alexa, for example, noted that her program did not understand her unique background which created challenges for her growth and acceptance. She thought her program lacked an understanding of her background and had difficulty bridging the difference between the two professions. David also described a similar experience in that his cultural and military backgrounds were different from many of the students in his program. As a result, he considered and sought professional mentorship outside of the
program to address his needs.

Participants also viewed their cohort peers as lacking life experiences. For many of the participants, their prior military careers brought many leadership and organizational managements skills to the counseling programs. Within the experiences, participants learned how to deal with life situations for themselves. Therefore, participants noted that views of stress and challenging situations were drastically different when compared to their peers. As a result, graduate SV perspectives were used to compare previous life experiences to present life situations to determine the impact of the situation.

Within existing literature, studies noted the difference in perspectives of SVs. For instance, Rumann and Hamrick (2010) found that SVs reported having a clearer perspective on personal and academic matters due to military experiences. This study correlates with the study of Boettcher (2017) that noted SVs viewed non-veteran peers as having narrow worldviews and limited life experiences. These studies, and the experiences of the study’s participants, confirm the findings of Lim et al. (2018) that noted that SVs had different perspectives of peer students.

Furthermore, research also found that SV perspectives changed after entering college. For example, Gregg et al. (2016) found that SVs tend to experience a shift in their sense of purpose following college. Participants in the current study also noted an adjustment in perspective after entering their programs. Participants acknowledged the differences in views early in their career and the rationalization of perspective differences. However, the process of rationalizing the differences also highlighted the awareness of their identity differences from their peers.

When compared with existing research, graduate and undergraduate SVs perspectives were consistent with peer and program experiences. However, this study found some differences in their views. For instance, for undergraduate SVs, their perspectives included a more self-
centric view of peer and program experiences without identifying other possibilities. However, the graduate participants of this study considered other views or considerations for their experiences outside of their own. This reflects a more mature approach to acknowledging differences and considering other possibilities outside of their own lives. The reason for this broader perspective might be the result of leadership experiences gained in the military or other professions.

**Pursuing Goals.** Participants also discussed their reasons for pursuing goals. These reasons were embedded in their motivations and ambitions they saw to help fellow veterans or the military community. Participants also discussed the opportunities that were presented or available while searching for their counseling programs. Motivations included personal experiences or observations they encountered during their military or professional careers. Several participants noted their motivation to pursue a counseling degree became evident in the latter half of their military service. For others, pursuing a counseling degree was a means to use their understanding of the military culture. They drew upon their prior military experience and connected it with counseling needs.

Tinto acknowledged that students entered their programs with pre-entry considerations, goals, and intentions. Additionally, past studies revealed that SVs were goal-oriented students. For example, previous research found that SVs were focused on goals and ambitions prior to and after their enrollment (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). In addition, literature reflected that SVs kept their long-term goals in perspective throughout their programs (Hunter-Johnson, 2018). Lastly, Boettcher (2017) also found that SVs relied on perseverance skills gained in the military to achieve goals and remain in college.
However, graduate SVs were different from their undergraduate SVs when pursuing goals. Both groups acknowledged that achieving goals was important as they entered their programs. Yet, graduate SVs were different in that they saw a need to fulfill an unmet opportunity and found the chance to meet that need. For this study, this makes graduate SVs different because they are pursuing goals based on selfless reasons.

**Feeling Supported and Connected.** Participants noted the importance of support and connection during their programs. Participants detailed how support and connections before and during their programs helped them pursue and persist. For example, some noted that family support and program qualities that offered support were important before entering their counseling programs. Others discussed the importance of a solid support network that extended beyond their immediate family. In addition to their families, a few noted the importance of previous colleagues as an effective support network.

Others did not seek out support and connections with cohort peers and institutional organizations because they were comfortable with their social and academic needs. They highlighted that they chose to limit social connection to peers with similar backgrounds, such as career-transitioning parents. Others found it challenging to connect with cohort peers due to academic requirements and unrelated backgrounds.

Literature also demonstrated that social support and connection experiences were common experiences. For example, some found that social support and connections were challenging for SVs (Durdella & Kim, 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Separate studies also noted that institutional support and connections were also important (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Whiteman et al., 2013). Research also found that SVs often experience feelings of isolation throughout their programs (Osborne, 2014). For the graduate SVs in this study, only two
participants described feelings or thoughts concerning isolation. The rest of the participants noted that external support was important to remain in their programs while social connections were reduced by choice to balance life.

Literature regarding SV social connections noted similar findings. For instance, Bryan (2018) noted that participants had minimal connections during their academic and institutional transitions. For graduate SVs in this study, a lack of connection was based on balancing life and different backgrounds, such as age or careers. These characteristics also aligned with separate research which noted that participants were challenged with social interactions with their younger non-veteran peers (DiRamio et al., 2008). One participant even questioned her “fit” within the program based her connections and support. This experience was also captured in an earlier study which discovered that SVs reported having a lower sense of belonging compared to their non-SV peers (Durdella and Kim, 2012). Research also found that SV struggled with support and faculty that were knowledgeable of military culture and needs (Cole-Morton, 2013).

For graduate SVs, there appears to be a substantial difference concerning the views of social support and connections when compared to existing literature. While the challenges of connecting and relating to cohort peers and programs were the same, the intentional nature of focusing on family and long-term goals was important to graduate SVs. For graduate SVs, social support or connections with their cohort peers or institutional services were secondary to family and employment. Participants noted that social support and connections were factors brought with them as they entered their counseling programs.

**Balancing Life.** Two distinct categories emerged as graduate SVs detailed their experiences of balancing life. These categories were life factors and funding. Life factors included work, family, and social considerations. Participants noted that balancing life always
considered their enrollment status and course load to life factors. For instance, participants discussed balancing course loads to ensure they met family and employment needs. Student veterans also noted that funding educational endeavors were important in their programs. Participants were evenly split when it came to the use of the GI Bill. Participants that did use their GI Bill educational benefits noted that it helped considerably in the programs and reduced the need to work. Others, however, noted that the lack of educational funding directly impacted their employment status or increased the need to complete their programs faster because of the financial strain it produced.

For graduate SVs, balancing life requirements is tantamount to Tinto’s view of external commitments. Balancing life also included the consideration of family. The experiences of this study found consistencies with previous research concerning undergraduate SVs. For instance, Radford et al. (2016) found that SVs had family considerations or cared for dependents upon entering their programs. Additionally, Kim and Cole (2013) discovered that nearly half of SVs entering college had family obligations that competed with academic responsibilities.

Furthermore, Tinto highlighted, and previous studies noted, employment considerations were significant factors for undergraduate students completing their programs. For instance, Radford et al. (2016) and Cate (2014) found that SVs were employed in some capacity to compensate for changes in financial income. Previous research also revealed that finances and community were just as important for graduate-level students (Phillips, 2016). Lastly studies also noted that SVs were concerned about financial hardships as attending school affected income (DiRamio et al., 2008).

When compared to broader literature, balancing life requirements, such as family, employment, and social connections, during enrollment were consistent. However, a minor
difference between graduate and undergraduate SVs were the choices that graduate SVs made when balancing life. For instance, graduate SVs focused on family needs in addition to their own. Their needs included maintaining family connections or giving educational benefits to their children, which affected their financial situations. This study also found that graduate SVs balanced life by choosing not to work or reduced the amount of time they worked outside of their academic programs. By balancing employment, graduate SVs reduced the stress and commitments that competed with their academic responsibilities. Lastly, participants also chose to remove themselves from social commitments or involvements in order to focus on school.

**Essence.** This study identified that the essence of being a graduate SV involves a constant adjustment to life demands while acknowledging identity components. These adjustments are experienced and resolved along a time continuum before and during their graduate counseling programs. In addition, graduate SVs mitigate intrapersonal and interpersonal identity transitions and interactions to reduce the stress of family and employment demands while meeting academic requirements. Recognizing these areas and understanding the interactions between each hopefully provides educators and academic institutions with a better picture of graduate SV experiences. Furthermore, understanding the essence of graduate SVs hopefully creates opportunities to proactively adjust teaching practices or organizational assistance to better support these students.

**Limitations**

The study possessed several limitations. The most notable limitation was the 2020 global COVID-19 pandemic, which began during my data collection process. The COVID-19 virus arrived in the 2020 Spring semester and changed the lives of many students across the United States. For participants of this study that attended residential schools, there was a shift from in-
person to online education. One participant described the pandemic adjustment as “getting used to a new normal.” Many of these participants found that balancing life and resolving challenges increased family and employment adjustments during the latter half of their programs. While SVs completing online schools did not experience academic changes, they did experience changes in family and employment requirements, such as changes in child-care and employment responsibilities. For all participants, these experiences were evident during the study as they noted increased activity in the home due to child-care responsibilities or worked adjusted hours to meet employment demands.

Another limitation was the disproportionate ratio of male to female participants. Of the nine participants, eight were male. During recruitment, there were 11 participants that expressed interest in volunteering for the research. However, two potential volunteers did not respond. Of the two, one was female. The one remaining female that did participate was unique due to her military background as a cadet. Without her participation, there would have been no female participants in the study. Therefore, the study would have benefited with more female participants as Alexa provided culturally-specific factors and observations that the other male participants did not address. For instance, Alexa noted the impact of working in a profession with a male majority and the impact it had on her identity. Although this discrepancy mirrors the overall SV population, it nevertheless limits the outcome of the study.

A third limitation also included racial diversity. Of the nine participants, seven identified as Caucasian. The two participants that identified as Hispanic/Latino discussed cultural experiences that included differences in family and military background. These experiences provided rich and detailed descriptions that highlighted challenges and concerns, as well as, goals and motivations for pursuing counseling. One participant discussed the challenges he faced
as he transitioned from one career to another and his desire to strengthen and reconnect with his cultural background.

The last limitation was potential researcher bias. I, as the researcher and coordinator of this study, recognized the connection with the experiences described by the participants of this study. Throughout the literature review, data collection, and data analysis, the existing literature and experiences of the participants overlapped with me at multiple points. To address this, I used a pre-study interview and reflective journaling to identify and bracket potential biases. Although bracketing and audit checks helped me manage preconceived ideas, I still acknowledge potential intersections that were missed or interpreted throughout the process.

**Implications**

The findings of this study suggest that graduate SVs have several characteristics that makes them unique as graduate students. These unique characteristics involved an acknowledgement of their identity and identity transitions, the constant management of balancing life responsibilities, and views of academic support and connection. These implications offer cultural awareness considerations, institutional practices, and counselor educator considerations.

**Increased Cultural Awareness.** Graduate SVs participants possessed cultural identity characteristics that were different from their peers. To begin, SVs were different from their non-veteran peers in that identity and identity transitions included military and student considerations. As reflected in previous research, identity transition was a common experience for SVs attending college (Ackerman et al., 2009; Blaauw-Hara, 2017; DiRamio et al., 2008; Iverson et al., 2016). SVs acknowledged they experienced intrapersonal and interpersonal adjustments throughout their program. Intrapersonal adjustments included shifts in perspectives
of stress and strain to adjustments to academic requirements and personal awareness. Interpersonal experiences included focusing on immediate personal responsibilities, such as family and employment, and reducing the importance of socializing and connecting. These experiences were recognized as balancing life and was described in various ways by all participants.

Another cultural identity characteristic of graduate SVs was the importance of the support system. Participants entered their programs with stable family support systems and social connections, outside of their cohort. This was consistent with existing literature which found that family support systems before and after entering college programs were important to SVs (Jones, 2017). However, other literature concerning undergraduate students noted that institutional support was important for college persistence (Bryan, 2016; Cole-Morton, 2013; Whiteman et al., 2013; Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). This highlights a difference between undergraduate and graduate SVs. While this was not discussed in any interview, a potential reason for this difference was the view of support experienced within the military. The military profession possesses layers of support that assist service member throughout their career. This support system also cares for families as well. When applied to a graduate SV, the reliance of an external support system is secondary to that of the immediate family. For graduate SVs, the family unit is the primary source of social connection and support throughout the academic process. For a few participants, they noted the impact that previous colleagues had on the support network. As several participants highlighted, involvement with institution support initiatives, such as veterans support centers, or program social groups, such as the Chi Sigma Iota honor society, were opportunities they chose to limit.
Lastly, SVs brought with them cultural values of goal achievement, task completion, and mission accomplishment. SVs noted described themselves as determined and persistent in their approach to school, which was discovered in a separate undergraduate SV study (Boettcher, 2017). Participants found that they gained or reinforced those qualities while in the military. The “don’t quit” attitude was a consistent quality that highlighted a sense of purpose by completing and achieving their goals. This identity trait reflects that SVs rely on intrapersonal skills to remained focused on the long-term goals and achievements.

**Institutional Practice.** The first consideration for practice is the understanding of cultural identity that each participant noted. Graduate student veterans described the transition of identity between careers. SVs described their increased awareness and acknowledgement of these differences between them and their faculty and cohort peers. These differences can be approached between two categories of graduate SVs, which include graduate SVs that separated early in the military and graduate SVs that retired from the military. For SVs that separate early, cultural identity involves views of teamwork, camaraderie, recognition of rank hierarchy, sense of purpose, and mission accomplishment based on clearly defined goals and expectations. Each task is a micro-level requirement based on concrete standards that eventually builds to a comprehensive understanding of macro-level roles and responsibilities that is delivered through consistent mentorship and leadership. When applied to institutional practices, institutions can assist the graduate SVs by offering mentorship and leadership services that guide graduate SVs through institutional requirements. In addition, these services provide graduate SVs with a sense of belonging and awareness of the larger picture.

Service members that retired have a slightly different cultural identity in that most of these service members were in positions of leadership with increased responsibilities. These
graduate SVs were required to train, mentor, and lead service members in manner to complete their organizational roles and responsibilities. They coordinated with organizational leadership to implements guidance and requirements to assist in accomplishing their missions. When applied to institutional practices, these experiences can be leveraged to create or improve support and connection between academic institutions and SVs. In addition, these SVs can offer advice and guidance to tailor transition programs that meet the needs of graduate SVs or the overall SVs population. Regardless, institutional practices would benefit from using graduate SVs in advising or mentoring SVs that enter their college program.

Faculty members and institutions should also be aware that SVs tend to reduce their social connections and involvements to balance their lives. Participants provided abundant examples of their intentional reduction of social involvement to ease academic stress. For many SVs, their focus involved school, family, and employment. These decisions were not meant to distance themselves from their cohort peers and future professional connections, but more to focus on important life areas.

**Counselor Educators.** Counselor educators are the first line of interaction for SVs. These leaders bring the cultural, developmental, ethical, and organizational understanding of the graduate experience. Counselor educators rely on the cultural practice of understanding student needs (ACA, 2014). The findings of this research will hopefully provide ideas to guide and support graduate SVs while acknowledging their unique cultural backgrounds.

To increase cultural identity awareness for graduate SVs, counselor educators could promote an intentional awareness that careers have on identity development. For example, counselor educators could create intentional times to conduct “transition-checks” with graduate SVs to assist with or gauge potential challenges that SVs are experiencing. Research noted SVs
were reluctant to seek help (Lim et al, 2018), which identifies the need to offer this assistance.

Counselor educators should also note the differences in perspectives that is a part of graduate SVs cultural identity. Previous research (Gregg et al., 2016) noted that SVs view their academic and life experiences differently from their cohort peers. Similarly, participants found a difference of perspectives from cohort peers. SVs discussed differences in academic stress and personal responsibilities. The differences noted in the perspectives increased awareness of graduate SVs which influenced social connections. Interestingly, when graduate SVs lacked the veteran and peer connection, they sought connections with working adults with similar backgrounds and responsibilities, such as being a parent or transitioning careers.

In addition, counselor educators have an obligation to tend to the counseling and identity development of counselors in training through supervision practices (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011). These standards outline effective means of supervising and developing counseling skills experienced during counseling programs. For graduate SVs, these are the standards equivalent to the regulations and procedures experienced in the military. To assist graduate SVs, counselor educators should understand that graduate SVs transition from a career that is rigid and structured. Expectations and standards are codified and reflected in checklists or step-by-step instructions. When applied to supervision practices, counselor educators could approach supervision in more concrete terms and exploration. This approach would allow supervisees to observe a way of accomplishing a task. From this point, a transition to more conceptual or abstract exploration would allow the SV to consider other options for exploring the same task. In addition, the fluid nature of counseling practices could also be reinforced with clearly defined ethical requirements and professional standards that SVs could acknowledge and implement during their counseling identity development. This would provide a similar approach used in the
military which relied on policies and regulations to govern expectations and requirements.

Lastly, it was noted that SVs felt supported and acknowledged when their programs provided flexibility and understanding when life entered the academic equation. Counseling programs that seek to attract and retain graduate SVs would benefit by adopting flexible teaching and academic standards or adapting existing teaching practices to account for adult student considerations. For instance, flexible teaching practices include providing grace periods for assignments that overlap with chaotic and demanding personal schedules. Another flexible practice includes providing leniency towards class periods that conflict with employment requirements. Lastly, flexible teaching practices could account for accountability concerns due to family SV considerations. In short, flexibility and understanding were important for SV participants as they noted the importance of balancing life, and for most participants, focusing on family.

**Future Research**

There are several exploration points for future research. The first is the exploration of experiences of women and underrepresented graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. While the gap in the literature was notable, future studies would benefit from widening the experiences of more women and underrepresented participants. These experiences would strengthen and better support SVs that choose to pursue graduate counseling degrees. In addition, these experiences would provide academic institutions, counseling programs, and faculty with a better means of supporting their academic needs and identity transition.

Second, future studies should include the exploration of perspectives and experiences of counseling faculty members that work with graduate SVs. As noted by several participants, the
faculty involvement and guidance influenced the way SVs connected with and proceeded through their programs. These experiences would provide other faculty and programs with best practices to ensure SVs receive the type of connection and mentorship they sought while enrolled in their programs.

Third, a quantitative study should be considered to gain a better understanding of graduate SVs either graduated from or enrolled in CACREP-accredited programs. A quantitative study would provide a better understanding of SV enrollment and graduation in the field of mental health counseling. This study discovered during the literature review that research regarding empirical information of graduate SVs enrolled in counseling programs was challenging. A quantitative study would address that challenge and provide educators, professionals, and the counseling profession with vital information regarding the exact status of veterans entering or a part of the field of counseling.

Alternative studies could analyze graduate SV experiences using Schlossberg’s Transition Theory. Schlossberg’s Transition Theory offers another perspective that focuses on transition experiences to determine the types of transition, associated factors, and coping strategies to address change. This approach would provide educators and academic institutions with a detailed understanding of transition events and how those events influence graduate SV perceptions.

Lastly, future research should consider an examination of intrapersonal cultural disharmony. Intrapersonal cultural disharmony is the conflict and adjustment of competing culturally-specific identity characteristics. Participants noted they experienced a conflict and adjustment of cultural identity traits that increased their awareness of their differences with their peers. Future research would assist in identifying those experiences and possibly offer recommendations and considerations to assist these transitions. This research would also offer
educators and practitioners with increased options to support graduate SVs.

Conclusion

Research concerning student veterans enrolled in institutions of higher learning is widely available at the undergraduate level. However, there is limited research concerning SVs enrolled in graduate programs, which becomes non-existent in the field of counselor education. The literature review found in Chapter Two notes that SVs experience a wide range of challenges as they transition from their military profession to their academic programs. Those challenges include a lack of social connection, external responsibilities, and funding considerations. To explore these experiences, Chapter Three detailed the approach used to explore this phenomenon and give life to the experiences of graduate SVs. The participants described similar experiences but included the considerations of identity awareness and transition as well as the intentional focus of balancing life between intrapersonal and interpersonal factors as SVs persisted in their program.

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of graduate SVs enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. Several themes emerged that identified the essence of these participants as it relates to academic persistence. The intent of this study was to provide considerations and recommendations to practitioners and educators to bring awareness and support to graduate SVs and address the literature gap noted within the larger field of research and education.
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Appendix
Appendix A

Tinto’s 1975 Model

Pre-Entry/Separation Stage
- Family background
- Individual Attributes
- Pre-College Schooling

Goal Commitment

Transition Stage
- Academic Performance
- Academic Development
- Social Groups
- Social Interactions

Integration Stage
- Academic Integration
- Social Integration
- Institutional Commitment

Dropout Decision

Tintos’ 1975 Model
Appendix B

Tinto’s 1987 Model

Pre-Entry/Separation Stage
- Family background
- Individual Attributes
- Pre-College Schooling

Transition Stage
- Intentions
- Formal Academic
  - Academic Integration
- Informal Academic
- Institutional Commitment

Integration Stage
- Intentions
- Academic Integration
- Social Integration
- Institutional Commitment
- External Commitments

Dropout Decision

Tinto’s 1987 Model
Appendix C

Tinto’s 1993 Model

Pre-Entry/Separation Stage
- Family background
- Individual Attributes
- Pre-College Schooling

Transition Stage
- Intentions
- Formal Academic
- Informal Academic
- Formal Social
- Informal Social

Integration Stage
- Academic Integration
- Social Integration
- Intentions
- Goal Commitment
- Institutional Commitment

Dropout Decision

External Commitments
Tinto’s 1993 Model
Appendix D

Recruitment Email

Dear Counselor Educators and Counseling Students,

My name is Gerald Spangler and I am a doctoral candidate completing my dissertation in the Counselor Education program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Under the guidance of my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Melinda Gibbons, I am conducting a qualitative phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences of graduate student veterans enrolled in CACREP counseling programs. [will insert IRB approval once I have it]

I am seeking 10 to 12 student veteran volunteers that are willing to participate in an online interview to discuss entrance into and persistence in graduate-level counseling programs. I am interested in hearing your stories related to your graduate experience as a student veteran. Interviews will be conducted over Zoom and last 60-90 minutes in duration.

I am seeking student veteran volunteers who meet the following criteria: (a) Student veterans that are separated from the military with no service obligation remaining, and (b) student veterans currently enrolled in CACREP counseling programs (master’s or doctoral, any specialty). All participants will receive a $20 gift card.

Student veterans that volunteer to participate are asked to forward this email to fellow veterans that meet these conditions.

If you believe you qualify and are willing to consider participating, please contact me at gspangl1@vols.utk.edu for further information.

Thank you,

Gerald “Jerry” Spangler, MS, NCC
Doctoral Candidate, Counselor Education
Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling
University of Tennessee
Knoxville, Tennessee
gspangl1@vols.utk.edu
931-217-7679

Dr. Melinda Gibbons
Professor and PhD Program Coordinator
Counselor Education
Dissertation Chair
Appendix E

Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: The Lived Experiences of Graduate Student Veterans Enrolled in CACREP-Accredited Counseling Programs: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

Researcher(s): Gerald D. Spangler, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Dr. Melinda Gibbons, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this research study because you are a graduate student veteran enrolled in a CACREP-accredited counseling program.

What is this research study about?
The purpose of the research study is to explore the lived experiences of graduate student veterans enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs and factors that led to persistence. We want to know the story of how you selected to pursue a graduate degree in counseling and what impacted your persistence in your graduate program. We also want to know how being a graduate student veteran influenced your role as a graduate student.

How long will I be in the research study?
The total time of your participation will be less than two to two and half hours. The first hour to an hour and half will be dedicated to the interview. The second hour will be dedicated to reading the transcribed interview.

What will happen if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research study”?
If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to respond to the online demographics questionnaire and identify optimal times for contact.

- Even after consent, volunteers can withdraw at any time. Audio recordings and/or transcribed data will destroyed upon request.
- Following completion of the questionnaire, you will be contacted by the primary investigator within 48 hours.
- After initial contact, an informed consent form will be emailed to you for consideration and signature.
- A copy of the informed consent with your signature is required before the interview will begin.
- Once the signed copy is received, a date and time will be set to conduct a Zoom interview.
- At the completion of the interview, an electronic gift card will be emailed to each participant.
- Within 14 business days, a transcribed document will be sent to participants for review.
What happens if I say “No, I do not want to be in this research study”?  
Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won’t affect your grades, your relationship with your instructors, or standing with your university of enrollment.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?  
Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time. If you decide to stop before the study is completed, please contact the following people:
- Gerald Spangler, Primary Investigator, gspangl1@vols.utk.edu
- Dr. Melinda Gibbons, Dissertation Chair, mgibbon2@utk.edu
Dates and times will be required to remove analyzed data or pseudonyms-protected names.

Are there any possible risks to me?  
We believe the risk of being identified in this study is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form. It is possible that discussing your graduate student veteran experience may bring up negative feelings. If this occurs, I will provide referral information so you can speak to someone about these feelings.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?  
We do not expect you to benefit directly from being in this study, although describing your journey as a graduate student veteran may help you gain insight into your own experience. Your participation will help us to learn more about graduate student veterans enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs and factors that lead to persistence. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?  
We will protect the confidentiality of your information by providing pseudonyms and protecting audio recording devices.

If information from this study is published in counselor education journals or presented at a conference, your name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:
- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.
- Data co-coders.
- External auditors to provide unbiased perspectives on data collection and analysis procedures.
What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will not keep your information to use for future research. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from your research data collected as part of the study. We will not share your research data with other researchers. Your deidentified transcription will be kept in a password-protected online folder to which only the primary researchers have access. The transcription will be kept for up to five years and then permanently deleted.

Will I be paid for being in this research study?
Participants will receive a $20.00 electronic gift card by email following the interview. To facilitate payment, participants will be required to provide their full name and a functional email address. All participants, even those who do not complete the interview process, will receive the gift card.

What else do I need to know?
If we learn about any new information that may change your mind about being in the study, we will tell you. If that happens, you may be asked to sign a new consent form.

The University of Tennessee does not automatically pay for medical claims or give other compensation for injuries or other problems.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?
If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers:

Gerald “Jerry” Spangler, MS, NCC
Doctoral Candidate, Counselor Education
Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling
University of Tennessee
Knoxville, Tennessee
gspangl1@vols.utk.edu
931-217-7679

Dr. Melinda Gibbons
Professor and PhD Program Coordinator
Counselor Education
Dissertation Chair
mgibbon2@utk.edu
For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
1534 White Avenue  
Blount Hall, Room 408  
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529  
Phone: 865-974-7697  
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Adult Participant</th>
<th>Signature of Adult Participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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</table>

**Researcher Signature** (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the study to the participant and answered all of their questions. I believe that they understand the information described in this consent form and freely consents to be in the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Research Team Member</th>
<th>Signature of Research Team Member</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F

Demographics Survey

Please answer each question by highlighting or bolding your response. Return to me via email along with your signed informed consent.

1. Is your counseling program CACREP-accredited?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Pending
   d. Unsure

2. Are you separated from military with no remaining service obligation?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Other (please describe)

3. What is your military background?
   a. Army
   b. Marine Corp
   c. Navy
   d. Air Force
   e. Coast Guard

4. What type of counseling program are you enrolled in?
   a. School counseling
   b. Clinical mental health counseling
   c. Addiction counseling
   d. Career counseling
   e. Clinical rehabilitation counseling
   f. College counseling and student affairs
   g. Marriage, couple, and family counseling
   h. Doctoral program in counselor education
   i. Other (Please describe:)

5. What is your year in your graduate program?
   a. First year
   b. Second year
   c. Third year
   d. Fourth year

6. Prior to the pandemic, select the response that best describes your counseling program?
   a. Online or mostly online
   b. Face-to-face or mostly face-to-face
   c. Mixed online and face-to-face
7. What is your gender?
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Non-binary
   d. Other
   e. I would prefer to not answer

8. What is your ethnicity (select all that apply)?
   a. White (Non-Hispanic)
   b. African American
   c. Hispanic/Latino
   d. Asian
   e. Native American
   f. Pacific Islander
   g. Multiracial
   h. Other
   i. I would prefer not to answer

9. What is your age?
   a. 20-29
   b. 30-39
   c. 40-49
   d. 50-59
   e. 60-69
   f. 70+

10. What is the highest education level of the adult person #1 who raised you?
   a. Did not graduate high school
   b. High school graduate/GED
   c. Technical school (e.g., HVAC, skills diploma, cosmetology, CNA)
   d. Some college (two- or four-year) but no degree
   e. Two-year college degree (Associate’s)
   f. Four-year college degree (BA, BS)
   g. Beyond a four-year degree (e.g., master’s, doctorate)
   h. I don’t know the education level of the adult person #1 who raised me
   i. I did not have an adult person #1 who raised me
11. What is the highest education level of the adult person #2 who raised you?
   a. Did not graduate high school
   b. High school graduate/GED
   c. Technical school (e.g., HVAC, skills diploma, cosmetology, CNA)
   d. Some college (two- or four-year) but no degree
   e. Two-year college degree (Associate’s)
   f. Four-year college degree (BA, BS)
   g. Beyond a four-year degree (e.g., master’s, doctorate)
   h. I don’t know the education level of the adult person #2 who raised me
   i. I did not have an adult person #2 who raised me

12. Do you have children?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. I would prefer not to answer

13. Are you employed?
   a. Yes-Full time
   b. Yes-Part time
   c. No
   d. I would prefer not to answer

14. Are you using VA educational benefits provided by the military to attend college?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. I would prefer not to answer

15. Do you have veterans resources on your campus?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Unsure

16. Have you utilized the veterans resources on your campus?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Unsure
## Appendix G

### Participant Tracker

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<tr>
<th>Ptc #</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Returned Email</th>
<th>Informed Consent</th>
<th>Demo Form</th>
<th>Interview Date</th>
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Appendix H

Interview Protocol

1. Personal introduction
   a. Before we begin, I just wanted to remind you that I am recording this interview. This will ensure that details of your experiences are accurately reflected. Do you have any questions or concerns about being recorded?
   b. Good morning/afternoon/evening. Thank you for participating in my study. I am Jerry Spangler and I am a doctoral student completing my dissertation at the University of Tennessee. I would like to reiterate that your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time.
   c. This interview will be about 60-90 minutes in duration.
   d. Following our interview, this recording will be transcribed and a copy will be sent to you within one week. I will provide you with a two-week window to verify details of our conversation or determine continued participation. If you do not respond in those two weeks, I will assume you do not have any corrections or clarifications and still consent to be a participant in the study. I would like to reiterate that the details of this interview are confidential in nature and your identity and information protected at all times.
   e. Before we begin, do you have any questions or concerns?

2. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study will be to explore the lived experiences of graduate student veterans enrolled in a CACREP counseling program and factors that lead to persistence.

3. Research question: What are the lived experiences of graduate student veterans enrolled in a CACREP counseling program?

4. Interview Questions:
   a. Could you please describe your program experiences?
   b. What resources have you found useful during your program?
      • How did you find them? For instance, Veterans Resource Center or some service on campus.
   c. Could you describe some goals you wanted to achieve by entering a counseling program?
      • Academic goals
      • Career goals
   d. Could you please describe your relationships/connections?
      • Peers
      • Faculty
      • Institutional staff
e. External commitments are responsibilities outside of the academic program. Could you walk me through external commitments you might have experienced?

f. What are military skills you have used as a graduate student veteran?

g. As a student veteran, what are notable transition experiences that might have affected you?

h. How would you describe your military to student identity transition?

i. What are some notable cultural transitions you might have experienced?

5. Prompts
   a. Tell me more about that…
   b. Can you give me an example…
   c. You mentioned the word xx…can you tell me about that?

6. Before we conclude our interview, is there anything else that you would like to add to this discussion that I have not included in the interview?

7. I would like to thank you, again, for participating in my study. As stated earlier, I will send a transcribed copy of interview for you to review. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me through email.

8. Notes about participant discomfort: *If participant experiences discomfort during interview:
   Steps:
   a. Offer opportunity to stop interview or stop discussing a given topic
   b. If discomfort continues, offer information on seeking external help
      • Counseling services at their university
      Veteran helpline (include number) Veterans Crisis Line: 1-800-273-8255
Appendix I

Temi Confidentiality Agreement

Any and/or all recordings (video and/or audio) received from account holder Gerald Spangler, username – gspangl1@vols.utk.edu – will be kept confidential and not shared with others.

Requests for access to any recordings or transcriptions, submitted between March 1, 2020 and July 31, 2020, by outside or third-party vendors will not be granted under any circumstances.

Data will be protected to the standards established by Temi.com Transcription Service. Any breach of data will be immediately reported to the account holder.

Data will not be duplicated or saved beyond July 31st, 2020. Transcribed data will be deleted from the servers on August 1st, 2020.

Printed Name

Signed Name

Date
Appendix J

Thematic Relationships
Gerald Spangler is a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education program enrolled at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. He retired from the United States Army in 2013 and pursued his goals of becoming a counselor. He graduated from the Lipscomb University Clinical Mental Health Counseling program in December 2016. He was accepted to the Counselor Education program at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. His interests include creative arts, play, and garden therapy. He is married to Donna Spangler and enjoys spending time with their four fur kids. He is expected to graduate in the Fall of 2020 and is currently employed as a prison counselor.