

# Impact of a Cohort Model on the American Veteran Transition to College

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## Abstract

Veteran student populations are on the rise across the U.S. due to benefits from the revised Post 9/11 Government Issue (G.I.) Bill that guarantees financial assistance for housing and education for exiting service members. Institutions seeking integration practices for this student population may fail to acknowledge the multiple identities that veterans bring to the campus community and, thus, do not provide proper social support for this unique student population. The purpose of this case study was to examine how one veteran student cohort program provides support for veterans transitioning to their new student identity, and with retention and degree completion at one large California State University. This instrumental case study was conducted utilizing one-on-one in-depth interviews and archived document review to examine how effective the Veteran Education Program assists veteran students at Fresno State. The findings of this research show how students that partake in a veteran cohort program transition better into the broader campus community. As veterans begin transition into a new college student identity, pre-existing identities compete in the reprioritizing process.

**Keywords:** higher education, veteran students, transitioning veterans, cohort programs, veteran identities

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Challenges for American Veterans in Higher Education

One's identity is shaped by held roles, group associations, and self-perceptions within a social context (Stryker, 2002; Burke & Stets, 2009). American veterans (veterans) have a unique identity shifting from military experience to civilian life (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs [USVA], 2018b). Transitioning from one identity or role to the next may be complicated if an individual is not receiving support throughout their transition process (Zakaria, 2014). In addition, if an individual has multiple competing identities, it may be a struggle to fluidly move from one identity to another (Haley, McAmble, & Graham, 2018). Thus veterans transitioning to their college student identity can be further complicated (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Competing identities for veteran college students include but are not limited to socioeconomic status, first-generation college student, gender, race, sexual orientation, a veteran, and ethnicity (Campbell & Riggs, 2015; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Ford & Vignare, 2015; Green & Van Dusen, 2012; Kim & Cole, 2013; Wuster, Rinaldi, Woods, & Lu, 2013). As one continues through life changes, as with veteran college students, identities are prioritized or abandoned to begin coping with the transition process (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

Schlossberg's Transition Theory was used to guide this study. Schlossberg (1984) suggested that transitions consist of three categories: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-event. Identifying the impact of the transition is most important when assisting individuals and their transition (Schlossberg, 1984). The impact is precisely how the transition alters an individual's life (Evans et al., 1998). Schlossberg (1984) identified four factors that need to be understood and met in an individual's transition coping process: situation, social support, self, and strategy. The researchers used the four factors to explore how the student veteran population at Fresno State started, worked through, and completed their transition coping process. This study used Schlossberg's theory to examine how Fresno State and the Veterans' Education Program (VEP) assisted veterans in their transition process of becoming a student at Fresno State. All courses mentioned are explicitly reserved for the veterans in the program, and they take the courses as a cohort before matriculating to Fresno State.

Veterans experience barriers related to other competing non-traditional college-going identities, such as someone with disabilities, older aged, suffering from post-traumatic symptoms, and first-generation student (Campbell & Riggs, 2015; DiRamio et al., 2008; Ford & Vignare, 2015). Therefore, institutions need to assist the veteran population during their transition process to successfully move from their veteran to student identity (Green & Van Dusen, 2012). Beyond a sense of belonging, this involves helping veterans understand how their educational benefits work and what support they are receiving (Mentzer, Black, & Spohn, 2015).

Although the transitions may be difficult, creating a social support environment for veterans can help them better assimilate to their new student identity (Elliot, Gonzalez, & Lars, 2011; Mentzer et al., 2015). Student veterans tend to feel alienated from their campus when they do not receive social support from peers upon their exit from the military. According to Elliot et al. (2011), veterans who have social support communities outside of the classroom at institutions experienced lower rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), leading to a better transition process for all student veterans. This type of social support is built by having veterans take a block of classes together and having courses taught by faculty trained to specifically teach student veterans (Elliot et al., 2011). The transition from military to higher education comes with obstacles such as adapting to their new identities and environments while completing their education, and most may also be working full-time to support their spouse and dependents (DiRamio et al., 2008). Without having a proper support system or community with peers alike, retention and degree completion for student veterans may be at risk (Mentzer et al., 2015). Therefore, universities should create a veteran, student-friendly campus with which this population can develop a sense of belonging and receive the support necessary for success (Green & Van Dusen, 2012).

### *1.2 Understanding Veteran Educational Benefits in the U.S. Context*

Since the beginning of America, benefits have been administered to military veterans. The first benefit provided was in 1636 to disabled veterans from the English North American colonies. Benefits included pensions and financial support to those disabled in the colonies' defense against Indians (VA History in Brief, 2005). However, these benefits were only available to those that served in the North American armed forces; confederate soldiers did not receive any federal veteran benefits until 1958, when congress pardoned them (VA History in Brief, 2005). The first version of educational benefits that veterans could receive was established with The Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1918 (USVA, 2018b; VA History in Brief, 2005).

While many revisions have occurred since 1918, the final revision to the G.I. Bill comes from the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill in 2009, which ensured that all veterans had the opportunity to receive educational benefits that paid for tuition and fees, book and supply stipend, and provided a monthly housing allowance (USVA, 2018a). This benefit had a deadline of 15 years to use all elements of this G.I. Bill. In 2018, the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act (Forever G.I. Bill) was implemented, where it eliminated the 15-year time limit for veterans to use their educational benefits.

Each revision to the G.I. Bill does not ensure that an institution is responsible for veteran success once the transition to the new student identity commences. As each revision changes educational benefits to veteran students, confusion about how to use and what is included with benefits may arise. The financial assistance for veterans to begin their life as a civilian and a student creates a solid foundation, but institutions are not held accountable to ensure that veterans using their benefits are better transitioned to the campus community and graduate within their 36-month educational benefit time frame (Hill, Kurzweil, Pisacreta, & Schwartz, 2019; Jenner, 2017).

This qualitative case study aimed to explore how one university cohort program may impact a veteran's transition to a new identity as a student in higher education. A qualitative case study was chosen to make sense of how an institution provides a program or service to this student population as they begin their transition process to a successful outcome as a college graduate.

### *1.3 Expected Outcomes and Research Questions*

This instrumental case study research has the potential to benefit the student veteran population as the research findings reports how one program supports the intent of a successful transition process for veterans from higher education to graduation. If the data shows that student veterans have a more successful transition experience through this case example, institutions may begin to consider how elements of this case might best fit their student veteran population and university context. It is also understood, as a limitation of case study research, that findings are not generalizable beyond the context of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). However, this study's implication can help other Institutions consider how a similar cohort system might work best for their campuses to increase support for veteran students.

A qualitative instrumental case study method was selected to examine the success of one veteran cohort program at California State University, Fresno (Fresno State) and uncover how the program assists veterans with their identity transition to and integration on campus. An instrumental case study focuses on a detailed study of one or more cases within a bounded system to understand a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). The research used a case study to understand the individual parts and relationships around the program and how well the program sets up veteran students for success in college. It was expected that veterans who participated in the Fresno State cohort program perceived an easier transition to college and integration in the campus community with increased success versus those veteran students who did not participate in the program. As such, the following research questions guided this qualitative instrumental case study:

1. How does the Fresno State Veterans Cohort Program help veterans transition into their new identity as a student?
2. How does the Fresno State Veterans Cohort Program assist the veteran population regarding integration, retention, and degree completion?

## 2. Method

The case study research took place at Fresno State, located in an urban area within the overall rural serving Central Valley of California. *Fresno State* is a public, four-year institution that serves over 25,000 students annually, with an annual average total number of 325 veteran students (Carnegie Classification, 2017; Fresno State News, 2019). In addition, Fresno State is designated a Minority Serving Institution (MSI), a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), as well as an Asian American- and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI; Carnegie Classification, 2017).

The four factors in the Schlossberg Transition Theory (1984) were used to examine how the veteran student population at Fresno State began and completed their transition coping process since enrolling. The research goal was to understand how the cohort program experience, designed to assist veterans during their transition process, supported student veterans compared to those student veterans not involved in the program. The interview questions focused on what type of support veteran students sought, what type of social support they are a part of, and how they felt as part of the campus community. The research was university-approved with minimal risk through the Committee on the Protection of Human Subjects process. All participants were over the age of 18, and the content of the study related solely to veteran student educational experiences with confidentiality maintained.

### 2.1 Fresno State Cohort Program Context – The Veterans Education Program

The Veterans Education Program (VEP) was created in 2012 to provide opportunities and create access to resources at Fresno State. The VEP is housed within the Veterans Resource Center (VRC), which is designed to offer services and resources to veterans transitioning from the military to student life (Fresno State News, 2019). Veterans use the VRC to study or connect with similar peers on a campus that serves over 24,000 non-veteran students. Those using G.I. education benefits can get course advising and have their classes at the VRC. In addition, the office has a website for current or potential veterans to use as a guide on how to use their benefits, get military credit at Fresno State, and find essential forms all veterans need to be a student under the G.I. Bill.

The goal of VEP is to connect veterans to support organizations at Fresno State and in the Central Valley (Division of Continuing and Global Education [CGE], 2019). Additionally, the program aims to create a sense of belonging for veterans at Fresno State by providing a lounge and study area for current and past cohorts to meet up, study, and work as a volunteer in the office. Finally, VEP also works to build and maintain the academic skill sets required for veterans to succeed as a student and in their future careers (CGE, 2019).

### 2.2 Participant Characteristics

There were six veteran student participants (3 Male, 3 Female) for this study: three veteran students who participated in the VEP cohort program at Fresno State and three who did not. Each participant was a veteran who served on active duty or was currently on reserves using the G.I. Bill for educational benefits. Additionally, each participating veteran had multiple identities that included being married, a parent, a part of other on-campus organizations, and a first-generation student. All participants were from different military branches, and all exited or were on the reserves at different ranks in their respective branches.

### 2.3 Sampling Procedures

Participants were selected by purposeful snowball sampling (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017) by asking the VEP first to allow the researchers to connect to veterans who had graduated from the program for voluntary participation. The same

was done through the Veterans Resource Center (VRC) at Fresno State. Furthermore, each interview participant was asked to provide other veteran student contacts with the researchers' contact information if interested in volunteering to be part of the study.

### 2.3.1 Demographic Survey

A demographic survey was used as an instrument in this research study to gain more insight and strengthen credibility. Surveys were filled out by the researcher before each interview with participants and identified: the branch of the military they served in, rank, race, age, gender, marital status, dependents, and campus involvement. Providing this information assisted the researchers in gaining knowledge on the competing identities veteran students hold as they begin their transition to higher education.

### 2.4 Interviews

One-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews in person and through Zoom were used to understand better veteran students' experiences and feelings about their transition process and if VEP is accomplishing the goal of easing that process (Lochmiller & Lester 2017). Each interview began with a brief overview of the research study and informed consent stated with participant volunteer signed agreement obtained before commencing. Participants interviewed through Zoom were provided the consent form digitally for virtual signatures.

The study utilized a semi-structured interview process with 8-10 guided topic questions and with additional time for follow-up questions when needed. A semi-structured interview approach allowed for a conversation feel with research participants, and the inclusion of two general questions prior to asking the guided research topic questions aided in building rapport and trust (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).

The participants were asked research questions around three main topics:

- the transition to higher education experience;
- assistance in the transition to a new student identity; and,
- perceptions on how a program or service aided in persistence through college.

After each interview, all identifying factors (i.e., names, nicknames, and titles) were revised to participant labels to ensure confidentiality.

#### 2.4.1 Interview Data Collection

All interviews were recorded digitally. Transcribe was used as the application in the transcription process for all recorded interview data. Transcripts and recordings were stored on university-supported, dually authenticated password-protected cloud storage through the duration of the study and deleted upon its conclusion.

Field notes were also taken throughout the interview for data collection to guide the transcript review (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). These field notes allowed for main ideas and themes to be written down in real-time, strengthening the analytic process.

### 2.6 Data Analyses

Regarding the interview transcripts and collected demographic information, all identifiers were listed by the corresponding label (ex. Participant 1) along with interview dates, time, and interview length. The transcription was completed as a gist style, while memos were created throughout the process to keep ideas and comments intact while analyzing the data set (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Once categories were identified through the initial coding process, the findings were considered in relation to veteran students' feelings regarding the transition process with or without support from the VEP.

#### 2.6.1 Validity and Reflexivity

To ensure the study analysis remained transparent, the researchers continuously reflected on their identities and biases regarding this study and the student population (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Both researchers had many connections to the institution the case study took place. The student researcher was an alumnus of Fresno State, enrolled as a graduate student at the institution during the study, and has a parent who worked at the institution for more than 25 years. The student researcher also has Marine Corps Veteran partner using the educational benefits of the G.I. Bill at the time of the study. The faculty researcher, an alumnus of Fresno State, was also employed with the university for less than ten years at the time of the study. She follows a student-centered approach to teaching and learning and remains an advocate for student support and services. Her grandfather was a Marine veteran, and her other extended family had served in the Navy, Army, and National Guard.

Fresno State was purposefully selected due to the VEP and how it was being used to aid veterans' transition into higher education. At the time of this study, Fresno State was the only large public university in the Western U.S. with a program created specifically to serve this minority population. The researchers acknowledge that these identities may create subconscious assumptions, and to establish credibility by mitigating cognitive drift and bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), colleagues and mentors were invited to read and give feedback on the research and writing.

### 3. Results

Using the Schlossberg Transition Theory (1984), this qualitative study focused on the veteran student transition into higher education, specifically, the veteran transition at Fresno State and whether they were a part of an educational program supporting the veteran transition into a new student identity. Each participating veteran (N=6; 3 Male, 3 Female) had multiple identities: single, married, parent, part of other on-campus organizations, and first-generation student. In addition, all participants were from different military branches, and all exited or were on the reserves at different ranks in their respective branches. After conducting in-depth interviews with six veterans, three non-VEP, and three participating in VEP, themes emerged from each respective group and across both groups' experiences.

#### 3.1 Non-VEP Student Demographics and Themes

Three non-VEP veteran students participated in the interviews, one male and two females. Participant 1, a current student, identified as a non-married male who served in the Army. He was over the age of 25 with no children and had been involved in multiple student career-focused organizations on campus. Participant 2, a current student, identified as a married female who served in the Marine Corps. She was over the age of 25, a mother of one, and was only involved in the Student Veteran Organization (SVO) at Fresno State. Participant 3, a current student, identified as a non-married female on the reserves in the Army National Guard. She was over the age of 19 and not involved in any student campus organization. The following are emergent themes from this group of veteran student responses.

##### 3.1.1 Challenging Process to Become a College Student

Two of the three non-VEP participants stated that their process of becoming a student was challenging. Participant 1, a male veteran student, mentioned how he did not understand how the enrollment process worked and "never bothered to learn while serving" because they thought they were "just going to go into the military and retire in it and not have to ever go to college." Participant 2, a female veteran student, expressed how "it was scary to think about enrolling in college" because they were "going to be in classes with others a lot younger...I felt far behind and I was only 23." On the other hand, Participant 3, a female, drew upon her previous high school experience, which eased the college transition. She noted that because she was in "dual enrollment while in high school with a community college," she could "handle the workload and environment that comes with higher education" and understood what was expected at that level of education.

##### 3.1.2 Difficult Enrollment Processes, Policies, and Procedures

All three non-VEP participants discussed how it was difficult and confusing to enroll or pause their admissions in college due to the lack of knowledge regarding the respective process. For example, there are currently two GI Bill educational benefits that veteran students may be using as they begin their educational journey, and both provide financial assistance differently. Furthermore, the additional layer of university policy and procedures only added to the frustration. For example, Participant 3 noted, "the most difficult part for me was when I had to pause my schooling for training or had to leave on an assignment." She explained that the institution did not believe she had "training or special orders to leave mid-semester due to being in the reserves" and that it took her "quite a while to get clearance to leave for a period of time." Participant 3 also discussed how she wanted to make sure that she could pick up her coursework once she returned without any enrollment issues. The policies and procedures were an added difficulty to maneuver while also preparing to leave for her military reserve training and assignments.

Despite the complicated processes and policy navigation, Participants 1 and 2 mentioned that due to helpful staff and administrators at Fresno State and local community colleges, both experienced a better enrollment process. For example, Participant 2 shared, "I started at City College, and that was simpler. They were very helpful and were willing to help me online or over the phone, which was incredibly helpful considering I was in [another state across the country] at the time."

##### 3.1.3 Need for Mental and Social Support During Transition to Higher Education

One female and one male participant discussed how their transition period of becoming a student was "tough" and "anxiety-filled." Participant 1 expressed that "even though I was done with the military, the military was not done with me." Both said they experienced depression when their transition began because they "felt detached" or "unable to

bond and connect with their classmates" due to their age and maturity differences. Even though the participants were back home, they found it difficult to relax and felt out of place when they moved back home because they were also mourning the military family they had left. Participant 2 noted, "It wasn't that I didn't know how to do any class assignments, but it was more about connecting to the classroom and connecting myself to the community."

An effective way both participants said they sought support while enrolled at Fresno State was to find other veterans. Participant 2 stated, "I went to the VRC and that was helpful because it brought back the community, and that's a big part of being to the military." Creating a social support environment for veterans can help them better assimilate or transition to their new student identity (Elliot et al., 2011). Providing a space for veterans to create and connect with other veterans is helpful to this student population because it gives them a place to interact with peers alike and have a community they may not have had without it. Due to these participants not being a part of a program like VEP designed to build a community in itself, they used the space provided at Fresno State to create one on their own and receive the moral and social support they were seeking during their transition process.

### 3.2 VEP Student Demographics and Themes

Those interviewed as VEP participants consisted of three veterans, two males who graduated from the program and one female currently in the program. Participant 4, who graduated from VEP, was a married father over the age of 35 that was a part of the Coast Guard. He was currently involved in multiple on-campus organizations, both affiliated and not affiliated with veteran issues or topics. Participant 5, who graduated from VEP, was a single male over 25, without children, and had served in the Army. Participant 6, a current VEP student, was a single female without children and over 20 who had served in the Navy. The following are emergent themes from this group of veteran student responses.

#### 3.2.1 Creating a Community Before Matriculating

Two participants expressed that VEP was a big part of their success as Fresno State students. Taking introduction courses with other veterans who may be their age or have similar military experiences built a space for veterans to relate to each other as they learned in the higher education setting. "...[being with] other veterans that are currently going through the same thing. We're both learning but we're also assisting each other and navigating academically." The interviews uncovered that the program provides a time, location, and space for veterans to build or find the same camaraderie that they experienced in the military, which ultimately became great assistance in the transition process for these participants in VEP. Participant 6 said that at community college (before VEP), they were the oldest person in the classroom.

Once they joined VEP, they had "peers that were the same maturity level or age and were able to connect to the classroom and classmates better" because they were with other veterans. Participant 4 mentioned how administrators connected to the VEP community are also very helpful in their transition at Fresno State. "I was having a hard time, and they walked me over [to the Student Health and Counseling Center] to receive counseling and [the administrator] found a way to pay for [the counseling] 'cause we weren't particularly students yet." As told by Participant 5, those who work with the veteran students in VEP always found a way to help these veterans receive the assistance they need before becoming official Fresno State students, no matter the cost.

#### 3.2.2 Barriers When Not a Fresno State Student

Veterans who are a part of VEP are not considered Fresno State students. VEP participants are given temporary student identification numbers and identification cards but cannot access the same resources others on campus have. One administrator had to find a way to pay for a VEP participant to receive counseling from the Student Health and Counseling Center, which is otherwise free for all full or part-time Fresno State students. Participant 6 expressed how disappointed she was with one student affairs department on campus.

I did seek [help from] the career counselors in the [redacted] Center, and they told me because I wasn't an official student, that they couldn't help me. [They] just sent me to the Veteran Resource Center, who told me to go to [redacted] Center in the first place.

Though VEP students receive their foundational courses at no cost, Fresno State programs and services are outside the scope of this pre-enrollment identification; thus, these participants lacked a sense of belonging to the larger campus community in their early transitional stages. After these experiences, Participant 5 noted, "A lot of us [currently] in the program really don't know if we want to stay and transition into Fresno State or just work."

### 3.3 Combined Themes

Though both groups of veteran students have different transition experiences at Fresno State, they shared common experiences as veterans on campus. From facing challenges with faculty on campus to finding the social support they

sought in their transition from the VRC, the following themes emerged regardless of their affiliation to VEP.

### 3.3.1 Better Training for Faculty, Staff, and Administrators

Each participant expressed how the staff, faculty, and administrators on campus lacked the proper training and knowledge for working with veterans and veteran students. Veteran knowledge includes understanding specific topics or issues that trigger traumatic responses for this student population or allowing test or class accommodations to veterans who may have physical or mental disabilities due to their military service. By way of example, Participant 5 said,

One thing I noticed about Fresno State is that they have rape prevention trainings and suicide prevention stuff, that I am appreciative of, but don't have training towards veterans like helping veterans. There isn't anything like being cautious [of certain topics], to be cautious of talking about suicide within the classes, that is something that can trigger a veteran.

The Veteran Resource Center does provide training for staff, faculty, and administrators, but Participant 4 mentioned that the training has low campus community attendance. Veteran students are asked to be part of a panel to discuss their own experiences on what it is like to be a veteran on campus and what they need to succeed. Participants mentioned that they want to feel comfortable in class and not have professors assume they are not paying attention due to having to step outside because of sensitive topics or reset their focus.

Another area that may be overlooked is counseling services. These staff should be trained to work with the types of issues and topics that veterans have. Participant 1 said,

I saw the [Veterans Affairs (VA)] Hospital as a support, but I felt like I didn't get exactly what I wanted from the VA to help me to transition into college. Then I went to the [university] health center... and I felt like they weren't really equipped and prepared to help veterans.

This participant expressed that the VA Hospital had counselors and therapists that focused on suicidal prevention and how to deal with civilian life rather than how to become a student. He mentioned how he was seeking a type of counselor to help him get through the transition of becoming a college student because they never thought they would be in the position of starting classes at a university.

Lastly, participants also noted that faculty and staff needed a better understanding of the veteran assets to the traditional classroom, mainly because they tend to be older and have many more life experiences than the typical 18- or 19-year-old college student. Participant 2 described,

I felt like every professor that taught in the day or during work hours are used to having students that are 18 or 19 years of age and haven't been out of home, just out of high school. It really made me feel like they were diminishing my adulthood.

This participant expressed that she worked a job with flexible hours and, in turn, was able to take courses that were during the typical work hours when the traditional student population was also taking those courses. However, when in those classes, she wanted her professors to acknowledge and accept that there were older students in the class, who may also be parents, married, veterans, and have families with both international and demanding life experiences from their military backgrounds.

### 3.3.2 Veterans are Used to a Structure

Most participants in this study said they did not have trouble transitioning to becoming a student; instead, the transition to becoming a civilian was foundational to obstacles they may have faced transitioning to school. Each participant mentioned how the structure they learned and lived with from being in the military was an asset for navigating college courses, assignments, and any other responsibilities they held while at Fresno State. Being given multiple tasks or assignments at a time and doing them by the respective due dates is a structure that these students are already familiar with as a function demanded of them while in the military (Naphan & Elliot, 2015). Participant 5 noted,

Once you start keeping yourself preoccupied and busy, and that's what school is, it was very easy for me because I am able to adapt to the environment of needing to understand and pay attention and concentrate.

This participant expressed how he gained all the necessary skills to succeed as a student at Fresno State from being in the military.

Participant 2 said, "[any obstacles] were personal obstacles, like being detached. I didn't know who to talk to or did I want to talk to anyone. My biggest obstacle was getting used to people." This participant discussed how the course work and course load was manageable, and any issues that had to do with their transition process at Fresno State had to

do with not wanting to engage with the campus community. They could balance the multiple identities of being a student, parent, spouse, and all of the tasks that came from those identities. Having learned a life structure from the military experience was central to each participant's ability to successfully navigate the responsibilities required of them in their new identity as college students.

### 3.3.3 Finding Support from Veteran Services

The most significant theme discussed across all participants was how much veteran-focused programs and services, VEP and otherwise, helped them during their transition and time at Fresno State. Participant 2 said,

giving vets a space is needed. We are all looking for a community, so offering us a space to be at home is very inviting on campus. It makes me feel like Fresno State cares...the VRC is a great community where the coordinators try to meet and get to know every vet that comes in. They treat them like family.

Participant 5 noted, "I went to the VRC and that was helpful because it brought back the community, and that's a big part of being to the military." Participants discussed how they kept pursuing their educational goals due to the VRC and VEP being critical supports during stressful times transitioning back to civilian life while attending Fresno State and finding the support they needed to continue with courses was vital. Participant 6 said, "the VRC invites VEP students to do a lot of programs, I always get invited to a women's luncheon and other ceremonies or gatherings." Participant 2 shared that,

The bridge the VRC built with VEP, and those students in the program is great because it creates connections with potential Fresno State students that may not feel like they have a space within the larger campus community.

The interviews uncovered that the VRC continuously provides support, guidance, and assistance for all veterans on campus, regardless of their student status.

I definitely feel a part of a community on campus, the veteran community. I know all those guys and girls in the veteran's office. We all know [a specific VRC Coordinator] really well and they all are helpful and are willing to lend a hand at any time you need it.

Providing a space to find and build a community on campus can help maintain and improve this student population's retention and graduation rates.

## 4. Discussion

All participants expressed how and what contributed to obstacles during the civilian and student transition to Fresno State. Additionally, the veteran students' assets are attributed to their military experience. Whether it was the policies and procedures that were put in place by the institution or how the campus differentiates who receives assistance from services, the findings from this study showed that veteran students who participated in a cohort program specifically designed to matriculate them into the larger campus community, had a more supported experience than those who did not. Furthermore, all came with the challenge of civilian transition, yet they discovered they possessed student-ready skills from military structures that greatly aided the college experience. The following is a discussion of how the research questions were answered for this study.

### 4.1 RQ1 - How does VEP at Fresno State Help Veterans Transition into Their New Identity as a Student?

Students who participated in VEP showed that because of the cohort program, they were able to gain the social and mental support they were seeking at an earlier stage in their transition process compared to the non-VEP students' experiences. Creating a socially supportive environment for veterans can help them better assimilate into their new student identity (Elliot et al., 2011). Those in VEP expressed that they felt a sense of belonging with other veterans in the classroom because everyone had the same life experiences and was roughly around the same age group. The program also assisted veteran students with four general education courses that would later help them enroll in Fresno State while also providing a transition course that is typically recommended for the traditional first-year student but tailored to the veteran population. Participants expressed that they were set up for success at Fresno State because VEP provided a time and location to meet with other veterans, which aided in mitigating barriers before joining the larger campus community.

In contrast to the non-VEP students, those who participated in VEP seemed to have minimal issues enrolling in Fresno State and gave much praise to every professional working with VEP. In addition, the VEP associated faculty, staff, and administrators cared for the veteran students long before official Fresno State enrollment. Lastly, veterans are dealing with their transition process from one identity to the next, and they may be struggling with trying to understand what their G.I. Bill educational benefits entail (Bennett, 2014). In contrast to the comments regarding the VEP student experience, non-VEP students struggled with understanding policy and processes related to benefits for education and



other available support. Results suggest that the VEP mitigated barriers related to G.I. benefits through the cohort network and resources geared towards the American veteran needs, including educational policy and procedure.

#### *4.2 RQ2 – How can a Fresno State Veterans Cohort Program Assist the Veteran Population Regarding Integration, Retention, and Degree Completion?*

Despite the pathway to college enrollment, this study highlighted that veterans seek out other veterans for a sense of belonging and support. Creating a cohort, such as VEP, can accelerate this community-building process for new veteran students providing them a network in a smaller environment to facilitate the transition process before joining the larger campus community. Additionally, supporting and accommodating the veteran population early on in their student experience through a collaborative familial style, such as a cohort, can provide the social, strategy, self, and situational support to positively impact their integration, retention, and, ultimately, their degree completion (Cambric-Gumbs, 2018). Furthermore, as this study suggests, a cohort can provide an immediate connection to those who have similar military life experiences – much like the military family left behind – which was an asset brought up by each participant that mitigated transitional challenges.

#### *4.3 Recommendations to the Field*

Support for veteran students at Fresno State progresses as more students move through the VEP program or VRC office. While individual support for veterans may vary, providing a space for veterans to seek assistance and services was helpful throughout the veterans' time at Fresno State, even beyond the initial transition period. Beyond the support, however, creating a professional development seminar for faculty, staff, and administrators regarding the veteran student experience and standard accommodations can prepare the larger campus community for working more effectively with this student population. Though the resources created explicitly served the transitioning veteran student community, once the veteran students shifted into the general population, they found support and understanding for their conditions and experiences lacking, which created barriers to success. The barrier was most challenging for veteran students when interacting with student enrollment offices and staff regarding benefits and policies related to veteran student status.

##### *4.3.1 Accommodating the Veteran Enrollment Process*

Institutions need to be more open to the unique challenges of veteran students, particularly within student enrollment. These offices need to consider how to support the enrollment process in non-traditional ways, such as in virtual spaces like Zoom, to accommodate veterans transitioning from international spaces. Also, developing a more straightforward enrollment process along with a deep knowledge of the G.I. Bill policies and procedures will significantly assist the veteran population seeking to attend the institution while also navigating the challenges that inherently arise from the parallel civilian transition process (Bennett, 2014; Elliot et al., 2011).

##### *4.3.2 Understanding and Supporting the Veteran Student Experiences*

Veteran students are aware that typical first-year classmates will not understand the veteran experience; thus, having staff, faculty, and administration know what this student population needs and how to accommodate it would mitigate potential barriers to success. For veteran students, higher education faculty and student affairs professionals need training on the veteran student experiences, potential challenges for this population, and G.I. Bill policies for ease of enrollment. Providing this type of professional development can bring the campus faculty, staff, and administrators alongside the veteran community and provide a space for them to feel that the institution and the staff care about them both as students and individuals who served the country. Furthermore, this deep knowledge can create smoother processes when coursework must be halted for official orders or military training is suddenly required of the veteran students as part of their civilian transition or the military reserves.

#### *4.4 Further Research*

Despite the growing research on the veteran student population, there is more than can be understood. This study highlighted the experiences of veteran students within and outside of one specific program at Fresno State designed to matriculate veterans into the larger campus who did not initially qualify to attend the institutions. Future research should explore how a major-focused program focused on veterans can also assist veteran student persistence. Additionally, future research should seek to understand the best supports for the transition to higher education, specifically for female veterans and veterans with disabilities. Understanding the many aspects of the veteran student transition, persistence, and experiences in the higher education setting can not only help others understand what this specific population needs for eventual success with a college degree.

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