STUDENT VETERANS WITH SYMPTOMS OF POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS:
THEIR HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

by

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A DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

As the Global War on Terror began and developed from 2001 to present, there has been a continued persistence of multiple deployments for many service members, which has eventually led to greater cohorts of service members leaving the military, and a continued increase of veterans enrolling in colleges and universities to use their military related education benefits. There has also been a shift in the perception of student veterans related to mental health; one of the greatest predictors of posttraumatic stress disorder in service members is exposure to combat. Within the state of Alabama, we are also now seeing the effects of combat among veterans who have transitioned to student life and the unique needs and characteristics of this population.

Through a descriptive qualitative study, this research examined the experience of student veterans who have been diagnosed with, or self-identify as having symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, while attending the University of Alabama. The overall findings of the study provided insight into better understanding the student veterans’ experience at the University of Alabama and were greatly consistent with findings from previous studies focused on student veterans. Two aspects of the findings of this study that sets apart this research is the focus on posttraumatic stress symptoms and the overall influence of a global pandemic across higher education; from these findings, five themes were derived.

From the findings, recommendations for future research and implications for practice were identified to include professional development and sensitivity training for faculty and staff; create targeted new student orientations for student veterans; focus counseling center efforts on
veteran needs; and provide formal campus opportunities for student veterans to engage with other students outside of the classroom in a social setting.

Due to the pandemic many students were shifted to a method of course and program delivery that was outside of their preference and campus activities and meeting spaces were either slowed dramatically or restricted all together. It would be beneficial to conduct research on campus, in person, and have the opportunity to be immersed in the student veteran culture and environment.
DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to the many service men and women who have selflessly served and fought for our nation. To those who have returned with injuries, both visible and invisible, thank you for your sacrifice. For those who have returned home and continue to fight a war within, know that you are supported. If this study can have just the slightest influence in creating a better and more supported student experience, it has all been worth it. This study is dedicated to you, the student veteran; the warrior; the person who battles posttraumatic stress – you are seen, and you are heard.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

How do I wrap up a journey and turn the page in a chapter of my life that has been full of so many experiences, changes, challenges, and exploration? First and foremost, I give my utmost thanks to my wonderful and loving husband. As a veteran, a Marine, and an Army pilot, he has inspired me and continues to amaze me through his level of dedication and perseverance in the face of uncertainty. He has supported and pushed me every step of the way to ensure that I fulfilled my dream of becoming Dr. Gina Thayer. There will never be enough words to express my gratitude, love, and appreciation for all that he has done to make sure that I have all I needed to be successful in these endeavors. He is my rock, and I could not ask for anyone better to live this life with. Thank you, my love.

To God be the glory – there have been many prayerful nights, mornings, and weekends, and I know God continued to help me find my persistence in completing this study. Thank you to my family for your support and love during this long journey. Sadly, we lost my mother in 2020, and then my father in the summer of 2021; however, I know they are looking down on me and are so very proud. Mom and Dad helped me develop into the woman I am today, and they instilled within me the desire to always be more than I am. Thank you Mom and Dad for always believing in me.

Finally, thank you to my friends and colleagues in Cohort XI, as well as, many thanks to my supportive chair, Dr. Nathaniel Bray and my entire committee; Dr. David Albright, Dr. Arleene Breaux, Dr. Karri Holley, and Dr. Claire Major. I appreciate your insight, expertise, and guidance during this long process!
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Tuesday that changed many American lives forever, and took many American lives, was September 11, 2001. Many citizens within the United States can remember exactly where they were and what they were doing on that early morning of 9/11, just as many previous generations remember the details of their day on such significant days like the assassination of John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963; the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968; and the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion on January 28, 1986. Like each of these traumatic events in our nation’s history, the horrific attacks of September 11, 2001, have been added to the list of unforgettable and life altering events that have shaped our country’s culture and history.

It has been approximately 18 years since the Global War on Terror (GWOT) began. In 2001, the United States engaged in battle against terrorist groups in the Middle East following the attacks on the World Trade Center Twin Towers in New York City, the Pentagon building in Washington, D.C., and plane crash in a field in Shanksville, PA; all attacks were the result of airplane hijackings by Islamic extremists from the terrorist group Al-Qaeda. Many Americans do not realize that this war has not been isolated to the countries of Iraq and Afghanistan but has been comprised of combat in other countries including the Philippines and countries across Africa. Since the beginning of the GWOT, there have been over 2.7 million service members deployed to the countries involved in the GWOT and many of those service members have served in multiple deployments.
(Hautzinger et al., 2015). The Global War on Terror has been described as a very different war from wars past and has set the tone for difficult readjustments back to civilian life for many (Phelps, 2015). Part of the readjustment back to civilian life includes the transition from combat living conditions to the unfamiliar comforts of home as well as the transition to retirement or separation from the military to civilian life. With the transition to civilian life comes the opportunity to apply their veteran education benefits to pursue or continue higher education. Although veterans and service members are no stranger to higher education, this cohort of combat veterans pursing higher education has been part of an ongoing active combat military, which has not been seen in recent history.

Approximated 250,000 service members leave the military annually (Zogas, 2017), and concurrent to the great numbers of service members leaving the military, there is an increased rate of combat veteran students enrolling as first-time college students who have a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or have self-identified as having symptoms related to PTSD (Lopez et al., 2016). Lopez and colleagues reported that between 2009 and 2011 there were a total of 238,841 new, first time students enrolled in a college or university with a confirmed diagnosis of PTSD (Lopez et al., 2016).

Chapter 1 of this study explains the Global War on Terror (GWOT) and provides details related to combat service members’ separation from military service. Additionally, Chapter 1 provides the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, an overview of the methodology and research questions, and conclusion.

**The Global War on Terror**

The Global War on Terror (GWOT) began as a result of attacks on U.S. soil in September 2001. These attacks were at the hands of the known terrorist group Al-Qaeda. These attacks
resulted in the death of over 3,000 Americans on September 11, 2001. Never in America’s history had we experienced this level of direct attack or number of casualties in our country on a single day. Immediately following these attacks of terrorism, U.S. military efforts focused on retaliation in Afghanistan. Afghanistan was known as the home for training and harboring members of Al-Qaeda and of their leader, Osama bin Laden (Stewart, 2004).

Afghanistan has not been a stranger to conflict and war. The United States has had a vested interest in the country and political climate of Afghanistan through the 1970s and 1980s due to the Soviet invasion and occupation of the country. The Soviet Union departed Afghanistan in 1989 and the United Stated subsequently shifted focus out of the country of Afghanistan and the decline of the country continued to accelerate. However, in 1996, a group of “Muslim fundamentalist who sought to return the country to strict Islamic rule using whatever brutality was necessary,” was formed and is known as the Taliban (Stewart, 2004, p.4). In 2001, the Taliban seized rule over most of Afghanistan and provided protection to terror organizations such as Al-Qaeda, who were directly responsible for the September 11 attacks. Because terrorism connections within the countries of Afghanistan and Iraq were and continue to be so deeply intertwined between the people, the government and their religion, this was not purely a retaliation of an attack.

The occupation of U.S. military forces within Afghanistan and Iraq quickly became an ongoing war that involved the U.S military at the center of helping the local people rebuild their military, homes, schools, and villages and find safe harbor and protection from the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Building trusting relationships within this culture and climate is a delicate process and one that is not quickly achieved. With the assistance of the locals, the U.S. military has been able to weaken and disarm the Taliban from their tyrant rule over the people, however there continue
to be attacks on U.S. military service members serving in the Middle East, that have resulted in numerous deaths. As of December 2019, 60,088 service members have either been killed in action or wounded in action throughout Operations Enduring Freedom, Freedom’s Sentinel, Inherent Resolve, New Dawn, and Iraqi Freedom (DMDC, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e). Each of these operations are part of the GWOT. Each operation can occur simultaneously with other operations and overlap in time and geographic location. The overwhelming effects for the U.S. military service members has been their constant rotation in- and out-of-country for nine to 18 months at a time.

With more than 53,000 military service members across all branches of the military being wounded in action (DMDC, 2019f), service members have suffered not only physical but most likely psychological wounds as a result of their combat service. Many service members have likely suffered from psychological wounds such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As discussed later, PTSD can greatly influence a service member’s ability to reintegrate back into civilian life and transition to new roles within their civilian life, such as a college student.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reports that within the state of Alabama, there were over 52,000 veterans under the age of 40 as of September 2020 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017). According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (2009 – 2018) Education Benefits Usage Statistics, there was a national rise in the number of veterans utilizing education benefits between 2009 and 2016, with a slight decline between 2016 and 2018. These trends are consistent with veterans in Alabama. These statistics help inform institutions of higher education that there will continue to be greater numbers of veterans separating from the military, seeking out opportunities to further their education at colleges, universities, and trade schools. According to the U.S. Department of
Veterans Affairs, as of September 2017, there were 23,761 individuals receiving veterans affairs (VA) education benefits in the state of Alabama.

**Combat Service Members Separation from Service**

Phelps (2015) cited three factors that contribute to difficulties in readjustment to civilian life from military combat: “the [combat] tour of duty length and pattern, the danger level, and disengagement from civilian culture (p. 236). The rate at which service members are currently separating from, or leaving the military, is approximately 250,000 per year (Zogas, 2017). According to the Department of Defense Manpower Data Center (2016), at the end of the fiscal year for 2016, there were a reported 1.3 million active-duty service members across all branches and 818,305 reservists across all branches. Based on these numbers, approximately 20% of service members turnover per year. While the military is losing 20% of service members, there is still a consistent rate of total numbers of service members across all branches (DMDC, 2012, 2016), which means that there is still a constant influx of newly enlisted or recruited service members each year.

**Student Veteran Profile**

For the purposes of this study, veterans of the Global War on Terror is the subject of focus. The term veterans, as defined by U.S. Code Title 38 – Veterans’ Benefits, §101 (1958), refers to, “a person who served in the active military, naval, or air services, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable”. The term combat service veteran includes the aforementioned definition of veteran, plus the experience of having served in at least one combat deployment throughout the Global War on Terror (GWOT) within a combat zone. Combat zones most prominently associated with the GWOT are the countries of Iraq and Afghanistan (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015).
Data reported by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has helped to confirm that the number of student veterans will only continue to rise with the continued deployment of service members and the continued retirement and separation of veterans from the military. If a service member were to have entered the military in 2001 when the GWOT began, those same service members, should they have stayed in for their full retirement obligation of 20 years, will be eligible for retirement in just 12 months. Stated another way, there is an entire ‘generation’ of service members who have known nothing but a war-time military, with a repetitive deployment cycle, as compared to service members who entered their respective branch prior to 2001. With such a large number of service members either separating from the military, or simply choosing to take advantage of their VA benefits while active duty, many are choosing to use their Post 9/11 G.I. Bill to earn their degree or technical training, for a civilian career.

Higher education in general, has felt the impact of the increased enrollment of veterans over the past two decades, and many have been working toward creating veteran support services on campuses to help student veterans with the transition between military and civilian life. One of the most discussed impacts on college campuses is the need for more personnel to accommodate the needs of the student veteran population. Some institutions may only have one designated student veteran staff member, and their time is typically monopolized by working on VA benefits. Another impact that college campuses are now becoming aware of, is the greater presence of student veterans who have been in combat, unlike their student veteran predecessors of the 1980s and 1990s.

According to the Veterans Administration (VA) Benefits Report from 2016, there were 790,090 beneficiaries using VA education benefits in 2016 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). As of 2014, there were an estimated 250,000 enlisted service members separating
from the military, and this number was expected to remain constant through 2019 (Zogas, 2017). With this increased number of service members and veterans pursuing higher education, there is a greater presence of this unique group of students on college campuses across the nation. These students have a different set of needs than do most traditional students due to their varied life experiences, worldviews, exposure to traumatic events, significant changes in their financial situation, and obligations to family and career (Elliott et al., 2011; Gregg et al., 2016; Olsen et al., 2014). Administration, faculty, and staff need to be prepared to accommodate the unique needs presented by this student population and help these students navigate this new, uncharted territory of higher education. The purpose of this study was to explore student veterans’ experiences on college campuses and more specifically, students who self-identify as living with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While many service members and veterans are taking advantage of veterans services provided on their respective institutions, there is speculation that there are veterans who suffer with symptoms of PTSD who are not utilizing the support services offered by their home institutions, possibly due to the perceived stigma that is associated with PTSD and veterans. One of the rationales of this study was to determine the percentage of veterans on college campuses who do experience symptoms of PTSD as well as the frequency in which they seek out support from campus student services. The symptoms, causes, and effects of PTSD on student veterans will be further explored in Chapter 2.

**Statement of the Problem**

Despite the continued increase and presence of student veterans on college campuses between 2009 to present, institutions of higher education do not fully understand the experiences of combat service veterans as students and, therefore, are not fully providing the academic and student life services and supports, mental health and disability services, or proper training and
education to faculty and staff related to understanding combat veterans and posttraumatic stress disorder. Across institutions of higher education, there is an overarching disconnect between the support needs of student veterans’ support and campus leadership.

There is a continued increase in the presence of combat military veterans on college campuses nationwide as well as in the state of Alabama, as evident by the rise in Veterans Affairs education benefits usage. Between 2009 and 2018, there was a consistent rise in benefits usage, with the exception of a slight drop in in 2018. This trend is consistent across the nation and in Alabama. With the increase of military combat student veterans on campuses across the nation, there is now a greater spotlight on the experiences of veterans. In addition to obstacles that are traditional to adult learners, these students have other facets of their identity that could potentially influence their higher education experience and ultimately their persistence and success. One such facet of the combat military student veteran is the presence of posttraumatic stress disorder.

The number of student veterans on college campuses has continued to rise between 2009 and 2018, and a contributing factor to the increase in veterans pursuing higher education is due in part to the extended availability of education benefits provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (Elliott et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2009-2018). Between 2009 and 2018, there was a steady rise in the number of beneficiaries who used education benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs with a peak of approximately one million beneficiaries between 2013 and 2016. In 2017 and 2018, the total number of beneficiaries declined slightly, but only by approximately 10%.

Through the Department of Veterans Affairs, there are several education benefits available to beneficiaries as well as limited benefits for dependents. There are a total of six types
of educational benefits including the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the Montgomery GI Bill for Active Duty (MGIB-AD), the Montgomery GI Bill for Selected Reserve (MGIB-SR), the Survivors’ and Dependents’ Educational Assistance (DEA), the Post-Vietnam Era Veterans Educational Assistance Program (VEAP), and the Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP). The GI Bill has undergone several revisions since its initial passing by President Roosevelt in June 1944 to aid World War II service men and women in pursuing and furthering their higher education opportunities.

Following the attacks of 2001 and the beginning of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), Congress passed the Post-9/11 GI Bill which extends education benefits to veterans’ families if they so choose to transfer said benefits. The Post-9/11 GI Bill underwent another amendment in 2017, when President Donald Trump signed into law the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act, also known as the ‘Forever GI Bill’ (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018). This most recent version of the GI Bill allows veterans more time to use their education benefits and other extended benefits and supports provided by the VA.

With more education benefits than ever before available to veterans, there has been a consistent rise in the number of beneficiaries utilizing those benefits. Table 1 shows the national distribution of education benefits by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs between 2009 and 2018. Since the passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2008, the number of beneficiaries following the first year of benefits usage in 2009 increased while the number of Montgomery GI Bill for Active Duty decreased during this same time frame. Table 1 reflects U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reported nationwide beneficiary numbers broken down by type of education benefit and year the benefit was received.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VA Reporting Year</th>
<th>Post-9/11 GI Bill</th>
<th>MGIB-AD</th>
<th>MGIB-SR</th>
<th>REAP</th>
<th>DEA</th>
<th>VEAP</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>708,069</td>
<td>26,441</td>
<td>48,690</td>
<td>696</td>
<td>109,760</td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td>755,476</td>
<td>34,582</td>
<td>54,909</td>
<td>1,586</td>
<td>100,275</td>
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<td>2016</td>
<td>790,090</td>
<td>47,307</td>
<td>61,388</td>
<td>4,538</td>
<td>96,762</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>2015</td>
<td>790,507</td>
<td>61,403</td>
<td>63,030</td>
<td>9,965</td>
<td>91,755</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>2014</td>
<td>790,408</td>
<td>77,389</td>
<td>63,745</td>
<td>13,784</td>
<td>90,789</td>
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<td>2013</td>
<td>754,229</td>
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<td>17,297</td>
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<td>2012</td>
<td>646,302</td>
<td>118,549</td>
<td>60,393</td>
<td>19,774</td>
<td>87,707</td>
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<td>2011</td>
<td>555,329</td>
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<td>27,302</td>
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<td>2010</td>
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<td>67,373</td>
<td>30,269</td>
<td>89,696</td>
<td>286</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>34,393</td>
<td>341,969</td>
<td>63,469</td>
<td>42,881</td>
<td>81,327</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>564,487</td>
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In 2009, the Post-9/11 GI Bill was amended to allow children of fallen service members to use the Post-9/11 GI Bill as part of what is known as the Fry Scholarship. This bill was further amended in 2014 to allow spouses of fallen service members to use Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits under the Fry Scholarship, which is known as the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (United States Congress, 2014). The Fry Scholarship was created in memory of a Marine Gunny Sergeant (GySgt) who was killed in the line of duty while serving in Iraq in 2006. GySgt Fry injured his hand in 2006 with one week of his deployment tour left. Rather than accepting a bronze star award and coming home, he opted to stay and fulfil his obligation and go out on another bomb diffusion mission. It was on that mission in March 2006, that an improvised explosive device (IED) went off and took the life of GySgt Fry. GySgt Fry left behind his wife and three young children (“Marine GySgt John D. Fry Scholarship,” 2019). Between 2009 and 2018, eligible (non-Fry Scholarship beneficiaries) comprised between 14% to
20% of the recipients of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. During this same timeframe, Fry Scholarship recipients comprised only .1% to 1.5% of recipients of the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefit annually. Therefore, between 2009 and 2018, between 77% to 100% of beneficiaries of the Post-9/11 GI Bill were veterans and service members (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2009-2018).

The overall trend of increased Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit distribution and the decreased benefit distribution of the Montgomery GI Bill, has also been reflected by the veteran population in the state of Alabama who have received education benefits through the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. Table 2 shows the distribution of education benefits distributed by the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs in the state of Alabama for 2009 through 2018 as well as the Department of Veterans Affairs reported beneficiary numbers broken down by type of education benefit and the year the benefit was received specific to the state of Alabama.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VA reporting year</th>
<th>Post-9/11 GI Bill</th>
<th>MGIB-AD</th>
<th>MGIB-SR</th>
<th>REAP</th>
<th>DEA</th>
<th>VEAP</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>14,673</td>
<td>740</td>
<td>1,188</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5,004</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td>16,745</td>
<td>1,021</td>
<td>1,412</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>4,538</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23,761</td>
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<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>15,546</td>
<td>1,325</td>
<td>1,588</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>4,157</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>2015</td>
<td>17,887</td>
<td>1,675</td>
<td>1,650</td>
<td>253</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>2014</td>
<td>17,492</td>
<td>2,181</td>
<td>1,748</td>
<td>357</td>
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<td>2013</td>
<td>17,409</td>
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<td>439</td>
<td>3,367</td>
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<td>2012</td>
<td>14,669</td>
<td>3,679</td>
<td>1,895</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>3,336</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>2011</td>
<td>11,582</td>
<td>4,913</td>
<td>2,053</td>
<td>669</td>
<td>3,332</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>7,738</td>
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<td>2,075</td>
<td>883</td>
<td>3,102</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19,582</td>
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<tr>
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<td>not reported</td>
<td>6,718</td>
<td>1,728</td>
<td>1,269</td>
<td>2,703</td>
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For both national and state reported numbers, the number of beneficiaries using the Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefit has consistently increased between 2009 and 2016 when the overall number begins to decrease. Despite the continued presence of veterans and military service members on college campuses, many institutions simply do not have or choose not to funnel funds towards the support of this unique student population on campus, including training of faculty and staff regarding the needs and general characteristics of this population. This lack of funding and resources is just part of the problem.

Without understanding what is needed by student veterans and their experiences as students, institutions do not have a clear understanding of what services and trainings are needed to best support the student veteran community and how to better educate their faculty and staff about this population. While the lack of funding of student veteran-specific services and spaces does not account for all factors affecting student veteran experiences on campus, it must be considered that provided services do in fact have a direct impact on the student veteran experience. Student services directed toward veterans on campus may include a dedicated space for student veterans to meet and socialize, study, conduct support groups, and receive academic and emotional supports from university professionals.

Student veteran services have a direct impact on the environment for the student veteran, and therefore has a direct impact on the output of the student veteran, which is part of their overall experience and feeds into their sense of belonging (Astin, 1984; Strayhorn, 2019). Because of the difficulty of connecting with others on campus, student veterans may also have difficulties fully committing to the transition from the military to college. Veterans across multiple institutions and studies have reported difficulty making the transition from the military to college; difficulty connecting with other students; feelings of not being accepted by their
professors and other students; difficulty adjusting to the academic classroom setting; and difficulty navigating the financial aid process and student services (Kato et al., 2016; Kirchner, 2015; Lange et al., 2016). Furthermore, there are even fewer institutions that have the ability to provide specialized support to veterans and service members who may be suffering from and coping with invisible disabilities, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (Lange et al., 2016).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of student veterans, who experience symptoms of PTSD, and attend the University of Alabama. Participants may be students who at the time of the study were either undergraduate or graduate students, and may be attending classes in-person, virtually, or a combination of the two. At the time of the study, higher education was significantly impacted by the global pandemic of COVID-19, forcing many students to alter their preferred course delivery modality. Studying the student veteran experience at the University of Alabama system will serve to inform leadership of the disconnect and/or omission of support services provided for student veterans, and those support services which are used by and perceived as beneficial, by student veterans.

Given what is known about the number of Global War on Terror veterans leaving the military annually, the annual usage of Veteran Assistance education benefits, and the limited funding of student veteran-specific resources on college campuses, the purpose of this study was to also discover the overall experience of student veterans on campus and how student veteran needs are being addressed on college campuses. Additionally, the frequency with which student support services are used by student veterans and the extent to which these services are perceived as beneficial to the student veteran, was explored.
The student veteran for the purpose of this study is defined as any active duty, reserve military, or retired or separated military service member from any branch of the United States armed forces who has served in a combat deployment during the Global War on Terror, beginning in 2001 through present day. This study did not focus on only one degree level, rather, students of both the undergraduate and graduate path. Due to an anticipated limited number of participants, the decision was made to not limit the study to one specific student level, rather include all student veteran participants regardless of their degree seeking level. The differences between the general characteristics associated with both undergraduate and graduate students will be further explored in Chapter 2. While the primary focus was to study the experience of student veterans diagnosed with PTSD, all student veteran experience data were captured, reviewed, and analyzed. The reason to include all veteran data was to form a conclusion of percentages of veterans with PTSD or PTSD-related symptoms at the University of Alabama. The studied experience of each participating student included their interactions with the Student Veterans’ Center on campus, as well as their experiences and interactions between professors and other students in the classroom.

Significance of the Study

With the understanding of the current trends in veteran education benefits usage throughout the country, it is imperative that the field of higher education embrace the student veteran population and ensure that their unique needs are being addressed by appropriate support systems, just as other student groups are valued and supported on campuses across the nation and throughout Alabama. This study has the potential to explore the relationship between military combat student veterans and their higher education experience as well as inform leadership on campus of the experiences that students are having and whether or not their needs are being met.
By exploring the current status of student veterans’ experiences on traditional college campuses, within a single state and specifically a state funded institution within Alabama, the researcher hoped to draw a connection between student veteran experiences, the on-campus resources that are used by student veterans, and the need for dedicated space and funding for such services.

This study presents the experiences of current student veterans within the state as well as their own personal experiences in coping with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and the role that the university student support systems play in their persistence through their respective degree programs. Researching the experiences of student veterans at the University of Alabama will lead to a greater understanding of processes, procedures, and support systems that are currently effective for this population. Once an understanding is gathered about the student veteran experience, a continuity of support across institutions and systems can be identified and recommended as a best practice solution to support and ultimately retain student veterans at their respective campuses.

For many of the student veterans who choose to pursue higher education, they apply their earned VA education benefits. While institutions are receiving tuition from the VA to support students, it can only be assumed that those institutions are also providing student veterans with the adequate supports needed to be successful. As previously stated, access to student veterans support services and transition support are just a couple of ways that institutions can help positively influence a student’s experience.

Education benefits can be used while the veteran is still on active duty service or once they have left the military. Annually, institutions report how many students on their campuses are using Veterans Administration (VA) education benefits. This information is stored by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). To date, the most recent IPEDS data
available are for the 2017-2018 academic reporting year and at the undergraduate and graduate levels. All VA education benefit usage that is reported in the following section has been gleaned from the IPEDS database.

The two types of VA education benefits that are reported to IPEDS are the Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries and the Department of Defense (DoD) Tuition Assistance beneficiaries. The Post-9/11 GI Bill can be used by the veteran or active-duty military member, or they may choose to transfer their benefit to an eligible dependent. In the event that the active-duty military service member is killed in combat, his or her Post-9/11 GI Bill is then granted to their surviving spouse or child(ren) under the Fry Scholarship. The DoD Tuition Assistance refers to the education benefit available to active duty, National Guard, and reserve members. At present, this benefit covers 100% of tuition for courses costing up to $250 per credit hour and a total of $4,500 per fiscal year (U.S. Army, 2020).

Taking advantage of this education benefit does mean that the service member has to complete their military service obligation in full but does not cause the service member to incur an additional service obligation. Table 3 shows the respective number of U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs education beneficiaries at each Alabama public institution participating in this study for the 2017-2018 academic year. Shown below, in Table 3, are the total number of beneficiaries for the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Department of Defense Tuition Assistance at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, according to the most recent IPEDS data from the 2017-2018 academic year.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Type of Veterans Affairs Education Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-9/11 Undergraduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athens State University</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auburn University Montgomery</td>
<td>203</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jacksonville State University</td>
<td>119</td>
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<td>The University of Alabama</td>
<td>982</td>
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<td>Troy University</td>
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<td>University of Alabama at Birmingham</td>
<td>419</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Alabama in Huntsville</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Montevallo</td>
<td>68</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of North Alabama</td>
<td>134</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of South Alabama</td>
<td>340</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of West Alabama</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Overview of Methodology**

The data collected for this study were part of a descriptive qualitative study. This study explored the experiences of military combat student veterans across multiple higher education institutions within the state of Alabama. Data were collected and analyzed after conducting basic individual interviews with participants at the University of Alabama. The goal of each interview was to begin to answer the research questions listed below.
The research questions for this dissertation explored the experience of the military combat veteran student on a college campus.

Purpose: What is the experience of student veterans with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder attending the University of Alabama?

1. What symptoms of posttraumatic stress do student veterans most frequently experience?
2. Which university support services do student veterans most frequently use and how do they view those services?
3. What feelings of acceptance or alienation, from both faculty and student peers, do student veterans experience?

Conclusion

Military combat veterans have continued to be a presence on college campuses throughout history, however, over the past 20 years campuses have seen not only an increase in the number of veterans on campus, but also in the type of veterans on campus. With the continued military operations associated with the Global War on Terror, as of December 2011, 73% of all active duty Army soldiers alone had deployed to combat since September 2001 (Baiocchi, 2013). Due to the high percentage of combat deployments, there are also more reported cases of posttraumatic stress disorder to the Department of Veterans Affairs within the past decade, than previous years. While the civilian population is gaining more knowledge and understanding of the basic causes, symptoms, and treatment of PTSD, there is still a generalized stigma perceived by many service members, both active and non-active. This study aims to provide a greater understanding of what the military combat veteran with PTSD or PTSD symptoms experiences on a traditional college campus and how leadership within higher
education can better serve this population academically, socially, and personally. The overarching problem that this researcher hypothesized, is that there is a disconnect between the student veteran experience, their unique needs, and how they are ultimately being understood and potentially underserved by administration and faculty on campus.

This research is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the research and described the purpose and importance of the research. Chapter 2 explores the literature related to student veterans, transitions from the military to civilian student life, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Chapter 3 explains the research questions presented for this research study and the methodology and framework for how the research was conducted.

Chapter 2 of this study explores the literature related to the experiences of student veterans on college campuses beginning with the history and trends of student veterans on college campuses as well as a review of the GI Bill of 1944 and the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Chapter 2 also presents literature related to the themes relevant to the transition of combat veterans from the military to student life including themes of isolation and alienation among student veterans and literature related to posttraumatic stress disorder and student veteran supports on campuses. The gap in the literature and framework for the study are also presented. Chapter 3 of this study will discuss the methodology used for research and analyzing the data. Chapter 4 will then provide a detailed overview of the discovered data and themes that emerged as a result of the interviews. Finally, Chapter 5 will discuss and review of the findings, as well as, the implications for practice and future research.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the literature and research related to military combat service members and veterans and summations of their student experience on college campuses as well as contributing factors that have a direct impact on their experience. The first part of the review presents an overview of the history of student veterans on college campuses and current trends of military service member and veteran education benefits usage since the passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Next, a review of the research and literature associated with military service members and veterans as students is presented, including the major themes found within the literature. Finally, the gap in the literature, the framework through which this study was conducted, and the conclusion are presented.

History and Trends

College campuses today are comprised of more diverse groups of students than in years past. The culture of the college campus has largely developed into one that is welcoming of students of different cultures, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, religions, genders, and sexual orientation. Now, more so than any other time in higher education history, there is an understanding and acceptance that each student experience is specific to that person’s life experience, cultural background, race, gender, and even military service background. Overall, college campuses have become more welcoming environments to groups that may not have been as accepted by peers, faculty, or administrators in years past. One group that has been present on college campuses throughout higher education history is the student veteran population. Student
veteran services in higher education have also become more common across college campuses over the past several decades, but college education and military service are no stranger to one another. As Wells (2015) highlighted in the Council for the Advancement of Standards of Higher Education (CAS) text, there has been a relationship between higher education and the military since the United States was founded. Such evidence of this bond was exhibited in 1802, when Thomas Jefferson played a major role in the establishment of the United States Military Academy (Wells, 2015). Since then, military service members have maintained a delicate balance of military service and pursuance of higher education during times of peace.

Prior to the passage of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill), there was no assistance or benefit from the government to support veterans pursuing education after their service obligation. There had been many pension programs in place for veterans and their families to help support and supplement income, however, nothing that assisted the veteran in learning a new trade or expanding their educational opportunities (Alschuler & Blumin, 2009). This pre-World War II era also had very little noted enrollment of veterans within higher education (Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

Following World War II, student veterans became more visible on college campuses, and although have been fluctuations in student veteran numbers on campuses since that time, there is still a significant presence today (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). However, there is a void of scholarly publications exploring the extent of student veteran presence and participation on college campuses prior to World War II (Vacchi & Berger, 2014) There was, however, a rapid increase in student veterans enrolled in college in the 1946-1947 academic year, and by 1949, approximately 50% of all college students were veterans (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Until 1944, there did not seem to be much interest in veterans as college students from the academics nor
from politicians. In fact, during the discussions of the GI Bill of 1944, many educators and politicians expressed not only apprehension about veterans on college campuses, but also believed that many veterans did not have the intellectual ability or academic drive to be successful (Alschuler & Blumin, 2009). There seemed to be resistance from academic elites regarding veterans enrolling in college; even the president of Harvard at this time stated, “education was a rite of passage for the elite few” (Vacchi & Berger, 2014, p. 98).

GI Bill of 1944

In the early 1940s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt recognized that there needed to be something done about the level of financial support being provided to veterans upon returning home from combat. In 1943, Roosevelt outlined plans for veteran benefits. Both political parties understood that there was not enough being done to support veterans returning from World War II and something needed to change. While the President and members of Congress attempted to outline benefits that would best meet the needs of veterans, as well as, what worked best for their own budgets, the American Legion stepped in to help navigate the best benefits options for veterans. The American Legion had many members across the country, including members of both political parties within Congress (Alschuler & Blumin, 2009).

Before the final draft of the GI Bill of 1944 was passed, there were many drafts and revisions throughout 1943. In January 1944, the American Legion provided Congress and President Roosevelt with six outlined categories of benefits for veterans. Educational support was just one aspect of the GI Bill; however, it is what many Americans most associate with this bill (Alschuler & Blumin, 2009). The final bill was signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on June 22, 1944. This bill appropriated funds for veteran service facilities, unemployment funds for veterans, job placement services, and guaranteed loan opportunities. Additionally, education and
training benefits were to be provided to veterans. According to Alschuler and Blumin (2009), the GI Bill of 1944 would provide:

…up to four years of education and training at an annual tuition rate of as much as $500 (and a monthly stipend of $50 for single men and women and $75 for those with dependents) to GIs who had served at least ninety days, with the presumption that the schooling of all veterans who enlisted or were drafted before their twenty-fifth birthdays has been interrupted. (p. 70)

While there were many who were excited and positive about these new educational opportunities for veterans, there were just as many who were critical and skeptical about the new demographic of student on campus.

The expansion of higher education began to accelerate following the passing of the GI Bill in 1944. Originally, this legislation was passed with the intent of serving as a relief effort for service members who were returning from World War II; originators had no idea that the passing of the GI Bill in 1944 would have such a monumental impact on the issue of access within higher education (Alschuler & Blumin, 2009; Clark, 1998; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Lawmakers during the World War II era, speculated and anticipated that unemployment would be an issue for many service members upon their return home from combat. What they had not anticipated was the complexity in the shift of ideas surrounding what the typical college student profile looked like as well as the ideas and demands that many service members brought with them to campus. Following their service in the war, service members who were now attending college were bringing new ideas, different worldviews, and different expectations to the conversations on campus. These military veterans, who were characterized as being more mature than their counterparts, questioned the status quo on campus and demanded course work and programs of
study that were relevant to the civilian workforce (Clark, 1998). Many of the sentiments and points of concern that were expressed by veterans in Clark’s 1998 article, “The two Joes met. Joe college, Joe veteran”, are very similar to the sentiments and points of concern expressed by many veterans on college campuses today. These themes will be further explored in the following sections.

The honeymoon period of veteran education benefits began to wane slightly during the gap between World War II (WWII) and the Korean War. After the Korean War, the tuition benefit in the GI Bill 1944 for WWII veterans was eliminated; however, the “monthly living stipend” was increased (Vacchi & Berger, 2014, p. 100). This amendment to the GI Bill remained in place until 1977 when the Vietnam Education Assistance Program (VEAP) was instated to assist Vietnam veterans in further reducing financial burden left over from education expenses not covered by the GI Bill. The GI Bill received another facelift in 1985 with the implementation of the Montgomery GI Bill.

The Montgomery GI Bill was passed in 1985 following the implementation of VEAP in 1977. One of the major and noticeable differences of the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) was the shift in the way the benefit was presented to prospective service members; this benefit was now being used as a recruitment tool (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). One of the most notable differences between the GI Bill, VEAP, and the MGIB, is that the MGIB gives service members the option of contributing to this benefit.

Service members are automatically enrolled to contribute to the MGIB fund and can opt out if they choose to not take advantage of this benefit. If service members take advantage of this benefit, their “pay is reduced by $100 per month for the first 12 months of active duty” (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Benefits Administration, 2009, p. 26). The MGIB was
the most updated version of the service member-affiliated education benefit until the Post-9/11 GI Bill was implemented in 2009.

Post-9/11 GI Bill

As previously discussed, the GI Bill was passed in 1944 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and it provided much needed financial support for many of the WWII veterans returning home from the war. This was more than just financial support for many of these veterans, but a chance to begin a new life by expanding their education and knowledge and creating a new professional life for themselves. Today, that sentiment is still true with the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which was enacted in June of 2008 and implemented in 2009. A few of the major benefits of this “New GI Bill” is that the beneficiary receives up to 36 months or four years of tuition; the beneficiary is paid a monthly stipend for living expenses; the timeline in which the benefit can be used has been extended; also, testing and certification fees are covered by the bill (VanBergeijk et al., 2012, p. 50). At the time of the bill’s passage, this was the greatest level of education benefits ever offered; the Post-9/11 GI Bill truly captured the essence of the original GI Bill (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill provide; “tuition and fees, monthly housing allowance, books and supplies stipend, 36 months of full-time education benefits, and 15 years to use the benefits” (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Benefits Administration, 2009, p. 30).

Between 2003 and 2019, approximately 4.3 million service members will have and will be separating from the military; as of 2017, there were already over 2.5 million Global War on Terror veterans returning home and many chose to use their education benefits from the military (Borsari et al., 2017). Student veterans are not only utilizing their Post-9/11 GI Bill, but also using college benefits supports such as Vocational Rehabilitation (Zogas, 2017). Vocational
Rehabilitation (Voc Rehab) services are different from financial support such as the GI Bill. To be eligible for Voc Rehab, service members must prove a disability upon requesting benefits. Between 2002 and 2015, Voc Rehab benefits payouts increased from just over $2 billion in 2002, to almost $14 billion in 2015 (Zogas, 2017).

In addition to Voc Rehab, many veterans use their GI Bill benefits for tuition, fees, and living expenses. According to Zogas (2017), 555,329 veterans used their GI Bill benefits in 2011, and that number rose to 790,507 veterans using their benefits in 2015. With the increasing number of veterans enrolling in college campuses across the nation following their service in the GWOT, colleges and universities must be prepared for the unique set of needs of these students. The overall percentage of veterans on campus has not been this high since the end of WWII and the passing of the original GI Bill in 1944 (Dillard & Yu, 2016).

Prior to the current war-time military generation, veterans in the 1940s and 1950s attended college in large numbers and the nation saw an increase in the significant numbers of professionals such as teachers, engineers, and health professionals (Reynolds, 2013). Like this post-war era following WWII, our nation is again seeing a rise in the number of veterans seeking out higher education for a new civilian profession. In John Braxton’s article review and deep dive into Tinto’s studies and models related to student veterans’ persistence in college, as well, student veterans’ population attributes in general, Braxton highlights student experiences relative to this student population. Braxton sets the stage in presenting frameworks by Tinto and relates them to the student veteran experience, while also creating a mental picture of who the student veteran is. Although this review and application of Tinto’s models are described as being “mostly theoretical” (p.50), these proposed applications are intended to serve as a potential basis for additional future research (Braxton, 2011). One of the initial key attributes Braxton (2011)
discussed early on in his review, was related to the student veterans’ population and their rate of persistence in college. Despite a significant number of student veterans on college campuses, the Veterans Administration has reported that complete usage of benefits by student veterans is relatively low; specifically, “veterans are using an average of 17 out of 36 months of their Post 9/11[GI Bill], and only six percent had used the entire 36 months” (Braxton, 2011, p. 35). While student veterans are making the decision to pursue postsecondary education, there is a breakdown in retaining these students and ensuring program completion. Ensuring that student veterans have a successful transition from the military to student life and providing them with appropriate supports is a significant responsibility of all administration, faculty, and staff of the higher education community.

This section has reviewed history and trends of student veterans, primarily focused on the creation, implementation, and usage of education benefits for service members and veterans. However, as Vacchi & Berger (2014) presented in their review of student veterans, there is very little known about the trends of actual student veterans on college campuses prior to WWII. Even after WWII, most service member-related data has been due to the usage of the GI Bill or some evolved version of the bill through today. The following section will explore literature and themes related to the transition of veterans from military service life to life as a college student.

**Transition from the Military to Student Life**

The relationship between service members and veterans has been long-standing and gained greater presence primarily in the 1940s following World War II, along with the release of the GI Bill (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Even as early as 1802, Thomas Jefferson played a major role in the development of the United States Military Academy (Wells, 2015), and those actions helped to set the pace for maintaining a balance of military service and the pursuance of higher
education throughout war and peace times. To this day, the U. S. Military Academy, also known as West Point, continues the tradition of educating future military leaders.

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the initiation of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), there was an increase in the number of civilians joining the military, which eventually resulted in an increase in the number of veterans utilizing education benefits. Figure 1 shows the progression of civilians joining the military between September 2001 and September 2019. Data presented in Figure 1 show the total number of active duty service members across all branches of service between September 2001 and September 2019. All data were retrieved from the Defense Manpower Data Center, Office of the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Department of Defense, Active-Duty Military Personnel by Service by Rank / Grade reports (DMDC 2011, 2012a, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016a, 2017, 2018, 2019g).

**Figure 1**

*Total Number of Active Duty Service Members between September 2001 and September 2019*

*Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force*
The decision to pursue higher education also comes with the decision to transition from the identity of a service member and combat veteran, to college student; and, in some cases, balance the two identities simultaneously. This transition does not mean that one identity replaces another identity it only means that the student must now add another layer to their identity. Making a transition from one job to another, or one career field to another, is a process that many individuals go through several times throughout their lives. This process consists of acclimating from one environment to another and establishing new sets of expectations. For military service members who transition from their ‘job’ as a service member, to their new role as a student, the transition can be more complex than just simply changing offices and receiving a new job title. Service members who leave the military for various reasons and choose to pursue higher education bring with them the identity that was created and developed throughout their military career.

Many service members and veterans are accustomed to a structured, militant, routine due to their service time and combat deployment(s), while simultaneously navigating a seemingly chaotic lifestyle, which brings new challenges daily. Many times, these challenges included preservation of their own life in extreme combat conditions. Transitioning from an environment that is rooted in structure, respect, and authority and is mostly classified as moderate to conservative, to an environment that is less structured, and does not demand respect from students to authority figures and is largely liberal, can be challenging to student veterans (Borsari et al., 2017; Dillard & Yu, 2016; Elliott, 2014).

While many of the positive attributes of maturity, experience, expanded worldviews, and discipline are beneficial to the student veteran in their transition to civilian life as a student, there are other attributes and facets of their sphere that can make the transition especially challenging.
Some of these challenges include the physical act of relocation after departure from service, losing an established social support within the military, changing to a new career path, as well as possible mental and/or physical disabilities sustained while in the military (Dillard & Yu, 2016; Falkey, 2016).

Military service members who separate from their respective branches of service are accustomed to a specific culture of discipline, structure, respect, and hierarchy (Gregg et al., 2016; Kirchner, 2015). Making the transition from a structured lifestyle to one of less structure and discipline can be difficult for some student veterans. Along with making the physical transition of no longer reporting for duty, but instead reporting for class on a college campus, student veterans are also faced with the mental and emotional transition of taking classes with other students who are typically younger than they are and who have less world experience (Kato et al., 2016). Some of the key themes of transition for student veterans include issues with college structure, feelings of isolation and alienation, reconstructing identities, difficulty in navigating the processes and university structure, and building relationships (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Badger et al., 2014; Gregg et al., 2016; Kirchner, 2015; Semer & Harmening, 2015). Feelings of isolation and alienation will be further explored later in this chapter.

In Reynold’s 2013 article, “From combat to campus”, a former U.S. Marine described the transition from combat deployments to the academic setting as difficult. Kirchner (2015) explained that this transition from a “structured military to a less-structured college environment…” may be one of the most challenging aspects of the student veteran transitions (p. 116). Student veterans must now combat stereotypes that may be perpetuated by faculty and fellow students regarding veterans; these effects and implications may be compounded if there is the presence of a posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosis or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)
diagnosis (Kato et al., 2016). According to Kato and colleagues, one of the themes that stood out among student veteran interviews was a persistent sense of not belonging and feeling ‘othered’; many of these students felt like no one truly understood them outside of the military culture. These feelings of not belonging and not being understood led to increased feelings of isolation.

**Student Population**

The student population at the University of Alabama is made up of a diverse group of undergraduate students, as well as professional students and graduate students. Professional students at the University of Alabama are defined by the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, as those pursuing Law and Medicine (University of Alabama, Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2021). Graduate students at the University of Alabama are made up of those students pursuing either a Masters, Educational Specialist, or Doctoral degree (University of Alabama, Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2021). For the purposes of this study, when a reference is made of a graduate student, this will be encompassing of both the professional and graduate degree path students. On average, between 2011 and 2020, graduate students have made up approximately 13% to 17% of the total population of students enrolled at the university (University of Alabama, Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2021).

While we may know what the breakdown of the student enrollment looks like across campus, the actual characteristics of the student levels are a bit more complex to define. It is rather easy to assume that because someone is enrolled in a graduate program, they have successfully completed an undergraduate program. Beyond this one constant variable, all other characteristics about undergraduate and graduate students are pure assumption and speculation. Typically, the general assumption (and from my own personal experience) is that undergraduate students, in the historically traditional sense, have recently graduated from high school; are most
likely between the ages of 18 and 24; are not married, and do not have a full-time career outside of college. In contrast, the assumptions for graduate students are that they vary in age, from early twenties, with no ceiling on the maximum age; they have completed their undergraduate degree; they may or may not be married and potentially have children; and, they have greater life experience due to age and experience in a career field. Overall, graduate students are assumed to be more mature and to have had more life experiences and exposure.

When considering characteristics that may be applicable to student veterans, it must be understood that many of these characteristics are perceived to fall under the category of the assumptions relative to graduate students, or a combination of characteristics of both traditional undergraduate students and graduate students. While there is no clear cut, nor consistent definition of characteristics and traits that are specific to students at the undergraduate or graduate level, a 2015 study focused on stress levels between undergraduate and graduate students found that the majority of undergraduate students were between the ages of 18 and 25, whereas the majority of graduate students were between the ages of 21 and 30 (Ickes, Brown, Reeves, Zephyr, 2015). This study also reported that of the approximately 1,100 participants, there were consistently more students who were not in a relationship with a significant other, rather than those who were in a relationship (Ickes, Brown, Reeves, Zephyr, 2015).

**Feelings of Isolation and Alienation**

Veterans come to campus as students with different sets of world experiences and expectations relative to their anticipated college experience. Many service members have served in combat missions and campaigns, such as Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and/or other missions throughout the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Not only do many of these veterans balance their identities as veteran, spouse, partner, parent, and
professional, but as they make the transition to academia, they are now adding another identity to their resume: student. Along with adjusting to a new identity, student veterans must also adapt to a new professional and social structure.

College campuses are designed to be a space of self-exploration, identity development, collaboration, and intellectual maturation; for those coming from the military culture of structure, order, unity, and group work and development, the transition can be especially challenging (Borsari et al., 2017; Falkey, 2016). Frequently, group work or collaboration in the military, more specifically during combat operations, determines life or death for fellow service members; this is a concept that many college students who are not associated with the military, have difficulty truly understanding. When veterans do not have the support structure or the ‘brothers in arms’ community surrounding them, the transition to a foreign environment and culture, such as a college campus, can leave them feeling truly alienated from their peers and misunderstood as individuals (Kato et al., 2016). As a student, there are new and different expectations set for performance and achievement, and many service members have expressed feelings of unpreparedness for college and a need to re-learn how to study and adapt to a new type of learning environment (Dillard & Yu, 2016; Gregg et al.). Part of that feeling of unpreparedness stems from the difficulty of transitioning from active duty service in the military to life as a college student. Student veterans reported feelings of isolation; inability to connect with peers in the classroom due to gaps in their relative ages; disconnect with the college culture; and stress due to the reconstruction of self-identity (Borsari et al., 2017; Daly & Fox-Garrity, 2013; Gregg et al., 2016; Kato et al., 2016; Kirchner, 2015). Each of these feelings contribute to the overwhelming sensation of being alienated on campus and contributes to stereotypes that are reportedly prevalent among student peers and professors (Alschuler, & Yarab, 2018).
In a survey conducted in 2015 by the Vice Chancellor of Syracuse University, of 8,500 Post-9/11 veterans most cited that they felt they were not welcome on college campuses and would not fit in with other students, which was a major barrier to pursuing higher education (Haynie, 2016). Student veterans have a need and desire to be connected socially (Heineman, 2016) and feel heard in the classroom without judgment (Kirchner, 2015). Many veterans have reported feeling isolated, stigmatized, and judged in the classroom, by not only their classmates, but also their professors. These compounded feelings have led to anxiety and discomfort in the classroom and, ultimately, can impede student success and true exploration of knowledge (Kirchner, 2015). While it is difficult to truly examine a person’s bias for or against another individual, there are student veterans who believe they are unfairly judged by their professors, and this feeling of judgment only adds to feelings of alienation and anxiety; especially those who suffer from combat-related injuries and disabilities such as posttraumatic stress disorder. In a 2011 study, researchers found a direct correlation between faculty members who opposed military service and their inability to compartmentalize those feelings and still respect the veteran as a student without bias (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011).

These experiences of being singled out and ‘othered’ in the classroom, have not been isolated to only one or two students, but these feelings of being, “openly slandered, disrespected, and hated”, by faculty members, are feelings and sentiments that several students across multiple campuses experiences (Elliott et al., 2011; Kato et al., 2016). Academia prides itself for being open and inclusive of and embracing diversity, however, student veterans have been treated as the exception rather than the rule when it comes to acceptance by some faculty, staff, and students on campuses (Elliott et al., 2011). For a student who is already struggling to fit into a
new environment with new challenges, being ‘othered’ by peers and individuals in authority positions can create an even greater sense of isolation and alienation.

**Posttraumatic Stress Disorder**

“United States military veterans and service members (i.e., active-duty personnel) represent less than 10% of the total U.S. population, yet they are disproportionately affected by mental health problems, such as posttraumatic stress disorder” (Bergman et al., 2017, p. 117). Mental health concerns within the military are gaining great attention due to the spotlight on posttraumatic stress disorder associated with some combat veterans returning from operations associated with the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has gained national attention over the past two decades, beginning with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and continuing through the multiple deployment and homecoming cycles, which have ensued with the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Today’s climate and culture is more knowledgeable and accepting of the diagnosis of PTSD than years prior to 1980 when the diagnosis of PTSD was added to the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders ([DSM]; National Institute of Health, 2010).

Symptoms that are associated with PTSD were previously only associated with combat veterans and were referred to as shell-shock in previous wars; even today, PTSD is referred to as “temporary shell-shock” by some (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011, p. 29; National Institute of Health, 2010). While PTSD is primarily known to be associated with mental health, the diagnosis has also been associated with several physiological issues such as “endocrine, immune, and neurobiological abnormalities. Posttraumatic stress has been shown to impede functioning of the hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis, the autonomic nervous system, and the immune system” (Bookwalter, Roenfeldt, LeardMann, Kong, Riddle, & Rull 2020, p. 1).
There are still many facets of posttraumatic stress that researchers are continuing to discover. The National Institute of Health (2010) defined posttraumatic stress disorder as a “psychobiological mental disorder that can affect survivors of not only combat experience, but also terrorist attacks, natural disasters, serious accidents, assault or abuse, or even sudden and major emotional losses” (p. 1). However, not all combat veterans who experience symptoms of PTSD seek out treatment or diagnosis due to the stigma that is largely associated with the diagnosis, especially those who may still be on active-duty status in the military, or who hold certain clearance levels within government agencies.

There are estimated percentages related to combat veterans who most likely have PTSD, but those numbers can fluctuate in accuracy due to the proximity of time from when a service member returns from combat, the increase or decrease in their social supports, the presence of alcohol usage, and the presence of external anxiety creating situations and environments (Barry et al., 2012; Campbell & Riggs, 2015). Campbell and Riggs (2015) reported that following Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), there were between 17% and 19% of veterans who reported PTSD; following Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), which was the name for the fight in Afghanistan, there were 11% of veterans who reported PTSD; for other operations that were not specifically named, there were 8.5% of veterans who reported PTSD. In another study, Barry and colleagues (2012) suggested that there are as many as one in every three veterans of OIF and OEF who either have PTSD, symptoms or episodes of PTSD, a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and/or depression.

It would stand to reason that service members who have been exposed to combat have a higher likelihood of having PTSD than those who have not deployed to combat. Those who do have PTSD experience fewer symptoms when they have a social support system (Elliott, 2015).
In addition to PTSD, approximately 7.6% of veterans have “subthreshold PTSD”, which will be further explained in this chapter (Bergman et al., 2017, p. 4).

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a term that has become increasingly public and incorporated into mainstream society and culture. For those who suffer from PTSD, the increasing knowledge about the condition has become a double-edged sword for many. While the awareness of the condition has become more prevalent, there is also a stigma attached to those who suffer from it; especially, those who have been diagnosed as a result of military combat experience (Barnard-Brak, 2011). Barnard-Brak examined faculty self-efficacy and their feelings about working with student veterans with PTSD and reported that one-quarter of respondents had negative feelings about teaching these students and acknowledged their inability to put aside their personal feelings about war to teach these students without bias (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011). Elliott and colleagues (2011) expanded upon this idea that there is stigma associated with student veterans on college campuses and found that service members and veterans on college campuses who suffer from PTSD symptoms experienced feelings of alienation from their peers as well as feelings of negative feedback and lack of support from their professors.

Posttraumatic stress disorder, as defined by the American Psychiatric Association is “a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape or other violent personal assault” (Torres, 2017, para. 1). PTSD has been known in various forms throughout military history, more specifically it has been known as shell-shock and combat fatigue.

There are some individuals who may exhibit the symptoms typically associated with PTSD, however they have not fully met the criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD; this is referred to as
“subthreshold PTSD” (Bergman et al., 2016). As of 2016, there were approximately 7.6% of all veterans who were reported as having subthreshold PTSD (Bergman et al., 2016). The rate at which military veterans have been diagnosed with PTSD has been on the rise. In a study released by the American Journal of Public Health, of the 61% of veterans who have used the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) between 2001 and 2014, 57.6% of those veterans have been diagnosed with a mental health diagnosis (Ramsey et al., 2017). Of the six mental health diagnoses examined by Ramsey et al., the highest frequency of diagnosis was of PTSD. The total sample used in determining mental health diagnosis statistics by Ramsey et al. was 888,142 military veterans; 82% of the 1.1 million veterans enrolled at the VHA at the time.

The three top diagnoses discovered were posttraumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, and alcohol use disorder. Table 4 outlines the percentages of these diagnoses, along with the breakdown of male and female ratios per Ramsey et al. (2017).
Table 4

Mental Health Disorder Diagnosis of Veterans (2001-2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Posttraumatic Stress Disorder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>27863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>241280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>269143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Depressive Disorder</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>16556</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>73141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>89697</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alcohol Use Disorder</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>6422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>92794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99216</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


When examining the experience of any population, the ‘typical’ behaviors of that population must be defined before an accurate analysis of behavior can be conducted. Before understanding the context of the military student veteran on a college campus, a definition of said students’ behaviors must be understood. For this study, the focus was centered on students who have been diagnosed with PTSD or exhibit symptoms consistent with the diagnosis of PTSD, such as subthreshold PTSD (as previously defined). According to the DSM-V (2013), published by the American Psychiatry Association, PTSD is exhibited through the following symptoms: “intrusive thoughts; flashbacks; distressing dreams; avoidance; anger; guilt; shame; detachment; irritability; angry outbursts; self-destructive behaviors; easily startled; and problems concentrating or sleeping” (APA, 2013, pp. 271-272). It should be noted that not all who identify
with having symptoms of PTSD have been evaluated and diagnosed with PTSD. There are many factors as to why this could be, but one overarching reason for symptoms without diagnosis is due to the fear and apprehension of seeking out professional mental health care and any perceived or actual career repercussions that may be produced.

**Coping Strategies for Student Veterans with PTSD**

Kumari and Mukhopadhyay (2016) defined coping as “things people do to master, tolerate, and minimize life strains or demands” (p. 1037). There are several coping strategies that individuals with PTSD may practice. Some strategies are positive, and some are less than ideal.

Emotional avoidance as a coping strategy is not a positive technique; it has been linked to continued and increased severity of depression (Hassija et al., 2012; Rice & Liu, 2016). Strategies that prove to be positive and beneficial to veterans with PTSD long-term are strategies related to emotional expression (Hassija, et. al, 2012; Rice & Liu, 2016). As Elliott and colleagues (2011), discovered, something as seemingly simple as accessing social support groups among peers, has shown to lessen the symptoms of PTSD among student veterans. Social supports in the form of student veteran peer groups, academic support groups, and even PTSD support groups help student veterans to feel included and lessen their feelings of isolation and alienation on campus.

In addition to the coping generalities that were presented by Kumari and Mukhopadhyay (2016), Rice and Liu (2016) outlined several positive coping strategies for service members and veterans: “acceptance”, “positive reframing”, “religion”, “active coping”, and “planning” (p. 343). Acceptance, positive reframing, and religion are all classified as “emotion-focused strategies” (Rice & Liu, 2016, p. 343). When accessing emotion-focused strategies, individuals cope by truly accepting who they are, their experiences, their circumstances. They choose their
own perception of change and growth related to their experiences and rely on their faith to cope with their thoughts and feelings (Hassija et al., 2012; Rice & Liu, 2016) Active coping and planning are classified as “problem-focused strategies” (Rice & Liu, 2016, p. 343).

These two types of coping strategies allow individuals to focus on a plan of changing their way of thinking and interpreting their feelings and then actually making a plan to implement those changes in their life (Rice & Liu, 2016). Using these types of coping strategies in the context of integrating into life as a student veteran, and not just as a veteran, could prove to be beneficial. Emotion-focused strategies of coping with PTSD on a college campus could include the acceptance by the student veteran of their own current circumstances and the changes that have occurred since their traumatic event(s) throughout their active-duty service career. In conjunction with this acceptance, student veterans can choose to expand their own personal growth journey by reframing how they see themselves. Rather than being a ‘victim of PTSD’, they can see themselves as an advocate for others with PTSD and an educator to others, such as classmates and possibly even faculty, who may not understand PTSD in the context of military combat veterans from a first-person account.

**Student Veteran Supports on College Campuses**

Before understanding how those in Student Affairs can best serve student veterans, the attributes of those student priorities must first be understood. Per the “Adaptation of Tinto’s Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure for Student Veterans” flow chart found in the ASHE Higher Education Report from 2011, there are six attributes to consider: “financial matters, health concerns & physical disabilities, psychological & adjustment difficulties, family background, skills & abilities, and prior schooling” (Braxton, 2011, p. 37). Braxton noted that many times, military veteran students are perceived as being more mature than other students
who may be their same age with similar civilian backgrounds. However, it must be understood that these student veterans come to the college classroom with a different set of life experiences and skills, than most traditional-age college students (Braxton, 2011). Braxton also made the link between “lack of academic integration and student departure” (p. 46); meaning that during a student veteran’s transition to college, most of the emphasis of support is placed on the social aspect of college integration rather than the academic. If more resources were allocated towards the academic integration rather than the social, Braxton (2011) proposed that the student veteran persistence rate would increase.

There are several ways that campuses and systems can simply modify the way they enroll and support student veterans without the great financial commitment and investment of building new facilities or hiring a large, dedicated staff to only serve student veterans. A few ways that campuses can best support student veterans on campus are: creation of a veteran resource center, host veteran only orientations, dedicate a point of contact for all student veterans on campus, provide faculty and staff education and professional development related to veterans and PTSD, and support a military friendly culture across campus.

**Services and Supports**

Student veteran supports and services are currently presented on college campuses in a variety of ways. One way that universities are meeting the unique needs of student veterans is by creating veteran resource centers, which provide an environment for peer support as well as guidance, counseling, and academic supports (Kirchner, 2015). For institutions in Alabama, veteran resource offices and centers are typically housed in or managed by the Office of Student Affairs or the Office of Financial Aid. Creating spaces for student veterans to have a “one-stop shop” (Kirchner, 2015, p.118) allows student veterans to meet with various offices to have their
questions answered by staff who have a greater understanding of the military benefits and student veterans as a whole. However, not all ‘centers’ are physical locations dedicated to support of student veterans. There are institutions that embed student supports among traditional student support centers that are specific to the unique needs of student veterans.

Another avenue of support for student veterans is through organizations such as Student Veterans of America, which was founded in 2008 by and for military veterans (Kirchner, 2015). Student Veterans of America (SVA) is a nonprofit organization that establishes chapters on college campuses at the request of a student veteran. One of the requirements of establishing an SVA chapter is to enlist the support of campus administration and campus community. When establishing an SVA chapter members are encouraged to not only create a plan for their chapter to include a mission statement and goals but also to build relationships across campus with both veteran and non-veteran students, faculty, and staff (Military Family Research Institute, 2013). Establishing student clubs such as the SVA provides student veterans with an opportunity to meet with other students with whom they closely identify; develop bonds through shared experiences; and develop an emotional, social, and academic support system (Elliott et al.; Gregg et al., 2016; Heineman, 2016). Creating student veteran organizations on campus can also help in, “educating and acclimatizing the entire campus community to the unique experiences of student veterans and the challenges of transitioning” (Dillard & Yu, 2016, p. 183).

Previous researchers have identified additional supports and services that are essential to student veteran success such as veteran-specific orientations and student veteran specific advisors (Heineman, 2016; Kirchner, 2015). Providing orientations aimed at the student veteran campus population allows student veterans to identify with one another and ask questions in an environment that may be more hospitable to veteran specific benefits and culture. These
orientations may also provide a more intimate atmosphere overall. As Kirchner (2015) pointed out, a student veteran orientation to campus can help begin building bonds between these students and foster a support system. Student veteran only orientations can be the beginning of building relationships and bonds among veterans and creating a positive introduction to campus life.

Just as important as the student support network developed by orientation, the student veteran advisor provides another dimension of support. DiRamio et al. (2008) stated, “If trained to provide adequate support for veterans, advisors can recognize special needs, offer credit transfer assistance, clarify education assistance programs, and ultimately prove vital to the student’s success” (p. 118). However, many institutions cannot provide a robust number of personnel for student veteran supports. Nevertheless, having just one person, such as a student veteran academic advisor to serve as a point of contact for veterans and their families is a step in the right direction.

Providing student, faculty, and staff education and professional development related to the student veteran community and combat-related PTSD, specifically, can help foster a campus environment and culture of understanding and acceptance of this community of students and their unique needs. Providing faculty and staff with education and professional development helps to not only educate those without any previous experience or knowledge of the veteran community or culture but also begins to create advocates on campus for student veterans (Altshuler & Yarab, 2018; Dillard & Yu, 2016). Taking ownership of training within academic departments and colleges will give the faculty a greater opportunity to connect with student veterans within their own discipline and introduce them to the needs of all student veterans. Areas that would be of benefit to provide professional development to faculty and staff regarding
student veterans include, GI Bill benefits, overview of the military culture and structure, mental health diagnoses specific to combat deployments, and validation and sensitivity training (Rumman & Bondi, 2014). If student veterans have a sense of being understood or at least recognized and respected on campus, they are more likely to be successful and acclimate to campus culture more effectively and with greater ease.

One way that supports are being implemented on college campuses is through faculty instruction and course design within “five principles of effective instructional practice identified by the NRC [National Research Council] …” (Lopez et al., 2016, p. 145). Connecting with students in the classroom helps to build rapport with them and create a more effective learning experience. The NRC outlined the five instructional practices as:

- building on students’ previous experiences (p.145);
- creating a social classroom environment for learning;
- meet diverse learning needs of students through differentiation;
- create instructional content that is relevant and organized; and
- solicit feedback and facilitate evaluations to gauge student learning (Lopez et al., 2016).

Using these principles in the classroom can support and validate student veteran experiences, establish skills and knowledge, and provide academic rigor to challenge the student.

Other programs, such as the “Green Zone” program, promote education to faculty and staff on college campuses, and cultivate safe spaces for student veterans to seek out guidance and support (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012). The Green Zone training program was developed by the Assistant Director of the Military and Veterans Programming Office at Texas Tech University in 2012. This program has truly been a grassroots effort in developing training for faculty and staff.
volunteers, with the goal of creating allies and advocates for student veterans to help them not only navigate college culture but also to help guide them to appropriate resources as needed. The structure and premise of the Green Zone program was developed based on the “safe spaces” programs for the LGBTQ community on college campuses (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012, p. 27).

While the Green Zone program was developed in July 2010 and based on the foundation of the “safe spaces” program, there are specific requirements of all participants who choose to participate in the program and serve as allies to student veterans on campus. All volunteer participants must have: “(1) [a] willingness to work with military students needing assistance; (2) attendance at a training session; and (3) agreement to publicly acknowledge they are military student-friendly” (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012, p.27). The major focus and goal of the Green Zone program is to develop allies for student veterans and ensure that those allies have a solid foundation of understanding of the veteran culture, the challenges that student veterans face, and how they can guide and direct student veterans to appropriate resources both on and off campus. Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) was the birthplace of the Green Zone program and it began as an effort to meet the needs of the increasing population of student veterans, as well as a response to the “2010 National Survey of Student Engagement [which] found that veterans reported feeling less support on campus than nonveteran students (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012, p. 26).

After the development and implementation of the Green Zone program on VCU’s campus, student veterans were surveyed to determine the level of success of the program based on responses from student veterans related to their transition to campus from the military, their awareness of the Green Zone program on campus, and their “perception and services at VCU for military students” (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012, p.28). The major take-away from the Green Zone
program initiative at VCU was that the majority of the 150 survey respondents (just under half of the total number of identified military students), indicated that they believed that the Green Zone program had made a difference in creating a more military/veteran-friendly culture on campus (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012).

**Military-Friendly Campus Culture**

There are many college campuses that proudly proclaim themselves as being military-friendly campuses. While there has not been one concrete definition of what a ‘military-friendly campus’ is, there are several overarching themes that are found throughout the literature. Typically, a military-friendly campus is one that accepts and supports student veterans and their culture; removes perceived barriers to academic success; and provides supports and services that are intentional in creating a culture of support academically, mentally, emotionally, and socially (Dillard & Yu, 2016; Heineman, 2016; Lokken et al., 2009; Moon & Schma, 2011).

There have been a few early leaders in the journey to develop more inclusive and military-friendly campuses. As a result of the GWOT one of these early, modern day pioneers was Western Michigan University. In 2007, Western Michigan University (WMU) realized the need to take a more proactive approach in supporting student veterans after noticing the difficulty of reintegration into civilian life following deployments (Moon & Schma, 2011). Being a military-friendly institution “refers to the intentional efforts made by campuses to identify and remove barriers to the educational goals of veterans and create a smooth transition from military to college life” (Moon & Schma, 2011, p. 54). One way that WMU demonstrated their military-friendly status was both simple and effective: listening to soldiers and veterans and providing a system of care (Moon & Schma, 2011). Aspects of this system of care has included identifying an advocacy office for student veterans and creating a Military and Veterans Student Association
Western Michigan University has worked to create a culture on campus that meets and exceeds the expectations of serving their student veteran population on campus; however, there are always areas in which improvement is needed. According to student veterans on WMU’s campus, there are two areas that could be improved upon; sensitivity training for faculty and staff regarding veterans and some type of mentoring program for student veterans (Moon & Schma, 2011).

While some institutions are taking the lead in creating a veteran or military-friendly campus, some states, such as Minnesota, are taking a statewide initiative to be recognized as military-friendly on their college campuses. This may seem uncharacteristic for a state that houses no active-duty military installations; however, Minnesota has a high number of deployed reserve and guard members. Due to the high number of deployed service members, members of the state level legislature and other key members of the state including the Chancellor of Minnesota St. Cloud University, the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, the University of Minnesota, the Minnesota Office of Higher Education, military members and their families, and community members and local veterans, worked to pass initiatives that would require state institutions to have dedicated space for a veterans resource center or office (Lokken et al., 2009). Originally, legislation also specifically outlined that college credit should be assigned to military training courses (Lokken et al., 2009). While not all states are at this level of student veteran support, Minnesota has created a potential blueprint for other states to follow.

The presence of student veterans on college campuses is not a new phenomenon; however, the numbers in which student veterans are using their education benefits and attending traditional campuses has continued to rise over the past 16 years, post 9/11. With the introduction of this group of students to traditional college classrooms, administration, faculty,
staff, and other students need to be aware of their unique needs for support. Most student veterans are older than traditional age college students; they have more life experience, more professional experience, more global aspects of life and culture, and are perceived as being more mature students overall. Furthermore, there is a significant population of student veteran students returning to higher education, or pursuing higher education for the first time, who experience PTSD, a TBI, depression, anxiety, and/or physical disabilities.

Faculty members in the classroom are encouraged to be sensitive to the unique perspectives of student veterans and respect the experiences that have shaped their views and beliefs. Support for student veterans goes beyond ensuring that their VA benefits are received by financial aid and creating a space for students to gather and socialize. Student veterans, specifically combat veterans, typically do not perceive a sufficient or robust amount of student support for individuals like themselves (Rumman & Bondi, 2014). Because student veterans are less likely to be involved on campus and seek out supports, as compared to their traditional student population peers (Rumann & Bondi, 2014), it is imperative that faculty and staff develop strategies to keep student veterans involved in more intentional and meaningful ways.

True support of the student veteran population includes providing area experts for personal counseling, academic counseling, career counseling, student groups that promote socializing and reaching out to other student groups, and collaboration across departments. Moreover, it requires faculty and staff to see student veterans as more than just their service. Many veterans have admitted that they have anxiety and are cautious about sharing their views in academic situations for fear of stereotypes that have been placed on them.

Supporting our student veterans means making classrooms and college campuses environments that welcome and acknowledge all viewpoints and experiences without
preconceived notions about the student. One way in which faculty can support student veterans within the classroom is by simply acknowledging and validating the student veteran experience and their ability to be successful in the classroom. Validation of students at both the personal level and academic level can be extremely important in setting the student on a course for success, especially when validation begins early within the student’s college career (Rumann & Bondi, 2014).

Gap in the Literature

The researcher has proposed to fill the gap in the literature related to the experience of student veterans on traditional college campuses. The literature related to student veterans did not appear in robust numbers until after 2001; most likely, this surge in research was due to the vast number of service members who had been deployed in combat during the Global War on Terror (GWOT), and who are now seeking to use their education benefits. Overall, the literature related to student veterans focuses on the transition of veterans from the military to the classroom; substance use and abuse by student veterans; student services provided to veterans; and the general mental health of student veterans. What is not present in the literature is a focus on student veterans, both active duty and retired, who have been deployed in association with the Global War on Terror (GWOT); who experience symptoms of PTSD; and who are currently pursuing their degree at a traditional university. For this study, the participant focus was at the flagship university in Alabama; the University of Alabama. Student veterans involved in the study may have attended classes in-person or virtually.

As Elliott (2015) stated, there is a need for more research regarding student veterans on campus and the effect their military service may have had on their college experience as well as how the culture and environment of “academia” influences the student veteran experience and
academic success (p. 106). Gregg and colleagues (2016) also explained that there is a great need for studying themes surrounding student veterans’ transition to college and how they fit in with the college culture.

**Theoretical Framework**

There have been various frameworks used to study student veterans within the higher education culture and processes within higher education that relate directly to student veterans. Some frameworks that are common to this body of literature are “positivist theories of organizational design” (Daly & Fox-Garrity, 2013, p. 6); stress process theory; Astin’s Student Involvement Theory; Schlossberg’s Transition theory; and social-cognitive theory. This researcher examined the student veteran experience through the lens of the newly developed framework of Vacchi’s Model of Student Veteran Support. This model focuses on the “individual student veteran” (p. 34) as well as the overall student veteran experience from a “holistic perspective” (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 34).

**Vacchi’s Model of Student Veteran Support**

Vacchi’s model of student veteran support is built upon the foundation of services, academic interactions, personal support, and transitional support, and all have the student veteran at the center (Vacchi, 2011, 2013). Each of these areas focuses on the student veteran as an individual as well as the influence of each in the overall higher education experience for the student veteran and path to degree completion. Vacchi’s model not only explores the ways in which higher education institutions can help the student veteran succeed in their transition from the military to college, but also focuses on the veteran as an individual and recognizes that there is no one specific pathway of support for all student veterans. Each student veteran experience must be viewed from a “holistic perspective” (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 34).
The first pillar in the model is services provided by the institution. Services provided for student veterans should be intentional and unique to their needs; services unique to student veterans are processing of Veterans Affairs education benefits, course evaluation and credit for military specific courses, and veteran specific disability accommodations (Vacchi, 2011, 2013). Next, transition supports are key in helping the veteran shift to life as a student. Some transition supports provided by the institution that are key in providing a positive college experience for student veterans include veteran only orientations, transition courses for student veterans to help navigate the new campus culture and terrain, and peer mentorship to help ease and direct the transition (Vacchi et al., 2017). Academic interactions are another key pillar that influence the student veteran experience on campus. These interactions comprise peer and faculty interactions and the setting in which interactions take place. Interactions outside the classroom are just as important and influential as those inside the classroom. The fourth pillar of this model is student veterans’ own personal supports. Personal supports that institutions can help facilitate include peer mentorships among student veterans on campus and information regarding support resources within the community.

Vacchi’s model, which focuses on student veterans and supports in making them successful on campus, has largely been developed and influenced by research from Bean and Metzner (1985) and Weidman (1985). Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a retention theory focusing on non-traditional and part-time students and the factors that influence their persistence and retention. A key component of this theory is recognizing that non-traditional students have greater influence of external factors on their persistence through college as compared to their traditional student peers, and the social aspect of college for non-traditional students is not as important or influential as it is for traditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Weidman (1985)
also developed a retention theory, however, this theory focused on traditional students and how the same framework would be beneficial in studying non-traditional students as well. One of the key differences between Weidman’s theory and Bean and Metzner’s theory is that Weidman suggested that the social integration of non-traditional students on campus was important to their success (Weidman, 1985). While each of these theories are based on retention, the idea of student engagement, faculty and peer interactions, and external influences are all woven throughout the theories and have a great influence on student experiences which in turn influence the persistence and retention rates of non-traditional students.

Exploring the student veteran experience through the lens of Vacchi’s Model of Student Veteran Support provides a closer look at how the overall college experience is built via various pillars or facets that support the student. For example, direct collegial interactions between students and faculty are as important to the student experience as personal interactions and supports outside of the classroom. The student veteran experience is not siloed to just the obvious social interactions: academic engagement and standard support services offered by the institution; rather, their experiences are the summation of the academic and personal supports offered both on and off campus, interactions and validation (or lack thereof) offered by faculty, and acceptance and understanding of their military service and combat by faculty and peers.

Summary

The research outlined in Chapter 2 has provided a solid foundation of the history of student veterans and how their presence on campus has evolved over time, as well as the evolution of services and programs targeted to support military and veteran students. The research tells us that access to higher education was increased by several federal government efforts by way of tuition assistance and paid tuition opportunities. While these opportunities lead
to greater numbers of student veterans or military student enrollment, the supports in place have been slower to evolve, however there has been an apparent effort by universities since the beginning of the GWOT, to provide greater services specific to the military and veteran student population. The research presented also explored the challenges in transition from the military to student life on a college campus, as well as the challenge of coping with symptoms of posttraumatic stress. In light of all of the previous research, this study will add to the body of literature by presenting the first-hand experience of student veterans at a large research institution in the state of Alabama, who also have symptoms of posttraumatic stress.

Conclusion

Chapter 2 explored literature related to the history of student veterans within higher education, the financial bills that have been passed to help support those efforts, and literature related to posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms that are most prevalently expressed among veterans. Additionally, this literature review explored the terminology around military-friendly campus designation, how this definition can vary between institutions, and how some institutions and states have strived to meet the needs of veterans. Based on this literature review, the researcher identified a gap in literature that this study can help to address: student veterans with PTSD or symptoms of PTSD and their experience as students on a college campus. To address this gap in the literature, a veteran-specific student experience framework was used to analyze study findings. Chapter 3 will outline the methodology for this qualitative study, the processes in which data were collected, and the rationale for participant selection.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of the experience of student veterans who have self-identified symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or have been diagnosed with PTSD, while also attending the University of Alabama. Additionally, the researcher explored the frequency with which student support services are used by student veterans and the extent to which these services are perceived as beneficial by the student veteran. As part of the student veteran experience, the frequency of use of the student veteran resource center and perceived benefits, if any, were investigated. The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of the student veteran on the college campus. For the purpose of this study, the student veteran was defined as any active duty, reserve military, or retired or separated military service members from any branch of the United States armed forces. While the main focus of the study was the experience of student veterans diagnosed with PTSD, all student veteran participant experience data were collected, reviewed, and analyzed. The lived experience of the student included their interactions with the Student Veterans’ Center on campus as well as their self-reported experiences and interactions between themselves, professors, and other students in the classroom (both in-person and virtual).

Previous research related to student veterans has been studied through the lens of grounded theory, such as the work by Kato et al. (2016) regarding student veteran transitions from the military to civilian life on campus. The foundation of this research was qualitative methodology, specifically a qualitative descriptive study. The rationale for pursuing a case study
research approach was to gather and ultimately, “provide an in-depth understanding of [the] case”, meaning the experience of military combat veterans at the University of Alabama, the state flagship institution (Creswell, 2013, p. 104). Another way to view the qualitative descriptive study is, “to produce a rich description and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of interest, the cultural or lived experience of people in natural settings” (Magilvy, 2003, p. 123). Qualitative studies in general have several common characteristics including a focus on the participant within their natural setting; this was especially true for this research because the focus was on the student veteran on a college campus. This qualitative study investigated the experience of multiple student veterans at the University of Alabama who have been diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder or had identified symptoms of PTSD and were currently enrolled and attending either in-person or virtual classes at the University of Alabama.

Qualitative data were derived from individual interviews with student veterans from the University of Alabama, and both undergraduate and graduate students participated in the study. These data were then analyzed for common themes leading to assertions of the study (Creswell, 2013). Each basic interview consisted of structured questions related to student veterans’ military service, combat exposure, posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms (if present), personal support system, social interactions on campus, academic progress, interactions with faculty and staff on campus, and, finally, the support services used on campus and frequency and effectiveness of said services.

This methodological approach was best for this research project due to the nature of the topic. Qualitative descriptive studies are not only common for research within the fields of education, psychology, and social sciences (Nassaji, 2015) but also this type of research seeks to understand the what of their experience, rather than the why of their experience (Nassaji, 2015).
Studying student veterans on college campuses who experience symptoms of PTSD is not just a study of a specific group of students, but also a study of a phenomenon taking place among this group. There is a sub-group of student veterans who are experiencing effects from PTSD, and outsiders to that community do not fully understand the breadth and depth of how those effects are affecting their holistic student experience. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of this student group’s experiences and how the leadership on college campuses can better meet this group’s needs and successfully support them.

**Research Questions**

The researcher explored the following research questions via semi-structured interviews with military combat student veterans enrolled at the University of Alabama:

**Purpose:** What is the experience of student veterans with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder attending the University of Alabama?

1. What symptoms of posttraumatic stress do student veterans most frequently experience?
2. Which university support services do student veterans most frequently use and how do they view those services?
3. What feelings of acceptance or alienation, from both faculty and student peers, do student veterans experience?

**Site Selection and Rationale**

The researcher chose to conduct this study within the state of Alabama due to an abundance of military installations within the state and the proximity of installations to higher education institutions within the state. The state of Alabama is home to several military installations including: Ft. Rucker, Enterprise, AL; Redstone Arsenal, Huntsville, AL; Maxwell
Airforce Base, Montgomery, AL; Anniston Army Depot Base, Bynum, AL; Aviation Training Center Coast Guard Base, Mobile, AL; and Ft. McClelan Army Base, Anniston, AL. In addition to the five active duty bases around Alabama, there are numerous military reservist and National Guard soldiers throughout the state. There are a number of notable higher education institutions near each of these active duty installations throughout Alabama. For this study, the flagship institution of Alabama, the University of Alabama, was chosen as the site of this study. This site was selected based on its status as a public, state-funded institution in proximity to military installations and the high potential of student veterans in the areas surrounding the institution.

Table 5 outlines the initially proposed institutions for this study, including Fall 2018 enrollment totals, the institutional research classification, the number of students receiving VA educational benefits for the academic year 2017-2018, and whether or not the institution identifies as being military-friendly (indicated by the notation of being a Yellow Ribbon School). All three institutions are within the University of Alabama system; therefore, all are public and state-funded institutions. While the researcher chose to focus the study at one institution, the University of Alabama, due to reasons previously mentioned, all institutions within the system have the potential to benefit from the findings of the study. If the findings and suggestions for implementing new processes and supports are supported by the institution and system, an even greater number of student veterans will benefit from the outcomes of this study.
Table 5  
*Public Universities within the State of Alabama*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Research Classification</th>
<th>FA 2018 Enrollment</th>
<th>AY 2017-2018 Veteran Benefit* Recipients</th>
<th>Yellow Ribbon School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The University of Alabama</td>
<td>Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity</td>
<td>38390</td>
<td>1209</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Alabama at Birmingham</td>
<td>Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity</td>
<td>21923</td>
<td>603</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Alabama in Huntsville</td>
<td>Doctoral Universities: High Research Activity</td>
<td>9736</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Benefits include Post-9/11 GI Bill & DoD Tuition Assistance

*Note. Information was gathered from both recent IPEDS data as well as individual institutional websites.

**Participant Selection and Rationale**

To begin the participant selection process, the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs (OVMA) at the University of Alabama was asked to disseminate information regarding the student veteran study. The OVMA sent out an informational email describing the study, the research participants qualifications, as well as the process for expressing interest in participation of the study. Along with the informational email, an informational flyer was included in the communication. The flyer, which is part of the submitted IRB documentation, can be found on page 150 within Appendix B.

The OVMA provides services to 3,186 students as of Fall 2020. Of these 3,186 students, only 892 are classified as either active duty, a reservist, or a veteran. The remaining registered students within the OVMA are military dependents; this means they are either the spouse of, or the dependent of, the military service member. Unfortunately for this study, there is no way of knowing exactly how many student veterans are actually enrolled with the university. Student veterans are not required to register with the OVMA or self-disclose their veteran status unless they are utilizing military benefits. It is possible that there are more student veterans on campus...
that are not utilizing military education benefits, therefore they are not registered with the university.

Participants selected for this study were recruited based on their participation in military combat deployments. If a student was deployed at least once during the Global War on Terror (GWOT) to one of the areas involved in the GWOT (Iraq and/or Afghanistan), then that student met the required deployment parameters set for this study. All participation within the study was voluntary and students were notified of the opportunity to participate in the study via email communications sent by their Veterans’ Affairs personnel at the University of Alabama. Students were asked to complete a brief questionnaire to express their interest in the study. Once students submitted this request, the researcher reached out to them individually to coordinate a virtual meeting time to conduct the research interview.

While all military combat veteran students were encouraged to participate, all were asked about their experiences with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and if this is a challenge that they are currently working through or coping with. Students who self-identified as having PTSD or symptoms of PTSD were the primary focus of this study. This study was open to all ages of veterans (both active and retired), as well as any gender, length of service time, branch of service, and rank at the time of separation from the military. The goal was to gather a sample size of between 20 and 30 students to participate in the interview and data collection process. Of the 892 student veterans who were notified by the OVMA of the research participation opportunity, only 29 qualified student veterans expressed interest in participating. Of the 29 student veterans whom expressed interest, only 22 of those student veterans responded to my request to connect for an interview. It was determined that the point of saturation was reached when interest in participation became stagnant and interviews revealed a great overlap in response to interview
questions. At the point in which interviews among 22 participants had taken place, there were no
new themes emerging. Saunders et al. (2017) defined this type of saturation as “inductive
thematic saturation” (p. 1897). Student veterans across all services and active duty status were
encouraged to participate in this study. Previous studies focusing on student veteran collegiate
experience emphasized mainly the transition between military and civilian life, rather than their
actual experiences as a student (Borsari et al., 2017; Faulkey, 2016; Jinkerson et al., 2016). The
goal of this study was to fill the gap of understanding the experience of student veterans across
branches and service status: active, reservists, guard members, and retired veterans.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with volunteer
research participants from the University of Alabama. Study participants were recruited through
the Veterans Affairs office on campus through information dissemination via email. The goal of
this researcher was to conduct between 20 and 30 semi-structured interviews in total. Once a
substantial sample size of students had volunteered and individuals were selected, interviews
were scheduled virtually. Due to the impact of social gathering and campus closures, meeting in-
person for interviews was not aligned with institution guidelines. Virtual interviews all took
place via Zoom; the researcher had a designated Zoom account for this study. Phone interviews
were offered as needed however all participants chose to meet via Zoom. All data were collected
digitally via voice recording provided through the Zoom account and then transcribed for data
analysis. Prior to beginning the participant recruitment and interviews, the researcher had already
taken into account that remote or virtual interviews were going to be the preferred method of
communication.
Data Collection and Analysis

Student participants were enrolled at the University of Alabama at the time of their respective interview. While it would have been preferred to conduct interviews in-person, COVID-19 restrictions and guidelines necessitated the use of technology. All interviews were conducted one-on-one and were recorded via Zoom software. It was the goal of the researcher to ensure that students were in a familiar environment that provided comfort to them in order to mitigate any unnecessary stressors due to the sensitivity of the subject matter. All interviews were conducted in a space that allowed for as few distractions and noise interruptions as possible. The researcher conducted all interviews from her home office, which provided privacy and minimal distractions or interruptions. The researcher and participants communicated via email to determine the best date and time for the interview to take place. All participants joined the Zoom session from their choice of location; most participants joined the meeting from their own home, dorm room, or vehicle. While the data reflected that participants were enrolled at the University of Alabama, all identifying information related to the individual participant was redacted and the identity of each participant was kept confidential. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant so that individual student veteran’s stories could be told and direct quotes attributed when appropriate.

The interview protocol, along with the interview questions, can be found in Appendix A. The interview questions listed in Appendix A are linked back to the research questions. Interviews were recorded via Zoom and the audio file for each interview was then transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. Once all interviews were successfully transcribed, the transcriptions were thoroughly reviewed, and common terms and phrases were manually recorded. Similar and consistent terms and phrases were then grouped and categorized into themes across all
participants. Consistent with the case study approach to research, data were reviewed and coded and then categorized into themes (Creswell, 2013). Once themes were derived from the data, the researcher then determined what the overall interpretation of the data revealed in relation to the research questions presented. It was assumed that “naturalistic generalizations” would be formed from the data and emergent themes (Creswell, 2013, p. 200). These generalizations are provided to the reader for a better holistic understanding of the experiences of student veterans with PTSD on college campuses.

In addition to Appendix A which outlines the interview questions within the protocol, the table below provides a cross walk which links each of the research questions with the related pillar of Vacchi’s student veteran experience model, as well as, provides the interview questions which address each research question. The extent to which each of these connections were proven successful in deriving data, will be further explored in Chapter 5.
**Table 6**

**Summary of Research Questions, Theoretical Framework, and Interview Questions**

**Purpose:** What is the experience of student veterans with symptoms of posttraumatic stress, attending the University of Alabama?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theoretical Framework related to RQ</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What symptoms of posttraumatic stress do student veterans most frequently experience?</td>
<td><strong>Services:</strong> The first key area for supporting student veterans and their experience are services provided to veterans are one of the most frequently discussed areas to help veterans overcome obstacles (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 35).</td>
<td>1. What symptoms or behaviors do you experience on a daily basis that are related to PTSD?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Transition Support:</strong> The second area for supporting student veterans and their experience is transition support. This is an area to help student veteran success in supporting them in overcoming obstacles during the transition to and through college (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 35).</td>
<td>2. How have symptoms of PTSD affected your ability to adapt to student life on a college campus?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Academic Interactions:</strong> The third key area of supporting student veterans and their experience is with academic interactions, which involve frequency and intimacy of contact (in and outside of the classroom) with classroom peers and faculty (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 36).</td>
<td>4. To what extent, if any, have you shared your combat experience and PTSD with your professors and/or student peers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Support:</strong> The fourth area for supporting student veterans and their experience is the effect personal support has on student veterans. The support can include both peer supports and support from external (off-campus) services (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 36).</td>
<td>6. What does your individual support system look like?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Transition Support:** The second area for supporting student veterans and their experience is transition support. This is an area to help student veteran success in supporting them in overcoming obstacles during the transition to and through college (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 35).

**Academic Interactions:** The third key area of supporting student veterans and their experience is with academic interactions, which involve frequency and intimacy of contact (in and outside of the classroom) with classroom peers and faculty (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 36).

**Support:** The fourth area for supporting student veterans and their experience is the effect personal support has on student veterans. The support can include both peer supports and support from external (off-campus) services (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 36).

10. In what ways do you feel that the support services have helped you transition from your military service to life as a student veteran?

11. Do you feel heard and accepted for your own belief system by your peers and professors?

12. Please give me a brief narrative of what your college experience, as a student veteran with PTSD, has been to this point.

13. Given that these times across higher education have been quite uncertain with the onset of the pandemic of COVID-19 settling across not only the nation but also the world, there has to be an acknowledgement of these current events. With the closing of the university for the spring 2020 semester as well as the shift in course delivery and the uncertainty of the fall 2020 semester, how has this affected you as a student?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Services: The first key area for supporting student veterans and their experience are services provided to veterans are one of the most frequently discussed areas to help veterans overcome obstacles (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 35).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14. As a student veteran, do you feel that having posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or symptoms of PTSD, has affected the way you have processed and reacted to the pandemic?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Are there any other questions that you believe would be helpful for me to ask to better understand your experience as a student veteran?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Which university support services do student veterans most frequently use?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support: The fourth area for supporting student veterans and their experience is the effect personal support has on student veterans. The support can include both peer supports and support from external (off-campus) services (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 36).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What does your individual support system look like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. To what extent do you use student support services at your institution?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What services do you use that are provided by your institution?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What feelings of acceptance or alienation from both faculty and student peers do student veterans experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Services:</strong> The first key area for supporting student veterans and their experience are services provided to veterans. These are one of the most frequently discussed areas to help veterans overcome obstacles (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 35).</td>
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<td><strong>Transition Support:</strong> The second area for supporting student veterans and their experience is transition support. This is an area to help student veteran success in supporting them in overcoming obstacles during the transition to and through college (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 35).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Please give me a brief narrative of what your college experience, as a student veteran with PTSD, has been to this point.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How have symptoms of PTSD affected your ability to adapt to student life on a college campus?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Academic Interactions: | 3. What has your overall impression been of the acceptance and tolerance of your combat and military service among peers, professors, and administration?
| Academic Interactions: | 4. To what extent, if any, have you shared your combat experience and PTSD with your professors and/or student peers?
| Academic Interactions: | 5. What have been some of the reactions or responses that you have received from your professors and/or student peers?
| Support: | 6. What does your individual support system look like?

Academic Interactions: The third key area of supporting student veterans and their experience is with academic interactions, which involve frequency and intimacy of contact (in and outside of the classroom) with classroom peers and faculty (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 36).

Support: The fourth area for supporting student veterans and their experience is the effect personal support has on student veterans. The support can include both peer supports and support from external (off-campus) services (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 36).
Academic Interactions: The third key area of supporting student veterans and their experience is with academic interactions, which involve frequency and intimacy of contact (in and outside of the classroom) with classroom peers and faculty (Vacchi et al., 2017, p. 36).

11. Do you feel heard and accepted for your own belief system by your peers and professors?

12. Please give me a brief narrative of what your college experience as a student veteran with PTSD has been to this point.

15. Are there any other questions that you believe would be helpful for me to ask, to better understand your experience as a student veteran?

Delimitations

A delimitation of this study is related to access of the exact numbers of veterans at the University of Alabama. Currently, reporting of education benefits distributed by the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs is the best access point of gaining a sense of how many veterans are utilizing education benefits on college campuses. While the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs does report on how many of those using benefits are actual veterans as well as dependents who are using the education benefits, those same statistical breakdowns are not currently available by state and institution. Within the IPEDS system, each institution reports how many students are using education benefits, specifically the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the DoD Tuition Assistance. However, the university within this study does not require that veterans report themselves as such on campus and the total number of veterans and dependents is not recorded. Any record of military veterans on campus is based on self-reporting to the institution.
Prior to data collection and analysis, the researcher made initial contact with the University of Alabama Veterans and Military Affairs Office to request verbal consent to work with the institution and veterans after successfully proposing the prospectus to the assigned program committee at the University of Alabama. The points of contact at the university were familiar with the purpose of this study and the goal of interviewing a total of 20 to 30 student veterans across varying degree levels at the university. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic of this research study, it was imperative to stress the confidentiality of the content of the interviews for each participant. Some individuals were still on active-duty status and their careers could be potentially impacted if information revealed in their interview were to be made public knowledge. All participants were given a pseudonym for purposes of publishing data and findings.

**Positionality Statement**

Researchers choosing to conduct qualitative research studies may do so in part because of a personal interest in the research topic and to have the opportunity to tell the story of the group of participants or of the case; this holds true for this qualitative study regarding student veterans. Cresswell (2013) notes that researchers innately bring a piece of themselves into their writing and that, “writing of a qualitative text cannot be separated from the author…” (p. 215). It is crucial for a researcher and writer to be aware of their own biases and preconceived ideas regarding the topic of research, as well as, the research participant population (Cresswell, 2013).

As the wife of a retired service member and avid supporter of the military community, my interest of student veterans’ experiences on college campuses and the extent to which their symptoms of posttraumatic stress influence their experiences as a student, came very naturally to me. I have been surrounded by the military community since my own undergraduate experience.
The university I attended for my undergraduate degree is in a military-centered city and community. There were many active-duty and formerly active-duty service members on campus. It was in my second year of college that the climate across our country changed dramatically due to the attacks on September 11, 2001. Throughout my college years, I had several friends who joined the military, deployed to combat, and unfortunately, I had friends who died in combat.

It wasn’t until my senior year of college that I met my husband who was active-duty military and had already been deployed as part of the beginning of the Global War on Terror (GWOT). In addition to having a passion for supporting our military service members, I began my education career with the intention of serving in a (K-12) teacher role, and later in a counselor role, for schools located on military bases (these are known as Department of Defense Education Activity schools). Being a military wife, I found myself changing my physical job location or career path every few years, due to moving to a different military base every three years. In 2010, I shifted my career path to focus on higher education. It was this job that allowed me to begin interacting with graduate students from various backgrounds to include military backgrounds as well. I noticed that I found myself more closely aligned with many of our military or former military students; there is a certain level of familiarity with other military connected individuals that is unspoken and understood.

As a military spouse, I am aware that I have experiences and have been exposed to situations and cultures that many civilians have not had the opportunity to experience. Many of these experiences and relationships developed, have directly influenced my own biases, values, viewpoints, and political standing. My assumption is that if I have been so greatly impacted by my experiences as a military spouse, those who have served and been deployed in association with the GWOT have also been shaped similarly.
The intersectionality of my personal connection with military service members, to include my own husband, my professional interest in mental health, and my personal and professional experiences with service members in the classroom and on college campuses, lead me to this research study. Over the past 16 years of my career, I have had the opportunity to work with post-secondary students at the undergraduate level, as well as, the graduate level, both civilian and military affiliated. I have also had the opportunity to work in the field of mental health care and have studied posttraumatic stress as part of my professional career.

**Figure 2**

*Positionality Statement Venn Diagram*

![Positionality Statement Venn Diagram](image)

**Ethical Considerations**

When deciding upon my research topic and what issues within higher education that I wanted to address, I knew that the military and veteran community was at the heart of my interest. I also understood that being a military wife and proud supporter of our military could potentially be seen as a conflict of interest when conducting interviews. When deciding upon my interview questions, I made sure to structure the interview and protocol in a way that would not be leading to the participant. I did share my own military adjacent affiliation with participants and the sharing of this information seemed to provide a sense of comfort and level of familiarity for the participant.
All interviews for the study were conducted via Zoom in a virtual setting. Because of restrictions due to COVID, this was the most appropriate avenue for conducting interviews. These interviews were recorded and transcribed and stored within my personal password protected cloud-based storage account provided by the University of Alabama. The protection of participants’ interviews and data results was of the utmost importance, and I made sure to adhere to all suggested and submitted storage guidelines that were submitted to the University of Alabama’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

In addition to receiving approval from the University of Alabama’s IRB, I also provided all participants with an informed consent document. This document was received by participants prior to our interview, and I reviewed the document with all participants as part of the interview and provided them with the verbal acknowledgement that they were free to stop or pause the interview at any time without consequence.

**Trustworthiness**

Quality assurance, or determination of the trustworthiness of the data, is an important step within the qualitative research and report writing process. The purpose of establishing the trustworthiness of the data is to ensure that data collected is as accurate as possible and is in line with the spirit of conversation and line of questions provided to the participants. Throughout the individual interviews, I was sure to disclose my personal interest in studying student veteran experiences, as well as the fact that I am a military spouse and higher education professional. I encouraged participants to ask follow-up questions and paused throughout the interview to clarify answers and paraphrase comments back to the participants to clarify their meaning and my understanding. As part of the process to establish trustworthiness, I followed the process of member checking, as defined by Cresswell (2013). Cresswell (2013), defines member checking
as the process of, “solicit[ing] participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations” (p.252).

Following the interviews and transcription of all interviews, I sent a copy of the respective transcript to each participant and asked for their feedback and confirmation that the transcript reflected their true words and meaning and asked for any corrections if needed. I asked all participants to review and submit any clarifications or corrections within 48 hours of receipt of the email. This process of providing the participants with the transcription of the interview, along with requesting feedback and clarification if needed, is referred to as, “writ large” (Cresswell, 2013, p.252). Of the participants who responded to my outreach regarding the transcripts and request for feedback, all participants agreed that the transcripts captured the accuracy, spirit and intent of the interview and they had no corrections or clarifications to provide.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 presented the methodological approach the researcher used throughout the study. Due to the nature of the topic as well as the participants who were involved, a qualitative case study approach was selected for studying the experience of student veterans with PTSD or symptoms of PTSD on a college campus. Participants were selected from the University of Alabama based on their status as a military veteran who deployed as part of the Global War on Terror (GWOT).

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews as well as publications review relative to the institution. Interviews were transcribed and data were then coded and categorized into themes. As part of the process of establishing trustworthiness of the data, all participants were given copies of their respective transcripts and provided with an
opportunity to review and provide feedback and / or clarification of the text. Results from data collection and analysis are intended to contribute to a greater understanding of the research questions presented.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain greater insight and understanding of the experience of student veterans, who have self-identified symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or a confirmed diagnosis of PTSD, while attending the University of Alabama. The study consisted of 22 qualitative interviews with student veterans from the University of Alabama, who exhibited symptoms of PTSD. Chapter 4 summarizes findings that were concluded from the interviews, including the themes that were identified through the coding process (Creswell, 2013). This study was designed to address the following research questions:

Purpose: What is the experience of student veterans with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder attending the University of Alabama?

1. What symptoms of posttraumatic stress do student veterans most frequently experience?

2. Which university support services do student veterans most frequently use and how do they view those services?

3. What feelings of acceptance or alienation, from both faculty and student peers, do student veterans experience?
For this study, student veterans at the University of Alabama who served in the military and were deployed at some point during their military service career as part of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) were interviewed in fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters. Students were recruited for the study through an outreach from the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs (OVMA) at the University of Alabama. An email was distributed to students within the OVMA listserv, with a crafted message, description, and flyer outlining the research study and target population for the study. In addition to exploring the experiences of student veterans at the University of Alabama, student veterans with symptoms of PTSD were the major focus of the research study. Students were asked to complete a Google form to express their interest in participating if they met the following criteria: student veterans must (a) be current students, (b) served in one of the branches of the United States Military, and (c) deployed in association with the Global War on Terror (GWOT). There were 35 total responses from student veterans at the University of Alabama. Of those respondents, one was not a current student; therefore, this individual did not qualify for the study. An additional six respondents did not qualify for the study because they did not deploy in association with the GWOT. Of the 29 qualified students, 22 participated in individual interviews via Zoom. Although the original intent was to meet with student veterans in-person, either on campus or at an agreed upon location, interviews were conducted via Zoom due to the current pandemic of COVID-19. Exigent circumstances included social distancing recommendations and the transition of courses and programs to remote platforms.
Participants

Student veterans at the University of Alabama were recruited through the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs at the University of Alabama (UA). Of those students who received the email requesting participation in the research study related to student veterans, their experience at UA, and their symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, 29 qualified individuals expressed interest and 22 met the criteria for the study.

Participants were of various ages, branches of service, rank, education level, and number of past deployments associated with the Global War on Terror. The overwhelming majority of participants were male, affiliated with the United States Army, and between the ages of 34 and 41. One female veteran participated in the study and was former active duty Army; she had recently transitioned to the Army National Guard. Most participants separated from the military less than 15 years from date of service entry and were at an enlisted (non-officer) rank at the time of separation.

Table 7, outlines demographic, education level, and service-related data for all 22 student veteran participants (see Appendix C).

Major Themes of the Study

The major findings of the study are outlined in the subsequent paragraphs throughout this chapter. These findings were derived from the results of participant interviews as they described their own experiences as student veterans at the University of Alabama as well as their experiences with symptoms of posttraumatic stress symptoms and how these symptoms have influenced their experiences. The major themes that developed from the analysis of the interviews are outlined below.
1. All participants in the study expressed at least one defined symptom of posttraumatic stress.

2. Student veterans in this study experienced a disconnect with peers and/or professors at both the undergraduate level and graduate level.

3. The identity of student veterans is multifaceted, and their cultural views and values are at times in conflict with the culture of academia.

4. Student veterans services are minimally used by student veterans,

5. The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 – 2021 provided some challenges for student veterans, yet there was an overwhelming expression of resiliency and ability to adapt to tumultuous circumstances.

Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms

Posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are frequently used interchangeably although they are very different in their respective definitions. At the beginning of this study, the main focus was on those student veterans with PTSD, however, it was revealed through interviews, that while there were some student veterans with a diagnosis of PTSD, many were actually experiencing PTSS. Posttraumatic stress symptoms differ from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in that those with PTSS have the symptoms associated with PTSD but have not developed the disorder. Biggs et al., (2019) best explained PTSS as:

[PTSS] often develop after exposure to a traumatic event and are associated with clinically significant distress and impairment. PTSS include intrusive re-experiencing of the traumatic event, persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the event, negative alterations in cognitions and mood, and marked alterations in arousal and reactivity. (p. 1)
Posttraumatic stress disorder develops when those symptoms of PTSS are great in severity, frequency, and the extent of number of symptoms is numerous (Biggs et al., 2019).

Symptoms revealed by study participants were varied in tone; however, there were many consistencies in the most frequently expressed symptoms experienced as a student veteran. Through the process of in vivo coding, the most highly identified symptoms were identified. These terms encompassed many of the other terms used to describe symptoms by the participants. The following paragraphs explore the most frequently expressed posttraumatic symptoms that student veterans reported experiencing while attending the University of Alabama. The image below gives a visualization of the most frequently expressed terms and symptoms shared by participants. The larger the term is represented, the higher the number of instances in which the symptom was expressed by participants.

**Figure 3**

*Visualization of the Most Frequently Expressed Terms by Participants Related to Posttraumatic Symptoms*
Anxiety. Over half of participants explicitly expressed that they experienced anxiety regularly, if not on a daily basis. Of the 22 participants, 12 explicitly named anxiety as being a symptom of PTSD that they experienced and routinely struggled to overcome. There were several others who expressed symptoms that mirrored anxiety without explicitly naming anxiety. The connection between anxiety and the student experience was expressed by many as a result of no longer being in the military and the uncertainty of the future. Others reported believed belief that the source of their anxiety was part of their posttraumatic stress symptoms but did not identify a specific rationale for their anxiety. For many of the student veterans interviewed, anxiety was only one symptom of many that they struggled with regularly. Ezra, a former non-commissioned officer in the Marine Corps, shared what his experience was like when transitioning from the military and how he experienced symptoms of posttraumatic stress:

In the beginning, I didn’t realize it [the posttraumatic stress symptoms]. When I first separated [from the Marine Corps], I felt like I had an identity crisis. And then that just sort of threw me into a depression and it just got worse. From there, I started drinking a lot more. I couldn’t sleep. I felt angry. I was very hostile. I would have panic attacks every other day. My anxiety was through the roof.

Ezra confirmed that his anxiety continued as he began his academic career at the University of Alabama and noted that it was exacerbated during the past year due to the isolation demands brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Isolation is a common theme among many veterans returning from combat and carries over into their college experience (Campbell & Riggs, 2015). Not only have Ezra and other student veterans been coping with symptoms of posttraumatic stress and managing their role as a student, but now those symptoms have been compounded by forced isolation:
Because I’m forced to be more isolated, and there’s not too much interaction, I think it affects my PTSD in a couple of ways. I think it affects me because I don’t have the option to connect with students or to be able to at least get out of my comfort zone a little bit. And because of the isolation, it is just creating and inducing more anxiety; it is just keeping me more indoors and isolated from the world.

This was not the only account of student veterans within the study expressing their feelings of anxiety and how it related to their experiences at the University of Alabama. Reese, a student veteran who served in the Marine Corps, also expressed feeling great anxiety directly related to his performance in school:

I want to do well in school, but it has a military kind of smell to it, where it’s if I don’t do well, I’m letting people down, but it’s like fundamentally, I know that’s not true. But I need to do well, because that’s my job now.

Reese further explained how his anxiety was also triggered when working with younger students due to what he perceived to be their lack of structure, his sense of urgency to complete a project, or what he perceived to be their lackadaisical nature and approach in the classroom. Having a baseline anxiety level as result of military service and combat deployments, these student veterans were now experiencing another layer of complexity in terms of their anxiety and triggering events that may not be as prominent in other students who seek a degree later in life.

**Hypervigilance and loud noises.** Hyper-vigilance and sensitivity to loud noises were common symptoms of those who had a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder, especially those who had served in military combat. Approximately half of participants expressed feelings of hypervigilance and sensitivity to loud noise. For most, they did not elaborate too much on their feelings of being overly alert or hypervigilant. Several student veterans shared their feelings
and experiences related to their own hypervigilance and sensitivity to loud noises; Lance, a former enlisted Marine, expressed his hyper-vigilance in the context of how he coped daily.

I don’t get really too startled by loud noises or anything like that. But I’m hyper alert, always. You know, like, maybe to the point of detriment maybe. I lock all the doors. I brief the family on what we are going to do if someone breaks in; stuff like that. So, whenever we go out to eat, I have to make sure I’m sitting near the door, have a weapon, see the door; you know, stuff like that. It’s not destructive, but it’s so much.

Lance’s example of how hypervigilance influences his own daily life, hyper-alertness that affects his experience on a college campus since there are certain rules on campus that prevent him from carrying himself in a manner that eases his symptoms. When asked how explicitly this affected his day-to-day experience on campus, Lance provided further insights regarding how he coped while on campus:

I don’t think there is too much [of an issue]. The only issue is that I can’t have a weapon on campus. I think that’s the only thing that bothers me; I am in the hands of the faculty and the security guards, who don’t have weapons either. That is the only thing that makes me a little uneasy… but I am still able to function.

While this statement may be jarring to some who are not as comfortable with self-defense weapons, this is the reality of someone who has served in the military, been trained to properly handle a weapon, and has a sense of duty and protection for those around them. This hypervigilance and sense of protection can easily stir up feelings of anxiety. Waylon, an active duty, enlisted soldier in the Army, also expressed hypervigilance as a major symptom of PTSD that he experienced routinely. His symptoms were very similar to Lance’s:
[I experience] mainly hypervigilance. Not being able to have my back turned towards a large group or door going out into the streets. I am constantly scanning for IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices). The way I walk, I’ll point randomly as I am walking, and I realize that I was behaving like a point man on patrol. You can’t just stop the patrol every time you may see a suspected IED, but you want to tell the guy behind you.

Another aspect of the hypervigilance that several participants discussed was that of sensitivity to loud noises. While some did not attribute loud noises as being a trigger, like Lance, there were others who explicitly named loud noises as being a trigger for them. Ollie, a former Army officer, identified sensitivity to loud noises as something he has struggled with as a result of his combat deployments and based on “the number of mortar and rocket attacks I went through”.

Lastly, Quinton, a former enlisted Navy Sailor, also expressed feelings of hypervigilance: however, he described his symptoms in a slightly different way:

Being in big crowds is really, really difficult. There’s always a paranoia factor; are people watching me? Are people paying attention to what I’m doing? When I know that most of the time, people are really just doing their own thing.

Quinton elaborated about how feelings of hypervigilance and paranoia can quickly take him down the path of social anxieties. Those social anxieties affect his abilities to develop relationships with new acquaintances and influence his ability to socialize and communicate with others. This was another example of how intertwined these symptoms can truly be. While many student veterans experienced similar symptoms related to PTSD, the ways in which those symptoms presented themselves varied widely.
**Depression.** Depression and anxiety, while each has its own diagnosis and treatment, are more frequently than not diagnosed in tandem. However, based on the findings of this study, while depression was expressed as a symptom of PTSD that participants experienced, only half of those who named anxiety as a symptom they dealt with regularly also mentioned depression. Approximately one-third of study participants mentioned depression as part of their PTSD. Many of the participants struggled with depression chose not to elaborate on specific details. However, Benjamin, a former enlisted Army solider, gave a very poignant and direct account of his feelings and how his symptoms of depression made him feel:

> I have depression. I have social isolation. I have a lack of trust and my fight or flight response is always active. I have a hard time calming down, and I tend to not enjoy anything. I tend to not feel worthy of love. I have a hard time staying in the moment. I am afraid and ashamed; guilty. I am troubled and feel misled in a lot of ways. I [have] felt let down and disappointed by those who I served with and my country.

Benjamin expressed a wide range of feelings and symptoms that tied back to PTSD; however, the root of his statement revolved around depression and feelings of hopelessness and defeat. Other participants, such as Useff, a formerly enlisted Marine, expressed that while he had depression, he still acknowledged that he had “significant” issues from PTSD and was striving to adjust to life outside of the military. He stated that one of the only times he feels normal is when he is working.

Waylon, who is currently an active duty solider in the U.S. Army, had just recently become aware of his PTSD symptoms and named depression as a major symptom alongside anxiety and hypervigilance. Waylon indicated that he had been in denial for so long about having those feelings that he had convinced himself that they were not present. Finally, those symptoms
came to a head when he had what he described as a “break” and needed to seek out help. After meeting with a physician and psychologist, Waylon was diagnosed with PTSD. In his mind, things began to make more sense in terms of how he felt mentally; he explained some of the thought processes that helped lead him to this realization:

Once I started getting depressed and started losing it, or losing interest in things that kept me busy; when my brain stopped thinking; when I didn’t care about those hobbies anymore, I knew I was depressed. That’s when everything came out, you know; I stopped the thoughts for the first time in 10 years and that’s when it all rushed back.

Waylon had been suppressing symptoms of PTSD, namely depression, and it had affected many aspects of his life including his support structure, family, and success in his classes.

Depression can affect individuals in many different ways, and this group of student veterans was no different. Some simply acknowledged that they struggled with depression, while others not only acknowledged it but identified other facets of their life and how depression affected them. Participant accounts by Benjamin, Useff, and Waylon, were just a few examples of the ways in which depression presented itself for student veterans with PTSD. These few examples encompassed the sentiments of others in the study who also expressed feelings of depression.

**Nightmares/Sleeplessness.** A co-occurrence of depression and anxiety that may present in those with PTSD is sleeplessness, insomnia, and/or nightmares and night terrors. This was true among responses from study participants as well. Approximately half of participants explicitly named sleeplessness or nightmares/night terrors as something with which they battled. George, a retired U.S. Army soldier, noted that he would experience nightmares and his wife would find him punching in the air in his sleep. Another former U.S. Army soldier, Ira, noted that he
struggled with sleeplessness to the point that he relied on prescription medication to aid him in nightly sleep. Another effect of the medication was that it keeps him from remembering his nightmares and flashbacks that he had experienced.

Naturally, it is a logical conclusion that those who experience difficulty sleeping and frequent nightmares and night terrors, will also experience symptoms of exhaustion and other related symptoms such as difficulty focusing and memory issues. For participants who expressed sleeplessness and nightmares, they also expressed feelings of hypervigilance, anxiety, and depression. While participants chose not to disclose the details of nightmares they experienced, there was an overarching theme of nightmares being related to flashbacks from their military service. The resulting exhaustion from the sleeplessness carried over into their individual personal lives. Such was the case with Vance, a former U.S. Army soldier, who struggled to balance his irregular sleep cycles with having a newborn baby in the house. Others, such as Samuel, another former U.S. Army soldier, noted this about his symptoms:

The most prolific [symptoms] would be frequent panic attacks and nightmares. [I have] general heightened anxiety in different situations. At this point, I am so aware of those things that it doesn’t really hinder my day-to-day; it’s just something that I have to learn how to live with.

For study participants who expressed sleeplessness and nightmares, they each exhibited additional symptoms of PTSD including anxiety, panic attacks, depression, hypervigilance, distrust of others, self-isolation, memory loss, difficulty focusing, anger, and bouts of excessive alcohol usage. It is important to note that typically those with PTSD do not experience sleeplessness in isolation.
**Guilt.** A phrase that several participants echoed several times and, in many ways, represented their feelings of not being worthy. They suggested that other veterans sacrificed more than they did and their own personal injuries, visible or invisible, were not as great and deserving of attention. The phrase, *others have it way worse*, was a sentiment that seemed to underscore many of the conversations with participants. The guilt experienced by participants in direct relation to their military service, combat exposure, or lack of combat exposure manifested in different ways. Teddy, a former U.S. Air Force Airman expressed his feelings of service and recognition:

> I have my personal qualms. When people actually thank me for my service or make comments about sacrificing so much…. Because while I was in the military, and I do technically have 1500 combat hours, knowing what other people went through… it’s difficult. I mean, yeah, I was away from family and friends for long periods of time and it was very stressful and there were a couple of very close calls offline. But, you know, that was nothing compared to what a lot of guys I know went through.

How does one describe feelings that have been left unspoken? Guilt is an emotion that is not easily described or expressed by many, and this was especially true of those veterans who had experienced and survived trauma. For those who served in combat and saw their fellow service members killed before their eyes, lose limbs, or suffer from other visible injuries, it was quite a weight of guilt to carry when they did not have visible injuries. These sentiments have been ones shared by veterans repeatedly and many times, veterans expressed feelings of not having sacrificed enough. This facet of PTSD is one that is especially sensitive, which is why this researcher believes that participants simply eluded to these feelings of guilt by expressing how many others made sacrifices and did more than they had done. Feelings of guilt were
exacerbated even further for some when student peers and even faculty members simply thanked them for their service. While this gesture may have been completely sincere in nature, this simple phrase brought up feelings of guilt and inadequacies for simply surviving combat and coming home.

**Academic Relationships**

Relationships across academia between students and peers can be quite complex and evolutionary over a student’s academic career. The relationships explored through this study were those between student veterans and their respective faculty members and between student veterans and other students on campus and in their classes. For this study, participants were represented fairly equally between undergraduate; graduate student (at the Master’s level); and post-graduate status at the doctoral, professional, or law degree level. Another variable related to interaction and development of relationships between students, peers, and professors, is the modality in which the student is participating in their respective academic program. As previously noted in Table 7 of Chapter 4, three students were enrolled in an online program, five students were in enrolled in a traditional hybrid program, and 14 students were enrolled in programs that forced into a hybrid delivery format due to restrictions imposed as a result of COVID. Had COVID not been a factor in course delivery format, these altered programs would have been held in the traditional in-person format. Keeping in mind that course delivery among participants varied and there was potentially less direct interaction between students, peers and professors, student veteran participants were asked questions related to their relationships and how they were accepted among other students and by their professors.

The following sections explore the relationships and interactions between student veteran participants and their fellow classmates and their professors for their respective degree programs.
In total, there were six student veterans at the undergraduate level, seven at the graduate/Master’s level, and nine at the doctoral level. Those at the doctoral level were enrolled in PhD, EdD, and JD programs.

**Undergraduate student veterans.** This study included six undergraduate student veterans participating in both in-person and online classes. The age range of these undergraduate students was between the ages of 24 and 36. Overall, their experiences were positive between faculty and student peers; however, there were some isolated negative instances. For those undergraduate student veterans who did experience negative interactions with faculty, they typically experienced feelings of being disregarded by faculty or being stigmatized by their professors. Samuel, a former enlisted U.S. Army soldier, summed up his experiences with his professors:

As I have progressed in my education, I’ve really tried to not tell anyone or not let any professors know that I’m a veteran. In more situations than not, it has basically backfired or put me in a position where the professor assumes A, B, or C about me before ever getting to know me or regarding any of my work. Basically, they associated veterans or military with stereotypes and as a combat veteran, most people associate it with what they’ve seen in Hollywood…It’s more something that I just keep under wraps now.

Samuel was not the only student veteran who expressed this sentiment. Ezra, a former Marine, stated that he did not experience negative interactions necessarily, but chose to keep his veteran status as quiet as possible due to some former reactions he had received from others on campus. Ezra explained his fears of being portrayed in a certain way:

I don’t tell many people that I have PTSD because I fear that they’re going to look at me like I am a crazy military veteran that might shoot up a school. I try to keep to myself
most of the time. I have fears of being portrayed or seen or perceived in a certain way, so I don’t disclose much information [about myself].

Ezra did acknowledge that the professors he has had thus far, seemed to respect the fact that he is a veteran, and many of those professors suspect that he has served in the military even if he does not say anything about it. For him, his professors have not pried or asked questions about his service, and he stated that they seem to be more “tolerant and appreciative” than his student peers.

Vance, a former U.S. Army soldier, described his experience as a bit different in terms of interactions with his professors. Vance noted that he has struggled to connect with several of his professors due to their expressions of their own political views in the classroom and a disregard for his political beliefs. Not only did he express these feelings relevant to some of his professors, but also noted that he felt there was a certain political agenda being pushed by some administrators on campus. Vance noted that he felt that there was a much greater intrusion of messaging from the university administrators around politics and race than from his former HBCU (Historically Black College or University) institution and did not find it to be appropriate. He added that, “you definitely can’t advocate for anything else [different from what the university promotes], so you just kind of have to sit down and shut up”. Vance was not the only participant who expressed feelings of disconnect and misalignment with university messaging, but he was the only undergraduate student in the study who voiced specific examples of discontent.

Overall, undergraduate participants expressed generally positive experiences at the University of Alabama in terms of their interactions with their professors. For interactions between student veteran participants and their class peers, there was an overarching sentiment
expressed by all: other undergraduate, non-veteran students had little to nothing in common with student veterans and typically had a difficult time connecting with them. Reece, a former Marine, stated that when he has to work with students in class he feels like the “old geezer”, even though he is only 35 years old. He summed up his interactions with other undergraduate students, “When they find out I’m a veteran, their automatic response is, ‘thank you for your service’. At this point, that has been translated to, “I don’t know what to say, but I’ve been conditioned to respond with this.” Other participants, both undergraduate and graduate student veterans, noted that they received many acknowledgements from non-veteran peers thanking them for their service; however, it seemed like it was just something to say because they do not know what else to say otherwise.

Samuel, a former U.S. Army solider, explained his feelings regarding the interactions between himself and non-veteran peers on campus and how he understood that discussing his military service was an isolating and alienating point of conversation. When asked about the responses and reactions from students that he has received on campus when discussing his veteran status or experience, he stated:

I would say it’s just mostly negative or neutral. It’s an alienating and isolating topic to bring up. It just puts the ice on any conversation. In most of my classes, most of the kids have gone directly from high school to college, so they don’t have that world experience. So, I can understand why that might be intimidating to them. Like I said before, it is a little bit disheartening and discouraging when these people around you say they are “for the troops”, but then they act the exact opposite.

Samuel’s experience and feelings that other students, at both the undergraduate and even at the graduate and doctoral level, in some instances, lacked world experience and views and therefore
had a difficult time connecting with other students and some professors, were expressed in some way by almost all study participants.

**Graduate student veterans.** This study included a total of seven graduate students at the master’s degree level. The age range of graduate students was between 27 and 48. These student veterans overwhelming expressed feelings of support by their faculty and positive interactions with both their professors and peers. This was encouraging because these student veterans were enrolled in programs across various colleges at the university and participated in both in-person and online modalities of course delivery.

Quentin stated that he has had positive experiences with his professors in his program at the University of Alabama, “have always been really helpful”. Quentin noted that there had been times throughout his program that he struggled with assignments or assignment deadlines and his professors were always willing to work with him. Another student veteran, Peter, an active duty senior non-commissioned officer in the U.S. Army, noted that he too had had positive experiences in his program. His program is fully online, however he had quite a bit of interaction with his professors and other students in the program. Peter was one of the three student veteran participants who were enrolled in regular online programs. Because this program was traditionally offered online, interaction between the professor and students most likely was not impacted by course delivery changes affected by COVID restrictions. Conversely, there were a total of 14 student veteran participants who had originally enrolled in programs that were meant to be held in an in-person delivery format. Because of this modification to a hybrid course delivery method, students at both the graduate and undergraduate program level expressed displeasure with the change in format and further forced isolation from peers and professors.
Franklin, a former U.S. Army soldier, described some of his previous experiences as a student veteran at a university outside of Alabama, indicating that his professors at the other university were not receptive to his military service and were dismissive of his input if it had to do with his military experiences. He was very surprised and relieved that he had not had any of those negative experiences at the University of Alabama to date. He described his experience as one of support and thanks from his professors or complete ambivalence, but he had not experienced direct negative responses, disrespect, or mal-treatment throughout his graduate program. While other participants had earned their undergraduate degree and / or their Master’s degree in a traditional in-person format from a university other than the University of Alabama, no other participant explicitly named their previous university experiences as being negative in terms of their interactions with faculty and students.

Many of the interactions between student veterans and peers in their classes had also been positive. The status of being a student veteran did not seem to have any influence in the way that peers interacted with Master’s level study participants. Much like the interactions between student veterans and faculty, student peers expressed thanks for service members’ service, and some participants stated that peers had questions about combat experiences. Nevertheless, study participants reported no direct negative comments or dismissive treatment. The overall experience of Master’s level student veteran participants was positive in terms of their relationships and interactions with faculty and peers in the classroom. Neither degree program nor modality of program delivery seemed to influence how student veterans were accepted and treated.

**Doctoral student veterans.** This study included a total of nine graduate students at the doctoral degree level. Degree areas were across various colleges at the university including,
education, law, and arts and sciences. The age range between these graduate students was between 35 and 59. All student veteran doctoral participants were enrolled in a either a traditional, on-campus program or an executive program which has an intensive on-campus component.

Unlike the previously discussed groups of student veteran participants, this group had very strong and expressive opinions regarding their interactions and relationships with faculty and peers in the classroom. Norman, a retired U.S. Army officer, identified some positive and supportive experiences with his professors, but also mentioned some very confrontational experiences with professors. He noted that professors with military connections shared their own connections to the military with him, and this information seemed to be a connection that made him feel seen and supported. Conversely, his experience with students in his academic program had been strained. While on the surface those students appeared to be respectful of him, his opinions, and experiences, however, the reality of these relationships was very different. Norman provided a description of how he viewed the division between himself and many of his student peers.

There is an invisible curtain in the room, and yet everyone gets along, and I get along with them. However, they and I both know that we don’t like each other at all; it is because of their liberal beliefs. I’ve been disgusted with many of our classes, because they’re touting things that my generation and my father’s generation feared and loathed and fought against. We’ve had visitors come to class, and if I knew them personally, they would comment that there was a palatable tension in the air.
These same sentiments were expressed by Ollie, another retired U.S. Army officer. While he and his professors did not always see eye-to-eye on various topics, there was still a level of respect and willingness to listen and engage with one another. Ollie stated that in some classes he felt that only one side of an argument was presented by the faculty, but he took this as an opportunity to express his opinions and his view from his military service. Just as Norman described tentative relationships with his student peers, Ollie had many of these same experiences. Ollie expressed a belief that there was a disconnect between veterans and civilians within his program; he suggested that much of this disconnect was due to differences in worldview and combat experience. He had had multiple experiences of watching fellow soldiers die in front of him due to combat and participated in combat on multiple deployments.

Ollie gave a glimpse of how he felt in many of his classes, “I felt like a pariah when I presented a conservative point of view [in class]. Culturally, we’re just very, very different.” This specific example of feeling like an outsider stemmed from a class discussion focused around multiculturalism. Ollie truly believed that there was only one point of view presented by the instructor, and because this professor, along with his classmates, were expressively liberal in their philosophical views, this was presented as truth and fact. For Ollie, he believed that his classmates just accept what is presented, “lock stock and barrel” without question, whereas he, pushes back and believes that much of the conversation around the topic “postmodern gender” and believes it is “untenable”. Another time he noted an overtly obvious disconnect between his classmates and himself was as simple as discussing activities that were considered to be relaxing for the individual. While others in class, discussed spending time with family and their pets as being ways to relax, Ollie honestly revealed that his preferred method of relaxation was shooting guns at the range. This was met with a deafening silence and was ignored. He believes that is
because the culture of his classmates and professors sees guns as being bad, while the military culture teaches a healthy respect for guns, and he understands that guns are machines and tools; it is the person who controls the action of the device. This was another way that cultural differences had an influence on the interactions between student veterans and their student peers and professors. This theme of military culture is woven throughout the other developed themes of the study.

Other student veteran participants expressed the same type of experiences with faculty and students. For Lance, a medically retired enlisted, U.S. Army soldier, faculty were supportive and accepting, but he also suggested that they simply did not understand what he had been through as a solider and could not relate.

Most of my professors are academics and most have never been to war. They don’t understand it. Most of the kids that I’m going to school with are in their early or mid 20s, so if they don’t understand it, I’m not going to share it. They just don’t get it.

Overall, experiences for these students included a basic level of acceptance and understanding from their professors even if they stood on opposite sides of issues; however, interactions and relationships with civilian students was more strained. There appeared to be significant difference in world experience as well as political and philosophical stances. These differences posed barriers for several participants to develop positive relationships with others due to feeling rejected, stigmatized, and disrespected.

**Identity and Culture**

Student veterans, like all students, are multifaceted. There was an intersectionality for student veterans in this study, which consisted of being a service member, a combat veteran, a disabled veteran, in some cases, a veteran with PTSD, and a student. The majority of study
participants were either retired from the military or separated from the military and there were three participants who were either still serving on active duty or a current reservist.

While none of the participants expressed having regret or shame for having served in the military or for having served in combat, there was a widely expressed shielding of the fact that they were veterans, from other students on campus or in their classes. From the perception of the majority of student veteran participants, they believe that civilian students and faculty who have not served in the military do not and could not, understand what it means to be a veteran and service member. Student veterans in this study felt pride in having served in the military and having been able to protect others as part of the GWOT. While their pride was somewhat revealed through the specific words they spoke, mostly, their pride in their service came through in the way they spoke about their time serving, their facial expression when discussing their served time, and hint of pride in their voices when sharing how long they served and their duty stations or units they supported.

Several undergraduate participants expressed feelings of alienation upon divulging their veteran status; Ezra for example, said that he has experienced student peers completely stop talking and interacting with him when they find out he is a veteran. Graduate and doctoral student veterans tended to not discuss their veteran status if it could be avoided. Student veteran study participants acknowledged their veteran identity, and many embraced it; however, several also acknowledged that this facet of their identity had affected their experience as a student. These participants understood that they have most likely been stereotyped by students and faculty in the past.
Another layer of identity that many participants said influenced their experience as a student was the presence of their PTSD or posttraumatic symptoms. Samuel described how his PTSD affected his ability to adapt to life as a student:

[Adapting to life on campus] It’s definitely an ongoing process. It’s definitely much better now. It sounds weird, but it’s a lot easier now with the Zoom thing, because a lot of times [before Zoom meetings], just walking into the classroom and sitting down in a group of complete strangers, I would start basically having a panic attack even though none of the stressors were there or any other perceived threats.

Samuel’s experience in the classroom was echoed by other participants in the study as well feelings of hypervigilance in the classroom and being confined to a room without a personal defense weapon.

Just being a veteran comes with a set of characteristics and behaviors that were developed while in the military, and these behaviors and expectations do not always mesh well with the civilian university culture. It is widely known and accepted that the university culture is one of exploration, self-discovery, individuality, and questioning. These cultural traits are in direct conflict of many traits that are commonly associated with the military; structure, conformity, command structure, and obedience. Because of this difference in cultural norms, there is a conflict that must be reconciled for many students to move forward and assimilate or adjust to civilian university culture. For most study participants, there was a general intolerance for perceived disrespect, tardiness, and unwillingness to pull one’s own weight in classroom group projects. The transition from a structured military lifestyle to a student lifestyle, which did not have the rigid structure, proved to be a challenge for several student veteran participants. Quentin described the transition as going into a “new world”. Heather, a former U.S. Army officer,
shared some of her challenges in the transition to life as a student on campus. She said that challenges stemmed from simple things such as addressing others as Sir and Ma’am, and this courtesy was not very well accepted by her professors. She also expressed frustration in adjusting to the lack of structure in classes and the indirect nature of many conversations.

Humor was another area that several student veteran participants expressed a difficulty in adjusting to regarding the civilian student life culture. Humor among service members can sound quite different from what civilians who have no prior exposure to military culture typically experience. As Franklin, a former U.S. Army soldier, mentioned military humor can be quite “dark”. Jokes and comments that may seem perfectly humorous and innocent enough among veterans may sound offensive and insensitive to civilians. Something as seemingly innocent as this humor can be a challenging aspect of transition for student veterans.

The identity of a service member has, in itself, many facets: enlisted, non-commissioned officer, officer, warrant officer, leader, mentor, battle-buddy, brother in arms, sister in arms, veteran, pilot, infantryman, ranger, pathfinder, Sailor, Solider, Marine, Airman, and more. Once a service member begins the transition of leaving the military or becoming a student in conjunction with continuing their military service simultaneously, their military identity does not fade away. Rather, it becomes folded into their newly developing additional identity of student veteran and two cultures, military, and college, must reconcile.

**Off-Campus Support Structure**

Student veterans confirmed that they had some type of a support structure in place to help them in persistence of pursuing their degree and to support them both mentally and emotionally throughout their academic journey at the University of Alabama. For all except one participant in
the study, a spouse or family member was explicitly named either first or second, as being a
pillar of support for them in terms of their daily life support structure. These were individuals
who they feel closest to and could rely on in times of feeling overwhelmed and needing someone
to help them through daily life stressors.

Development of friendships with other veterans on campus and maintaining relationships
with friends and veterans with whom they had previously served, was also another highly noted
aspect of participants support structure. Some participants relied on meeting other veterans on
campus through the OVMA and CVA (Campus Veterans Association). The CVA on the campus
of the University of Alabama is a social club that strives to develop relationships among student
veterans and dependents of veterans on campus. Development of relationships with civilian
students was another sentiment described by several veterans as being an important part of their
support structure. Many student veterans identified their close group of fellow veterans as being
their inner circle but recognized that many were located in various geographical locations.
Having this distance between friends did not seem to affect how some of these veterans
continued to see this group as a pillar of their support structure. Teddy, a former Air Force
Officer, described the composition of his friend group of other veterans and how they continued
to support one another:

Most of my family is still down on the coast; so they are six hours away. My friend
network is kind of scattered around the country and around the world. I’m sure you
probably understand what that means to the people that you know. That means, that to the
people that you know, would drop anything for you or you for them; but they’re six hours
away.
Another participant, George, a former senior non-commissioned officer in the U.S. Army, described his friend network and extended network, and how they support one another:

There are several guys in there [former unit] that, you know, we stay in touch. We check on each other, and we do buddy checks to make sure we’re good. Plus, I have people in the church that I go to, and they make a point to reach out and I reciprocate. And I’ve got, you know, my wife’s family that we’re close with. And I have a best friend from high school. I mean, I’ve got a good support group.

George described three of the most frequently noted pillars of support that were identified by most participants of the study: family, friends, and faith. Useff, a former senior non-commissioned officer in the U.S. Army, described his support group in a similar way to George:

My personal support system is actually pretty multifaceted. I’ve got a group of friends in the area that I have made since moving here [to Tuscaloosa], mostly through my church…My wife’s parents have been extremely supportive and just really helpful in a lot of ways…My advisor is great. He has given me a lot of latitude and to have a freedom in my schedule for the work I do for him. He’s been really supportive.

Useff was also involved in a group of statewide veterans who support other veterans and focus on issues such as veteran suicide and the isolation that many veterans feel.

Kyle, a retired U.S. Army officer, provided a concise picture of his support system; and this same type of support system was described by others in the study. Kyle elaborated on George’s pillars of support noting that he struggled with his PTSD symptoms and struggled to adapt to life after the military. After meeting with counselors and getting involved with his church he found that immersion into his family and faith was key:
Christ first, family second, and then my friends. And those friends are part of my circle. We have a saying, that if you know Christ, you have to find your purpose; you have to make a circle. That circle is surrounding yourself with other godly people. When you do that, it works.

Among this group of student veterans, participants relied on their support system of family, whether that was their spouse, children, or parents and extended family. Friends, both fellow veterans and civilians, were also key to many participants’ support systems. Student veteran participants seemed to rely on fellow veterans to continue the connection to the military and camaraderie with those who had similar and shared military experiences. Veterans tended to connect with other veterans; however, they also expressed the need to begin to assimilate into the civilian culture on campus.

**Student Veteran Services**

The University of Alabama offers several targeted services to support the student veteran population and military dependents who attend the University of Alabama. The Office of Veteran and Military Affairs (OVMA) at the University of Alabama describes itself as a “one stop shop” for veterans in terms of meeting their needs for financial aid; course registration; and advising, tutoring, and designated meeting and study spaces for veterans and dependents (Office of Veteran and Military Affairs, 2021).

The OVMA has a staff size of seven, including one Director, one Assistant Director, three VMA Specialists, and one Program Assistant. Student services specific to veterans expand beyond the traditional financial aid and registration assistance due to the extensive and ever-changing processes of filing documents in compliance with the United States Veterans Affairs Office to receive funds relative to enrollment. Students who use their earned military education
benefits must submit paperwork through the OVMA in order to receive their tuition dollars. The OVMA is housed at the university within Houser Hall. Houser Hall is also the home to the Office of Disability Services and Testing Services. Within Houser Hall, there is dedicated space for veterans and dependents to meet, study, and work. Due to the restrictions put in place because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this space was closed to students through spring 2021 semester.

Study participants expressed varying reactions and exposure to the OVMA and differential experiences with this and other offices and services offered by the university. All participants, regardless of their degree level, level of degree completion, or in-person or online status, expressed being bound to the OVMA to obtain their tuition funds, and all had previous exposure to the office in some capacity each semester of their attendance at the University of Alabama. Of the 22 participants of the study, eight stated that they had used the OVMA to access their GI Bill benefits and register for classes because they had to but did not use any additional services offered by the office or were not aware of other resources that were available to them through the office. Their overall experience with the OVMA could be described as neutral. Of those eight participants expressing a neutral experience with the office and having a lack of knowledge of all available services provided by the office and their applicability to them as a student, five of those students were graduate students enrolled in either an online or hybrid degree program. One of these graduate student participants was a traditional, on-campus student; one participant was a doctoral student enrolled in a hybrid-structured program, and one was a doctoral student enrolled in a traditional, on-campus PhD program.

Of the 22 participants, only five explicitly discussed having a negative experience with the OVMA and/or other services offered by the University of Alabama. Of the five students who
had less than positive experiences using the student services available to them, one student was a graduate student enrolled in an online program. Another student was a professional degree student enrolled in a traditional, on-campus program. The other three students were all undergraduate students enrolled in traditional, on-campus programs. Charlie, an undergraduate student and former non-commissioned Naval officer, explained that he had not yet had a chance to use any of the services offered on campus due to the current closure of many office across campus as a result of the current pandemic guidelines.

I did try to reach out to the veterans group on campus when I first showed up [to campus], and because of the COVID thing, they’ve pretty much shut down now. You can still access all of the benefits through them [OVMA]; like, if I need anything, all I have to do is set up an appointment with them, but, as far as going out and hanging out with people and talking, I really can’t do that because of COVID. So, that has really put a damper on utilizing those services. I really don’t like the online platform. I mean, there’s a reason that I’m sitting in Tuscaloosa, trying to take classes [in-person].

Charlie further explained that he wanted to use the Speech Center and Writing Center, however, because of the online set up, he was not utilizing those services; he said that he had a difficult time adapting to the online format.

Samuel, a former enlisted U.S. Army soldier, noted that while his experiences working with the OVMA had not been horrible, it has been less than positive. In his experience, he had to deal with mostly student workers in the office to access information, and this had led to frustrating encounters due to their lack of knowledge of the information that Samuel was seeking. He expressed a feeling that while this was an office to work with veterans, there were not many veterans working in the office who could relate to him. While he was able to
eventually get what he needed from the office, the process was not seamless and was rather inefficient in his opinion, “I honestly don’t think I used any of the veteran services. It’s almost been easier to circumnavigate then try to get them to understand or do what we need them to do.” These same sentiments were echoed by another undergraduate student, Vance, a former non-commissioned officer in the U.S. Army. Vance experienced some of the frustrations related to accessing his GI Bill benefits and stated that if he did not have to use his benefits, he would forgo them, just so he would not have to deal with this office.

The remaining nine study participants shared positive experiences using student services at the university; some of these services were within the OVMA and others were outside of this office. Some study participants stated that employees within the OVMA helped them extend their benefits for tuition by getting them connected to the Vocational Rehabilitation program. Several students said they felt comfortable speaking with and reaching out to those in the OVMA and viewed their relationship with staff members as positive. Quentin, a former Navy sailor, described his experience with the office, despite his feelings of being an introvert:

I kind of keep to myself in a lot of ways. So, reaching out has always been a weak point for me. That’s probably something that I could have really used some of the support systems at the university for, but my experience was very little….I did always have a positive relationship with the OVMA. Every time I had an issue with billing or scheduling or advising, they always were there to help me and they always offered additional beneficial information.

This statement captures how many study participants viewed services offered on campus and through the OVMA; they typically did not want to reach out for assistance or ask for help, but when they did, they were met with professionalism and individuals who were willing to go the
extra mile to help them with their requests. Some of the terms that this group of participants used to describe the OVMA were: “super helpful”, “supportive”, “phenomenally good”, and “extremely positive”.

There were a few other services on campus that participants noted using that they found to be helpful. Two participants said that they had used the Office of Disability Services to seek out accommodations for testing. Another study participant described a positive experience that he had had with the Help Center on campus. Reece, an undergraduate student and former U.S. Marine, described his experience reaching out the Help Center on campus to receive mental health services. While the Counseling Center did not originally provide him with the counseling services that were best suited for him, they did help him get in touch with the Health Center and connected him with a counselor who was also a counselor for the VA (Veterans Administration Medical Center). This counselor at the Student Health Center not only helped Reece get the counseling he needed, but also helped him get services through the local VA. Several other student veterans who attended classes on campus, also noted their appreciation for the ease of access to VA services via the university and the counseling services provided.

Several participants noted that there are multiple services currently being offered to student veterans on campus through the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs, as well as, other services across campus. While these services were certainly appreciated by many, there were several suggestions made by participants for consideration by the university to add to the arsenal of targeted services specific to student veterans. The consistent theme that I heard from participants in regard to student services specific to student veterans, is that there is a lack of communication between the university and student veterans to fully inform them of what services are available to them. This sentiment was echoed by both students who
were attending classes on campus, as well as, online learners. When participants were asked if they had sought out counseling services on campus when needed, many said they either had not due to not knowing what was available, or they were already seeking services through the VA. While the Counseling Center through the Student Life Division at the University of Alabama does offer many dynamic resources such as online screenings, the ability to schedule in person sessions, as well as, multiple resources for anger management, multi-cultural mental health, test anxiety, and election stress supports, there are no resources targeted for student veterans specifically per their website (University of Alabama, Counseling Center, 2021).

One service that has traditionally been offered for student veterans is a space that is specific to them; a safe space for other veterans to meet, study, or simply have a space to go to that is familiar. Unfortunately, because of the implications of the Covid restrictions on interactions, several student veteran participants noted that this was a big deal to no longer have this space available to them and not have access to student veteran groups as they previously had been in contact with. While this is not a service that has failed them in practice, this is a service that was omitted, albeit temporarily, and there was no temporary alternative introduced to the knowledge of the participants of the study.

Another service that is typically access by all students in some capacity is student orientation. While this may not be traditional viewed as a service, when participants of this study were asked about services and resources they have engaged with, student orientation was one of the first things that Charlie, a former Navy officer, mentioned.

The whole point of orientation is to get to know your classmates. They’ve completely took that out of it by doing it online. It’s just here’s the information; they kind of dumped it on us and moved on. I would love to get to know more of the veterans on campus.
There were very few student services specifically named by the student veteran participants as having engaged with; those include, the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs, GI Bill assistance, course registration assistance, student veteran study space, student veteran social group, student orientation, and the Office of Disability Services. Some student veterans may not use services due to the lack of knowing what is available and others, like Norman, a retired U.S. Army officer, stated his reasoning for not using student services, is because he didn’t feel like a student; “The fact that I didn’t use student services is because I didn’t feel like a student [while on campus].”

Regardless of the student veteran’s experience with course registration and GI Bill / tuition assistance, there is no alternative because this is a process, they must go through to access their benefits. More so than not, it expressed by participants there was a general lack of knowledge of the actual services, supports and resources available to them from the university in general. Rather than dismiss the usage of services available to them, student veteran participants of the study offered several suggestions they believe would be helpful in enhancing their student experience, for both on campus and online students.

Below is a list of suggested services that participants requested to enhance and support their student experience:

1. Offer a new student orientation session specifically for student veterans. This would help veterans to begin to get to know one another and build a community of support.
2. Offer virtual counseling services to student veterans that are specific to the military culture.
3. Create a ‘buddy’ program to help veterans connect with others as a new student. Assign both a fellow veteran and a civilian student. Study participants suggested that this
would be especially helpful in navigating new environments and understanding civilian cultural norms as compared to military customs.

4. Advertise services more frequently and explicitly to veterans.

5. Create a virtual supportive culture to help enhance the experience of online to mitigate feelings of isolation, especially during times in which students cannot meet in person.

COVID-19

The past 18 months across the United States and the world has presented many challenges, changes, frustrations, and disappointments that many of us could not have seen coming. The extent of the impact that the global pandemic of COVID-19 has had on higher education in terms of enrollment, student persistence and retention, and financial deficits are still being determined. What can be agreed upon is that the impact to course delivery, commencement ceremonies, student activities, student research, and the overall student experience, has been quite great, and it may be some time before we truly know the full extent to which students were affected academically, socially, and mentally.

It would be negligent to not address the implications of COVID-19 restrictions on those student veterans who were already coping with varying facets of mental health due to posttraumatic stress symptoms. Participants were asked how COVID-19 affected them during the interview process. For students enrolled in online programs at the time of their interview, they unanimously stated that COVID-19 had not negatively influenced their academic experience. In terms of how they had been affected personally, their responses varied. Peter, a retired U.S. Army senior non-commissioned officer, noted that he really was not affected by COVID-19 restrictions in terms of his graduate program since it was online. The only inconvenience he experienced was finding a proctor for academic test administration, during the pandemic. His
When we went into initial quarantine and everything sort of locked down, I think that hit a lot of people in a negative way because they are used to getting out and socializing.

Well, I would probably say that eight out of my 10 deployments, I’m always out at an austere base, where it’s me and 20 other people and we live in a little five by eight shipping container. So, I guess I’m used to what I like to call the fishbowl effect when I deploy.

Peter’s experience was similar to other participants in terms of how they viewed the quarantine and social distancing. Several participants noted that they would do what they had to do in accordance with state and university guidelines, as applicable, even if they did not agree with it or like it. While there were no student veteran participants who denied that the Covid virus was something to pay attention to and take precautions for, there were several who noted that in the grand scheme of their own experiences, this virus has been politicized and they are not overly concerned about it. George, a retired U.S. Army senior non-commissioned officer gave his perspective of where the concern regarding Covid falls for him.

I don’t take it as serious as everybody else. You know my job requires me to go to [foreign countries] and places where, you know, there’s a lot more to worry about than other Covid. So, I take it seriously, because my wife makes me take it seriously. She tells me to wear a mask, so I’ll wear a mask….I just don’t take it as seriously. I know that unfortunately, there’s been many deaths from it, but I also know there are many deaths from drug overdoses and things of that nature.
Another student veteran participant, Heather, a former U.S. Army officer, explains how she sees wearing a mask and taking precautions as a personal responsibility and choice.

I’m much less risk averse than most of the people [civilians] on campus. Yeah, okay, I’ll throw a mask on. Whatever. Let’s go. My kids are still in sports. I mean, I think that it’s partly a personal thing.

Other students like Lance, a former non-commissioned officer in the U.S. Marine Corps, appeared to be taking things as they come in regard to restrictions due to Covid, but stated he would stand firm in his choice related to the vaccination and against a university wide mandatory vaccine mandate. Somewhat in jest, Lance remarked, “If they want to kick me out of school for not taking the vaccine, then I’ll just go work at Chick-fil-a. That’s fine too.” Overall, the general sentiments expressed by most participants regarding Covid was that, it (Covid) has been huge inconvenience in everyone’s lives; it has disrupted normal processes; it has been greatly politicized; there are much bigger issues to be concerned with; they, themselves, have experienced much greater threats but at the end of the day, they will abide by the rules put in place by the university to get through their respective programs. The preparedness of student veterans to get through the adversity of this pandemic is further described by another student veteran participant, Quentin.

Quentin, a graduate student, and former U.S. Navy sailor, expressed similar feelings to Peter; however, he was pursuing his degree on-campus, which added a layer of complexity to how he processed and dealt with the pandemic. As almost every other participant noted regarding how they adjusted to regulations for COVID-19, Quentin expressed that being in the military prepared him for these types of scenarios:
One of the many phrases I’m sure you have heard well is, ‘adapt and overcome’. That was one of the things that I learned in the military that I felt like translated very well. You know, things are changing and well, I am geared up for this; I’m ready for this. So, I felt like, if anything, with all of this going on, being a veteran gave me an advantage.

Quentin further discussed how COVID-19 affected him as a student and a veteran regarding the change in course delivery and forced isolation:

The shift in the method in the way we were receiving our education, was one of the biggest hurdles. You know, going into the Zoom university type mode in isolation, I think, is a very big thing for a lot of veterans. That’s one of the things that I think isn’t on the surface where everyone sees it. It’s one of those underlying issues that you know veterans are already dealing with, along with the suicide rates and PTSD, and all the mental issues. Then this just exasperates it.

The majority of student veterans in this study said that while they did not necessarily agree with the way that the pandemic was being handled by both the university and the nation as a whole, they believed they were more prepared than most to deal with this type of culture and transition. While the university mandates masks, closed off common meeting spaces, and transitioned to online or hybrid learning, many of the student veterans who chose to come to campus for their programs did not agree that this was the best course of action. Several viewed the further isolation as a trigger for their anxiety and depression. At a national level, there was great distrust expressed for the way this pandemic has been politicized and a lack of confidence in how serious the threat of this virus is partially the result of the politicization of the pandemic. There was however, an overwhelming sense of overcoming adversity and doing what you have to do to get by. However, there were several students taking classes on-campus who were
discouraged to have transitioned to an online learning format and experienced isolation from other students. Many veterans were already dealing with a sense of isolation and being ‘othered’ on campus, and these feelings only increased for many. Restricting common student areas, including the student veteran space, further contributed to the feelings of being an outsider and being isolated with the inability to meet and socialize with other veterans.

**Overlap of Themes**

Across the various themes that were developed as a result of the data, it was obvious there was a revelation of some overlap between themes. The overlap in the theme of the presence of posttraumatic stress symptoms across other themes such as disconnection with peers and faculty, and the influence of military and veteran culture on the newly developed student veteran facet of identity. There is also an aspect of overlap among the symptoms of posttraumatic stress that were most predominantly identified by student veteran participants. The presence of anxiety can lead to increased feelings of hypervigilance. Similarly, the overlap of anxiety and depression were present in several of the participants. Furthermore, student veteran participants expressed a challenge in reconciling their evolving student identity and the reconciliation of the military and academic cultures. This reconciliation of cultures overlapped into the academic interactions and relationships discussed. While the student veteran participants were proud of their service and veteran status in general, several expressed their hesitation to reveal their veteran status due to fear of being stigmatized. In the same line of thought, student veteran participants wanted to be heard by their professors and respected for their experiences and expanded worldviews. The student veteran experience is complex and there is much overlap in themes and experiences.
Summary

It was evident that student veterans had very unique experiences, not only as a sub-category of students, but also in terms of differences in experiences within various academic program levels and among different learning modalities. Posttraumatic stress symptoms or posttraumatic stress disorder were present in the majority of student veterans who participated in this study, and the most prominent symptoms were: anxiety, hypervigilance and sensitivity to loud noises, depression, nightmares and sleeplessness, and guilt. Many participants expressed feelings of isolation and disconnection from their peers. Student veteran participants expressed feelings that they brought a level of world experience and exposure to the classroom that many of their younger and civilian classmates did not possess. This same level of world experience and exposure, however, created a different dynamic between student veterans and their professors; each interaction seemed to be rather unique for the relative degree level. The relationship and dynamics between student veterans and peers within the graduate and doctoral classroom setting proved to be tumultuous at times. Student veterans pursuing their graduate or doctoral degrees more frequently stated that they had a more difficult time connecting with their peers in the classroom and frequently felt ostracized.

Student identity was expressed as multifaceted. Many student veterans were juggling several aspects of their identity simultaneously and being a student who also experienced posttraumatic stress symptoms added another level of complexity to their identity. When exploring veteran-specific student services on campus, all participants used the Office of Veteran and Military Services (OVMA) for their basic needs of financial aid related to their GI Bill and course registration. There were only a few participants who took advantage of services offered through the OVMA and other campus-wide resources. Other services in which this smaller group
of student veterans took advantage of included, the Office of Disability Services, tutoring services, and counseling services. Finally, while the past 18 months have proven to be quite unique in terms of course delivery and campus climate and culture due to restrictions as a result of COVID-19, the majority of participants stated that they believed they were more prepared than most to cope with a pandemic and quarantine due to their military service. There were a few participants who admitted that the isolation and social distancing affected them and further exasperated their anxiety and depressive symptoms. Participants who expressed such feelings related to isolation were students pursuing academic degree program on-campus.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of student veterans at the University of Alabama and assess how their symptoms of posttraumatic stress shaped and affected their experiences as a student. This final chapter will discuss the findings from this qualitative study and outline what these findings mean to the field of higher education. Specifically, these findings will serve to better inform campus leadership of how student veterans are understood by faculty and peers and how, in some cases, they may be underserved. Finally, this chapter will identify implications for practice developed from this study and provide recommendations for future research.

This study was structured by examining the student experience through the lens of Vacchi’s model of student veteran support, a conceptual model of the student veteran college experience (Vacchi et al., 2017). By applying this framework for research to the 22 semi-structured interviews with participants, the researcher was able to gain better insights regarding student veteran identity. Interviews addressed the research questions by exploring their interpretations of symptoms of posttraumatic stress, interactions and experiences with faculty and students, support services they sought and their experiences with those interactions, and their support system both on and off campus resulted in the following five themes:

1. Presence of posttraumatic stress symptoms among participants

2. Disconnect and alienation from other students and professors
3. Multifaceted identity including cultural identity

4. Student services used & personal support system

5. Resiliency and adaptability in the face of COVID-19.

**Research Questions**

Purpose: What is the experience of student veterans with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder attending the University of Alabama?

**Research Question 1: What Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Do Student Veterans Most Frequently Experience?**

Analyzing the complexity of the overall student veteran college experience proved to be multilayered. Themes which emerged throughout the interviews not only outlined symptoms of PTSD that participants most frequently experienced, but also revealed the multifaceted identity of student veterans and the impact of the recent pandemic of COVID-19 has had on the student veteran experience. While not all participants confirmed having a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder, all participants did expressed symptoms consistent with PTSS (posttraumatic stress symptoms). Collectively, the symptoms expressed by student veteran participants were most frequently reported to be anxiety, hypervigilance and sensitivity to loud noises, depression, nightmares and sleeplessness, and guilt. While these symptoms affected participants in their personal lives outside of their pursuance of a degree, symptoms also bled over into their college experience. Anxiety and depression were exasperated by many student veterans pursuing their degree in a traditional on-campus format due to COVID-19 restrictions on in-person classes. Anxiety was also present among students who were struggling to meet deadlines and find success in group projects with other students who they perceived to be less disciplined and structured in their work ethic. Hypervigilance was expressed as an issue for some in the context of the classroom setting and location of their seat in class relative to doorway entrances.
All participants divulged some level of symptoms of posttraumatic stress; however, the major finding was that these symptoms did not appear to have an overwhelming influence over their college experience. While participants did share their symptoms of posttraumatic stress, as well as, their experiences to date as a student veteran, there was a great deal of conversation around frustrations with Covid and how restrictions as a result of the pandemic have affected their college experience. Many of the participants voiced sentiments of how this current pandemic situation could be worse, how they themselves had been exposed to much greater threats and risks, and that there are many other diseases and issues prevalent in the world that are a greater threat than Covid.

While Covid has greatly affected the majority of the participants in regard to their interactions within the classroom and their social interactions on campus, posttraumatic stress symptoms were expressed to be less of an influencing factor on their overall experiences as a student. Symptoms of posttraumatic stress were largely expressed as something individuals dealt with and worked through but did not necessarily reflect who they were as a person. Participant identity was presented as multifaceted. Most participants held their identity of service members in high regard but their identity as a veteran very close. This aspect of their identity was one that many were reluctant to share with others out of fear of preconceived notions and unfounded stigmas. Another aspect of participant identity was related to the branch of service in which they served and the job they held. For some, being an Army Ranger, a pilot, or a member of the Special Operations community was as much a part of them as the fact they served in the Army, Air Force, Navy, or Marine Corps. In addition to the identity of service member, the identity of student provided an additional level of complexity and brought with it certain challenges of adapting to a civilian culture that was quite different from what they experienced in the military.
Student veterans described a population of student peers who had far less world experience, limited exposure to other cultures, and varying philosophical and political viewpoints.

The identity of a service member and veteran, coupled with experiences and character development from their time in the service, proved contributed largely to how student veterans reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic. An overarching sentiment expressed by study participants was that they were far more adaptive to the restrictions and changes implemented due to COVID-19 because of their military service. While some acknowledged that they experienced higher levels of depression due to the isolation imposed by restriction of COVID-19, they noted that these circumstances were not much different to following orders of confinement during deployment cycles.

The question addressing the overall experience of student veterans at the University of Alabama was a rather large question to tackle. While there were some consistencies in aspects of student experiences, individual student experiences were developed and shaped by student veterans’ unique personalities, resiliency levels, personal support spheres, and other individual identity facets such as family structure and professional career standing.

**Research Question 2: Which University Support Services Do Student Veterans Most Frequently Use and How Do They View Those Services?**

The University of Alabama offers student support services to the student body, but there also targeted resources specific to student veterans and those who are dependents of service members. All study participants used the financial aid and registration services offered by the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs (OVMA). The researcher was surprised to discover that other than those specific and required usages, most participants had not used other services offered by the OVMA or other student support offices on campus, and many stated that they were unsure of what resources specific to veterans were available to them. The services that a
few participants mentioned using at least once included the writing center, the speech center, the health center, and tutoring services. There were also a couple of participants who noted that they directed to Vocational Rehabilitation services by the OVMA. While the overwhelming majority chose not to take advantage of services offered to them on campus, all participants expressed having a support structure in place and access to services such as counseling and health care through the VA, if needed. When participants were asked if they were aware of the services that were available to them on campus, many stated that they were not sure what they had access to outside of financial aid and registration services through the OVMA.

Student veterans on campus and those attending remotely expressed differential experiences with support services offered on campus, ranging from very positive interactions to very negative interactions. Participants who were completing coursework remotely had very limited interactions with the OVMA, and those interactions were limited to only discussions of their financial aid and registration processes. All reactions from this group of participants were rather neutral in tone. Participants who were attending classes in person had mixed reactions to services provided and the level of support they felt they received by those who worked in the office. The most widely expressed point of concern was that there were not more veterans working in the office who could relate to student veterans and that they typically had to ask questions multiple times to multiple people, similar to going through the chain of command. Overall, there was a consistent level of satisfaction for services that were sought out and received.

The researcher suggests that COVID-19, greatly skewed the frequency and usage of student veterans services and limited student veteran use of social space reserved specifically for them. Having access to an area specifically designated for student veterans and military
dependents is crucial in supporting and facilitating the development of relationships among student veterans for building a network of support that is central to campus. With the social space being unavailable and without events targeting student veteran engagement, a crucial element of the student veteran experience was lacking.

Research Question 3: What Feelings of Acceptance or Alienation, from Both Faculty and Student Peers, Do Student Veterans Experience?

Study participants represented all degree levels (Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctoral) as well as various colleges and programs across campus. Regardless of their program affiliation, there were some consistencies regarding their interactions with faculty and student peers. While the majority of participants stated that they attempt to not discuss their military or combat service, or even allude to the fact that they are a veteran, it was nearly impossible to hide their veteran status.

The student veteran population as a whole is older than student peers at the undergraduate level, and therefore, they are immediately seen as different. There was an obvious gap in age for many in terms of life and world experience. Undergraduate student veteran study participants noted being put in a position of leadership more often than not when working in groups. They suggested that this was primarily due to their age and how other students perceived them. Their undergraduate classmates had a tendency to either express gratitude for and interest in their previous military service and ask questions or they simply acknowledged their service with thanks and did not engage in further conversation. Overall, undergraduate student veterans reported positive interactions and communication with their faculty. Many participants had received great support and understanding from their faculty, and they had been encouraged to share their expertise and experiences from the military. Overall, undergraduate student veteran participants expressed having positive experiences in the classroom with both faculty and peers.
To some extent, they expressed feelings of being ‘othered’, but they recognized that this could be due to a gap in age, maturity, and experience between themselves and their civilian student peers.

Graduate student veterans at the Master’s level had much of the same experience as the undergraduate student veterans in terms of positive interactions with both faculty and students. The difference at this level, however, was that there was not as much of an obvious age gap between student veterans and their civilian student peers. They seemed to have more in common with other students in their programs and expressed feeling supported and appreciated by both their professors and their student peers.

Doctoral student veteran participants expressed a greater range of experiences than other participants in the study. This group was the most expressive in their description of various encounters between themselves and faculty and students. Overall, doctoral student veterans expressed fairly positive interactions with their faculty despite the known differences of opinion and philosophical stances held by each. Participants noted that while they may not agree on various discussion points, they felt as if they were at least heard and respected for their views and opinion. Many of the doctoral students interviewed discussed without prompting that they held conservative or moderately conservative political views. They expressed a belief that having these beliefs and being a military veteran generated certain perceptions of them by their professors and peers, regardless of the reality of the circumstances.

Nearly all study participants indicated that they preferred to keep their veteran status as low key or hidden as possible from faculty and peers, except for circumstances in which their veteran status was relevant to discussion or an academic situation. Faculty and student peer interactions for student veterans were generally positive, although there were some outlier situations. Student veterans mostly felt supported and accepted by their professors; however, at
the doctoral level, there were more instances of student veterans feeling isolated and ostracized by their peers for their differences in philosophical and political stances.

**Discussion**

The research conducted via semi-structured interviews provided great insight into the experiences of student veterans at the University of Alabama including their interactions with faculty and peers, interactions and use of student services, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress and their effect on academic and student experiences. The study also explored the implications of COVID-19 on student veteran academic and student experiences and whether or not COVID-19 had an effect on their posttraumatic stress symptoms.

The findings of this study provided the researcher with a greater understanding of the academic and social experiences of student veterans attending the University of Alabama based on the pillars of Vacchi’s student veteran experience model of student veteran support. Study findings were largely consistent with findings from previous research focused on student veterans with the exception of the unique circumstances of COVID-19 and the resulting implications for student veterans. Based on study findings, five overarching themes emerged:

- presence of posttraumatic stress symptoms,
- personal support system and use of support systems on campus,
- disconnect and isolation from professors and other students,
- multifaceted cultural identity,
- resiliency and adaptability in the face of COVID-19.

The presence of varying levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms across all participants was consistent with findings from previous studies from Barry et al. (2012) which outlined the prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), PTSD symptoms, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and/or depression among veterans from Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Both OIF and OEF were part of the Global War on Terror (GWOT).
The presence of posttraumatic symptoms identified by participants were also largely aligned with the symptoms outlined by the DSM-V (2013) that were published by the American Psychiatry Association. Symptoms that were most frequently cited by participants as being related to posttraumatic stress included: anxiety, hypervigilance and sensitivity to loud noises, depression, nightmares and sleeplessness, and guilt. Although anxiety and depression were not explicitly named as symptoms of PTSD by the DMV-5, these were consistently named as symptoms of PTSD by study participants.

Although study participants noted symptoms, only a small number of participants mentioned a confirmed diagnosis of PTSD by a mental health professional. Most participants seemed to be coping successfully with their symptoms and noted various ways that they addressed those symptoms. Several participants noted their personal support structure of a spouse, family, and faith, helped them in working through their various symptoms. Through discussions of personal support systems and structures, a theme of personal support systems outside of the university setting was established. The successful coping of posttraumatic stress symptoms for this group of participants who largely had a solid personal support system is supported by research by Elliott (2015). Elliott suggested that student veterans who have a support structure of family and friends are less likely to suffer the effects of PTSD and therefore less likely to be alienated on campus. Social support groups and student veteran groups were also noted by Elliott et al. (2011) as being very influential in mitigating and lessening the symptoms of PTSD among student veterans. Fortunately, all participants were able to name individuals in their life who serve as a personal support system; unfortunately, there was not an opportunity to further explore the successful coping of PTSS of those without a personal support system. While all participants had a support system, those at the graduate or doctoral degree level named a
spouse or significant other as their main support system, whereas, personal support systems were most likely made up of family and friends. There was not a direct correlation between the age of the participant, the degree level, and the presence of posttraumatic stress symptoms.

Another facet of support that student veterans discussed was that of the support services offered on campus. All study participants used the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs (OVMA) as part of accessing their military education benefits. Many, however, had not accessed other services provided by OVMA. Only a few student veteran participants noted using tutoring services, the writing center, and the speech center. Likewise, only a limited number of student veterans used counseling or health services provided by the university. Part of the rationale for not using other services provided by the OVMA or other campus-wide student services was due to a lack of knowledge of available services. Student veteran participants enrolled in on-campus courses noted that having a single space or building to access services and connect with other veterans would be ideal. These are the same recommendations that Kirchner (2015) offered related to providing student veteran services and creating a welcoming and supportive environment for student veterans. However, the ability to access a physical space to connect with and meet other veterans had been greatly impacted and even halted over the past year due to COVID-19 restrictions. The inability to access such meeting spaces and gather with other veterans on campus had also contributed to a greater sense of isolation, as discussed by several study participants.

A third theme that emerged from the study was that of multifaceted identities and the balance of intersectionality between identity of a former or current service member, a veteran, and a student, as well as, their own cultural identity. Many study participants claimed identities of spouse, parent, professional, and, for some participants, having a diagnosis of PTSD. Finding
a balance between these various facets of identity was part of a larger theme that has been discussed throughout much of the previous literature related to student veterans, the theme of transition. Essentially, student veterans were reconstructing their identity with the transition (Gregg, et al., 2016), even if it was only temporarily. Part of this reconstruction for some veterans meant shielding their veteran or former military service from their peers and faculty. The evolution and reconstruction of identity was closely connected to the development of relationships on campus with other students, staff, and faculty. While the majority of study participants expressed mostly positive relationships with faculty and students, there were still feelings of being different, isolated, and a general sense of not fitting in. These feelings of disconnect and isolation are connected to, in part, the student veteran’s cultural identity. As a student they are now fusing together a structured, disciplined, and mostly conservative military culture, with a university culture that emphasizes individuality, challenging and questioning of authority, and liberal mindset. This reconstruction or rebuilding of their identity can lead to feeling of being “out of place” due to how different their past experiences and challenges are from their civilian student peers (Gregg, Howell, & Shordike, 2016). This leads to the fourth theme that emerged from the study: disconnect and isolation.

Feelings of being disconnected from other students and feelings of isolation were described by a majority of participants using a variety of descriptors and experiences as student veterans. Again, while many faculty members and peers contributed to a positive experience for many study participants in the study, most still had feelings of being ‘othered’. These feelings of being an outsider and not fitting in were, in large part, due to the disconnect between themselves and other students as a result of their own military experiences, exposure to other cultures, and prior military service and age. These findings are consistent with Braxton’s 2011 research, which
was based on Tinto’s model of longitudinal student departures. Tinto’s model of longitudinal student departure focuses on student success and rate of persistence and mainly focused on traditional students (Braxton, 2011).

Disconnection and isolation was another reason that many veterans had chosen to withhold their military experience and veteran status from many of their peers. There was an expressed concern or knowledge that divulging this facet of their identity would prompt certain stereotypes about veterans as well as an assumption of a PTSD diagnosis of the veteran. These feelings of being an outsider, the fear of certain veteran stereotypes, and the disconnection from the traditional student culture led some student veterans to feeling further isolated. These themes reflected findings of Kato et al. (2016) and Badger et al. (2014). Both groups of scholars found that student veterans expressed feelings of isolation and not fitting in due to many of the contributing factors outlined by participants in this current study.

The most obvious reason that many student veterans develop these feelings of not fitting in and being isolated, is due to the disparity between those who have served and those who have not served in the military. Student veterans are faced with the task of reconciling the transition or merging of their former military culture to that of the academic and university culture; this process can be challenging for some (Elliott, 2014). In addition to the disparity between military service and non-military service, student-veterans at the undergraduate level are categorized as non-traditional students. Typically, non-traditional students are categorized by age (25 years of age and older), family or head of house responsibilities, financial independence, work / career experience and responsibilities (Ellis, 2019; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Alschuler & Yarab, 2018). These non-traditional characteristics are also very much fit the student veteran participants of this study. In general, studies have shown that non-traditional students typically
feel isolated from other students on campus (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014), which further
emphasizes the feelings of isolation described by participants in this study. Student veteran
participants of this study recognized that their military and deployment experiences set them
apart from their civilian peers in one sense, is simply due to the exposure to other countries and
cultures, as well as, combat associated with their military service. This distinct separation can
and does lead to feelings of being disconnected from other students and faculty (Gregg, Howell,
& Shordike, 2016; Campbell & Riggs, 2015).

Another aspect of feeling disconnected from peers and faculty was related to political
views and leanings. Some student veterans said that they were perceived by classmates as being
of a certain political affiliation simply based on their veteran status. Others expressed feelings of
being ostracized and not fitting in because of their conservative beliefs and opinions. These
experiences are consistent with findings by Elliott (2014) who explained student veterans
frequently hold political leanings closer to moderate or conservative and they tend to find faculty
on college campuses to be politically more liberal. Differences in political views can also lead to
feelings of isolation between student veterans and their student peers (Elliott, 2014).

Many times, student veterans tend to keep their political views to themselves (Phelps,
2015) and feel that they are already perceived to have a certain political affiliation that differs
from their professors and civilian student peers, so they choose to keep their political opinions to
themselves according to several of the participants of this study. This same sentiment of student
veterans withholding their political views and harboring feelings of being unwelcome in the
classroom, due to mostly conservative views, was found in an earlier study by DiRamio,
Ackerman, & Mitchell (2008). In another study by Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larson (2011), they
found consistent evidence that student veterans felt alienated in the classroom and felt that
politicized hateful speech toward veterans and toward the military was widely accepted by faculty and peers in those participants’ experiences, and further lead to feelings of isolation.

The final theme that emerged from the study was that of resiliency and adaptability in the face of crisis. When the researcher originally began the journey of researching literature related to student veterans in preparation for this study, the world had never heard of COVID-19. In the early months of 2020, the world learned of a new and unknown virus. COVID-19 made its way to the United States in early June 2020, and the country began the process of essentially shutting down.

Because there were so many unknown factors about the virus at the onset of the pandemic, many universities had to make drastic changes to standard practices and instructional modalities. Students were forced to adapt to online learning environments, limited in-person interactions with other students and faculty, and restrictions to social activities on campus. When study participants were asked about their reactions to the changes due to COVID-19 restrictions, many expressed a similar sentiment: adapt and overcome. As military service members, they were trained to adapt to their environment and do what needed to be done to accomplish a mission.

Many participants also shared a belief that the university and country was overall doing what they thought was best, but for them personally, they had been deployed to combat, faced deadly situations far more than most civilians, and reported not getting as upset or concerned by the sensationalism around COVID-19 as some of their civilian peers. Participants were divided in opinion of whether or not COVID-19 had a direct impact on their academic experience. Students on campus were frustrated by the further isolation they experienced while online students reported not noticing much change in their academic experience. Overall, student
veteran participants expressed that restrictions by the university and state had little if any impact on their posttraumatic stress symptoms. Moreover, they suggested that they had an advantage of their peers based on military training and combat exposure.

While these themes can each be discussed independently, there was an obvious overlapping and cross influences of themes on one another. Symptoms of posttraumatic stress influenced the student experience by exacerbating feelings of isolation, which further strained academic relationships and feeling of disconnection from peers. The emergence of these common experiences across student veteran participants tied to the originally discussed gap in the literature related to student veterans’ college experiences. While previous studies explored student veteran experiences, there none of the studies examined the experience of student veterans who had deployed as part of the Global War on Terror. The student veteran body of literature is further expanded by this study through the exploration of symptoms of posttraumatic stress, how student veteran participants contended with posttraumatic stress, and how those symptoms influenced their experience as students at the University of Alabama.

Although the framework for this study is rather new compared to other student experience frameworks, this framework provided a unique and specific backdrop for researching this group of students. Vacchi’s model of student veteran support provided a lens to view the individual veteran in a holistic perspective and accounted for all aspects that comprised the individual student rather than grouping them all together (Vacchi, 2011, 2013). Each of the pillars that encompass Vacchi’s model are directly aligned with the themes that emerged from this study, further validating the need to support student veterans at the academic level as well at the personal and social levels.
**Institution Support Services.** Student veteran participants did state that they use some support services offered by the university with the Office of Veterans and Military Affairs, such as course registration, financial aid and tuition assistance, and several of the on-campus students stated that they used the student veteran reserved study and social space when they were able to. What was not foreseen at the onset of this study is that restrictions would prevent some of the institution services from being accessed due to Covid guidelines. Other institution support services used by some student veteran participants were the Office of Disability Services and tutoring services. Overall, institution support services were used by student veterans, however, only those that deemed to be required for enrollment using Veterans Affairs benefits were the most prevalently used.

**Transition Supports.** As Vacchi (2013) states, transition supports can consist of specific support for veterans such as orientations and peer groups targeted directly for student veterans. While a few of the on-campus student veterans did interact with other student veterans via the campus student veteran group, there were still several student veterans who named suggestions of transition supports that they would like to see in place. Students who requested seeing these addition transition supports were not limited to a specific program modality, rather students on-campus, hybrid program students, and online student, provided the suggestion of having an orientation specific to veterans. Having a veteran only orientation would provide new student veterans on campus a chance to not only ask questions that are relative to their specific needs, but also, a chance to meet other veterans and begin forming bonds that are familiar. However, this is another area of the overall student experience that has been greatly affected by restrictions due to Covid. With restrictions in place, in-person orientations for some student veterans in this study, was not an option. Those who had to attend the virtual orientation stated that it was not
effective in getting them the information they needed and they missed out on having the opportunity to meet other students and potentially other student veterans.

**Academic Interactions.** Student veteran participants were asked specifically about their interactions with both professors and fellow students and the responses ranged from being very positive to very negative. Vacchi (2013) notes that interactions between student veterans and their professors, as well as, their peers, has an influence on the classroom experience and the continued attendance rate of student veterans. Both of these factors ultimately have an influence on overall student success. The results of this study found that while student veterans may not always have a positive interaction in the classroom or with their peers, they continued to persist in the classroom. They may not have found the course to be enjoyable due to less than favorable interactions, however, for those who expressed specific instances of conflict with professors and or peers, most noted they understood it could be an isolated incident.

On the other side, there were several student veteran participants who noted having very positive interactions with their professors and peers. Ultimately, the level of academic interactions between student veterans and their professors and peers did not have an influence in their individual success negatively nor positively from the findings of this study due to the fact that all participants were progressing in their programs and none expressed a desire to leave the institution prior to completion of their programs. However, the level and type of interactions may have an influence on the satisfaction and level of fulfillment that student veterans have with the course and ultimately the program they are respectively enrolled in. It must be noted that all students in the study were affected in the way their courses were delivered due to Covid restrictions and this alternative course delivery method for some did change their level of engagement and interaction with their professors and peers. No longer were those students
engaging in a face to face classroom setting, rather, they were now responding to messages via chat boards and emails, or, listening to lectures for some through virtual class meetings.

**Personal Supports.** All student veteran participants noted a personal support system; their support networks consisted of some combination of a spouse, significant other, family, and fellow veteran friends, as well as, civilian friends. Other aspects of the student veteran personal supports named by participants, were services provided through the VA, as well as, their respective churches, and personal counselors. As Vacchi (2013) notes, personal support can also be in the form of peer mentorship programs facilitated by the university. Some student veteran participants in the study suggested developing a mentorship program between student veterans to help navigate the new processes and cultural norms which may be difficult to adjust to in the beginning. Other student veteran participants also suggested a ‘buddy program’ of sorts that pairs student veterans with civilian students to help them to have a better understanding of civilian student life culture.

**Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms.** Although Vacchi does not explicitly discuss symptoms of posttraumatic stress within his pillars of support model, throughout the interviews and data analysis from the student veteran participants, elements of those symptoms did seem to have a direct influence on those pillars. As previously noted, some of the most frequently named symptoms that participants experience, are anxiety, hypervigilance and sensitivity to loud noises, depression, nightmares and sleeplessness, and guilt. These symptoms bled over into the student veterans experience in some capacity, where it was the anxiety of meeting a deadline and always being on time, or depression exasperated by isolation due to Covid restrictions, or nightmares and sleeplessness causing the participant to feel exhausted in general. When student veterans are experiencing these symptoms they all noted that they were able to go to their individual support
systems for assistance and guidance. Without having their individual supports in place, the ability to access other areas of support within their academic career may not be as beneficial for their progression and success in their program.

Interview questions aligned with pillars of the framework and directly tied back to the research questions. The only exception among interview questions were those that sought out information related to the effects of COVID-19. These questions revealed themes aligned with resiliency and adapting through adversity. While the application of this model was based on student veterans with posttraumatic stress or PTSD, it did not pair with the needs of student veterans and their support systems for mental health and pursuance of higher education. Had this study been quantitative in nature rather than qualitative, this framework may not have been the best fit. However, this framework allowed for discussion and exploration around themes specific to its main pillars.

**Implications for Practice**

Study participants were more than willing to share their thoughts on how the university and higher education overall could better support a successful academic and student experience for student veterans. According to Kirchner (2015) and Heineman (2016), student veterans have an innate desire to connect with others socially and feel heard without judgement. Based on the results of this study, student veterans were acutely aware of the services provided to them through the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs that were mandatory for access of their benefits. They were not, however, as aware of services outside of financial aid and course registration processes. The suggestions for additional or improved services for student veterans that was outlined in Chapter 4, all stemmed from suggestions from student veteran participants of this study. These suggestions were not siloed to one specific academic degree level or college;
however, these suggestions were a summation of comments and feedback given from participants. There was a genuine desire expressed by participants to have services that were unique and relative to the student veteran culture to not only better their experiences on campus, in the classroom (both virtual and in person), but also to help their professors and peers to begin to better understand the culture in which student veterans come from and how these overlap to the university setting. The following section will outline implications for practice related to study findings that would be beneficial to the University of Alabama, universities across the Alabama System, and universities across the state and country that serve a student veteran population.

**Student Health Services**

Student Health Services at the University of Alabama offers several services to students on campus to meet their physical and mental needs. Students at the University of Alabama have access to physicians, mental health counseling professionals, lab services, and pharmacy and other services. For civilian students, these services that are offered are focused toward students that are on campus, rather than online students. Student veteran support services in terms of counseling services are not specifically noted. For student veterans, these services fall short of meeting their unique needs due to the omission of any services that target the veteran population. There were several on-campus students who mentioned that having access to counselors who understood the military and student veterans would be helpful. Having access to counselors with experience and training in working with student veterans and the military population would prove comforting. While most all of the student veteran participants stated that they were adequate dealing with their symptoms of posttraumatic stress, this doesn’t necessary mean that having a professional counselor to connect with when needed wouldn’t be helpful or appreciated. Have a professional counselor trained in military culture could help student veterans in their
transition from the military to the university culture and climate. This was especially true in the area of mental health counseling for student veterans who struggled with episodic symptoms of posttraumatic stress or were in need of a counselor who could assist them in the transition from military service to the university climate and culture.

As many study participants expressed, there is a period of transition at the beginning their degree program, and there was an obvious disconnection between themselves, the university culture, and other students. Student veterans desired a counselor who was either former military or well versed in working with veterans. This would provide a greater sense of confidence and trust for student veterans seeking out counseling services at the university.

The past couple of semesters greatly reduced the availability for student veterans to interact with services in person due to COVID-19 that resulted in a shift to providing support virtually for many offices, including health services. For student veterans seeking mental health counseling, there was a need to receive these services via virtual counseling sessions.

Considering that some student veterans are still serving on active duty, they could be physically located anywhere in the world. Likewise, student veterans who are pursuing a degree program offered online, they too could be located outside of the state of Alabama. These students should still have access to the same resources that students on campus have access to for mental health counseling and provided virtual counseling sessions specific to the needs of military service members and veterans.

**Student Life**

The Office of Student Life at the University of Alabama oversees various student engagement-focused programs and supports to enhance the student experience and help foster a sense of unity and belonging. While this office does offer many programs specific to new
students and traditional students, student veteran participants in this study expressed a desire for their peers to better understand them. The relationship as a whole is complex because they want their peers to understand where they are coming from with their experiences and their military culture, but they also have expressed a general expression of not wanting to put a spotlight on themselves. One suggestion of fostering relationships between student veterans and civilian students would be to create an opportunity for these groups of students to meet in an organized setting.

A collaboration between the Office of Student Life and the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs would provide an opportunity to introduce another facet of diversity to the general study body by sponsoring opportunities for student veterans to meet one another and invite non-veteran students to engage with student veterans. Student veterans expressed feelings of not fitting in and not being understood. Giving them the opportunity to engage in a social gathering on campus outside of the classroom would help them form connections that could help breakdown some of the invisible barriers of isolation. In addition to social interactions, a structured schedule of programs targeted at facilitating conversations and presentations around topics of interest, military culture and experience, and focus on similarities between the groups can help to begin build relationships and understanding between the two. Intentional programming could focus on a mixture of military education for civilians, community involvement opportunities, and college and department-specific social gatherings.

**Student Veteran Orientation**

Currently, all orientations for the University of Alabama are planned by the Office of Orientation and Special Programs within the Student Services Center. The Bama Bound orientation program is an exciting, two-day event that gives newly accepted students the
opportunity to hear from university leadership, meet other students, learn more about their college, and get involved in small group sessions. While this is an excellent format to help students become accustomed to their new campus environment, many student veterans did not find great value in this orientation due to being older than the traditional college student. Student veterans also expressed their perception of not having much in common with non-veteran students.

Having a student veteran only orientation was explicitly named by several participants in the study. Having the opportunity to engage with other veterans in a formally organized event by the university would offer student veterans a chance to connect with others whom they more closely align with and provide a sense of familiarity. Having this quickly established network has the potential to directly influence and mitigate the level of isolation that on campus student veterans may feel. According to Rumann and Bondi (2014), student veterans are not as likely as their younger and traditional student peers to become involved on campus. Therefore, it is important to engage student veterans as they begin their academic journey to help ensure their persistence and retention. Providing an orientation explicitly for student veterans would provide them an opportunity to meet other veterans, learn about services offered specifically for the veteran and military community, and begin building a sense of community that is familiar. The idea of having a student veteran-specific orientation was suggested by study participants and is also supported by Kirchner (2015), “By meeting other students during orientation, student veterans can begin building a strong support network” (p. 118).

Office of Veteran and Military Affairs

The Office of Veteran and Military Affairs currently provides services specific to veterans in terms of their GI Bill, tuition assistance, and exploring other avenues of financial aid.
if needed. The office also provides assistance in registration and academic advising. Several study participants stated that while these services are helpful, it would be beneficial to have a greater understanding of the full extent of services available to veterans. It may seem like a rather simple observation, but simply sending out reminders about services offered, social media updates, and, campaigns around promoting specific services within the office would gain attention and serve as a prompt for student veterans to reach out. Creating targeted campaigns around highlighted services and the accessibility of these services for both on campus and online students would foster a greater sense of support by the office to student veterans. This implication for practice may require limited fiscal commitment by the university yet has the potential to yield great returns in terms of engagement of student veterans.

**Faculty and Professional Development**

A major theme of this study was the need for supportive and positive relationships and engagement between student veterans and other students and student veterans and their professors. Developing a student veteran-friendly community on campus is important for creating student veteran advocates among faculty. Faculty and staff should receive training and development regarding military culture, needs specific to student veterans, and awareness of mental health relative to the student veteran population (Rumman & Bondi, 2014).

This professional development can begin to make faculty and staff more aware of the student veteran’s military culture and the challenges that they may face in reconciling their military culture with the campus and academic culture. One pathway of recommended professional development for faculty is through a program called the “Green Zone”. This program helps to create advocates for student veterans and identify safe spaces on campus for student veterans (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012). While this program is based on the premise of faculty
volunteering to participate in the program, it does require participating faculty to display signage that they are a volunteer for the Green Zone.

Another avenue of faculty development specific to the student veteran population includes providing sensitivity training for faculty and staff to better understand student veteran needs, physical disabilities associated with service, invisible wounds of war, and the transition between a structured military culture to one that is less structured. As faculty and staff better understand a population of students, the better they will be able to relate to and support those students. While there are general guidelines around sensitivity training as related to faculty development, it is truly the university’s responsibility to assess the needs of their student veteran population, understand the construct of the student veteran population on campus, and develop in-house training for faculty and staff. The overarching theme of the training should be to better understand the student veteran experience and explore faculty and staff personal biases related to military service members, combat, and posttraumatic stress among service members.

The implications for practice that have been outlined here came out of a direct result of the analysis of data and suggestions from student veteran participants. These implications for practice and suggestions to better enhance the student experience and ultimately increase retention and persistence, is further supported by a report from Green & Van Dusen (2012) which outlines model to create a veteran friendly environment on campus. This model was a direct result of Van Dusen’s research regarding student veterans and this model further emphasizes key areas to focus on campus are; “mentor programs”, “Green Zone” initiative (which were both noted in the implications in chapter 4), but also includes other suggestions such as, “flexibility in general education requirements”, “develop a system to track academic progress”, and “commemorate veterans’ holidays” (Green & Van Dusen, 2012, p.5).
**Recommendations for Future Research**

When beginning the planning stages for this study and developing the protocol, the researcher was excited to gain greater insights regarding the student veteran experience on campus including interactions between student veterans, students, and faculty. Given that this study took place during extraordinary times due to the COVID-19 pandemic, protocols had to be adjusted to reflect such changes. To gain better insights and a richer narrative related to the student veteran experience at the University of Alabama, the researcher recommends conducting interviews of student veterans in person and on campus. Furthermore, having the opportunity to visit and tour the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs, interview professionals in the office, and capture their perspectives of interactions with student veterans would provide another perspective of the relationship dynamic between student veterans and professional staff on campus. Finally, having the opportunity to meet with faculty on campus to gather their perspectives of working with student veterans and observe classroom interactions between student veterans at varying academic levels and their classmates and faculty would provide another layer of understanding of the student veteran experience in terms of academic relationships.

The researcher suggests that it would be extremely beneficial to understand services used on campus by student veterans by further exploring the counseling center. Although this was part of the original purpose for exploring the experience of student veterans at the University of Alabama, due to the restrictions in place due to the pandemic of Covid-19, the full extent of the usage of counseling services and other student services was most likely under-utilized due to being closed or having limited operating hours. Conducting a future study when all services are available at full capacity would give another perspective of the extent to which student veterans
used the services and if they find benefit in these services. Future researchers should also consider the perspectives of the counseling services team in relation to posttraumatic stress among student veterans and their experiences with student veterans.

Data collected for this study through individual interviews with participants provided insights regarding experiences of student veterans specific to the University of Alabama across various degree programs and colleges. While this study was limited to one institution, it would be beneficial to expand this study to explore the experiences of student veterans across institutions within a system and compare those experiences to determine how administrators can learn from one another and share resources.

While this study was qualitative in nature and focused on the experiences of the student veterans on campus, it would beneficial to replicate this type of study in a quantitative format. In a quantitative study focused on student veteran experiences on campus and their level of posttraumatic stress symptoms, could further tie in data from the American College Health Association. With the data from the ACHA, national and university specific student trends could be examined and a correlation between the overall health (both mental and physical) and the level of satisfaction with the student veteran’s college experience. An additional layer of this suggested quantitative study is to incorporate first-generation status of participants. The current qualitative study at the University of Alabama did not explore the first-generation status of participants, however, this would be an interesting analysis which could lead to incorporating first-generation retention strategies for the student veteran population.

Furthermore, due to the unexpected implications of COVID-19, the researcher was able to explore the effects of the pandemic and restrictions in place with student veterans as related to their student experience. The overwhelming majority of study participants indicated that the
restrictions did not negatively affect their experience as a student. In fact, many student veterans stated that it was because of their military service and experience as well as some of the symptoms they experienced associated with posttraumatic stress that they were better prepared to overcome adversity.

Those student veterans who chose to pursue online degree programs did so because they stated it was the best option for them; whether that was due to geographical location or because they preferred the online learning environment. Those who chose traditional in-person or hybrid programs did express that they were not pleased with the change in the program or course modality, however they did express the ability to adapt as necessary. Offering more online courses could potentially provide an alternative to student veterans who prefer that particular modality of course offering, and from what the student veteran participants expressed in the interviews, there does not seem to be a significant discrepancy in whether or not engagement with faculty and student peers would be majorly influenced.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore the overall experience of student veterans at the University of Alabama, the presence of posttraumatic symptoms of those participants, and the influence, if any, symptoms had on their overall academic and social experiences as a student at the University of Alabama. Student veterans expressed a variety of symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress and noted how their interactions with faculty, students, and other professionals associated with support services influenced their student experiences.

While there was an overwhelming consensus of positive interactions with faculty and students there were also feelings of isolation, disconnection, and being stereotyped. Student veterans used services offered through the Office of Veterans and Military Services; however,
those services were rather limited to only those that were required to access tuition benefits and course registration. Several study participants identified services that they thought would be beneficial to the overall student veteran. Two of the supports included a student veteran-focused new student orientation and virtual mental health counseling with counselors who were well versed in military veteran psychology and treatment.

This study provided suggestions for faculty and various offices on campus to implement and recommended supports to facilitate a positive student experience that would meet the unique needs of this population in terms of veterans’ military service and combat exposure. Furthermore, this study provided insights into other avenues of research to further explore the student veteran experience. While this study focused solely on one university in the state of Alabama, it could be replicated to explore the experiences across multiple campuses within one university system universities across the state, or universities in other states. The value add for expanding this study across institutions within one system would allow leadership to analyze experiences and services provided and used by student veterans and then share findings so that each institution could benefit from this shared knowledge.

Finally, the unexpected developments and findings related to COVID-19 provided interesting insights regarding how student veterans viewed the pandemic and the restrictions imposed by the university and the state. The overwhelming response was that because of their military service and experience, student veterans were better prepared to react to the situation and confident in their ability to succeed despite the changes to student routines and processes.

The findings of this study will be beneficial for universities that have a student veteran population and are seeking to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for these students. Creating a more welcoming and accepting environment that provides supports unique
to the student veteran population, including mental health care specific to symptoms of posttraumatic stress, will help provide a more positive student experience for student veterans.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL OF STUDENT VETERANS RESEARCH STUDY: STUDENT VETERAN EXPERIENCE ON COLLEGE CAMPUS

Date of Interview:

Interview Location:

Time of Interview:

Interviewer’s Name:

Interviewee’s Name:

Interviewee’s Institution Affiliation:

Introduction to the Research

Hello and thank you for volunteering to participate in today’s interview which is part of a research study focusing on the experience of student veterans on college campuses. My name is Gina Thayer and I am currently a doctoral student at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. My research for my dissertation is focused on student veterans and how those with PTSD, or symptoms of PTSD are acclimating to student life and what your experience has been thus far at a traditional college campus. Your participation in this study is valued and your identity will not be revealed in association with your responses to the interview questions presented.

Our interview today will last approximately 60-75 minutes in total and all responses will be recorded via a digital recording device. This information will later be transcribed for the
analysis of results. There are no wrong answers here and all responses are valued and appreciated. If at any time throughout the interview, you no longer wish to progress, you have the right to ask me to end the interview.

All information collected today will be kept confidential and secure.

So that you may have a better understanding of what this study is about, the following are the research questions I am studying.

**Research Questions**

Purpose: What is the experience of student veterans with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder attending the University of Alabama?

RQ1. What symptoms of posttraumatic stress do student veterans most frequently experience?

RQ2. Which university support services do student veterans most frequently use and how do they view those services?

RQ3. What feelings of acceptance or alienation, from both faculty and student peers, do student veterans experience?

To begin the interview, I will begin by asking you some demographic questions and then we will move into questions regarding your previous education and military service. To conclude the interview, I will ask you questions related to your experience to date, at your current college.
Demographic Questions

1. What is your gender?

2. Where are you originally from?

3. How old are you?

4. Are you married or are you in a relationship?

Education and Military Experience

1. What is your education background?

2. What year are you in your degree program?

3. What is your degree program?

4. What branch(s) of the military service did you serve in?

5. How long did / have you served in the military?

6. When did you separate / retire from the military?

7. While you were on active duty, did you deploy to combat associated with the Global War on Terror (GWOT); for instance, were you deployed to either Iraq or Afghanistan?

8. How many times did you deploy to combat?

9. What was your job in the military?

10. What was your rank in the military at the time of separation / retirement?
Interview Questions

1. What symptoms or behaviors do you experience on a daily basis that are related to PTSD? (RQ1)

2. How have symptoms of PTSD affected your ability to adapt to student life on a college campus? (RQ1, RQ3)

3. What has your overall impression been of the acceptance and tolerance of your combat and military service among peers, professors, and administration? (R3)

4. To what extent, if any, have you shared your combat experience and PTSD with your professors and / or student peers? (R1, R3)

5. What have been some of the reactions or responses that you have received from your professors and / or student peers? (R3)

6. What does your individual support system look like? (R1, R2, R3)

7. To what extent do you use student support services at your institution? (R2)

8. What services do you use that are provided by your institution? (R2)

9. What student veteran specific support services are offered by your institution? (R2)

10. In what ways do you feel that the support services have helped you transition from your military service to life as a student veteran? (R1, R2)

11. Do you feel heard and accepted for your own belief system by your peers and professors? (R1, R3)

12. Please give me a brief narrative of what your college experience, as a student veteran with PTSD, have been to this point. (R1, R2, R3)

13. Given that these times across higher education have been quite uncertain with the
onset of the pandemic of COVID-19 settling across not only the nation, but also the world, there are has to be an acknowledgement of these current events. With the closing of the university for the Spring 2020 semester, as well as, the shift in course delivery and the uncertainty of the Fall 202 semester, how has this affected you as a student?

14. As a student veteran, do you feel that having posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or symptoms of PTSD, has affected the way you have processed and reacted to the pandemic?

15. Are there any other questions that you believe would be helpful for me to ask, to better understand your experience as a student veteran? (R1, R2, R3)

Thank you for taking time to speak with me today about this topic, which I know can be sensitive in nature and very personal. I appreciate you sharing your experiences with me and thank you for your service to our country.
October 8, 2020

Gina Thayer, M.Ed.
Department of ELPTS
College of Education
The University of Alabama
Box 879302

Re: IRB # 28-06-3654 “Student Veterans with Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Their Higher Education Experience at the University of Alabama”

Dear Ms. Thayer:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research. Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

The approval for your application will lapse on October 7, 2021. If your research will continue beyond this date, please submit a continuing review to the IRB as required by University policy before the lapse. Please note, any modifications made in research design, methodology, or procedures must be submitted to and approved by the IRB before implementation. Please submit a final report form when the study is complete.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved informed consent form to obtain consent from your participants.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

[Redacted]
Director & Research Compliance Officer
YOUR PARTICIPATION IS REQUESTED....

DISSERTATION RESEARCH STUDY

STUDENT VETERANS

PLEASE CONSIDER PARTICIPATING IN A RESEARCH STUDY RELATED TO THE EXPERIENCE OF STUDENT VETERANS ON CAMPUS.

PARTICIPANTS ARE BEING RECRUITED IMMEDIATELY.

PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY INCLUDES AN INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW WITH THE RESEARCHER REGARDING YOUR EXPERIENCES ON CAMPUS, USE OF STUDENT SERVICES ON CAMPUS, AS WELL AS, ANY SYMPTOMS YOU MAY EXPERIENCE RELATED TO POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD).

TO QUALIFY FOR THE STUDY, YOU MAY HAVE SERVED IN ANY BRANCH OF THE ARMED SERVICES (MARINES, ARMY, NAVY, AIR FORCE, COAST GUARD); CURRENTLY BE ACTIVE DUTY, RETIRED, SEPARATED, RESERVES OR NATIONAL GUARD. ALSO, YOU MUST HAVE BEEN DEPLOYED IN RELATION TO THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 2001 AND PRESENT.

PLEASE CONTACT RESEARCHER, GINA THAYER, TO EXPRESS INTEREST IN PARTICIPATING AT GTHAYER@UA.CRIMSON.EDU.
Project Title: Student Veterans with Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Their Higher Education Experience at the University of Alabama.

Please read this informed consent carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

Consent Form Key Information. You are being asked to take part in a research study. This study is called, "Student Veterans with Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Their Higher Education Experience at the University of Alabama". This study is being done by Gina Thayer, doctoral candidate within the College of Education at the University of Alabama. Details outlined for this study include:

- Your participation will consist of an approximately 90-minute interview either virtually or in person.
- You will be asked a series of demographic questions, as well as, questions related to military service background.
- The majority of the interview will focus on questions related to your experience as a student veteran and your symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, if present and the impact those symptoms may have on your student experience.

Purpose of the research study:

The purpose of this study is to discover the overall experience of student veterans on campus, as well as, how student veteran needs are being addressed on college campuses. Additionally, the frequency with which student support services are utilized by student veterans and the extent to which these services are perceived as beneficial to the student veteran, will be explored. Another facet of the student veteran experience that will be explored is how those students with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder navigate the student experience and to what extent their symptoms influence their student experiences.

The student veteran for the purpose of this study is defined as any active-duty, reserve military, or retired or separated military service member from any branch of the United States armed forces who has served in a combat deployment during the Global War on Terror, beginning in 2001 through present day. While the main focus will be to study the experience of student veterans diagnosed with PTSD, all student veteran experience data will be captured, reviewed, and analyzed.

What you will do in the study:

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to provide answers to demographic information about yourself, including information related to your military service. You will also be asked to provide answers to interview questions related to your experience at the University of Alabama, including interactions with other students, faculty, and staff, as well as, the frequency of use of the student services on campus and how beneficial you perceive them to be. Most questions asked throughout the interview will be related to your experiences as not only a student veteran, but also as a veteran who experiences symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.
Project Title: Student Veterans with Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Their Higher Education Experience at the University of Alabama.

Your interview will be conducted either in person or virtually, via Skype or Zoom. If your interview is conducted in person, it will take place on your campus, while following state-wide and the University of Alabama guidelines related to social distancing and COVID-19 restrictions. Your interview will be recorded so that transcription of the text can be conducted afterward for data analysis. Your identifying information will be redacted and your identity will be kept anonymous. Pseudonyms will be given for your interview, so that your story may be told and direct quotes may be attributed when appropriate.

**Time required:** The study will require about 1-1/2 hours (90 minutes) of your time.

**Risks:** There are no significant risks identified, however, due to the sensitive nature of discussing Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, you may experience some discomfort. Of course, you have the right to stop or pause the interview at any time. You also have the right to choose not to answer questions that make you feel uncomfortable. Also, you have the right to stop or pause the interview at any time, should you feel uncomfortable or need a break.

**Benefits:** There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. The study may help us understand this population of students – student veterans, along with their identified specific needs in relation to campus academic and student affairs support.

**Confidentiality:** The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a pseudonym. The list connecting your name with the pseudonym will be kept in a locked file. When the study is completed, and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report. All data collected through verbal interviews and recorded using audio-recordings, will be destroyed after three years.

**Voluntary participation:** Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.

**Right to withdraw from the study:** You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you should decide to withdraw from the study, any audio-recordings that you have participated in, will be destroyed and not included in the study.

**How to withdraw from the study:**
If you want to withdraw from the study at any time, please tell the researcher to stop the interview. There is no penalty for withdrawing. If you would like to withdraw after your interview has been conducted, please contact the researcher, Gina Thayer, at gthayer@ua.crimson.edu.

**Compensation / Reimbursement:** You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

**If you have questions about the study or need to report a study related issue, please contact:**
Name of Principal Investigator: Gina Thayer
Title: Doctoral Candidate
Department Name: College of Education, Education Leadership, Policy, and Technology Studies
Telephone: (931)538-2911
Email Address: gthayer@ua.crimson.edu

Faculty Advisor’s Name: Dr. Nathaniel Bray
Page 2 of 3
Project Title: Student Veterans with Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Their Higher Education Experience at the University of Alabama.

Title: Professor
Telephone: (205) 348-1169
Email: nbray@ua.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research study, would like to make suggestions or file complaints and concerns about the research study, please contact:
Ms. Tanta Myles, the University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer at (205) 348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066. You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach Website at http://ovpred.ua.edu/research-compliance/prco/. You may email the Office for Research Compliance at rscompliance@research.ua.edu.

Agreement:
☐ I agree to participate in the research study described above.
☐ I do not agree to participate in the research study described above.
☐ I agree to audio recording in the research study described above.
☐ I do not agree to audio recording in the research study described above.

Signature of Research Participant ____________________________ Date ____________

Print Name of Research Participant ____________________________

Signature of Investigator or other Person Obtaining Consent ____________________________ Date ____________

Print Name of Investigator or other Person Obtaining Consent ____________________________
APPENDIX C
TABLE 7 STUDENT VETERAN PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC, EDUCATION, AND MILITARY-SERVICE-RELATED INFORMATION

Table 7
Student Veteran Participant Demographic, Education, and Military-Service-Related Information

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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age in Years</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Service Branch</th>
<th>Separation Status</th>
<th>Rank at time of Separation</th>
<th>No. of Years Served</th>
<th>Degree Level</th>
<th>No. of Deployments</th>
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<td>George</td>
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<td>Army</td>
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<td>Ussif</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Married</td>
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<td>Separated</td>
<td>Staff Sgt.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>COVID Hybrid</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wydow</td>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>Army</td>
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<td>Sgt. First Class</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Online</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Deployments refer to deployments associated with the Global War on Terror.
* Traditional Hybrid program modality refers to programs that are either by default a combination of in-person and online learning.
* COVID Hybrid program modality also refers to programs that are supposed to be in-person, but have moved to hybrid course delivery or fully online due to restrictions.