Cisgender Women Student Veterans' Lived Experiences Inside the College Classroom

Ashley Frost

Dissertation submitted to the faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute

and State University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In

Higher Education

Claire K. Robbins, Chair
Sharrika D. Adams
D. Chase Catalano
David J. Kniola

August 7, 2024

Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: women student veterans, classroom experiences, identity

Cisgender Women Student Veterans' Lived Experiences in the College Classroom

Ashley Frost

Abstract

Women student veterans have been an understudied student population for decades. Although researchers have explored women student veterans' transition to higher education from the military, challenges relating to their peers, and mental health and service-related disabilities, there is virtually no literature on their lived experiences in the college classroom (Atkinson et al., 2018). The field lacks research on the narratives and counternarratives of the women student veterans' lived experiences in the classroom and on campus, and how their gender and veteran identities add to or hinder those experiences.

Addressing this gap in the literature, this qualitative study explored the following research questions: 1) What experiences do undergraduate cisgender women student veterans have in the college classroom? and 2) How do gender and student veteran identity influence cisgender women student veterans' experiences in the classroom? Veteran Critical Theory (VCT; Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) was used as a guiding framework for this qualitative study. The tenets of the theory provided guiding principles that assisted in understanding and evaluating how policies, procedures, and practices in the military and higher education marginalize and oppress women student veterans. Narrative inquiry was used as the methodological approach for data collection and analysis, which allowed the women student veterans to express themselves and their lived experiences through dialogue and stories (Creswell, 2014). Participants included seven undergraduate women student veterans (five from large, public research universities, and two from community colleges), between the ages of 23 to early forties, and were veterans from various branches of the military (Air Force, Army, and Marine

Corps). Data was collected through a participant questionnaire and semi-structured interviews and analyzed using initial and second-cycle coding procedures.

In response to the study's first research question (What experiences do undergraduate cisgender women student veterans have in the college classroom?), the theme of classmates emerged with the sub-themes of organic reveals, microaggressions, indifference, inability to relate, and ignorance. The participants shared they refrained from informing their classmates of their veteran identity unless it came up organically in conversation. They also shared that on occasion, when they did share their veteran identity, they experienced various forms of microaggressions or indifference. The participants described their inability to relate to their civilian peers due to differences in age, marital/parental status, and general life experiences. The participants also shared their frustrations regarding their classmates' ignorance of veterans and the military.

Another theme that emerged was faculty and included sub-themes of indifference and positive interactions. The participants discussed how they only revealed their veteran status to their faculty if it came up organically in class conversation, and their faculty responded either positively or were indifferent to the news. None of the participants had negative experiences with their faculty regarding their veteran identity or military affiliation. Several participants spoke of specific positive interactions they had experienced with faculty members and how those interactions had a lasting and influential impact on their classroom and academic experiences.

The final theme that emerged was experiences with the campus environment beyond coursework, which included sub-themes of "veteran-friendly" campus, disability support services, "you don't look like a veteran," and liberal environment. Regarding having a "veteran-friendly" campus, participants described having both positive and negative experiences. Many mentioned they did not participate in veteran-related activities on campus due to their busy schedules, and they also did not know of other women veterans on campus.

Some described the ease of using their GI Bill benefits, while one participant talked about the gender inequity of having to rush against the clock to finish classes before her GI Bill benefits expire due to multiple stop-outs from having her children. A couple of participants also described their experiences working with disability support services on campus. One participant had a positive, easy, and simplistic experience obtaining an accommodation letter for her military-related disabilities, while another participant described multiple challenges in trying unsuccessfully to get accommodations for her military-related disabilities. The women in the study also described multiple instances where their peers on campus and other veterans in the community would comment “you don’t look like a veteran” when they would reveal their veteran identity. Additionally, participants described their campuses’ geographical areas as being liberal environments. Several of the women shared that they felt anti-military and anti-veteran sentiments from their classmates while on campus, resulting in their desire to “blend in” and not advertise their veteran identity. When referring to campuses being liberal environments, the findings in the study also found that the participants were not referring to a geopolitical ideology, but rather an undercurrent of privilege and a negative peer culture that exists on campus.

In response to the second research question (How do gender and student veteran identity influence cisgender women student veterans’ experiences in the classroom?), several themes emerged: gender identity, sexism, and veteran identity. The first theme, gender identity, was a consistent theme throughout each of the participant’s interviews. They described how being a woman had a significant impact in their military experience as they experienced various forms of gender inequities, sexual harassment and assault, as well as having to work twice as hard to earn respect and acknowledgements. The women also discussed how those experiences impacted their desire to want to “blend in” on their campuses and be “regular” students. Although they shared that being a woman in class made no real difference in their in-class experiences, the findings showed that gender played a key role in the way they

approached their veteran identity, which influenced how they engaged with their classmates and faculty in the classroom and on campus. The participants did clarify, however, that they felt age, marital status/parental status, and a difference in general life experiences from their civilian peers were more influential to their classroom experiences than their gender.

The next theme that emerged was sexism. The participants discussed how they experienced various forms of sexism and gender inequities in the military. They shared numerous anecdotes of their experiences in the military due to their gender.

Another theme that emerged was veteran identity. Three sub-themes also emerged: blending in, fear, and reactions to “thank you for your service.” With regard to blending in, the participants described their desire to blend in on their campuses and not advertise their veteran status. The second sub-theme of fear was in reference to the participants’ feelings when anticipating the responses of their civilian classmates and faculty after revealing their veteran identity. The third sub-theme that emerged was reactions to “thank you for your service”. Several participants discussed how the well-intentioned statement of gratitude makes them uncomfortable because they do not know how to respond. Overall, the participants described how they typically felt the need to keep their veteran identities to themselves unless it came up organically in conversation, but their veteran identity was not as salient as some of their other identities (i.e., student, mother, friend, etc.).

In conclusion, this study offers implications and recommendations for policy and practice. These include training faculty and staff on veterans and military culture; providing additional resources and staff for on-campus resources like veteran resource centers and disability support services, improving classroom environments, peer culture and the liberal environment, and improving campus policies and procedures to better support student veterans. Further research should explore how to better serve women student veterans on college campuses, undergraduate women student veterans from other parts of the country and other

types of higher education institutions; and the harmful effects of “thank you for your service” and similar comments.

Cisgender Women Student Veterans' Lived Experiences in the College Classroom

Ashley Frost

General Audience Abstract

Women student veterans have been an understudied student population for decades. Although researchers have explored women student veterans' transition to higher education from the military, challenges relating to their peers, and mental health and service-related disabilities, there is virtually no literature on their lived experiences in the college classroom (Atkinson et al., 2018). The field lacks research on the narratives and counternarratives of the women student veterans' lived experiences in the classroom and on campus, and how their gender and veteran identities add to or hinder those experiences.

Addressing this gap in the literature, this qualitative study explored the following research questions: 1) What experiences do undergraduate women student veterans have in the college classroom? and 2) How do gender and student veteran identity influence women student veterans' experiences in the classroom? Seven participants participated in an interview where they shared details about their experiences serving in the military, interacting with civilians as veterans, and their experiences in college classrooms and on campus.

In response to the study's first research question (What experiences do undergraduate women student veterans have in the college classroom?), the findings included the theme of classmates with the sub-themes of organic reveals, microaggressions, indifference, inability to relate, and ignorance. Regarding the second research question (How do gender and student veteran identity influence women student veterans' experiences in the classroom?), several themes emerged: gender identity, sexism, and veteran identity. The theme of veteran identity also included sub-themes of fear and participants' negative reactions to the phrase, "thank you for your service." This study offers implications and recommendations for policy and practice

and recommendations for further research. Such efforts may not only assist in the support of women student veterans, but all student veterans and other marginalized and underrepresented students.

Dedication

This dissertation, and my interest in assisting veterans and their families, is dedicated to Levi Lawrence.

Levi, first let me thank you for your bravery, courage, and dedication to your country. I am so proud of the work you did while serving in the U.S. Air Force. As a veteran, you are not only valued, but greatly appreciated. You inspired me to want to work with and help support veterans and their families. Throughout my doctoral journey, you have been my north star, continuously reminding me of the value and positive impact that veterans have in our country. Whenever I would get overwhelmed by the work, I would think of you and your dedication and courage. You inspired me to do better and work harder, not only for myself, but for the thousands of veterans out there that need support and assistance. I could not have achieved this, or helped other veterans, without you - I am forever grateful.

Secondly, thank you for being such a bright and shining light in our family. Your humor, quick wit, outgoing personality, and sweet nature bring tremendous joy to so many. You are capable of achieving anything you set your mind to and I am confident that you will continue to do amazing things. You are loved, appreciated, and valued - always remember that!

Acknowledgments

The process of completing this degree has been a unique experience. My doctoral journey would not have been possible or successful without the love and support of so many amazing people. First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor and chair, Dr. Claire Robbins. Claire was not only one of my first professors in my program, but has been my graduate assistantship supervisor, advisor, mentor, therapist, and dear friend. She has been the fundamental pillar in my academic success, and is truly the most supportive, kind, and generous advisor I could have asked for. Thank you for the unwavering support and encouragement, countless reminders of “you got this,” and for always helping me to grow as a person and as a scholar. You are one of the most amazing women I’ve ever met and I am so grateful to have had you by my side through this journey.

I would also like to thank my committee members who provided guidance and thought-provoking feedback while completing this degree. Dr. Sharrika Adams - thank you for being not only a phenomenal committee member, but also a supportive supervisor throughout my graduate assistantship, as well as a trusted mentor. You encouraged me to stretch, think strategically, and to trust in what I already knew to be true. I will always be grateful for your support and positivity, and I will do my best to “just relax and enjoy the crown.” Dr. David Kniola - thank you not only for helping me become a better scholar, but thank you for your warm personality and humorous day-to-day interactions. As we all know, quantitative research will never be my strong suit, but your creative teaching style and fun disposition not only helped me learn critical skills, but helped me gain an appreciation for interpreting and understanding quantitative analysis. I’ll be thinking of you as I’m driving to Michigan for the umpteenth time and scowling my way through Ohio. Dr. Chase Catalano - thank you for always challenging me to think critically, and to be more intentional about *why* things matter and whom they impact. Your brilliance and wealth of knowledge were invaluable to me during this journey, and I would not be half the scholar I am without your feedback and support. You inspire me to be more courageous

in my work and not be afraid to ask the hard questions to get to the heart and soul of the real issues. Thank you for pushing me out of my comfort zone and empowering me to fight the status quo. With that said, a big thank you to each of you for dedicating your time, energy, and effort to helping me through this process and serving on my committee. It was truly a joy and an honor to have worked with you.

I want to also thank my dearest friend, Dr. Jade Eldredge. From the first day we met at orientation and through all these years since, you have always been by my side cheering me on. Your friendship is one of the greatest gifts of my life and I could not have asked for a better friend. I'm thankful for all of our adventures, treasure hunting expeditions, and venting sessions we've had since beginning the program. I always look forward to our trips together and I can't wait to see what new adventures we'll find ourselves embarking on in the future. Also, I could not have survived this process without your kindness, generosity, empathy, and beautiful personality. Thank you for all of your love, support, and endless "you got this." And together, we've finally got this!

Thank you to all of my family for their continued love and support throughout the years. Jackson – you are the love of my life. I am so thankful and blessed to have such an amazing, smart, caring, and absolutely hilarious son. You bring me so much joy, laughter, and happiness. I am so proud of all that you have accomplished and all that you continue to do. You have always believed in me and have encouraged me to believe in myself. You give me strength, hope, and most importantly the belief that anything is possible. You are and will always be my most precious gift and greatest achievement. I love you, Bubs!

Mom - thank you for always believing in me and being my biggest cheerleader from day one. You've been my rock, my shoulder to cry on, my sounding board, my constant reminder that I can do whatever I set my mind to, and it will all be worth it in the end. Your grace, sincerity, and unconditional devotion to your family is truly a blessing. I love you dearly. Dad and Ann - thank you for all of your support. Throughout the years, you have taught me so many skills and

life lessons. Dad - thank you for your service. You have been a fighter and a go-getter your whole life. The obstacles and barriers that you have overcome, and to be where you are today, are quite the accomplishments and have inspired and motivated me through my PhD journey. You have taught me the meaning of hard work, failure is not an option, and to never give up. Love you and Ann so much. Chrisfer - thank you for all of your support, encouragement, and for believing in all of my wild-hair ideas. You've always been there when I needed you, fixed my car 10,000 times and then some, and you're still, by far, the smartest person I know. You inspire me everyday to take things a little slower, be a little more patient, and know that I can do things if I give them a try. Thanks for being a great brother and friend. Love you!

I would also like to thank my brother John and sister Steph for their continued support through the years. John, I appreciate your commitment and contribution to the United States Navy Reserves for the many many years that you served. You also inspired me to pursue an interest in working with veterans. Thank you for all of your hard work and dedication. Steph - thank you for your continued support and encouragement. I am so proud of all of your accomplishments and you were such an inspiration when you went back to school and finished all of your degrees. Us Frost girls are making it happen and getting it done! Love you both so much! Also, I would like to give a big shout out to both of Steph's boys, Nathan and Finley, for their service in the United States Coast Guard. I couldn't be more proud of them. Love you both!

In addition, I would like to thank Kathy Tickle, Sherri Albert, and Wanda McAlexander for their support and assistance throughout the years. I don't know how I would have ever gotten registered for classes, filled out the correct forms, reserved meeting rooms, or completed any of the necessary paperwork for my program without you. You have always been phenomenal at what you do, how you've kept me on track, and you have been so gracious and accommodating with my countless "Oops, I didn't know I needed to do that," or, "Do you mind helping me with…" Thank you for all that you do and for all that you have done for me; I am forever grateful.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter One: Introduction

This study focused on the influence of gender and veteran identity on lived experiences in the college classroom for cisgender[1] women student veterans. The following sections discuss the history of women in the military, higher education, and in the college classroom, as well as the history of military education benefits. The chapter is rounded out with the statement of the problem, purpose statement, significance of the study, and my reflexivity. It concludes with a discussion of the delimitations and organization of the study.

History of Women in the Military

Women have not always served in official capacities in the United States military. Since the Revolutionary War, more than three million women have served, even though it was not until the turn of the 20th century that the U.S. military began allowing cisgender women to serve in official limited capacities (Vergun, 2023). In 1901, Congress permanently established the Army Nurse Corps and subsequently the Navy Nurse Corps in 1908 (Kamarck, 2016). Within a decade, more than 24,000 women served during World War I in official capacities as nurses and in clerical support roles (National Women's History Project, 2017). However, when World War I came to an end on November 11, 1918, the U.S. military demobilized the vast majority of women serving in the armed forces, with the exception of a small number of Army and Navy nurses (Vergun, 2023).

During World War II, the military was experiencing a severe manpower shortage and began accepting women into various branches: Women's Army Corp (as nurses only); Navy's Women Accepted for Emergency Services (WAVES); Marines Corp Women's Reserve; the

[1] Throughout this document, and in keeping with the VetCrit theoretical approach undergirding this study (Phillips & Lincoln, 2022), I have attempted to make accurate distinctions between sex/gender and female/woman, and to use the word 'cisgender' when I am referring to cisgender women specifically. However, I reference numerous secondary sources that conflate sex with gender and female with woman, as well as many references that discuss women without any discussion of trans* or cisgender identities. When referencing such sources, I do not attempt to correct them since there is no way to ensure accuracy.

Coast Guard Women's Reserve, and the Air Force (Vergun, 2023). In June 1948, President Truman signed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act which allowed women regular permanent status in the military (Vergun, 2023).

It was not until the 1970s that the U.S. military allowed women access to additional service positions and training opportunities. The Navy began allowing women in pilot training in 1973, followed by the Air Force in 1976 (Kamarck, 2016). In 1975, President Ford signed Public Law 94-106 granting women admission into the service academies: Air Force Academy (Colorado), Naval Academy (Maryland), and West Point (New York) (Kamarck, 2016). Although women were allowed admission to these academies, additional policies were created to limit their capacities in service roles. For example, in 1977, at the bequest of Congress, the Secretary of Defence submitted a formal definition of combat which also outlined who was entitled to serve in combat environments - thus excluding women from such roles (Kamarck, 2016).

It was not until decades later, that both combat and service support roles became available to enlisted and officer women. In December 2015, Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter announced that starting in January 2016, all jobs (including combat), in all branches of the military would officially be open to women (Rosenberg & Phillipps, 2015). Defense Secretary Carter stated:

> There will be no exceptions. They'll be allowed to drive tanks, fire mortars and lead infantry soldiers into combat. They'll be able to serve as Army Rangers and Green Berets, Navy SEALs, Marine Corps infantry, Air Force parajumpers and everything else that was previously open only to men (Rosenberg & Phillipps, 2015).

Even though this new ruling opened more than 220,000 jobs for women in the armed forces, there were many critics, including Senator John McCain of Arizona and Representative Mac Thornberry of Texas, who argued the change would have a "consequential impact on our service members and our military's warfighting capabilities" (Rosenberg & Phillipps, 2015). As of

2021, more than 231,741 (17.3%) women made up the active-duty military, and more than 171,000 (21.4%) made up the National Guard and reserves (United States Department of Defense, 2022). Although the number of women in the military continues to rise each year (United States Department of Defense, 2022), many of the challenges and barriers for women in service remain.

History of Military Education Benefits

Military education benefits began following World War II when the United States government recognized that following the end of the war, more than 16 million men (about the population of New York) and women serving in the armed forces would return home and essentially be unemployed (United States Department of Defense, 2019). On January 10, 1944, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 was passed by Congress, and on June 22, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed it into law (Department of Defense, 2019). The act became known as the GI Bill of Rights, as it assisted veterans in their readjustment to civilian life by providing home-buying assistance, getting jobs, and pursuing higher education (Department of Defense, 2019).

Post-war college and vocational school enrollments increased exponentially following the implementation of the GI Bill. Within the first seven years, over 8 million veterans took advantage of the educational benefits, and college and university degree holders more than doubled between 1940 and 1950 in the U.S. (Department of Defense, 2019). The GI Bill not only provided educational benefits but also kept millions of veterans from flooding the job markets at once, thus helping to keep the U.S. from entering another great depression. It is considered one of the most influential pieces of legislation ever passed (Department of Defense, 2019).

The GI Bill has gone through several reiterations. In 1984, then-congressman “Sonny” Montgomery revamped the bill which assured VA home loan guarantee and educational benefits for veterans of the post-Vietnam era - resulting in the Montgomery GI Bill

(Racepowerofanillusion.org, 2019). The next iteration of the bill came in 2009, called the Post 9/11 GI Bill, which gave servicemembers and veterans who had served at least 90 days (about three months) of active-duty service on, or after, September 11, 2001, enhanced educational benefits (www.racepowerofanillusion.org, 2019). Additional benefits included money for books, a living allowance, and most importantly, the ability to transfer unused educational benefits to a spouse or children (www.racepowerofanillusion.org, 2019).

The most recent iteration of the GI Bill came in 2017 when the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act - commonly known as the “Forever GI Bill” - was passed (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023). Beginning August 1, 2018, expanded educational benefits became available to servicemembers and veterans whose service ended on or after January 1, 2013 (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023). Expanded benefits included additional benefits for Purple Heart recipients, benefits for Reservists, Yellow Ribbon extensions for active duty service members, and the elimination of a 15-year limitation to use the Post 9/11 GI Bill program (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023).

Although all U.S. veterans who were honorably discharged were eligible for VA benefits, discrimination at the structural level prevented many veterans of color from accessing their benefits (www.racepowerofanillusion.org, 2019). During the 1940s and 50s, benefits were administered by the local Veterans Administration (VA), which was made up almost entirely of white men and was closely affiliated with the pro-segregation American Legion (Racepowerofanillusion.org, 2019). Veterans of color, mainly blacks, were often steered toward vocational schools instead of colleges or universities and were frequently told that the job market had no place for blacks as skilled workers (Racepowerofanillusion.org, 2019). Veterans of color also had challenges receiving home loans for homes, especially for homes in white neighborhoods, even though the GI Bill was federally guaranteed. A growing resentment of the millions of veterans of color being shut out of economic brackets, and higher quality schools and

neighborhoods, and some colleges and universities, contributed significantly to the rise of the modern Civil Rights movement in the 1960s (Racepowerofanillusion.org, 2019).

Women veterans faced similar discrimination during the 1950s and 1960s. Although over 320,000 women (about half the population of Wyoming) veterans were eligible to receive benefits, only about 65,000 attended colleges or universities using GI Bill benefits (Racepowerofanillusion.org, 2019). During this time, many women veterans were either told they were not eligible for GI Bill Benefits because their units had been demobilized or not informed about GI Bill benefits at all (Racepowerofanillusion.org, 2019). Many of the women veterans who managed to use GI Bill benefits, were often harassed and faced hostility when enrolling and trying to take advantage of their benefits (Racepowerofanillusion.org, 2019). Although GI Bill benefits provided the opportunity for more women to attend and afford college than ever before, fewer women following the end of World War II received college degrees because many colleges limited their women enrollment to allow more space for men veterans coming home from war (Racepowerofanillusion.org, 2019).

History of Women in Higher Education

The military was not the only institution historically dominated by men in which women have faced gender discrimination, they have also faced gender discrimination in higher education for hundreds of years. The history of women in higher education in the United States began in the nineteenth century. In the early 1800s, soon after public school was introduced throughout the U.S.,the need for teachers became a wide necessity. As a result, postsecondary education to be widely available to women came in the form of teacher training (MyChapterRoom.com, 2023). Throughout the 1800s, women made their way from strictly Normal Schools and the teaching profession, into degree-granting colleges and universities at an astonishing rate. In 1870, 30 percent of colleges and universities were coeducational, by the turn of the century it had increased to more than 70 percent (Antler, 1982). However, as women’s colleges and land-grant institutions were popping up all over the country, many

prestigious, historically all-men universities were suffering from slumping enrollments, and one such university, Cornell, was criticized heavily for refusing to enroll women “until funds were to be contributed specifically for women’s education”, and only admitting women as “token enrollments” and as an “expedient economic measure” (Conable, 1977, p.9).

By the early 20th century, the enrollment of men and women were nearly equal from 1900 to 1930 as men went off to fight in World War I and women continued attending college in record numbers (Golden et al., 2006). It wasn’t until the 1930s and the years following that the enrollment numbers started increasing in favor of men as unemployment from the Great Depression and the marriage bars — regulations that kept married women from being employed — rendered degrees for women less valuable (Golden et al., 2006). Following the end of World War II in 1945 and then the Korean War in 1953, President Roosevelt signed the GI Bill, which provided education funds and allowed veterans to enroll in college in record numbers, while also causing a restriction in the number of women who could be enrolled. In addition to the restriction of women’s enrollment into college, the 1950s was a period of early marriage and childbearing — commonly referred to as “the baby boom” era, which kept many women at home and out of college. Those who were in college during this time were often treated as second-class citizens, with limited access to assistantships and other training opportunities (Antler, 1982).

The 1960s saw another turning of the tides for women, not only in society but in higher education. The social pressure to marry early and start a family began to wane, and the women’s movement began to rise, bringing with it a new influx of women onto college campuses across the country in unprecedented numbers. The increase in women’s enrollment was primarily due to the establishment of The Higher Education Act of 1965, which provided Basic Education Opportunity Grants to low-income students (Education Writers Association, 2021) without regard to gender, which furthered the drive for equal educational opportunities for women (Antler, 1982). In addition, the 1960s not only saw an increase in women’s enrollment, but also women’s involvement on campuses by means of leading and participating in marches,

protests, and sit-ins for civil rights, women's rights, and the Black Power movement, as well as anti-war demonstrations against the Vietnam war.

The 1970s saw even more women's empowerment and involvement in higher education. A major contributing factor was the legalization and wide-spread availability of unmarried persons' contraceptives with the passing of Eisenstadt v. Baird in 1972 (Legal Information Institute, 2024), which positively impacted women's graduation rates, increased their ability to have high-powered professional careers, and increased their participation in the life-cycle of the labor force (Golden et al., 2006). Women began seeing themselves as active participants in the workforce, outside of just teaching, and they began to enroll in STEM majors such as mathematics, engineering, architecture, and physics at much higher rates than ever seen before. By the early 1970s, women's enrollment had increased to over 40 percent, a vast increase from a mere 24 percent in 1950 (Antler, 1982). Women were no longer following in their mothers' footsteps, they were forging their own paths, and many were doing so with the help of college degrees.

By 1982, women surpassed men in college enrollment across the U.S. (Jacobs, 1996). Yet women began enrolling more frequently as part-time students than ever before; were overrepresented in lower-status institutions with lower standardized test scores, fewer fees, and higher acceptance rates; and were scarcely represented in elite universities with large engineering programs (Jacobs, 1996). However, the 1980s did bring about significant changes on campus for women. Title IX was in full-swing at virtually all colleges and universities across the U.S., bringing not only awareness of sex discrimination, but a no-tolerance approach to almost all areas of campus activities, including athletics (Chamberlain, 1988). In addition, many other improvements have been made on campus to support women students: career counseling has expanded beyond teaching; women's athletics has expanded to include a variety of sports; budgets for women's sports and teams are comparable to men's; scholarships specifically for women athletes become available; campus health services expanded to include gynecological

care; some childcare centers began to spring up on campuses, though not many institutions embraced this service; and women's centers and women's research centers/institutes were also created at many institutions (Chamberlain, 1988). However, amidst all the improvements for women on campus, the "stalled revolution" and societal backlash against feminists from an unsympathetic government administration contributed to the slowdown in the integration of women into fields traditionally dominated by men like engineering (Jacobs, 1996, p. 96), and to the discovery of the "chilly climate" and gender bias against women in college classrooms (Allen & Madden, 2006, p. 685).

The 1990s and the first two decades of the 21st century brought large-scale challenges for women in higher education. Although overt discrimination now violated Title IX, gender bias remained widespread on college campuses, often in subtle forms. Women students were still reporting incidents of sexual harassment; they were not being taken seriously in the classroom (Penney et al., 2007), and as affirmative action and immigration began to garner more attention in the late 1990s, women students began promoting racial understanding (Sax, 2008). The early 2000s brought on discrimination for Muslim and Middle Eastern students due to the War on Terrorism, and in 2013, women students of color, particularly Black students, began to protest the culture of white antagonism with the start of the Black Lives Matter movement. Many Black women students reported experiencing microaggressions as well as feelings of impostorship, tokenism, and racial battle fatigue (Dancy et al., 2018). Immigrant students also began to face significant challenges on campus after the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) was passed, namely the stress that came with "outing' their family's status as undocumented and often being referred to as "illegal" (Benuto et al., 2018). In addition, queer and trans* women experienced violence and exclusion from their fellow classmates and peers, higher education campuses that fostered inadequate and exclusionary environments and policies, as well as hostile legislative attacks (Catalano, Haslerig, Jourian, & Nicolazzo, 2021). Again, it was often women students who came together on campuses across the country to form protests, write

newsletters, lead student organizations, and engage in activism in numerous other ways in the name of solidarity.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, women students have reported a greater negative impact on their health, mental health, and financial status (Zimmerman et al., 2021). Women students have also reported greater severity in anxiety symptoms and higher levels of stress due to online social media and problematic internet use (Zimmerman et al., 2021). These issues have served as challenges for higher education institutions as women are more likely to drop out of college (Kim et al., 2021). Colleges and universities have had to reassess their support of women students as challenges with mental health, physical health, and stress continue to rise.

Women have overcome barriers of entry and overt gender discrimination on campus, but many still face sexual harassment, microaggressions, subtle forms of gender bias, mental and physical health challenges, and perhaps even chilly classrooms. As the barriers continue to plague many women students in their pursuit of higher education, colleges and universities will need to continually evaluate and adapt to the needs of this population, as they continue to make up more than fifty percent of college enrollment and are critical to the future success of all higher education institutions.

Women's Classroom Experiences

Gender bias and discrimination against women have been found in every level of education since research began on the topic in the 1980s. The term "chilly climate" was coined in the early 1980s when research indicated discrimination against women students in college and university classrooms (Hall & Sandler, 1982; Tatum et al., 2013). Differential (though it may be subtle) treatment of women students within the college classroom can lead to lowered self-esteem, self-confidence, and academic achievement (Tatum et al., 2013). As a result, chilly climates in the classroom often cause women students to engage in avoidance behaviors including avoiding eye contact, avoiding being called upon by the instructor by pretending to

read, as well as reporting higher levels of communication apprehension in the classroom with their peers and their professors (Tatum et al., 2013).

Women students' participation in the classroom is strongly dependent on the professor/instructor (Crombie et al., 2013; Lesaas et al., 2018; Weaver & Qi, 2005). Women students who reported a perceived classroom environment as one of mutual respect and care, as well as having a positive rapport with their professors, typically participated more in class and had a higher degree of classroom connectedness (Lesaas et al., 2018; Johnson, 2009; & Weaver & Qi, 2005). Along with their interactions with their professors, women students' classroom participation and confidence levels have also been reported to be significantly influenced by their interactions with men classmates (Allen & Madden, 2006; Tatum et al., 2013). Women continue to experience several negative behaviors from men classmates, particularly in STEM fields like engineering, such as inappropriate sexual humor and remarks, frequent interruptions, ignoring of their [women's] ideas, and the taking over of leadership roles (Tatum et al., 2013).

Gender inequities in the college classroom may often go unnoticed due to the concept of gender schemas: "nonconscious hypotheses about sex differences that guide people's perceptions and behaviors, leading men and women alike to overvalue men and undervalue women" (Valian, 2002, p. 2). These behaviors create chilly classrooms for some women, directly reflecting a historically binary-gendered society's routine and taken-for-granted communication patterns (Allen & Madden, 2006). In many male majority fields, women students describe having to work harder to be noticed by their professors, be more prepared to back up their points in discussions, and are often designated the "leader" for group projects by either the men students in the group or the professor because they "knew it would get done"(Allen & Madden, 2006, p. 699). The group "leader" invariably equates to "group secretary" (Allen & Madden, 2006, p. 699). Women students in STEM fields often get called on less frequently in class and spend less

time interacting with the professor, thus resulting in fewer opportunities to participate in the classroom (Leraas et al., 2018).

The persistence of lower participation in the classroom for women students is found most prevalently in the classroom's "sonic space" (the sound or voice space that individuals occupy), as they participate and speak less, engage hesitantly, and often use apologetic language (Lee & McCabe, 2021). Women students perceive their lack of classroom participation is due to reasons such as not having well-informed ideas, not knowing enough about the topic of discussion, and/or fear of classmates viewing them as unintelligent (Crawford and MacLeod, 1990; Leraas et al., 2018). Women students reported that these feelings were reinforced by professors and classmates who made them feel discouraged, invisible, and often questioned their competence (Allen & Madden, 2006). As a result, many women students are disadvantaged in the classrooms with participation grades, particularly in STEM fields (Leraas et al., 2018).

The "chilly climate" seems to persist for some women students, particularly for women students with other minoritized identities, and particularly in classroom environments and with professors, and classmates who women do not perceive as positive and supportive (Kim & Kim, 2023; Jensen & Deemer, 2019; Roper, 2019). Microaggressions in the classroom, because they are difficult to deal with actively and promptly, lead women students to feelings of low self-esteem, anxiety, and stress (Kim & Kim, 2023). Sexual objectification, lack of gender sensitivity, and hostility towards feminism caused many women students to "conform to the social patterns of men to avoid being labeled as 'emotional' or a 'bitch', which indicates the prevalence of prejudice and coping skills" (Kim & Kim, 2023, p. 8). This is particularly prevalent in engineering and other STEM fields. Overall, women students continue to experience a "chilly climate" in the college classroom, primarily in STEM fields and engineering, through microaggressions, implicit sexism, and sexual objectification from both their professors and men peers (Kim & Kim, 2023; Leraas et al, 2018).

Statement of Problem

Women, especially women veterans, have fought hard to find their place in the American college classroom. Though acknowledged in the literature in general terms as a part of research on “student veterans” and their experiences in college (Cuseo, 2018; Dean et al., 2020; DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott et al., 2011; Guzzardo et al., 2020; Hammond, 2016; Hinton, 2020; Hoffman, 2014; Jones, 2013; Medley et al., 2017; Morris et al., 2019), there is very little research specifically on women veterans’ lived experiences in the college classroom. With more and more women veterans enrolling in college and using GI Bill education benefits each year, it is imperative for the U.S. military and institutions of higher education to understand women veterans’ experiences in college in order to better assist them in their pursuit of higher education and ultimately degree completion. Findings from this study may help inform the ways higher education is and is not working to create positive learning environments for women veterans within and beyond college classrooms.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe how women veterans’ experiences in the U.S. military and as women student veterans influence their lived experiences inside college and university classrooms. This study used narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) for data collection and analysis. This study was conducted at multiple higher education institutions within the South Atlantic region by interviewing enrolled undergraduate students who self-identify as women veterans. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What experiences do undergraduate women student veterans have in the college classroom?

2. How do gender and student veteran identity influence women student veterans' experiences in the classroom?

Reflexivity

Before initiating this study, I engaged in reflexivity to acknowledge my lived experiences and positionality and the ways they might inform the design of the study and analysis of subsequent data. I am a 38-year-old, heterosexual, cisgender, white woman, born and raised in Virginia. I am working on a doctoral degree in Higher Education, and I have been a full-time student for five years while working two part-time jobs, one being a graduate assistantship that pays my tuition and a monthly stipend.

My father is a wounded veteran of the Vietnam War, my oldest brother is a veteran of the Navy Reserves, my maternal grandfather served in the Korean War, and my paternal grandfather served in World War II. My god-brother is an Air Force veteran, having served two tours in Afghanistan in the mid-2000s. My oldest nephew also served and is a veteran of the United States Coast Guard, and his younger brother is currently serving in the United States Coast Guard. Although I did not serve in the armed forces myself, I have been around close family members who have served and heard and seen the military's influence on individuals. It was the negative impact that the service had on my god-brother that initially got me interested in working with and conducting research for veterans. Upon his exit from service, my god-brother experienced many psychological and physiological challenges related to his time in service. His challenges inspired me to investigate the challenges that other veterans in our generation face with the hopes that my research might help the government, military, and institutions of higher education provide better support and resources for veterans.

While completing my doctoral coursework and reading through the literature on veterans, particularly student veterans, I noticed very quickly that very little literature was available on women veterans, and virtually no literature was available on women student veterans. It was

this gap in research that inspired me to conduct my research on women student veterans' lived experiences in the college classroom. I wanted to learn more about the experiences of women veterans and how/if the military's conflation of masculinity influenced their perceived view of self, veteran, and college student.

Having personally experienced sexism and sexual harassment by a university faculty member while in college, I believe that it is not uncommon for other women students to experience sexism and oppression (both subtly and explicitly), and for many, they may not be aware of its occurrence. Women student veterans may be so desensitized to historically masculine cultural norms and a patriarchal society that they do not recognize sexism, oppression, and insensitive comments by faculty and fellow students in the classroom. These assumptions and personal experiences have encouraged me to pursue this research interest in women student veterans' lived experiences in the college classroom.

Significance of the Study

Previous studies on women student veterans have been very limited (perhaps only a handful in the last decade), with a focus on women student veterans' experiences transitioning out of the military and into college. Numerous studies have been conducted on student veterans in general, with women student veterans' experiences occasionally sprinkled in.The 2015 Veteran Economic Opportunity Report (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs) argues that women veterans are more likely to complete a college degree than either their men veteran counterparts or civilian women, however they still experience feelings of isolation on campus, challenges relating to their peers, and microaggressions from civilian classmates and faculty. Despite higher degree completion rates, higher education and the Department of Veterans Affairs need to have a more thorough understanding of women student veterans and their experiences on campus in order to provide them with higher quality assistance and access to essential resources on campus, knowledgeable faculty and staff of military culture and military-affiliated student challenges, as well as policies and practices that support the

well-being and academic success of women student veterans throughout their pursuit of higher education.

Transitioning out of the military and back into civilian life can be challenging enough, but transitioning into a higher education environment is yet another adjustment that women student veterans have to overcome. Colleges and universities can ease the discomforts and challenges of this transition for these students by gaining a deeper understanding of women student veterans and their experiences on campus, providing knowledgeable staff and faculty, tailored resources and assistance, and creating environments that support the needs of this special population as expressed by their narratives and counternarratives.This is not only beneficial for the women student veterans themselves, but it also helps colleges and universities to make the best use of their resources for these students and their families, which in turn increases retention and degree completion rates. This in turn is beneficial for the Department of Veterans Affairs because education benefits are being used efficiently for degree attainment and not just higher education enrollment.

Also, by having a more thorough understanding of women student veterans' experiences in the classroom, colleges and universities, as well as companies in the workforce, will gain insight on how to improve experiences for other underrepresented and minoritized populations such as women, persons of color, individuals with both visible and non-visible disabilities, and adult learners. By improving the lived experiences for these different populations, institutions of higher education and employers will be able to address the needs and challenges of these individuals, resulting in an increase in retention/graduate rates for students and an increase in retention and satisfaction rates for employees.

The audience for this study includes any individual, group of individuals, and/or organizations that are involved in women student veterans' pursuit of higher education. Additionally, this study may be meaningful to anyone interested in underrepresented or minority populations of students and their pursuit of higher education. This study is particularly designed

for audience members that belong to any of the following groups: higher education administrators, faculty and staff, the Department of Veterans Affairs, government agencies involved in higher education, and public and private employers. Findings from this study will potentially influence practice, theory, and policy. Specifically, this study will contribute to the body of literature on women student veterans, women students, and students from underrepresented and minoritized backgrounds. It will also contribute to the research regarding gendered oppression and sexism in the military and in higher education.

Faculty and staff are another group that may benefit from this study. As teaching practices and communication continue to evolve, faculty and staff constantly evaluate and reevaluate their teaching and communication styles with students. From this study, faculty and staff will gain a more thorough understanding of women student veterans, their lived experiences on campus, and how to better support them during their educational journey. Even if women student veterans continue to refrain from self-identifying in class, faculty and staff will have a clearer understanding of student veterans, the challenges that many student veterans experience in the classroom and with civilian classmates, and how to better support them without outing them in class.

This study also has significant implications for future research. This study provides a deeper insight into women student veterans and their lived experiences in and out of the college classroom. Future studies related to this topic might consider the lived experiences of student veterans of other minority groups (i.e. veterans of color, veterans who self-identify as LGBTQ+, veterans with disabilities, etc.). Studies regarding any of these topics would provide more literature on student veterans' lived experiences and would aid in providing more holistic support and resources during their pursuit of higher education.

Delimitations

This study, as with any research study, has several delimitations. One of the main delimitations to note is that typically, women student veterans do not want to be "found" or

acknowledged as a veteran on campus (Buckley, 2021), making it more challenging to find women student veterans interested in participating in this study. Also, many women student veterans struggle with identifying as a “veteran” at all (Schroeder & Perez, 2022). For many colleges and universities, the only acknowledgment of veteran status from some of their women student veterans is their use of GI Bill educational benefits. It is common for individuals in this population to not participate in anything on campus related to the military or being a veteran - from not utilizing student veteran resources (i.e. student veteran centers, clubs, study groups, etc.) to not informing their professors, faculty, or fellow classmates of their veteran identity (Buckley, 2021).

Another delimitation of the study was the global pandemic of 2020 and the lasting effects of COVID-19 that occurred during the course of this study. The effects of COVID-19 disproportionately negatively impacted underrepresented and minoritized individuals - particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, racial minorities, and first-generation students. Several things related to COVID-19 and the pandemic that may have directly impacted this study include additional stress and anxiety among participants, college courses being moved to an online format, and the lack of available childcare resources.

Throughout the pandemic, many individuals experienced an increase in stress and anxiety due to unprecedented levels of uncertainty. People struggled with finding a new “normal” for themselves and their families. Many companies furloughed employees or reworked job responsibilities so employees could work from home. K-12 schools closed their physical doors and made their students go completely online. Colleges and universities also shifted their classes online or canceled certain courses altogether making it more challenging for students to complete their degrees. These challenges were felt by women student veterans, as much or even more so, because many of them were also experiencing challenges related to reintegration into their civilian lives.

Another challenge that many women student veterans faced during the pandemic was the shift from face-to-face college classes to all courses being moved to an online format. Although many student veterans prefer online classes because of the convenience of being in their own environment and not having to be in a crowded space, not all faculty were used to teaching using an online platform and struggled with the transition. Not all classes were available or were available during times that were convenient for student veterans. Faculty and staff often struggled with teaching labs or hands-on vocational courses online, resulting in potentially lower-quality learning environments for students.

A third challenge resulting from the pandemic was the lack of available childcare. Most parents with children had to stay home with them because childcare facilities and K-12 schools were physically closed. This was especially challenging for college students with children because they had to focus on their online courses during the day while their children were also at home and potentially doing their own schoolwork. Being that many women student veterans are also single mothers, balancing online college courses with being their children's full-time childcare provider caused many students additional stress and time management constraints.

Another delimitation of the study related to the sample population used in the study. The sample population consisted of students from multiple colleges and universities in the South Atlantic region of the U.S. Being that women student veterans do not often identify as veterans, nor participate in veteran-related activities on campus, multiple institutions of higher education had to be used in this study to acquire the necessary sample size. Women student veterans from other institutions of higher education across different parts of the U.S. may differ in their perceptions of their lived experiences on campus..

A final delimitation related to the sample population of the study is that participants volunteered to participate in the study. Women student veterans who self-selected to participate in the study may have differing characteristics and perspectives than those women student veterans who chose not to participate. Despite the delimitations, this study is valuable, as it fills

a gap in the body of literature on women student veterans and has future implications for additional research on other minoritized and underrepresented student veterans and women in higher education.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five consecutive chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the dissertation and provided information regarding the following: context of the study, statement of the problem, significance of the study, reflexivity statement, and the delimitations of the study. Chapter 2 synthesizes relevant scholarly literature about women veterans' perceptions of their own identity as soldiers and as veterans, society's perceptions of veterans, women veterans as students, and women student veterans' lived experiences in the college classroom. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology used in the study, including the research design, a description of the participants, data collection and analysis, and trustworthiness. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, organized by themes and sub-themes that pertain to the two guiding research questions. The final chapter, chapter 5, discusses the findings of the study inconnection with prior literature on women student veterans, as well as the implications for future research, policy, and practice.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter focuses on the existing literature pertaining to women veterans, particularly as it relates to their identity as veterans and student veterans, American society's perspectives of veterans, women veterans as college students, and their lived experiences in college classrooms. This chapter also highlights the systemic gendered oppression and sexism that exists in higher education classrooms for both women and women veterans. The chapter concludes with an in-depth discussion of the conceptual framework of the study, Veteran Critical Theory (VCT; Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). VCT shines a light on what happens to many women veterans who feel muted and isolated due to repeated exposure to a hyper-masculine institution, one built on the foundation of civilian privilege, that espouses and reinforces sexism and misogyny (i.e. the military) and the importance and impact that exposure can have on their lived experiences in the college classroom.

Identity of "Veteran"

Identity is a collection of meanings one holds of and for oneself based on their lived experiences, what roles and status one holds in sociocultural contexts, which groups one belongs to, and which characteristics make one a unique individual (Burke & Stets, 2009). *"*Veteran*"* is typically an invisible identity, and some individuals find it more salient than others (Mobley et al., 2019). Veteran, as a group label, has a socially constructed meaning that has been created by groups within society based on their perceived relationship with veterans, their collective experiences with veterans, and their thoughts of the future as they relate to veterans (Mercurio, 2019). Veterans' perceptions of this socially constructed label, with its socially constructed meaning, often make the military the ingroup and non-military affiliated civilians the outgroup, thus widening the social and identity gaps between military service members and civilians (Mercurio, 2019).

Since 2015, less than one-half of one percent of the U.S population has served and/or currently serves in the armed forces (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020; Fernandez et al.,

2019). As a fraction of the population, veterans and service members are considered a minority group as they come from a distinct culture (hierarchically rigid, traditionally masculine, and group-oriented) and set of experiences within the military that are unique in comparison with other populations or the general public (Fernandez et al., 2019). As a member of this unique minority group, veterans and service members have an additional facet of their identity that they must continuously renegotiate as they transition back into civilian life.

To many veterans, the term *veteran* brings with it a socially constructed meaning that has been co-created by the public and others' perceived relationships with the group (Mercurio, 2019). The label of "veteran" may also create narrative usurpation for some veterans where they are precluded from expressing their personal narrative to a civilian because that civilian has already come to a heuristically derived conclusion of who and what that veteran is based on their veteran identity (Mercurio, 2019). A participant in Mercurio's (2019) study emphasized this point when he stated: "I don't think they [civilians] think about you as an individual…you're just… you are what the military is to them" (p.13). In a different study, a participant mirrored these same sentiments when they shared an incident when they were out with friends and they said "'oh, that's [name redacted] - don't mess with him, he's airborne' and stuff like that…And I think it makes me feel more like a legend and less like a person, which is irritating because I feel like I'm less human than everyone else" (Hinton, 2020, p.92). These examples reiterate the isolation that many veterans often feel as a result of civilians' perceptions of being a "veteran."

Unlike common societal perceptions, veterans are not a homogenous group (Mobley et al., 2019). Numerous studies have shown that identity is formed and informed by a multitude of factors, cultural contexts, and systems of oppression (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989; Dean et al., 2020; Fernandez et al., 2019; Hammond, 2016; Mercurio, 2019; Mobley et al., 2019). Collins and Bilge (2016) expressed this notion when they stated, "people's lives...are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, but by many axes that work together and influence one another" (p. 2). The formation of identity development for

veterans must also be considered within a wider construct that includes factors such as sex, social class, race, sexual orientation, ability, and age, as well as cultural differences produced by each individual branch of the military (Mobley et al., 2019). These factors are not the only influences on veterans' core sense of self; sociocultural contexts, combat status, and family background also influence one's personal identities (Mobley et al., 2019). The dimensions of veterans' identity development fluctuate in importance, and the sense of one's self varies based on the context of identity enactment and life experiences.

Veterans' sense of identity is also tied to their military-related experiences. Separating from the military has often been described as being "similar to leaving the priesthood - 'they [service members] are not only leaving behind a job but also who they are and what they believe'" (Dean et al., 2020, p. 21). Rebuilding a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, and a sense of purpose can be challenging for many veterans as they transition from military service back to civilian society. Veterans, as with other groups, possess unique characteristics and multiple identities, hold multiple roles, and are members of various groups within society (Burke & Stets, 2009). Upon separation from the military, some veterans struggle to find a new purpose, even if they enter into the new role of student. Many student veterans have described being a civilian and/or a student as being less meaningful than their role as a service member. Some student veterans even associate being a student with feelings of inadequacy of not being able to provide for their families or not doing enough to meaningfully contribute to society (Medley et al., 2017).

Combat Veterans

Combat veterans' sense of identity can often be even more closely tied to their military identity than their non-combat military-affiliated peers. Being a combat veteran is a significant part of many veterans' core identities and is a foundational cornerstone in the process of how they make meaning in their daily lives (Hammond, 2016; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Many combat veterans (and veterans alike) have an inferred perception of self - meaning they have

an apparent inferred perception of who they are as an individual based on the interactions they have with nonveteran civilians (Hammond, 2016; Mercurio, 2019). Some research participants expressed that not all civilians feel the same way about their [veterans'] military service and "often the power and privilege conferred upon them by a (mostly) benignly supportive society can result in discomfort and awkwardness" (Mercurio, 2019, p.14). This discomfort and awkwardness often felt by combat veterans when communicating with civilians can frequently lead to a self-imposed muting effect where veterans retreat inward to insular homogenous communities of other combat veterans, creating a symbolic "bunker" for their shared identity and experiences (Mercurio, 2019). Combat veterans in multiple research studies described a nearly universal discomfort with frankness when recalling their military and combat experiences to civilians. The discomfort corresponded with whether or not the veteran believed they could express their personal narrative to the civilian(s) in an authentic, dialogic exchange, free of socially constructed stereotypes and assumptions of the military (Hammond, 2016; Mercurio, 2019; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

With many combat veterans (and non-combat veterans) feeling the silencing effects of civilians' socially constructed stereotypes and assumptions of the military and military personnel, identity formation becomes exponentially more challenging and more isolating. Many combat veterans struggle with the challenges of constantly processing their combat experiences while simultaneously negotiating their multiple identities within whatever social context they find themselves in (Hammond, 2016; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). This continuous processing and internal negotiation of one's identities, how to avoid awkward interactions when a civilian finds out they (the veteran) is a combat veteran, and how to mitigate the self-imposed muting effect once their combat veteran identity is revealed can not only be overwhelming and isolating for the veteran but can also exacerbate the feelings of "other" or mental health challenges the veteran may already be experiencing (Hammond, 2016) - thus impeding the development of personal identity outside of "combat veteran."

Women Veterans' Perception of "Veteran" Identity

Transitioning out of the military back into civilian life can be challenging for many veterans but can be exceptionally challenging for women veterans - particularly as it pertains to adjusting to typical societal expectations, and many question their own gender identity after coming from such a highly-masculinized environment for such a long period of time (Albright et al., 2018). The public often assumes that only men serve in combat roles and women serve in noncombat, less-risky roles often resulting in having their [women veterans] injuries and/or mental health issues overlooked. Many women veterans internalize these civilian attitudes and conclude that their mental and physical health needs are not important or severe enough to seek assistance or warrant the utilization of services (Strong et al., 2018). Women veterans often experience feelings of being "on the outside of being a veteran because of their gender" (Schroeder & Perez, 2022. p. 61). One participant in the Schroeder and Perez (2022) study explained, "The biggest thing that defined me [in the military] was gender… I frequently feel at odds with the generally accepted identity of what a veteran is… I mean, in society in general, they assume guys are veterans" (p. 61). The participant described herself as being a "square peg in a round hole" because she was a woman in the military, which was essentially a "boys' club" - a feeling that continued with her even after she separated from service (Schroeder & Perez, 2022, p. 61).

Similarly, a participant in Hinton's (2020) study described how her gender and age were both factors in excluding her from the assumption of her veteran status:

> "I think, in a way, just like my age sets me apart from normal college students, my age sets me apart from other college veterans… When I was 18, I looked like a 12-year-old. [People would ask] 'How are you in the military? You look like you're playing dress up.' I'm not. I'm here because I'm learning and I'm trying to get job skills, and I'm trying to earn money, and I'm trying to be independent - take me seriously, damn it! … And I'll be

> like ‘Oh I’m a veteran too,’ and they’ll be like, ‘oh no way. You don’t look like a veteran.’ And I’ll be like, ‘Well neither do you.’” (p. 94).

This particular woman student veteran’s age and gender had been characteristics of her lack of belonging as a soldier, a veteran, and as a college student. This participant also had to continuously explain and “justify” her identity as a veteran throughout her interactions with fellow civilian and military-affiliated classmates.

Given the American societal assumption that “veteran” refers to a man who served, women service members often experience situations where their veteran identity was disregarded because someone assumed the man/men present was/were the veteran(s), not them (Schroeder & Perez, 2022). Everyday experiences like going out to celebrate Veteran’s Day but having the cake be mistakenly handed to a man at the table instead of the woman veteran is merely one example of how women veterans have their veteran identity diminished simply because they don’t fit the stereotypical societal view that veterans are men (Schroeder & Perez, 2022).

Women veterans’ identity challenges are further confounded by the military’s conflation with masculinity and the way in which men situate themselves on the top rungs of the “masculine hierarchies,” while women are left being marginalized (or at the very least subordinate) resulting in a loss of femininity for a woman identifying as a veteran (Hinojosa, 2010, p. 179). These feelings of subordination or marginalization are exacerbated by society’s conflation of veteran status being tied to combat exposure and not merely having just served in the Armed Forces. When asked about her veteran identity, a participant in Dunkin’s (2012) study stated, “Well, technically I am” (p. 65). Dunkin added that the participant “does not really embrace it [identifying as a veteran] because she feels she did not do anything to earn the title [because she was not engaged in combat]” (p. 65). This toxicity of conflation of being a soldier and masculinity “calls into question the very legitimacy of the women soldier” (Prividera &

Howard, 2006, p. 30) and their comfort level in being able to claim the veteran status (Iverson et al., 2016).

Societal Perspectives of Veterans

Service member and veteran identity can also be challenged for those affiliated with the U.S. military when they return home after long periods of active duty. Many active duty service members and veterans face societal assumptions and norms when reintegrating into civilian life that can often create challenges associated with identity development, feelings of isolation, and the muting of one's own personal narrative (Mercurio, 2019).

The "Victim"

When recognized for their service, veterans are often sensitive to connotations implied by the recognition bestowed upon them either in a formal manner (i.e., rewards, honors, medals, etc.), or informally with socially normative expressions of gratitude and praise. In response to both formal and informal recognition, student veterans often engage in behaviors or cognitive rationalizations to prevent others from labeling them either as a "victim" or a "hero" (Mercurio, 2019).

Oftentimes, veterans are cast as "victims" of military service and implications of sacrifice are forced upon them. To avoid this inaccurate labeling, veterans often emphasize their volunteer status - they freely choose the occupation of service member - and are receiving financial compensation for their work (Mercurio, 2019). According to Mercurio's (2019) study, a participant stated, "One cannot be a victim if they signed up for, benefit from, and enjoy whatever role or experience civilians perceive as victimizing or pity-inducing" (p. 14).

The "Hero"

Veterans often face another challenge when it comes to navigating their identities - the archetype of occupational heroes (most notably first responders during the attacks on September 11, 2001, and military servicemembers). Merriam-Webster (2022) defines a hero as: "a legendary or mythical entity often of divine origin equipped with extreme ability and strength;

a great warrior; or an object of tremendous devotion or admiration." These definitions equally apply to the occupational hero, making the term *hero* fundamentally harmful for the individual with regard to identity formation. The *hero* character is laden with idealized qualities that are "always and necessarily absent from individual men" (Boon, 2005, p.305). American society's hero metanarrative is injurious as it embodies "an unobtainable and transcendent object of desire residing in the realm of the divine " (Boon, 2005, p.303). The unattainable ideal of the hero metanarrative not only negatively impacts identity development, but often induces and/or exacerbates a muting effect for many individuals, particularly veterans. The hero archetype, though meant to portray a sense of honor, can often silence and prevent discourse for veterans as they are no longer seen as a person, but as something of fiction (Mercurio, 2019).

Veterans' ability to express their personal narratives is often silenced when directly confronted with the hero archetype in interpersonal communication. The hero metanarrative "places veterans and military members under the yoke of the inherently unobtainable and hyper-masculine qualities of the hero archetype" (Mercurio, 2019, p.14). This pervasive objectification creates a discursive environment which often results in veterans and military members feeling unable to participate in their own narrative, either actively or passively. Veterans and service members often attempt to avoid the hero label by actively diminishing their contributions during their military service and emphasizing they were just doing their job, while synchronously engaging in internal self-degradation - thus eliciting feelings of imposter syndrome and objectification (Mercurio, 2019). One participant in Mercurio's (2019) study said, "I don't want to be put on a pedestal" (p. 23), while another expressed, "I feel like I'm wearing a Halloween costume" (p.13). Another participant (an active service member) stated: "But there is an aspect where you feel uncomfortable because it's just you don't feel, actually I don't feel worthy of their adoration in some ways" (p.13).

The hero metanarrative the feeling of being objectified as being "other" or being "put on a pedestal" simply for wearing a particular uniform exacerbates the challenges of identity

negotiation and navigation for veterans by forcing a pre-packaged narrative upon them. Another participant in Mercurio's (2019) study went on to state:

> They [veterans] are broken because of what this country demands from them and we put them on this pedestal, and it makes them all the more lonely because they don't have anyone to connect with because now they're this hero and they can't be broken (p.12).

In addition to imposing feelings of objectification and impostor syndrome among veterans, another challenge with the hero metanarrative is that it reinforces both the military and American society's historical cultural norm of prescribing "privileged masculine-coded qualities relegating any exemplar to the 'masculine other'" (Mercurio, 2019, p.5). Consequently, these "masculine-coded qualities" of an inaccessible ideal not only apply to the traditionally-defined *male* veterans, but can also apply to those veterans who may identify as women or men, and can induce a muting effect (Mercurio, 2019).

The silencing (or muting) effect caused by the hero metanarrative creates a fundamentally challenging discursive environment for veterans. This toxic environment creates a sense of isolation for veterans and service members as they are no longer viewed by society as individuals but as symbols or signifiers, robbing the soldiers of their individual identities and preventing them from being active participants in their own narratives (Mercurio, 2019).

Thank You For Your Service (TYFYS)

Less than one percent of the United States population serves in the armed forces, thus creating repeated feelings of alienation and frustration for veterans due to the lack of understanding among civilians of veterans' unique experiences (Mercurio, 2019). The lack of understanding and knowledge of the military by most civilians creates additional challenges for veterans such as phatic communication. Phatic expression refers to common verbal or non-verbal expression(s) of communication used to establish or maintain social relationships, as opposed to communication used as an informative function (e.g., "What's up?" or "How are you?"; Zuckerman, 2021). When meeting a veteran (or service member) and learning of their

service in the armed forces, many civilians offer rote expressions that are often more functional than meaningful. Statements such as “Thank you for your service,” or, “I could never imagine what you’ve been through,” are indicative of civilians’ “failure of imagination” (Mercurio, 2019, p. 5). Such comments place veterans as the lone keepers of war’s unimaginable secrets, compounding veterans’ feelings of isolation and being “other” from those around them (Mercurio, 2019).

The phrase “Thank you for your service,” ritualistic in nature, creates “reduced individualization” (Lüger, 1983, p. 697) among veterans and servicemembers. Mercurio (2019) described this type of rote expression as being a manifestation in speech that relies on culturally prescriptive norms of expression that often circumvents the degree of differentiation typically appropriate to the situation. Young (2017) offered the following critique of these types of speech rituals: "Reflexive, collective gratitude is problematic because it objectifies veterans and denies them participation in their own ongoing identity formation while simultaneously placing those expressing thanks in the position of defining who veterans are” (p. 3). The result of this type of objectification of veterans creates a power imbalance that affords those conveying gratitude the ability to “ascribe their own subjective narrative to the veteran” (Mercurio, 2019, p. 6).

Some research argues that phrases such as “thank you for your service” are a result of society’s abdication of the guilt of those who have not served in the armed forces and gratitude itself may be a demonstrative public enactment of normative, prosocial behavior (Mercurio, 2019; McCullough et al., 2008; Sherman, 2015). However, these expressed sentiments of gratitude are absent from the individual with whom they are intended to honor, and to many veterans, they have become nothing more than a social obligation. As one participant in Mercurio’s (2019) study noted: “You are just saying it because it’s the popular thing to do. What are you thanking me for?” (p. 10).

“Thank you for your service” and similar phatic communications by civilians are harmful to veterans and service members’ identity development and expression of their personal

narrative. These expressions are often indicative of civilians' lack of knowledge regarding the military and further intensify veterans' feelings of isolation and the inability to communicate their personal narratives with those around them. Veterans often feel that these phrases are symbolic of a heuristically derived conclusion of what the military is to most civilians, and precludes them from expressing their own unique narratives and models of reality - thus leaving veterans feeling as though they have to be "avatars of themselves" (Mercurio, 2019, p. 12).

This section discussed some of the societal challenges veterans face due to metanarratives about military service and those who serve. Unfortunately, these challenges are not the only challenges women service members and women veterans face. The following section discusses additional challenges and barriers that women face while in service.

Military-related Challenges

Women soldiers, marines, airwomen, sailors, and guardswomen often experience challenges while in service, including mental physical health issues; military sexual trauma; gendered harassment, gendered ideologies, and sexism; and communication. The challenges many women face while in service often inhibit their ability to fully assimilate and socially integrate into civilian life after exiting the military, particularly for service members who experienced combat or hazardous environments (Dean et al., 2020).

Mental and Physical Health

Women service members and veterans of recent military conflicts, particularly those of OIF/OEF/Operation New Dawn, experience high rates of depressive symptoms, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Pittman et al., 2012), and poorer overall physical and mental health (Albright et al., 2018). In comparison to their civilian counterparts, women veterans were more likely to have an increased risk of mental health issues and comorbidities and were at a higher risk for suicide - with women veterans who had been deployed to combat or hazardous duty being nearly three times as likely to have attempted suicide as their women civilian peers (Albright et al., 2018). One in four women veterans also reported having been a victim of military

sexual trauma (MST) while enlisted in the armed forces (Moghul, 2021). In addition, women service members often experience physiological complications such as back and joint injuries, disrupted sleep, and chronic pain (Haskell et al, 2010; Kelly et al, 2011).

In Osborne's (2014) study, student veterans shared that "disclosing one's self as a veteran was risky and left them vulnerable to inaccurate assumptions about their mental health and overall wellbeing" (p. 254). Many women service members and veterans refrain from seeking out mental or physical health assistance due to the perceived social stigmas associated with mental health conditions, as well as concern that should they do so, it will somehow negatively affect their military status or career (Strong et al., 2017). Many women service members and veterans face the commonly perceived social assumption that they only serve in noncombat, less-risky military roles, which results in their injuries being overlooked, downplayed, or flat-out ignored (Disabled American Veterans, 2014; Street et al., 2009; Strong et al., 2017). Their role as service members is, or was, somehow "less than" simply because they are a woman. Many women service members internalize these downgrading attitudes by society and medical care providers, concluding internally that their mental and physical healthcare needs are neither important nor severe enough to justify seeking out or utilizing healthcare services (Mattocks et al, 2012O'Brien & Sher, 2013; Strong et al., 2017).

Gendered Harassment, Gendered Ideologies, Sexism in the Military

In addition to experiencing challenges with their mental and physical health, women service members often struggle with gendered harassment and sexism during and after military service (Albright et al., 2018). Gendered harassment are behaviors that occur, which are not sexually based, but are hostile, degrading, and create psychosocial stressors based on the individual or group's biological sex (Heineman, 2017; Street et al., 2009). Such behaviors are often apparent in environments such as the military, as men attempt to inforce traditional gender roles and/or expect women to work harder and prove their capability (Heineman, 2017). Women service members often struggle with their perception of self during and after military service

(Albright et al., 2018). During military service, women are often discouraged from being feminine and encouraged to take on highly masculinized mannerisms. Historically, highly masculinized mannerisms and images are celebrated as normative in both the military and in civilian culture, while being feminine, delicate, and nurturing has and continues to be the expected and accepted protocol for women in U.S. culture (Albright et al., 2018).

During service, women service members often find themselves having to walk a precarious and strategic line between femininity and masculinity in order to gain respect and acceptance from their male counterparts. Iverson et al., (2016) stated, “women… must walk a precarious line between masculinity (being tough enough) and femininity (being a real woman)” (p. 159). Women in the military have to act masculine enough to “assimilate into military culture but also accentuate their femininity so that they are still viewed as a ‘real woman’” (Culver, 2013, p. 66). Women veterans often described how simply being attractive gave them an advantage over other women in service because they could walk into a large group of men and already have their attention without ever having to say a word (Iverson et al., 2016). However, other women describe different experiences from their men peers.

A woman participant in Iverson et al.’s (2016) study described an experience when she received a leadership award that was previously won by a man. She described how her colleagues who were men were very disrespectful and boisterous when she received the award, which had “no real authority but carries assumed respect unless one is a woman recipient” (p. 159). She elaborated, “I’m shorter, smaller, high-pitched voice… I don’t have that deep thundering voice that you normally expect. People was [sic] just blatantly disrespectful, didn’t pay attention… I’m so offended by the way they treated me… that was probably the worst” (p. 159). These were just a few examples of challenges women service members encountered while in service and how they had to work harder to prove themselves in the military - to be more masculine, or rather, to be “that which is not feminine” (Herbert, 1998, p. 8).

In conjunction with the challenges women service members encounter to prove themselves, women service members are often in constant competition with fellow women peers as gendered ideologies are sustained and reproduced within the military (Chua & Evans, 2018). One participant in Chua and Evans' (2018) study explained, "As women in the military, we are turned against each other, we don't talk to each other, and then we get to the civilian world and it's the same way. Women are made to compete with each other" (pp. 129-130). Women service members lack mentors within the military due to the competitive nature created within the military environment (Chua & Evans, 2018), and thus must learn to work within a hyper-masculine culture that rewards power gained by dominating one's peers rather than by one's individual knowledge, skills, or merit (Heitzman & Somers, 2015). With few role models, women in the military refrain from asking questions, "lest they appear even more subordinate than is already assumed" (Iverson et al., 2018, p. 160). One participant in Iverson et al.'s., (2018) study shared the advice given to her by a woman drill sergeant, stating, "Don't ask, figure it out. Do it on your own… so I guess we [women in the military] just learned to do it on our own before we ask for help… If you want to be looked [at] as a soldier and not a woman soldier then I have to learn to do it on my own" (p. 160). These types of challenges only continue for women as they transition out of the military and back into civilian society. They often negatively impact women's identity development and their ability to foster and maintain interpersonal relationships (Moghul, 2020). In addition, these challenges also make it difficult for women service members and veterans who choose to enroll in college and transition to a higher education environment.

Communication

Veterans often experience challenges shifting from the direct, succinct, and culturally distinct language and communication styles unique to the military, to the multitude of language and communication styles found in American civilian culture (Young, 2017). Herman and Yarwood (2014) argued that many veterans "became stuck in a liminal space between civilian and military lives that perpetuate feelings of isolation" (p. 41). These feelings of isolation are

oftentimes created and perpetuated by the way civilians communicate with and about veterans . Veterans who struggle to readjust to the civilian code of communication and language upon military separation often suffer not only feelings of isolation, but also identity loss - particularly for combat veterans and those who were deployed (Young, 2017).

As service members transition out of the military, some may shift from a familiar sense of self (soldier identity) to an emerging sense of self (civilian identity): “the emerging self being experienced as alien to the familiar self” (Young, 2017, p. 4). Thus, many veterans may feel that their individual identity (their unitary “I”) becomes broken into two separate people: the soldier they were in the military and the civilian they are now becoming. As Young (2017) explained, “[u]ntil the new self is experienced as unitary, subjective, and integrated, an ‘I-it’ relationship persists within the self, making communication with others challenging because the permanence of language and labels is ill-suited to expressing a self in flux” (p. 4).

The transition to civilian communication is exceptionally difficult for veterans who experienced deployment(s), as they require communication patterns distinct from both general military service and civilian contexts. Many deployed service members experience environments where heightened perceptiveness, responsiveness, discretion, and accuracy are necessities for survival. Many of these same veterans may also experience the challenges of having to code-switch between military and civilian modes of communication during/between deployment(s). Service members are typically required to filter or censor the information they share with their families, as well as their superiors and subordinates during deployments (Young, 2017). With limited communication outlets, service members often seek out fellow deployed peers for mental and moral support (Young, 2017; Durham, 2010). The support and camaraderie service members build amongst each other during deployment, particularly in war zones, often cultivates a family-like bond which may make their civilian family relationships feel foreign or alien (Ahern et al., 2015; Young, 2017), and thus may cause communication challenges with those outside of the military (Young, 2017).

The military's blunt, assertive, and strategic mode of communication makes it difficult for veterans and service members to articulate their experiences and their sense of self to civilians, regardless of whether they are friends and family. Civilians are typically not accustomed to this style of communication as it lacks emotion and empathy. Service members are so ingrained in this style of communication, it is often difficult for them to transition back to a communication style that enables them to articulate their experiences, particularly if they experienced deployment(s) or combat as deployments and hazardous duty often permanently alter one's sense of self in a way substantially different from those deployed during peacetime (Young, 2017).

American society as a whole makes reintegration to civilian life more challenging for veterans due to the lack of knowledge of veteran status, less motivation than one's immediate support group to accommodate one's transition to civilian identity, and society often objectifies veterans in the broader civilian context. The hardest challenge, however, for many veterans, is that in order to participate in civilian life, they must translate their military experiences into civilian language, though civilian language is not always equipped to articulate such unique and life-altering experiences. The challenge of speaking about military experiences, particularly regarding deployment or combat, places some veterans between a rock and hard place. Some veterans may feel that they have to divulge military secrecy in order to rejoin their friends and family in the civilian sector. Whereas, some veterans may feel that they have to (re-)learn civilian "language" in order to feel "normal" or fit back into the larger societal context (Young, 2017).

Student veterans may also experience some of these same challenges in the classroom. Research has shown that student veterans may experience communication challenges partly because of the heroic pedestal that veterans are often proverbially placed upon (Dillon, 2017). Blaauw-Hara (2017) argued that when student veterans transition poorly from one learning environment to another, it could be a result of a communication barrier, not necessarily a

reflection of their skill or knowledge. Communication barriers cannot only lead to poor academic performance, but can also lead to feelings of alienation, isolation, poor experiences with faculty and peers, as well as, identity crises and/or muting effects (Hinton, 2020).

Military Culture vs. Higher Education Culture

The term “military culture” suggests the military has its own worldview, independent from that of civilian, mainstream America (Young, 2017). While people in the military identify with many cultural backgrounds, the military itself is a distinct culture containing its own social standards, norms, expectations, customs, and values. Unlike some other cultural dynamics, military culture places great importance on the chain of command, a hierarchical rank/grade system that indicates position, pay, and authority (Redmond et al., 2015). It is not just the law or hierarchical structure that renders leader legitimacy, but the trust and confidence that subordinates develop for their leader (Jones et al, 1975; Olsen, 1968; Redmond et al., 2015). Junior service members must support the mission, be confident that the risk and sacrifice required to accomplish the mission are necessary, and ultimately trust the lawfulness of orders received from their superiors. In conjunction with junior service members’ trust, senior leaders must also have trust that the orders they issue will be executed and have the utmost confidence in their subordinates that all actions will be performed to the highest standards which maintain both good order and discipline.

The hierarchical structure within the military also requires an immense sense of obedience and subordination in order to develop seniority - one in which the superior service member is responsible for the performance and well-being of their subordinate(s). Such displays of obedience and discipline are routinely seen through the regimented and ceremonial acts of shoe shining, salutes, and uniforms, as well as functional displays of discipline and subservience when service members follow orders and directives given by superiors (Redmond et al., 2015; Soeters et al., 2006). Each displays an individual example of a tightly woven thread within the fabric of military culture.

The hierarchical rank among service members is merely one aspect of the military's cultural structure. Military culture is not merely adopted by new recruits but is engrained through systematic, highly codified, exhaustive, and degrading military training known as basic training - boot camp for the Marines. These programs vary slightly based on each branch of service, but all teach new recruits on key practices, values, and expectations within the military community (Blaauw-Hara, 2017). These basic training programs, as well as more advanced training programs, foster a distinct set of values including honor, allegiance to command, and explicit hegemonic masculine dispositions. In the words of Lim et al. (2018), military ethos is so critical to the success of the organization that military culture has rejected the civilian norms or individuality in favor of the collective idea of self, which calls for commitment to comrades and mission completion" (p. 292).

Basic training and boot camp are degrading processes in which more senior service members deconstruct new recruits' civilian status by way of harsh, humiliating, and physically and emotionally demanding training exercises, practices, drills, and introduction to military life for roughly five to six weeks. Such experiences include exposure to new norms, codes, identity, and language. Group synthesis is accomplished by eliminating the idea of the individual through common dress and haircuts; communal suffering, eating, exercising, and sleeping; as well as complete isolation from the civilian world including family and friends during the entirety of the training (Redmond et al., 2015). Homogeneity, compliance, and discipline are essential in the military, and senior leaders emphasize this during basic training/boot camp, as well as reiterating the fact that new recruits are to learn to control their emotions and only the elite will make it. Those recruits who do make it through the training often show a greater commitment to the military (Redmond et al., 2015).

Although all cultures assimilate individuals, the U.S. military does so in a way that creates a strong, collective and cohesive culture that operates and excels during crises. This unique crisis-ready culture is created through uniformity by emphasizing core values

(obedience, discipline, self-sacrifice, trust, and courage), shared experiences by service members, and military-specific languages and symbols (Moore, 2011; Redmond et al, 2015; Soeters et al., 2006). To maintain such a unified and cohesive culture, the military's priority is building one united team. Service members are trained together as a team, will deploy as a team, and will be required to carry out their mission on the battlefield as a team. Working as a team is imperative on the battlefield in order to complete the mission successfully, but more importantly, to keep themselves and their fellow soldiers safe. This mindset that "nothing accomplished is ever done alone or individually" is a direct result of the successful indoctrination of the warrior ethos that the military aims to instill in all service members (Redmond et al., 2015). Until 2003, when the U.S. Army turned the unwritten norm into a codified statement, the warrior ethos (subscribed to by all branches of the military) emphasized service members should always place the mission above all else, never accept defeat, never quit, and under no circumstances ever leave another American behind (Redmond et al., 2015; Wong, 2005). By subscribing to the warrior ethos, expectations are set for what it means to be a warrior and a soldier in the United States Armed Forces. The warrior ethos further instills within the military culture a mindset of perseverance, responsibility for others, motivation by a higher calling, the ability to set priorities and adapt, trust, and accepting dependence on others (Redmond et al., 2015).

Higher Education Culture

In stark contrast to the highly structured environment of the military, the more casual and loosely structured environments of collegiate campuses can make the cultural shift from military life to student life challenging for many women student veterans. Women student veterans may not be used to having an abundance of choices on how to spend their time - attend or skip their classes, engage in social activities, or spend time alone, among other choices (McAndrews et al., 2019).

To help military-affiliated students adjust to the overwhelming difference between cultures, many colleges and universities offer a plethora of services, resources, and activities outside of the classroom to help with the transition to collegiate life. Two activities that many schools offer at the beginning of each academic year include new student orientation (many schools also offer a special orientation for student veterans and military-affiliated students) and Welcome Week activities, which provide opportunities for students to engage with other students and learn about student organizations prior to classes starting. Institutions also offer tours of campus, “open houses” for various offices on campus (i.e., counseling centers, student services office, health centers, multicultural centers, Dean of Students Office, academic advising, career services, etc.). Many schools also offer special activities for first-year, first-generation, and transfer students as well. These resources and activities are designed to help students feel welcome and assist them in preparing for the start of class through a semi-structured on-campus experience (University at Buffalo, 2023).

Along with activities and resources designed to create a welcoming environment, many schools offer additional resources to create an inclusive culture on campus, including multicultural and LGBTQ+ centers, living-learning communities, student unions, student organizations, and student governments. Many schools also offer training for faculty and staff on diversity and inclusion, how to be more engaging with students, and how to create collaborative learning environments inside and outside of the classroom (Collaco, 2017). The combination of these resources is designed to assist students in achieving academic success.

Higher education’s main goal is student success and ultimately degree attainment (Weatherton & Schussler, 2021). The academy typically defines student success with quantitative, academic outcomes such as grade point averages, test scores, and graduation rates (Weatherton & Schussler, 2021). Students, however, define student success differently. Students often define success as building interpersonal and professional networks and developing leadership and communication skills (Weatherton & Schussler, 2021). These

definitions of success by institutions of higher education and by the students themselves, highlight the importance of growth and individual accomplishment. The focus is on the individual, not the group effort; and individual identity development, not group assimilation and cohesion.

The differences between military culture and higher education culture are striking - one focuses on the creation and success of “the unit” and “team,” while the other focuses on individual and personal success. It is this stark contrast that often creates integration and identity challenges for military-affiliated students, particularly women student veterans and service members (Mobley et al., 2017). The military discourages independent thought and identity, whereas higher education environments are designed to actively support and encourage independent thinking and identity development. Shifting from the military culture to a higher education culture can cause identity development challenges for many women student veterans and leave them feeling at odds between the two worlds (McAndrews et al., 2019).

Student Veterans

Student veterans are different from non-veteran traditional college students. Student veterans are typically 24 years and older; are married and/or have children; have full-time employment and more financial responsibilities; are enrolled in college part-time; delayed college enrollment by one or more years; and are typically at a different place in life due to a more mature mindset and broad cross-cultural experiences during military service (Dean et al., 2020; DiRamio et al., 2008; Herrmann, et al., 2008; Kapell et al., 2017; Mobley, et al., 2019; Moghul, 2021; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Student veterans are also more likely to take longer to complete college degree programs (if they finish at all), with the average time being five years. It is even longer for active duty service members, those in the Reserves and National Guard, and those who experience interruptions in their education due to deployment, relocation, and additional military-related training (Moghul, 2021). These disruptions can result in lost

academic credits, tuition monies, scholarships, and can cause an increased financial burden for service members (Moghul, 2021).

Student veterans actively process their military-related experiences in conjunction with their perceptions of self, making identity negotiation and formation an integral part of the process of making meaning of their everyday lives, as well as their collegiate experience. Student veterans continuously have to negotiate their sense of identity because in one context they are viewed as a student; another context, a veteran; while simultaneously identifying as (for example) a citizen, mother, daughter, or peer. Student veterans develop an inferred perception of self, based on their experiences with non-military affiliated civilians. The common misconception of veterans often results in many student veterans experiencing microaggressions or being labeled and/or targeted due to the social stigma that surrounds combat veterans in the United States. Conscious or unconscious messages from non-military affiliated civilians are often perceived by student veterans as aggressive, suggesting that they (student veterans) develop an inferred perception of self as being damaged or emotionally and mentally unstable due to their military experience (Hammond, 2016). One participant in Hammond's 2016 study illustrated this point when they stated, "I don't wanna be seen as the crazy, 'you gotta watch out for him'" (p. 153), and another discussed how it felt to be the object of derogatory comments about their military service without taking all of their contributions into account. These types of social stigmas and microaggressions continuously remind student veterans that they are among the outgroup, they are different, and that they are continuously seen as "other" among the civilian population.

Hunter-Johnson et al's (2020) study shed light on the "us versus them" mentality among student veterans and the "strength of military identity" (p. 9) was a significant factor in feeling more comfortable and closer to fellow veterans, while feeling distant from civilian peers. This study also revealed that the vast majority of student veteran participants within their study were acutely aware that they were continuously negotiating their identities as they transitioned out of

their soldier identity and into other identities such as civilian and student (Hunter-Johson et al., 2020). The concept of “veteranness” was introduced as a way to describe how multiple facets of being a veteran (i.e. age, gender, combat experience, length of military service, etc.) influenced how student veterans conceptualized their own individual veteran identity (Hinton, 2020). Participants whose core identity was related to being a servicemember also expressed a strong identity with being student veteran, whereas those who did not position their military-related identity as a salient identity did not have a strong association with being identified as a student veteran (Hinton, 2020).

Regardless of how salient being a service member is to student veterans’ core identities, their military experience shapes the way they move in the world as individuals, as students, and as civilians. One’s core identities continuously “shift in relative importance” depending on factors such as current and past experiences, family background, and sociocultural contexts, and political contexts (Mobley et al., 2019. p.1214).

Women Student Veterans

Although research regarding student veterans is expanding, little is known about women student veterans’ college experiences (Atkinson et al., 2018). Numerous studies are often cited regarding student veterans’ experiences (Hammond, 2016; Livingston et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vaccaro, 2015), yet those experiences are of veterans in general, without specifying gender (Heineman, 2017). However, women veterans are overrepresented in higher education (Romero et al., 2015) and use their veteran educational benefits at a higher rate than their men counterparts (Atkinson et al., 2018). Although more women veterans seem to be utilizing their G.I. Bill benefits, research has shown that they are experiencing different challenges within the higher education system and have specific needs (Atkinson et al., 2018;Foster & Vince, 2009).

Women veterans are more likely to be divorced, widowed, or never married (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017), single parents (Atkinson et al., 2018), low

economic status, tend to suffer from PTSD at much higher rates due to experiences with MST, and are also much less likely to be accurately diagnosed with PTSD or receive disability compensation or VA support for mental health issues. As a result, women student veterans tend to internalize their military experience, and often become emotionally isolated and invisible from both their women civilian classmates and men veteran peers. Feelings of unbelonging can stay with women veterans long after their time in service. Their experiences of displacement within their deployed units, where their gender potentially disrupted the formation of strong emotional bonds and sense of comradery, as well as within historically male-oriented veteran service organizations, is again replicated on the college campus and inside the classroom (Buckley, 2021). For example, women student veterans are frequently reluctant to attend veteran events or join veteran's clubs on campus to avoid re-experience being the only woman (or one of a few) in attendance (Iverson et al., 2016). These feelings of unbelonging and challenges with building relationships with others on campus ultimately spill over into the classroom, as this is where women student veterans spend the majority of their time while on campus.

Women Student Veterans' Classroom Experiences

Although there is very little to no research specifically on women student veterans' experiences inside the college classroom, there is research on student veterans' interactions with faculty, staff, and civilian classmates (Blaauw-Hara, 2017; Jenner, 2019;Jones, 2013; Medley et al., 2017; Morris et al., 2019). The following sections discuss the literature on student veterans' experiences with fellow civilian classmates and faculty, referring to student veterans' as a homogenous group. The acknowledgement of women student veterans' experiences specifically, are noted when possible.

Student Interactions

Many student veterans not only struggle with building rapport with their civilian peers and classmates, leading to feelings of isolation (Medley et al., 2017). Finding common ground with

classmates can be challenging for many student veterans given the typical difference in age, stage of life, and overall maturity differences (Dean et al., 2020; Mobley et al., 2019).

Women student veterans are typically older than their civilian student peers, adding to the difficulties in being able to relate and build connections while in college. Student veterans often feel this lack of commonality and divergent perspectives around stress and responsibility as it relates to their civilian peers, which makes it that much more difficult to build relationships with them (Morris et al., 2019).

A general lack of respect by fellow students has been found by researchers to be another challenge for many student veterans in their ability to build peer connections is the general lack of respect they experience from their fellow students. In Jenner's (2019) study, around sixty percent of the participants reported being frustrated with their civilian classmates' lack of respect. A participant in a Blauuw-Hara's (2017) study remarked on a similar topic, commenting that while in the military, he had become accustomed to fellow soldiers following through in group work. However, in college, "I don't know how many times…like endlessly my classmates [said], 'ok, I'll meet you at 2:00,' and we've got a final the next day. We're counting on each other to get through this stuff together, and they don't show up" (Blaauw-Hara, 2017, p. 6). Several studies have found that women student veterans, in particular, are often frustrated by their non-military affiliated classmates because they perceive their civilian peers as being unreliable, having a poor work ethic, and having superfluous concerns (Blaauw-Hara, 2017; Persky & Oliver, 2010; Wheeler, 2012).

For some women student veterans, learning how to relate to or understand non-veteran students is often challenging. One participant in Jones' (2013) study articulated this challenge when she discussed how she found it difficult to understand her civilian student peers because they "complained all the time, about trivial things, and found them to have a nonchalant attitude about homework, studying, and school in general" (p. 7). Some student veterans even find the

actual behavior of non-veteran college students disgusting because they lack critical elements of task cohesion, which are fundamental pillars of military culture (Naphan & Elliot, 2015).

Many women student veterans have mentioned peer insensitivity in asking about their war experiences, which inadvertently reinforces many student veterans' feelings of difference and isolation (Medley et al., 2017). Student veterans often refer to being seen differently on campus due to their veteran status with a particular inferred perception of combat veterans as being thoughtless killers who lack emotion and the ability to make rational decisions - all of which is based on the inappropriate questions and behaviors of their civilian counterparts (Hammond, 2016). One participant, a combat veteran, discussed how he put up filters in class (and while on campus) "in an effort to avoid uncomfortable situations" (Hammond, 2016, p.153). Another participant in Hammond's (2016) study discussed their apprehension about reading their English paper regarding their combat experience aloud in class to other classmates who were not veterans. He stated, "It was part of the dehumanization part. Um, they might look at me like a monster" (Hammond, 2016, p.153). Although these examples were from men student veterans, women student veterans have been found to have similar experiences; however, the gendered dynamics of these experiences were not always explicitly stated in the literature.

In addition to feelings of difference and isolation, women student veterans often addressed peer insensitivity with regard to being asked about their war experiences. In Hammond's (2016) study, for example, every participant reported that at one time or another, at least one civilian student had asked them what one participant called "the worst question ever - 'have you killed anyone?'" (p. 152).The student veteran participants in this study (both women and men) described this question as immediately eliciting feelings of anger, frustration, and avoidance A participant in Medley et al.'s study (2017) echoed the same sentiments when they stated, "A lot of the kids [civilian students] here, when they ask you [student veterans] about the military or if you've been to war, one of the first questions that everyone always asks is, 'Did you kill anybody?' That's a question that'll piss off a veteran quicker than anybody" (p. 87).

For women student veterans who have survived trauma, each time they are asked by their civilian student peers about their military experiences, particularly the “worst question ever” (Hammond, 2016, p.152), the residual effects of the psychological sequelae of trauma . Congruently, women student veterans often experience a great deal of stress and anxiety when interacting with civilian peers, as stated by a participant in the Medley et al. (2017) study when they said, “so, students perceive us all different ways. Like, I’ve been told that oh, you’re probably a baby-killer and this and that, there are people that judge you automatically when they find out that you’re in the military. So what do we do? We just take ourselves out of the equation” (p. 153). Another study described student veterans’ collective attitudes as being “us vs. them" when referencing themselves and their civilian classmates - particularly because of the bond towards fellow veterans and, at the same time, the isolation and judgment from non-veteran students (Hinton, 2020; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021). These experiences further complicated women student veterans’ ability to connect with their civilian peers, integrate into the collegiate environment, and ultimately achieve their academic goals (Medley et al, 2017).

These are just a few examples of the types of stressors that women student veterans experience on a daily basis with their civilian peers and the types of lived experiences they have expressed while on campus. These social and societal norms are taught through formal education, cultural awareness, social media, literature, and other avenues of education.

Gender Bias

The term “chilly climate” was coined in the early 1980s when researchers identified pervasive patterns of discrimination against women students in college and university classrooms (Hall & Sandler, 1982; Tatum et al., 2013). Subsequent decades of research have confirmed that differential treatment, however subtle, of women students within the college classroom can lead to lowered self-esteem, self-confidence, and academic achievement (Tatum et al., 2013). Chilly climates in the classroom often cause women students to engage in avoidance behaviors (Tatum et al., 2013), and gender inequities in the classroom may go

unnoticed due to sexist gender schemas (Valian, 2002). As a result, women students work harder to be noticed by their professors and prepare to back up their points in discussions. In group projects, women students' professors and classmates who are men often choose them to be "leaders," typically secretarial roles (Allen & Madden, 2006). Women students in STEM fields often get called on less frequently in class,spend less time interacting with the professor, and have fewer opportunities to participate in the classroom (Laraas et al., 2018). Generally, in the college classroom women students participate and speak less, engage hesitantly, and often use apologetic language (Lee & McCabe, 2021). They also tend to believe they do not have well-informed ideas, do not know enough about the topic of discussion, and/or are afraid of classmates regarding them as unintelligent (Crawford & MacLeod, 1990; Leraas et al., 2018). Women students reported that these feelings were reinforced by professors and classmates who made them feel discouraged, invisible, and often questioned their competence (Allen & Madden, 2006). As a result, many women students are disadvantaged in the classrooms with participation grades, particularly in STEM fields (Leraas et al., 2018).

Women student veterans are no exception from their women civilian counterparts. As women students, they often experience these same gender inequities in the classroom. The following section describes additional experiences women student veterans have in the classroom with their college and university instructors.

Faculty Interactions

As non-traditional students who spend the majority of their time on campus in the classroom (Chen, 2017), women student veterans' interactions and relationships with faculty are crucial to achieving their overall academic success in college (Cuseo, 2018, Guzzardo et al, 2020; Kim & Lundberg, 2016; Miller et al., 2019). Women student veterans reported higher levels of course engagement and campus inclusion, and felt more personally valued, when faculty created supportive relationships with them through flexible assignment deadlines, open and consistent communication, encouragement, challenges, and demonstrating awareness and

respect for their individual needs within the classroom (Guzzardo et al., 2020). Participants in Guzzardo et al's. (2020) study described how their [student veterans'] professors had been "instrumental" in supporting them in and outside of the classroom, particularly when they had little support at home. Participants from Guzzardo et. al's (2020) study also discussed the importance of professors and faculty creating welcoming and inclusive spaces that- "made them [student veterans] feel like they belong in the class, their perspective is valued, and/or they have the ability to succeed" (p. 49). Faculty who display actions of sincerity, affirmation, and a willingness to assist women student veterans in and out of the classroom are fundamental pillars in creating a more veteran-friendly campus community (Persky & Oliver, 2010).

In contrast to the positive student-faculty interactions that assist women student veterans in their academic success, negative student-faculty interactions have a tremendous negative impact on women student veterans' classroom engagement and experiences, as well as their overall academic success (Gonzalez & Elliott, 2016; Guzzardo et. al., 2020; Jones, 2013). Women student veterans often reported feeling uncomfortable, silenced, and unwilling to share their experiences in college classrooms when their professors' versions of military history differed significantly from their own lived experiences, or when professors openly expressed their negative views of the military during class time instruction (Barry et al., 2014; Dean et al., 2020; DiRamio et al., 2008; Gonzalez & Elliott, 2016; Kapell et al., 2017). Kapell et al. (2017) reinforced this point when they stated, "Politically-charged comments made in class by some faculty members, not relevant to course topics, such as labeling military members as war criminals or terrorists further exacerbate feelings of disconnect by student veterans" (p. 33). Participants in Elliott et al's. study (2011) shared accounts in which professors made "impassioned comments" (p. 287) disparaging the military and calling service members torturers and baby killers. Additional research echoed these sentiments, stating faculty characterized military service members and personnel as terrorists (DiRamio et al., 2008). Participants in Fernandez et al's. (2019) study revealed that "in the classroom student veterans were at times

blamed for government decisions they had little control over and were ‘asked how it felt to kill people'” (p.235). Participants in the same study also stated professors “made derogatory or overly simplistic comments about the military… and disclosing one’s self as a veteran was risky and left them vulnerable to inaccurate assumptions about their mental health and overall wellbeing” (Fernandez et al., 2019, p. 236).

In addition to “impassioned comments,” research has found professors and faculty display other alienating, offensive, and disrespectful behavior towards student veterans within the college classroom. Elliott et al. (2011) provided an example of this type of behavior when they shared a participant’s experience, stating “a professor showed a film in class about terrorism in the Middle East and a marine student vet felt so uncomfortable that he had to walk out because he had been a block away from some of the footage of the film” (p. 287). This student veteran’s experience is a poignant expression of the alienation and frustration caused by a professor’s insensitivity and lack of understanding or acknowledgment of who is in their classroom. Though this example was based on the experience of a student veteran who was a man, one can speculate women student veterans with similar combat experience would have a similar reaction. One study found repeated instances where faculty and professors violated student veterans’ and/or service members’ anonymity by routinely calling on them in class *because* of their service experience (DiRamio et al., 2008), though this type of negative experience has been less documented for women student veterans, as they tend to refrain from informing their professors about their veteran identity (Strong et al., 2017).

Women student veterans have also described interactions with faculty who completely dismiss their military service. In Iverson et al’s (2016) study, a participant described a situation where a faculty member in a religion course got onto the topic of war and disregarded the participant’s firsthand knowledge of the military or war, as if her military service was invalid because it did not happen to involve direct combat experience. The participant explained,

> I had a completely different view than he [faculty member] might, and he just would speak without, he did not care. He didn't even know I was military. [However,] when he found out that [I had served in the military but] I didn't deploy in Iraq, I was dismissed.(Iverson et al., 2016, p. 161)

These types of experiences exacerbate the feelings of isolation, unbelonging, and gender bias/harassment that many women student veterans experienced in the military and continue to experience on campus.

Due to the lack of research on women veterans' lived experiences in the college classroom, there is a need to pursue this topic in greater detail. This study aims to fill that gap in the literature by focusing on women veterans' experiences in college classrooms in order to gain a more thorough understanding of how faculty, staff, school administrators, and the military can better support womens as veterans and as students. To accomplish this, Veteran Critical Theory will be used as the theoretical framework to understand how gendered oppression and sexism in the military and in higher education influence women student veterans' lived experiences inside the college classroom.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, I employed Veteran Critical Theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) as the theoretical framework for examining women student veterans' lived experiences inside the college classroom. Veteran Critical Theory (VCT) was first introduced by Phillips in 2014 and was then later fleshed out and published as a formal theory by Phillips and Lincoln in 2017. The theory focused on student veterans and their transition from the military into higher education (Mobley et al., 2019). The theory acknowledges the constructs, systems, and structures through which student veterans engage in transition from the military, particularly as individuals rather than a homogeneous group. VCT provides insight to and a platform for student veterans to share their lived experiences through narratives and counternarratives (Mobley et al., 2019). Combining multiple critical theories including feminist theory, critical race theory, disability

theory, and border theory, Phillips & Lincoln (2017), created eleven tenets that guide VCT through a critical feminist lens. Though VCT incorporates feminist theory and is guided by a critical feminist lens, the theory refers to all veterans and does not speak to women veterans exclusively. For this study, however, two of the eleven tenets will be applied to examine cisgender women student veterans' lived experiences in college classrooms. The following sections will provide an in-depth discussion of each of the two tenets.

Structures, Policies, and Processes Privilege Civilians Over Veterans

The first tenet of VCT (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) guiding this study is *structures, policies, and processes privilege civilians over veterans.* Feminist theory argues that the structures, systems, and world around us are shaped by gendered oppression and sexism (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017), meaning our most significant and foundational systems and structures (i.e, language, military, justice system, financial system, education system, etc.) were designed by and historically for the benefit of cisgender men. Cisgender men often do not recognize that their gender makes them overtly privileged, and they do not recognize the gendered processes that continue to privilege them over nondominant groups because they do not question the gendered status quo; they simply see themselves as "normal" (Schwiter et al., 2021). Others see themselves as critical threads that built the fabric of civilization; they are socialized in institutions with embedded beliefs that men's domination is evolutionary and natural (McIntosh, 1988).

In the same vein as men's privilege, McIntosh (1988) explained white privilege in relation to the idea that "Whites are carefully taught not to recognize White privilege as males are taught not to recognize male privilege" (p. 2). Those in the majority, who have the most advantages, and those who "are taught to believe that their privilege is the natural order of things or the most politically viable, characteristic-neutral, or efficient structure" (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017, p. 660) are typically and historically both cisgender men and white. The concept of white privilege is difficult to recognize for those born with access to privilege, resources, and advantages. It is

painfully evident, however, for those whom resources and advantages were not readily accessible, and to whom privilege was not granted (Kendall, 2012). The topic of white privilege is a difficult one to discuss because it is like “asking fish to not notice water or birds to discuss air” (Kendall, 2012, p. 45). Talking about white privilege and cisgender men’s privilege makes many white people and many cisgender men uncomfortable because it reminds them that the privileges that they have are not universal. It reminds them that not everyone gets to experience the comfort of the “normal” day-to-day experience of living as individuals - “just people” (Kendall, 2012, p. 45).

Civilian privilege is no different from that of cisgender men’s privilege or white privilege in that the vast majority of people are civilians who do not think twice about our privileges as civilians because we are the majority, and our experience is the norm. As the fish, why would we need to acknowledge the proverbial water, or as the birds, talk about the air? The institution of higher education is a civilian structure, historically created by and for cisgender men. Though many land-grant institutions have a military history, the vast majority of today’s universities, colleges, community colleges, and technical/trade schools are led by and taught by civilians (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). These schools were also designed to operate with an 18- to 24-year-old civilian student in mind. The following section takes a closer look at language and how this civilian-privileged structure creates barriers for women student veterans inside the college classroom.

Language

In 1975, anthropologists Edwin and Shirley Ardener coined the term “Muted Group Theory” (MGT) to describe the absence of women’s perspectives and voices from anthropological studies (Barkman, 2018, p. 3). Edwin Ardener argued that women are automatically at a disadvantage in expressing matters of concern because language was created by men for men. Therefore, if women cannot express their views in a form acceptable to men, they are often viewed as “inarticulate” or “muted” (Barkman, 2018, p. 3). Several studies

have reiterated the significance of gender language in which masculine norms dominate language due to heterosexual men having created language that is sufficient for expressing their lived experiences but is often limiting, ill-suited, or even silencing, to others (Kramarae, 2005; Mercurio, 2019; West & Turner, 2010; Young, 2017).

Civilian language is a structural feature of higher education that also serves to exclude women's voices. The constraints of civilian language don't stop at the front doors of colleges and universities. As institutions built on and around civilian language, colleges and universities are vessels not only to perfect civilian language, but encourage their students to use it to express themselves in new and creative ways (i.e., art, written word, class discussions, writing sessions, forums, reports, papers, projects, etc.). For many women veterans, this is one more constraint, one more challenge, one more obstacle they must endure and overcome. After separating from the military, many women student veterans face challenges regarding their ability to communicate with those around them and to adjust to the civilian student-centered structure of the academic environment. For many women student veterans, transitioning from the military – which operates in a strict, no-nonsense, structured, and direct environment –to an unstructured, non-linear, do as you please, creative environment (Morris et al., 2019) can be daunting. Expectations around writing styles in a college classroom, for example, are vastly different from those in the military. Women student veterans may experience difficulties fluidly transferring their writing skills from the military to the classroom. Blaauw-Hara (2017) explained that student veterans may have no trouble writing, for example, "an effective evaluation of a subordinate, but they may have trouble abstracting the skills of clarity, directness, and evidence and applying them to academic writing because the military and academic environments are so different" (p. 1).

Along with having difficulties in fluidly transferring their writing skills, some women student veterans have a hard time executing assignments where professors instruct them to "be creative." For many women student veterans, "being creative" is challenging when trying to

complete an assignment because of the lack of structure associated with the instructions. Women student veterans are not accustomed to vague, “choose your own adventure”-type instructions. They often prefer step-by-step, precise instructions that they can follow to a “T”, so they know what the expectation is going into the assignment, the necessary steps needed to complete it, and what the *exact* outcome is *expected* to be (Hinton, 2020). For many student veterans, the ambiguity of “be creative” that civilian professors bestow upon student veterans can create excessive stress and anxiety because the fundamentals of how to accurately complete the assignment to achieve the expected outcome are missing, which may ultimately hamper their performance in completing the assignment.

Another civilian language barrier for women student veterans in the classroom comes in the form of how they speak. In the military, the manner of communication is vastly different than that of the civilian environment. It is direct, concise, short, and to the point, and most civilians are not accustomed to that manner of speech. As a woman student veteran in Mercurio’s (2019) study explained , “I think that is very unsettling to the average person that has never served in the military. They think we’re overly aggressive or overly pushy when it’s just our culture in which we work every day…” (p.19). This type of direct communication style can make it difficult for women student veterans to communicate effectively with faculty and fellow civilian classmates, creating “norm tensions” (Mercurio, 2019, p. 19).

“Veteran-Friendly” Campus

In addition to language, the concept of the “veteran-friendly” campus illustrates how *structures, policies, and processes privilege civilians over veterans, which is one of the VCT tenets guiding this study (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017).* Many college and university campuses have student veteran centers, student veteran organizations, a chapter of Student Veterans of America, and/or elaborate Veterans Day celebrations honoring student veterans. . . However, most student veterans are nontraditional students who are typically older, married/divorced, , and have children (Dean et al., 2020). Many of these students suffer from MST, PTSD, and/or

TBIs Lehavot et al., 2013; Moghuk, 2021), do not function well in large, crowded classroom environments, and do not spend a lot of time participating in extracurricular activities outside of attending class. Unfortunately, most colleges and universities are designed for and cater to 18- to 24-year-old students who attend college immediately after high school. The faculty, staff, and administration, as well as the resources and services on campus, are ultimately designed to support the personal well-being and academic success of the civilian majority.

Student veterans, on the other hand, come in as students with vastly different needs and experiences. Higher education institutions, whether “veteran friendly” or not, are often inept in supporting student veterans’ personal well-being and academic success, particularly inside the classroom. Most colleges and universities have specific professional development and training opportunities for faculty, staff and administrators. However, training for faculty, administration, and even student peers on understanding and supporting student veterans on campus and in the classroom is relatively rare. One exception is Green Zone training, which originated at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in 2010 and is now offered at more than 100 universities. Yet, fourteen years after its inception, only a fraction of colleges and universities across the country offer the training. Further, there is no standardization in the way the training is conducted, the materials used, or the topics covered, particularly as it pertains to faculty and their interaction with women student veterans in the classroom (Weiterschan, 2020). In the eyes of many women student veterans, the lack of cultural training on understanding and supporting student veterans among faculty members is starkly evident. Colleges and universities claim to be “veteran-friendly,” yet some faculty and staff undermine the efforts of the institutions by their actions inside the classrooms (Elliott et al., 2011). Veteran-friendliness and language are just two examples of the structures, policies, and processes that privilege civilians over veterans, which is one of the two tenets of VCT (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) that guided the design of this study.

Veterans Experience Various Forms of Oppression and Marginalization Including Microaggressions

In addition to the ways colleges and universities privilege civilian students over student veterans, another tenet of VCT (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) posits that student veterans experience additional forms of oppression and marginalization on campus, most notably in the way of microaggressions. In addition to faculty openly slandering and disrespecting student veterans in the classroom (Elliott et al., 2021) based on their own political views of the military or the U.S.'s involvement in the wars in Middle East, student veterans experience microaggressions on campuses across the country in a variety of ways. These experiences include the denial of privacy (the idea that civilian faculty and classmates should have free access to a student veteran's story or to expose their veteran identity) and a spread effect (the assumption that if a student veteran has a disability, they have multiple disabilities (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017).

Within the classroom environment, less obvious forms of microaggressions towards student veterans may occur when faculty members and civilian peers ask certain questions about the student's experience in the Armed Forces. Being "outed" as a veteran by a professor, being singled out by a faculty member as a representative or spokesperson for the military (DiRamio et al., 2008), or being asked the "worst question ever" (Hammond, 2016) by a curious classmate not only makes many student veterans uncomfortable, but also alienates and marginalizes them while muting their individual narratives (Medley et al., 2017). Women service members often have difficulties expressing their lived experiences in the military and with civilians because the language of the majority poses limitations — "a language that is tailored for the civilian populace often characterized by a collective cone of silence regarding combat" (Mercurio, 2019. p.4). Civilians themselves have a limited knowledge and imagination of war and the military experience, so they impose what they know and consequently learn from the

media onto service members creating their narratives for them, imposing their own perspectives of reality — effectively, and often unintentionally, muting them.

The assumption that if you were a soldier, you must have seen combat, seems to be a very dominant belief for civilians. This is an assumption that many veterans deal with from civilians across the board and is usually accompanied with many follow-up questions. For women student veterans, however, microaggressions can go even further than just being outed in class by a professor, or being asked “the worst question ever” (Hammond, 2016) by a civilian peer. Women student veterans may have their military service not seen by their faculty as impressive or important because they did not serve in direct combat roles (Iverson et al., 2016). Or, a woman student veteran may disclose to a classmate that she is a veteran and immediately get the “but you don’t look like a veteran” response, or even the “but you’re too pretty to be a veteran” reply — both of which may seem harmless or well-intentioned in the moment, but are nonetheless detrimental. These statements not only imply that she does not look like what a “veteran” *should* look like (i.e., masculine, probably white, muscular, etc.), but also that the person with whom she is speaking with does not perceive her as being capable of being a veteran — whatever “veteran” might mean to them.

The “spread effect” (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) — the assumption that student veterans not only have one disability, but have multiple disabilities — is an assumption that certainly applies to women student veterans. When the spread effect is combined with the civilian concept that student veterans are entering education in a state of helplessness, the civilian perception is that these students need saving. Just as many civilians might think that “veteran” equals “has PTSD,” a woman veteran may equal “experienced military sexual trauma” or military-related sexual assault. Both of these are false. Yet, because civilian perception is what people continue to believe to be true, this perception is brought into the classroom. Thus, with women student veterans, the spread effect leads to assumptions like these: “Since she’s a veteran *and* a woman, she must have PTSD *and* MST. She must not like large crowds, loud

noises, *and* not like to be around men in positions of authority" - that is, if she is even recognized as a veteran at all. If she is such a helpless, fragile, mysterious creature, how would a faculty member have the resources or know-how to support her? How could she possibly be successful in college if she faces so many obstacles?

Perhaps this type of irrational, uninformed, and detrimental thinking is at the root of women student veterans' negative experiences in college classrooms and campus environments. Veteran Critical Theory, or VCT (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) uses a critical feminist lens to problematize the overarching assumption that many women service members and women student veterans are"less than" or, at the very least, "other than" while in both the military and within college and university settings. The two VCT tenets emphasized in this research, *veterans experience various forms of oppression and marginalization including microaggressions* and *structures, policies, and processes privilege civilians over veterans,* allowed me to center the following ideas in the design of this study. First, feelings of exclusion and isolation do not disappear for some women veterans as they transition to college, but instead are perpetuated. Second, the continuous feelings of self-doubt, isolation, and overall muting effect that were ingrained in them during service are the cornerstones on which they built their shields of invisibility and anonymity on campus.

Conclusion

The title of "soldier" is supposed to be earned when one finishes basic training or bootcamp, yet for women the title seems to always be in question, regardless of the achievements earned, battles won, or honors received. For many women service members, separating from the military and becoming a veteran does not bring a sense of honor or relief but instead acts as a proverbial hand over the mouth. This experience has an isolating effect where society merely "thanks" them for their service and prescribes upon them their own version of what a veteran "should be." This silencing and muting effect often continues on college

campuses and inside classrooms as a result of historical patriarchal and hegemonic, masculine normative social constructs.

When I first began this literature review, I sought to understand women student veterans' experiences in college, broadly speaking. Ultimately, I developed a core focus on women student veterans' lived experiences inside college classrooms because I noticed a gap in the literature pertaining to this topic. By "gap" I mean I identified no direct studies at all – rather, only a few women veterans' classroom experiences mentioned here and there in other studies pertaining to student veterans, along with a small number of studies focusing on women student veterans, but not specifically on the classroom. Upon reviewing the literature, I decided to use Veteran Critical Theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) as my conceptual framework. I initially utilized two of VCT's tenets to examine the oppressive and marginalizing structures, policies, processes, and experiences women student veterans must endure inside the higher education classroom and in other settings on campus. However, when analyzing the data, I found that additional tenets of the theory were applicable and necessary in helping me to better articulate the findings of the study.

Women student veterans have been underrepresented and overlooked for far too long. As an advocate for women student veterans, my hope is that this study aids in the acknowledgment and understanding of women student veterans' lived experiences inside the college classroom. As more and more women veterans and service members continue use their GI Bill education benefits, higher education administrators, faculty and staff, and other stakeholders such as the Veterans Administration will be forced to address women student veterans' specific needs and challenges both on campus and inside the classroom, garnering them the personal and academic support they need as they navigate their academic journeys.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of women student veterans inside the college classroom. To fulfill this purpose, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What experiences do women student veterans have in the college classroom?
2. How do gender and student veteran identity influence women student veterans' experiences in the classroom?

The overarching aim of the study was to shed light on and gain understanding of how women student veterans' gender and veteran identities added to or hindered their experiences in their college classes.

This study was designed to add to the lack of literature available on the specific topic of women student veterans' lived experiences in the college classroom, and to gain a better understanding of the continued challenges and barriers that women student veterans faced as individuals and not solely as a homogenous group. Although there have been numerous studies on student veterans, little is known about women veterans' college experiences - particularly inside the classroom (Atkinson et al., 2018). Various studies are often cited regarding student veterans' experiences (Hammond, 2015; Livingston et al., 2011; Ruman & Hamrick, 2010; Vaccaro, 2015), however, those experiences are either not specified by gender, or are overwhelmingly centered on the experiences of men. This is ironic, given that women veterans are overrepresented in higher education (Romero et al., 2015) and use GI Bill education benefits at a higher rate (Atkinson et al., 2018). This study sought to provide a platform for women student veterans to share their lived experiences in the college classroom and aimed to provide insight on how higher education administrators and faculty/staff, as well as the Department of Veterans Affairs, can better support them during their pursuit of higher education.

Veteran Critical Theory (VCT; Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) was used as a guiding framework for this qualitative study. The tenets of the theory provided guiding principles that assisted me in

understanding and evaluating how policies, procedures, and practices in the military and higher education marginalize and oppress women student veterans. The tenets of VCT also helped me to better articulate the findings of the study. Narrative inquiry was used as the methodological approach for data collection and analysis, which allowed the women student veterans to express themselves and their lived experiences through dialogue and stories (Creswell, 2014). Narrative inquiry allowed for an in-depth exploration of meanings that participants assigned to their lived experiences and relational engagements, as well as enabled me to obtain rich discourse over time and in context (Clandinin & Caine, 2008; Josselson, 2010). This study was conducted at several institutions of higher education within the South Atlantic region of the U.S. and included both four-year and two-year colleges and universities.

Included in this chapter is information regarding sample selection (including the population and how participants were selected), a detailed description of the interview protocol, a discussion of data collection procedures and narrative inquiry approach to data analysis, and procedures for advancing trustworthiness.

Participant Selection

Women student veterans were recruited for this study using non-probability and snowball sampling (Etikan & Bala, 2017). The participant population was selected based on the breadth of experience as a service member from any branch within the U.S. military (Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, Coast Guard, and reserve units). The participants were initially identified and contacted through the Office of Veterans Services or the military affairs coordinator at each public college or university based on students who self-identified as women veterans and who were currently enrolled in their institution. Participants were also recruited through faculty and other faculty (gatekeepers) at the participating institutions who work with (or potentially work with) student veterans.

Research on the study began once I received approval from my institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix A - IRB Approval Letter: #23-1362). Following receiving IRB

approval, an initial email (Appendix B - Veteran Services Recruitment Email) was sent to each institution's Veteran Resource Center requesting assistance with recruitment of women student veterans by the institution's student veteran liaison on my behalf. Student veteran liaisons at more than twelve institutions were contacted in two states requesting assistance with the study. One community college stated their institutional review board would not agree to allow their institution to participate in the study without prior approval which could have taken months to acquire, many schools did not respond at all, and ultimately only five institutions ended up yielding participants.

The initial email outlined the purpose of the study with a request to meet with me to discuss the study in greater detail. Following the student veteran liaison's agreement to assist me with the study, a meeting was scheduled to discuss the study and how participants would be recruited. During the meeting, I provided the liaison with additional documents outlining information to be sent to women student veterans on my behalf outlining the study (see Appendix C - Participant Recruitment Email), what happens if they say "yes" to participating in the study (see Appendix G - What if I say "Yes" to Participating in the Study?), a participant recruitment flyer (see Appendix H - Participant Recruitment Flyer) containing a QR code where interested students could access the women student veterans participant questionnaire (see Appendix E - Women Student Veterans' Participant Questionnaire), and a student veterans resource sheet (see Appendix L - Student Veterans Resource Sheet). Upon receiving confirmation from the student veteran liaison of their assistance with recruiting women student veterans for the study, they proceeded to email women student veterans the documents I provided.

In addition, an gatekeeper recruitment email (see Appendix D - Gatekeeper Recruitment Email) was sent to the directors of various offices on each campus who potentially interacted with women student veterans as well (student support services, student engagement, and the women's center). The same process occurred and the same documents were shared as with

the student veteran liaisons. Though many of the directors stated they did not know any women student veterans directly, they agreed to share the information with their respective offices and student organizations.

Once the awareness of the study was shared with students, women student veterans began completing the women student veterans participant questionnaire (see Appendix E - Women Student Veterans Participant Questionnaire). After a three to four week period, I reviewed the responses to the questionnaire to evaluate which students qualified to participate in the study. Once the potential participants had been selected, a participant recruitment email (see Appendix C - Participant Recruitment Email) was sent to each student thanking them for their interest in participating in the study, outlining the purpose of the study, and an invitation to meet with me for a one-on-one hour-long interview. If no response was received from the initial email invitation, a follow-up email was sent to check the student's interest in participating in the study and a gentle reminder to schedule an interview with me. For the students who completed the women student veterans participant questionnaire but did not qualify to participate in the study, an email (see Appendix J - Email to Students NOT Selected to Participate) was sent thanking them for their interest and informing them that they were not selected to participate.

When determining participant criteria, I wanted to keep the criteria broad enough to allow for the greatest amount of diversity among participants, but with enough limitations to narrow down the participants' experiences to a given set of parameters (i.e., all participants were undergraduate students, self-identified as women, were currently enrolled in their college/university, and self-identified as a veteran). The study excluded active duty service members, reservists, and women who identified only as dependents of military-affiliated service members, as these individuals would potentially not have the same types of experiences as women who self-identify as veterans. In the same vein, the study also excluded any student who was a master's or doctoral student, as these students would potentially be having different experiences inside the classrooms than their undergraduate peers.

Of the nine students who were qualified to participate in the study, two students failed to arrive at the scheduled interview with me and did not respond to my request to reschedule, ultimately removing them as qualified participants from the study. Of the seven remaining qualified participants, five were from a large, public, four-year research institution and two were from a public two-year community college (all institutions were located in the South Atlantic region of the United States). Once the participants were identified, a consent form was sent via email with ample time to review. Following this, each interviewee and I agreed upon a specific date and time to have an individual face-to-face interview at a mutually agreed upon location that allowed the interviewee the opportunity to share their lived experiences in a quiet, safe, and comfortable environment. Prior to the start of each interview, the participants were sent the participant consent form (see Appendix K - Participant Consent Form), which they signed and returned to me. Six of the seven interviews were conducted via Zoom and were recorded with the permission of the interviewee. One interview was conducted at the participant's home and was audio recorded with the interviewee's permission.

Research Sites

The institutions selected for this study were chosen mainly in part due to their proximity to my home and institution. I contacted institutions that were within a day's driving distance in the event a participant was interested in conducting their interview in person. Ultimately, the participants came from five separate institutions. Three participants attended four-year research universities (two with over 38,000 students and one with more than 19,000 students), and two attended two-year, public community colleges (one with roughly 5,000 students and the other with nearly 15,000 students). Two of the three universities are situated in urban areas, and the third is in a rural community. The large, four-year, public, research institutions were selected because they each have more than 300 students who self-identify as veterans (and not just those who utilize GI Bill education benefits). The community colleges were selected because student veterans often attend these types of institutions and I wanted to include student veteran

perspectives and experiences from both types of institutions (community colleges and public universities). A request to conduct this study was submitted and approved by my Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix A - IRB Approval Letter) prior to reaching out to students to request their participation in this study.

Data Collection

This section will discuss the data collection procedures that were used in this study. The theoretical framework influenced data collection by focusing on interview questions related to gender and veteran identity and how they impact the lived experiences women student veterans had in the college classroom. The first research question, “What experiences do women student veterans have in the college classroom?” was guided by the first tenet of Veteran Critical Theory (VCT), which states, *Structures, policies, and processes privilege civilians over veterans.* The second research question, “How do gender and student veteran identity influence women student veterans’ experiences in the classroom?” was guided by VCT’s second tenet: *Veterans experience various forms of oppression and marginalization including microaggressions.*

Before data collection (e.g., interviews) began, each participant completed the women student veterans participant questionnaire (see Appendix E - Women Student Veterans Participant Questionnaire) and signed a consent form (see Appendix K - Participant Consent Form) agreeing to participate in this study. On the participant questionnaire, the participant was asked to select a pseudonym to hide their identity. The assignment of the pseudonym provided additional privacy and anonymity for each of the participants. I kept all the participants’ information forms in password-protected digital folders for online copies and under lock and key for hard copies.

Participant Interviews

The primary source of data collection was roughly a one-hour, Zoom- or face-to-face interview with each woman student veteran. The interviews were on a one-on-one basis (researcher:interviewee), were both video and audio recorded (with the exception of one

interview, which was only audio recorded), and used a semi-structured protocol (see Appendix F – Interview Protocol). Creswell (2003) suggested that interview questions should be generally unstructured in an open-ended manner. According to Seidman (2013), interviews allow researchers to gain valuable insight into the lived experiences of their participants. The face-to-face interviews gave me the opportunity to gather thick, rich data on women student veterans' lived experiences in the college classroom. The semi-structured format of the interview protocol allowed me to ask follow-up questions, seek clarification, and delve deeper and explore responses in an authentic manner (Charmaz, 2014; Patton, 2015).

I developed a list of interview questions (see Appendix F – Interview Protocol) which was used during the semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. The interview questions were formulated based on the theoretical framework of VCT (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) and were derived to explore gaps in the literature. The questions aimed to explore the lived experiences of women student veterans, specifically as it pertains to women, women as veterans, and women as students.

Following the completion of the interviews, I contacted each participant via email requesting additional clarification on their physical classroom experiences, and how their classmates and professors contributed to those experiences. I provided the option to either meet with the participants to discuss their responses via Zoom or, if they felt comfortable, they could email their responses. Of the seven participants, only one participant responded to the email with additional information.

Field Notes

During each interview, notes were taken of what was happening within the environment. In qualitative research, field notes are highly recommended as they provide a means of documenting and constructing critically rich, thick contextual data for the study (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Field notes were taken to capture the environment, the participants' physical appearance, demeanor, overall mood, as well as their baseline nonverbal behaviors. These

notes were critical to documenting the aforementioned behaviors and visuals not captured by recordings. This contextual information helped in analyzing the data and assists me in documenting how she arrived at her conclusions (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

The theoretical framework also shaped how field notes were taken. As the researcher, I was mindful that I was a civilian and made note of the physical space we were in, the time of year, those who were around us (faculty, other students, family members, etc.). Being that most of the interviews were conducted virtually, I made note of their physical spaces, who was around them, and where they chose to hold the interview. I also made note of any particular special occasion, anniversaries, or holidays that might be relevant to the interviewees' and their salient identities.

Memo-Writing

Memo-writing (memoing) as a research technique should not be restricted to the analysis phase but should start at the study's conception. Memoing assisted me in the clarification and articulation of the topic, assumptions, and perspectives related to the study (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). Memoing allowed me to record ideas, thoughts, insights, and reflections throughout the study – regardless of how mundane or inconsequential the notes may seem at the time. Memoing also prompts the analysis of data in a more conceptual way, helping me to identify categories within codes, gaps, unanswered questions, and forces me to stay thoughtfully immersed in the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). By writing memos before, during, and after the interviews with the participants, I notated contextual issues, such as the interview location and whether the participant was uncomfortable or distracted, in case these issues had significance or lent meaning during the analysis of the data.

The theoretical framework (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) shaped memoing the same as it did with field notes by notating nuances in behavior, attitudes, and tones regarding topics around gender, gender identities, sexism, veteran identity/veteranness, oppression, and their intersections of identities.

Data Storage

Digital participant data are being stored in password-protected documents in Google Drive and Microsoft OneDrive. Physical copies of participant data and private information were stored in a locked drawer in my home office. Consistent with IRB requirements, physical copies will be destroyed three years following the completion of the study. The Zoom interviews were recorded and stored in my e researcher's Zoom account, while the digital file for the one audio-only interview was stored in Google Drive. To ensure privacy, the files were permanently deleted three years following the completion of the study.

Data Analysis

After each interview was conducted, the interviews were transcribed using transcription software. I reviewed each transcription line by line for accuracy. Processing the data as the researcher, helped me stay intimately connected and engaged with the data, and it encouraged emergent analysis of the data (Charmaz, 2014).

Data analysis was influenced by Clandinin and Connolly's (2000) three-dimensional approach to narrative inquiry, incorporating temporality, sociality, and place as a way of conceptualizing participants' experiences. As the researcher, to comprehend the experiences of the participants more fully, I immersed myself into the experience by being cognizant of my physical surroundings, mentally and emotionally present, and personally and socially aware of the positionality and roles I brought to the interview (i.e., white woman, cisgender, civilian, student, etc.). I entered into a relationship with each participant (Clandinin et al., 2015) and had to recognize and appreciate that each interview was "an experience of the experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 189).

Once interviews were completed, data analysis was completed through initial coding and second cycle coding. These coding cycles were used to develop the participants' narratives as they relate to time, situation, and place. Specifically, coding was used to develop temporality context for each participant by identifying past experiences and thoughts/comments of the

present and future. Also, coding was used to focus on existential conditions like physical space as it relates to the interview location, significant spaces in the participants' lives, and the physical spaces of the participants' college classrooms. The combination of these coding cycles enabled me to do a comprehensive analysis of the data.

Initial Coding

Initial coding was the first phase of coding where I went through the data and coded line by line. Before coding began, I read each transcript several times to ensure that the transcripts were coherent and transcribed accurately. Next, Ireread each transcript and examined the data carefully line by line and began to conceptualize the data into discrete concepts. While reading the transcripts, I made notations in the margins of the transcripts summarizing the event/experience or notating an important key concept for easy reference (see Table 1 for examples).

Table 1

Examples of Notations Leading to Initial Codes

Participants' phrases	Notations
I wasn't necessarily harassed, but there was definitely some sexism here and there.	Sexism in the military
One of the students did, like, devolve into making stereotypes about how uneducated and stupid veterans must be…	Negative experience with classmate/Ignorant comment by classmate
I just want to, like, blend in and be regular, I guess.	Wants to blend in
She [professor] opened up the test for me again later on, and she just, like, kept on checking up on me, like, every now and then.	Positive faculty experience
I just went to work. I wore a uniform. I took care of people who were over there, but like I didn't do it. So I'm always just kind of like, for what? Like, what did I do?	Thank you for your service
If I don't know someone, I'm not gonna just be like, Oh, I'm a veteran, just because I don't	Unsure of reaction to veteran identity

know how they’re gonna react.	
My mental health is a great struggle.	Mental health

These notations assisted in identifying initial codes. The notations were typically descriptive with a specific and distinct name that captured the meaning succinctly (Charmaz, 2014). Initial coding was not predetermined and was solely based on the data retrieved from each individual interview. Because there were seven interviews, I coded and analyzed each interview manually, then regrouping and categorizing the notations and grouping them into initial codes. Each initial code was assigned a different color. Ultimately, this process resulted in 21 initial codes (see Table 2).

Table 2

Initial Codes

Code	**Color**
Military	Green
VRC/Student veteran activities	Brown
Classroom/college/schoolwork	Red
Veteran identity	Purple
Woman/female identity	Yellow
Age	Orange
Classmates	Light blue
Faculty	Plum
Personality	Light teal
Motherhood/mother identity	Pink
Childhood	Olive
Motivation	Silver
Previous college experience	Peach

Civilians	Dark teal
Military experience relates to coursework	Dark pink
Mental health	Tan
PTSD/MST/Disability	Navy blue
Identity	Light orange
DSS	Light purple
Married/husband	Dusty blue
Thank you for your service	Dark green

This process helped me see emerging patterns and key ideas in the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). During initial color coding of each transcript, I began to identify the patterns in which the participants discussed their experiences - their military experience, school environment, classmates, interactions with faculty, topics about themselves as individuals, topics related to themselves as veterans, etc.

Following memoing and color coding, I began with one transcript and made a list of each topic or concept that was beginning to emerge. Then, I went through the next transcript and the next and added check marks beside each concept that appeared from the first transcript and added any new concepts or topics that were not previously listed (see Table 3 for examples). By doing so, this enabled me to quickly see how many participants were experiencing roughly the same/similar concept or topic and allowed me to move onto second cycle coding.

Table 3

Examples of Calculating Number of Participants Experiencing Various Concepts

Emerging topic/concept	**Number of participants who experienced the topic**
Mental Health	✓✓✓✓✓
Poor experiences with leadership in military	✓✓✓✓✓
Doesn’t attend campus veteran activities	✓✓✓✓✓

Hasn't met other vets on campus	✓✓✓
Age	✓✓✓✓✓
Classmates complain	✓✓✓✓
Fears/worries civilian reactions to vet identity	✓✓✓

Second Cycle Coding

During second cycle coding, I looked for patterns of codes, and the congruence and coherence of ideas that appear throughout the data. Patterns can either be natural (recurring patterns of human behavior) or deliberate (recurring patterns of human behaviors that the researcher/coder are specifically looking for within a given set of data; Saldaña, 2015.) Once codes and patterns were identified, thematic clustering was used to visually show how their codes, patterns, and relationships develop categories. As these new patterns of codes and ideas began to emerge, thematic memos are notated to summarize the key ideas of what the patterns signify (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

During second cycle coding, thematic analysis allowed me to determine that the data was essentially falling into two main categories: (1) external influences that women student veterans had in relation to their experiences inside the college classroom; and (2) internal influences that women student veterans had in relation to their experiences inside the college classroom. For example, external influences included their military experience; interactions with classmates, faculty, and civilians; as well as interactions with veteran resource centers and disability support services. Examples of internal influences include their identities as students and mothers, the age differences between themselves and their peers, service-related disabilities, and their desire to not advertise their veteran identities.

I used several tenets of VCT (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) to guide the second cycle coding and arrive at these breakdowns. The second tenet, which states *veterans experience various forms of oppression and marginalization including microaggressions,* assisted in the thematic clustering of the external influences, particularly as they related to many of the participants' lived

experiences in the military and with regard to civilian ignorance and anti-military sentiments. VCT's sixth tenet, *veterans experience multiple identities at once,* guided the thematic clustering of the internal influences, particularly in reference to the participants' intersecting identities (age, marital status, motherhood, veteran identity, student identity, etc.).

It was also the combination of these two tenets and the fifth tenet of VCT, *VCT values narratives and counternarratives of veterans,* that allowed me to identify the major themes and sub-themes within the data. These themes and sub-themes were organized in relation to the two overarching categories (external experiences and internal influences). Themes and sub-themes associated with external experiences were grouped under the first research question, while themes and sub-themes connected to internal influences were assigned to the second research question.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness, credibility, rigor, and overall replicability of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Maxwell, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), several procedures were put in place. First, the interview protocol is available in Appendix F, and the detailed description of the research design in this chapter further advances the transparency of this study. . Field-notes and memos were used to obtain nuanced and contextual information given by the participants that was not captured by the recordings. In conjunction, I attempted to follow-up with each participant following the transcription of the interviews to ensure the nuances of the classroom experiences and influence of classmates and faculty were accurately captured (i.e., member checking).

Further, the theoretical framework, VCT, also influenced the construction of the interviews and advanced the trustworthiness of this study. VCT emphasizes narratives and counternarratives of student veterans and the intersecting systems of oppression that shape student veterans' experiences. VCT encourages the guiding principle that the perception of what the student veteran is experiencing or has experienced may be very different from the

student veteran's perspective or actual lived experience (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). By providing the opportunity for the women student veterans to voice their own stories, the design of this study is consistent with VCT, which advances the trustworthiness of the study by connecting its design and findings to theories and research that are congruent with the study's purpose.

Conclusion

This chapter explained and justified why narrative inquiry was used as the methodological approach for data collection and analysis for this qualitative study. This approach allowed participants to answer the research questions and provide thick, rich data through stories and context. The sample population was denoted and the ways in which the sample population was recruited was described. The chapter also discussed how data was collected, stored, coded, and analyzed for the study. Finally, I described her efforts to enhance the trustworthiness, credibility, and replicability of the study.

Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore women student veterans' experiences inside the college classroom and how, if at all, their identities as women or as veterans influenced their experiences. This study used a narrative inquiry approach and was guided by two tenets of the theoretical framework of VCT (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). Using VCT allowed me to examine women student veterans' lived experiences and to provide a platform through which to amplify their narratives and counternarratives regarding their experiences in higher education classrooms. The original research questions that led the study were:

1. What experiences do undergraduate women student veterans have in the college classroom?
2. How do gender and student veteran identity influence women student veterans' experiences in the classroom?

This chapter will present the findings of this study, which utilized the methodology discussed in chapter three. First, the chapter presents descriptive profiles of the seven women student veterans who participated in the study, including the characteristics of each participant (Table 4). Next, I present the themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews with each participant regarding their experiences in college. Notably, while the original research question and semi-structured interview protocol focused on the college classroom, interview conversations were expansive and included participants' reflections on the experience of being a woman student veteran outside the classroom. Consequently, findings include participants' experiences not only in the classroom, but also within their broader college environments (e.g., student activities and organizations, peer interactions in co-curricular settings, and the experience of using GI benefits) and in other settings (e.g., at the VA and in social gatherings with other veterans). Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

A Note on Participants' Language

As this study focused on the role of gender identity among women veterans, this chapter used language directly from participants' own words, which at times used assigned sex at birth and gender identity interchangeably (i.e., female/woman and male/man). Similarly, I honored the terms participants used to describe themselves (i.e., a participant described her race as Phillipino, not as Asian or Asian American with a Filipina ethnic identity).

Participant Profiles

Each participant in this study was over the age of 18, identified as a cisgender woman, was enrolled as an undergraduate student at a public college or university, and had completed at least one academic semester. Initially, ten individuals met the necessary qualifications to participate in the study and were sent an invitation to participate, but only seven of the ten chose to participate in a one-hour individual interview. Six of the participants participated in Zoom interviews, and one participated in a face-to-face interview at the participant's home. Each participant selected their own pseudonym to protect their identity. Descriptive characteristics of each participant are presented in Table 4 below. Each participant completed the Women Student Veteran Participant Questionnaire (Appendix E). Table 4 represents participants' responses to the main items in the questionnaire. "Deployed" refers to whether or not the participant was deployed while enlisted at any point during active duty. "MST" refers to whether or not the participant experienced any form of military sexual trauma during active duty. Finally, "First Gen" refers to whether or not the participant is the first in their family to attend college - meaning neither of their parents or guardians attended college.

Table 4

Participant Characteristics

	Branch	Years of Service	Deployed	MST	Age	Race	Marital Status	Has Children	Inst. Type	Major	First-Gen	Prev. College Exp.
AJ	Marine Corps	10	Yes	N/A	39	Mostly White	Single	No	Public 4-year Univ.	Global Affairs & Spanish	No	Yes
Rose	Marine Corps	4	No	No	24	Hispanic	Single	No	Public 4-year Univ.	Political Science	Yes	Yes
Emma	Air Force	6.5	No	No	32	Phillipino	Married	Yes	Public 4-year Univ.	Civil Engineering	N/A	N/A
Mary	Army	4	Yes	Yes	35	White	Married	Yes	Public 4-year Univ.	Psychology	Yes	Yes
Alley	Army	4	Yes	No	25	White	Married	No	Public 4-year Univ.	Environ. Resource Mgmt	N/A	N/A
Joy	Army	3.5	No	N/A	23	White	Single	No	Comm. College	Nursing	N/A	Yes
Shirley	Army	4	No	Yes	36	White	Married	Yes	Comm. College	Web Design	Yes	Yes

The seven participants provided rich, thick data on their unique experiences in the military and in higher education. The following descriptive profiles provide a narrative introduction to each participant, including their pre-military background, a description of their military service, experiences with gender and/or sexism in the military, and their pathways to college and employment after their military service.

AJ

I interviewed AJ via Zoom while she was at her home. She is a vibrant, outgoing woman in her early 40s with blue hair. She spent almost ten years in the U.S. Marine Corps where she worked primarily in the IT field. AJ spent six years overseas in various countries, working for various embassies, learning new languages and cultures. She spent three of those six years as an embassy security guard, and when she wasn't acting as a Lioness (one of the Marine Corps' Female Engagement Teams), she was involved with setting up computers and servers. Her experience with technology helped her transition out of the military into a corporate role with Microsoft. AJ spoke fondly of the military but quickly noted that "I feel like after I, I was done… it was, like, closing a chapter in my life."

AJ was communicative and spoke with confidence. She spoke fondly of her family and how they value education. She mentioned that her parents have several master's degrees between them; her brother went through the Naval Academy, and her sister also has a master's degree. For AJ, though, even though she was the valedictorian of her high school and went to college directly after high school, it wasn't for her at that time because she was "just kind of burned out from, like, striving for perfection." She said she wanted more life experience and wanted to meet new people and learn new languages. She also noted, "I didn't wanna be a person who, you know, is born and raised and then dies, like, within miles of where they grew up." AJ's younger brother had gone into the Marines first, and she enlisted a few years later.

While in the Marines, AJ was one of only a few women, and sometimes the only woman, in her unit. She said she expected a certain level of crassness from her fellow men peers and

chose to present herself as “just another bro.” She mentioned that she never presented herself as a sexual being to them, and looking back that maybe that was a survival mechanism, but it was important to her to focus on her job and try her hardest to be completely included and not be singled out in any way. For example, AJ did not want to be seen as or included with other women Marines who were often labeled as “walking mattresses” (WMs. AJ described times where she experienced sexism and stereotypes where her fellow Marines accused her of being “hand picked by the upper echelons”’ simply because she was a woman, or she got opportunities to do things or things were made easier on her because she was a woman. But she said that her fellow Marines who were men often came together to help her more than they ever gave her trouble. Her worst experience as a woman in the Marines was with another woman Marine a few ranks above her who singled her out and continuously came down on her harder than others and treated her differently. AJ brought it to the attention of visiting officers but was dismissed by them. Overall, though, AJ said being in the Marines was a positive experience, but she didn’t love it enough to make it a life-long career. She noted “at no point did I feel like I was fully brainwashed.”

Four days after separating from the Marine Corps, AJ started working at a leading multinational technology company. She described how many of her clients were folks who were currently and/or previously associated with the military. Although she worked there for six years, she endured a very toxic environment. The older veterans often expressed sexist ideas, particularly a lack of respect for younger women veterans, even those who were supposedly supposed to be their equals. AJ talked about how she was scared to leave or change jobs because the pay was so good and she was fortunate to be able to buy a house in her area. However, the environment had gotten so toxic that she decided to interview with another leading multinational technology company. During the interview, she realized that she had no passion for it, it was time for a change, and it was finally time to go back to school. She said she was ready to close the chapter on corporate life. She started school during the pandemic and knew it

was the right time for her. Based on location and programs offered, she decided on her school:a large, public, urban, four-year research university. At the time of the interview, AJ was majoring in Spanish with a minor in anthropology and was about to graduate.

Mary

I interviewed Mary over Zoom while she was at home with her husband and three children. Mary was in her mid-thirties and dressed in casual attire with her hair pulled back. She started our conversation by telling me about her military experience in the U.S. Army. She enlisted at 17 years old due to “family dysfunction” at home, and it gave her “a path to follow and some purpose.” Unfortunately, when she got to her unit, it wasn’t what she expected. She said it “reminded me of, like, a college hazing party.” She described how folks in the military would pull herself and other women soldiers aside and treat them differently because they were women. During a very tearful and emotional moment in the interview, Mary talked about how she experienced military sexual trauma while in service, how she sometimes regrets not conforming, and how she decided that the military wasn’t for her. (Although Mary did not specify what she meant by *conforming*, I can only assume she meant conforming to the expectations of remaining silent, keeping her head down, and not drawing attention to herself regarding how she was expected to perform or unfavorable behavior exhibited upon her.) She served for four years and got out.

After separating from the military, Mary worked in various paramilitary roles including the Department of Corrections and even ran heavy equipment at a gold mine, which she thoroughly enjoyed. Unfortunately, she noted that she continued to have poor experiences in these fields that were predominantly run by men. She felt that there was “no winning” and anywhere she turned there would be “some weirdo.” Mary moved to Florida, where she was able to find a community she felt connected to and enroll in a helpful therapy program through the VA. It was there that she ended up enrolling at a local community college, where she started her journey in higher education.

Mary described how starting school was a whole new experience and how she did not know the terminology and everything about college was a “huge learning curve,” particularly as a first generation student. Mary described how going to school for something she was actually interested in was a far cry from going to school in her childhood where she simply went to class and existed. She also talked about how going to therapy was “just absolutely life-changing” and how she became happy in her own skin, which enabled her to meet her husband, who is also in the military (active duty Air Force and recently transferred to Space Force).

Due to her husband’s various duty stations with the Air Force, Mary and her family had to move around a lot, and she had to finish her associate’s degree online with the community college. Once they moved to their current location and he transferred to Space Force, she decided to continue her education and go to school for her bachelor’s degree in clinical psychology. She decided on her large, public, urban, research university based on good internet ratings and location. Mary expects to graduate next semester.

Joy

As with the previous participants, I interviewed Joy via Zoom. She was a reserved, rather shy, 23-year-old woman. She served in the United States Army for a little over three years until she was medically separated due to a back injury. She enlisted at age 17 when an Army recruiter came to her high school and got her mom’s contact information. Her mom passed along Joy’s information, and the recruiter called Joy. Joy said she couldn’t understand the lady on the phone due to the recruiter’s thick southern accent, so she agreed to meet her and her mom in person. The woman ended up talking her into enlisting. Joy talked about how she was extremely shy and how the physical tests were challenging for her and caused her some mental health (depression) issues. She also mentioned how the military expected them to be loud and yell, and she struggled with that as well.

While in the Army, Joy was training to be a nurse. She was stationed at a hospital in Texas when she herniated a disk in her back, though she doesn’t remember how it happened.

She attempted to get medical care, but it was brushed off by military personnel. She ended up getting degenerative disk disease and nerve pain to the point where she could no longer do physical fitness tests and her medical board discharged her. In addition to her poor medical care, Joy also discussed how the height and weight standards for women in the military were unrealistic to maintain. She mentioned how her superior officers would call her out about her weight in front of a bunch of the whole command group. In one particular situation, her first sergeant asked her what she weighed, said “oh,” then puffed up his cheeks and then smacked them and said “oh, you’re looking a little…” and then made a gesture indicating she was looking fat and belittling her in front of everyone. She also experienced sexist comments from men soldiers and heard them complain that women soldiers don’t belong in the military. The combination of these events, other events during service, and home stress contributed to Joy’s poor mental health.

Although Joy had some unfavorable experiences in the military and had challenges with her mental health, she said that her military was a positive one and that she missed it. She attributed learning how to do “the whole adult thing” to being in the military. She said that because she enlisted at 17, she wasn’t even able to vote when she went in. Before she joined, she only had her learner’s permit, and she was taught how to drive by her friends in her platoon. They took her to learn how to drive and to get everything she needed for her license. Essentially, her adult life was shaped based on her military experience, particularly the structured nature of military life. Joy shared, “whenever I feel like I’m doing terrible in life, like I’m just doing what I needed to be doing, I always go back to like, ‘oh, well, you just need to act like you’re back in the military. Like, just go do that.’ Like, that’s like my gold standard.” Even now, Joy attributes being successful in her everyday life to the way she was in the military.

Following her separation from the military, Joy enrolled in a local community college where she is continuing her studies in nursing to get her RN license. She chose her school because they offer a LPN to RN bridge program that can be completed in only a year and a half

and is the only college within a reasonable driving distance that offers the bridge program. She also works part-time, so she only has time to go to campus for class and labs and then back to work or home to focus on her studies. Joy is focusing on finishing her program and possibly moving on to earn her BSN in the near future if she does not go directly into the workforce.

Emma

Emma is a vibrant, Phillipino woman in her early thirties who joined me for an interview via Zoom while riding in the car with her husband and children. She joined the Air Force right out of high school to gain independence from her parents' home, travel the world, and to make her own money. She said she had dreams of doing a lot of different things, was ready to be on her own, and did not want to be living by her parents' rules any longer. Emma discussed how, overall, her time in the Air Force was enjoyable, but her main challenges were the leadership issues and dealing with people who "didn't know what they were doing" and were "given roles that they were not ready for" and did not care about. Emma talked about how in the Air Force, she discovered possibilities for jobs she didn't know existed when she was in high school. Even though she went to a "good" high school, they did not specifically say "these are career options" (i.e., engineering, surveying, etc.). When she was in the Air Force, Emma became an engineering assistant,discovered AutoCAD (a computer-aided design software application used by designers across multiple professions), and loved it.

Unfortunately, even though Emma loved her job, she did experience favoritism and sexism while in service. She described how leaders chose some people over others based on their career fields. She talked about how the leaders would choose men who were civil engineers in the field over her and other engineering assistants who did more desk work. She said they would say "Oh, you don't really do that much," and would imply that because they sat inside at a desk, they did not contribute or do any work during the day. She expressed that there was a great deal of "favoritism" of men over women in her particular field. However, she did not let that influence her or affect her attitude and brushed it off by saying, "I was getting paid

anyways. They're paying me for it, so, all right." Other than the favoritism of men over women and being told that women don't do anything, she said she did not have any other negative experiences, and she enjoyed her time in the Air Force.

During her time in service, Emma met her husband (who is also in the military), got married, and started a family. She had just had her son, and her reenlistment date was quickly approaching, when the Air Force informed her if she reenlisted, she would be deployed again for another six months. After talking everything over with her husband, she decided that it was time for her to separate from the military to focus on her family. While talking about her separation from the military, Emma's tone changed. She became more somber as she recounted why she had to cut her time with the military short. She explained that if she had had it her way, she would have done at least 20 years and retired. Then she sighed and moved on.

As we moved on from her military experience, Emma shared that she had always wanted to get a college degree, and it had been one reason she had joined the military. She chose her institution because it was one of the closest schools that offered a civil engineering program and because it was close to her family, who could help her take care of her children – and she had another one on the way when she first started her program. At the time of our interview, Emma was a commuter student to her large, public, urban, research institution. Having family close by to assist with childcare was essential to her ability to be a student, especially since her husband was still involved in the military. She said she was on schedule to graduate the following semester with her bachelor's degree in engineering and then would graduate with her master's degree the semester after completing an accelerated program.

Rose

Rose is a confident, mild-mannered, Hispanic woman in her early twenties. We spoke over Zoom, and she began her interview by discussing her decision to join the military at age 17, right out of high school. She said she watched her older sister, who was a straight-A student, go off to college and assumed that was what she was going to do as well. However, at

the time, she was not in the right spot mentally and knew she would have failed and wasted her parents' money if she had gone to college right away. She shared that a friend was interested in enlisting in the military and had invited her to the physical training they had at the recruiting office, and she was hooked from there. Rose reminisced about how much she enjoyed the feeling of family and camaraderie she experienced and how she decided "if I'm gonna do something, let me do it wisely." Following that experience, she enlisted in the United States Marine Corps.

Reflecting on her experience as a Marine, Rose talked about how as a woman, and one of only a few in her unit, she had to constantly watch her back and make sure she was "top tier." She never wanted to be seen as or provide any reason to be called a "barracks bunny" or other derogatory name that many women in the military are often called. She described how she would adamantly stand her ground, do her job, and not mix her personal life with her work life. She had to constantly prove that she deserved to be there with everyone else – that she, too, deserved mutual respect. Rose talked about routinely hearing comments such as "Oh, because she's a female, she gets promoted," or "well, female Marines kinda get things handed to them," and "you should count your blessings" (implying she should be *grateful* to even be in the Marines). She reiterated how difficult her job was and how challenging it had been to achieve all of her accomplishments.

After reflecting on her experiences in the Marines, Rose recounted the one negative incident she said stood out the most to her. She had been stationed in Hawaii with an infantry unit and was scheduled to leave for another station, but first an instructor sat her down and gave her "the talk," telling her that she couldn't mess around because she was going to be the only female there. Then, right before she was scheduled to leave, she received new orders that her duty station had been changed from the original location to Okinawa, Japan. Her instructor told her, "They thought you were a male, so because you're a female, they sent in another person. Considering how this made her feel, Rose said:

> I think it definitely makes me feel like I missed an opportunity…, feel singled out because I was a female. They found out I was a female, like, made them change their decision, and they were like 'Oh', and they changed their minds for selfish reasons.

She talked about how she was still glad she got sent overseas, but when she first arrived in Okinawa, she had a hard time understanding the dynamics, "spoken and unspoken," of the unit. She went on to describe how over time, she made friends within her unit and got used to the environment, but that being in the Marines had had a negative impact on her mental health in certain ways that she decided to separate after serving four years. Overall, however, she spoke fondly of the Marine Corps and said she loved the Marines with all her heart, but some of the experiences were "not what I would like, want or signed up for, I guess."

After separating from the military, Rose shared that she decided to go back to school and continue her education. She said that she had actually started "a little bit" while she was in the military, but wanted to focus on it full-time once she got out. She decided to attend a public four-year university in the South Atlantic region of the U.S. because her friends were there, but it did not "play out" quite as she would have liked because they were not very welcoming, particularly as a veteran and a first-generation student. Still wanting to finish her education, Rose decided to transfer to another large, public, urban, four-year institution within the same state that was closer to her family. At the time of our interview, Rose was finishing up her bachelor's degree in political science and was on track to graduate within the next year.

Alley

I interviewed Alley at her home with her husband (who is also a veteran) and their beloved dog. Alley is a down-to-earth, direct, White woman in her mid-twenties who feels her petite stature makes it hard for her to "blend in." She began our interview by telling me that she joined the U.S. Army directly out of high school because she always knew she wanted to join the military and she knew it would allow her to pay for college. Alley enlisted with the Army so she could be a watercraft engineer. Being from Florida, she said she loved being in the ocean

and sailing, and she wanted a job where she could still be on the water while also getting her hands dirty.

Alley talked about how there were only 32 people on their boat crews and how she only ever worked with one or two other women at a time on a daily basis. She described how there was always a battle as a woman to either be “too” outspoken so people actually listen to you, or to just quiet down and deal with whatever is happening. Alley said that she would usually be one of the women who spoke up, and most of the time that did not help her situation. When situations would arise and she and a fellow woman would talk to leaders about a situation, they would dismiss them and wouldn’t listen. The toxic leadership would only cause her to get in trouble but would not help her when she needed assistance. For example, Alley shared that she was assigned to a mission that was supposed to be four months long but turned into a 10-month mission due to the failure of leadership and their toxic behavior. As a result of that mission, she experienced a lot of mental health issues and distrust for the military. She said she also got a lot of backlash from the military for different things, including receiving mental health treatment. After that experience, Alley shared that her mental health was not in a good state and the structure of the military was not appeasing her anymore. She said she had done her four years at that point, and she was ready to get out and do what she really wanted to do: to live a better life for herself and for her future family (Alley and her husband met while they were both stationed in Hawaii and got married prior to her leaving for her 10-month mission).

After separating from the military, Alley knew she wanted to go to college. She shared that while in the Army, she witnessed and was told to commit numerous OSHA violations for her job that had a very negative effect on the environment. She described how as a child, she grew up in a household that taught her a lot about the environment, she went camping a lot, and she became a very outdoorsy person. She talked passionately about wanting to help the environment, how she was motivated to make a positive impact, and how it was something she wanted to do as a career. Alley described how this had influenced how she and her husband

had decided on which college was right for her. Since she was from Florida and he was from Massachusetts, they wanted to find a home somewhere in the middle. After doing a little research, they decided to select a large, public, four-year research university. At the time of the interview, Alley was a sophomore in an undergraduate environmental resource management degree program.

Shirley

I interviewed Shirley over Zoom while she was at home. She is a quiet, shy, White woman in her mid-thirties. She and her husband (who is also in the military) live in a rural area on a small homestead with their twins (one boy and one girl) where they raise goats and chickens. Shirley spoke fondly of her children and their career aspirations – her son wants to develop cures for "weird things," and her daughter wants to be a traveling veterinarian. She said she is going to start homeschooling them so that they can focus on the things they are interested in and so she can gear their studies more toward their career goals. Shirley spoke passionately about her family for a long time before she dove into her military experience.

Once Shirley began speaking about her military experience, she told me that she had a rough upbringing and background and came from an abusive home. As a teenager, she knew she wanted a better life for herself and wanted to get away from everything she knew growing up. She enlisted in the U.S. Army straight out of high school and became a parachute rigger in the Airborne unit. Even though she was terrified of heights, she knew she wanted to do something that she wouldn't do as a civilian. She said "I'm sitting here like, 'this is either gonna be something super cool to tell my kids when I, when they grow, you know, bigger and stuff, or it's gonna be something super dumb and I'm gonna die.'" She explained how she wanted to prove to herself that she could overcome her fear and that "courage is not the absence of fear, but the will to overcome it." She also said that she stayed true to herself and made it through, but she's still scared to death of heights.

Shirley went on to talk about how once she enlisted, she was immediately stationed overseas in Germany and thrived in her training schools. She took her job very seriously and was the honor graduate in her advanced training school. She described how it was harder for women because there was always a sense of having to prove yourself. She said she had done so well that her sergeant major of the rigor field had thought she would be the next sergeant major, and that she was well on her way, however, as Shirley stated, “life had different plans”. She experienced military sexual trauma while in service, and she was also medically discharged after she blew out her knee. She served four years.

During her time overseas, Shirley met her husband, who was also a parachute rigger. Her husband was still in the Army and got deployed to Afghanistan when she was pregnant with their twins. At the time, Shirley was already taking classes at a local community college but ended up not finishing her degree once she became pregnant, because she moved back to Arizona to be with family while her husband was overseas. Shirley stated that, luckily, her husband was able to return from Afghanistan four days after the twins were born, and then after a few years they were able to move away from Arizona to their current home on the East coast. Shirley said she tried to go back to school when they first moved back but realized that the classes she needed to take at the local community college were almost an hour away. She couldn’t afford the time or gas commuting that far with two babies, so she ended up deciding not to go. Instead, she chose to enroll at a cosmetology school to get her cosmetology license so that she could do her daughter’s hair, nails, and makeup when she got older. Shirley laughed when she said,

> I’m a tomboy. I mean, I’m gruff. I’m from the military. Come on. She [referring to her daughter] is not. She is very girly and likes her hair and nails and makeup and I don’t do any of that. I could do it for her, but I don’t do it to myself.

Several years passed. COVID hit, Shirley’s husband retired after 20 years in the service, they began to build their homestead, and their children began to get older. Shirley decided it was

time to go back to school to finish her degree. At the time of our interview, she had enrolled recently at her local community college and had begun to take courses in their web design program. She was looking forward to doing her schoolwork while her children were doing their schoolwork at home as well.

Thematic Findings

In the following section, I will present the themes that emerged during data analysis. First, I describe the findings for the first research question regarding women student veterans experiences in the college classroom. These findings reflect the themes related to the experiences of the participants in the context of those around them and how interactions with those around them influenced their experiences. Next, I present the findings for the second research question regarding how gender and veteran identity influence women students' experiences inside the classroom. These findings reflect the themes related to the participants' own feelings about their identities and how those feelings have shaped their experiences in the classroom. Finally, I present additional findings from the study.

Q1: What experiences do undergraduate women student veterans have in the college classroom?

The following findings discuss how participants internalize their experiences inside the college classroom and with the campus environment beyond coursework. They discuss how their experiences and interactions influence the way they reveal (or don't reveal) their veteran identities, how they interact with those around them, and their perceptions of their campus resources and environments.

Experiences Inside the College Classroom

Classmates. One of the primary themes associated with participants' experiences in the college classroom had to do with their interactions with their classmates. First, consistently and throughout the interviews with all seven participants, a common sub-theme that emerged was that each participant typically only revealed their veteran identity to their classmates if it came

up organically in conversation. They did not start off conversations with that identifying information or offer the information outright. Thus, the first sub-theme related to participants' classmates was *organic reveals.*

Organic reveals. AJ was the first to describe that she only shares her veteran identity if it comes up organically in conversation - thus, the *organic reveal* phenomenon. AJ stated, "It [her veteran identity] tends to come up organically… when we talk about personal experiences or travel experiences in the classroom… I don't really advertise it." Similarly, Alley shared,

> I feel like when I first went to college, for the first couple of semesters I did [share her veteran identity], less than I do now. But I still think that it's less than half of the time. I think unless some random discussion comes up where I'm able to say that I was, that I'm a veteran or something with the military, then I stated it.

Other participants shared stories of how they might have been contributing to a class discussion by recalling experiences they had in another country or with another culture from their time in the military and would reveal their veteran identity in that way, or a discussion would take place about a technical skill or task, and a participant would reference a job they performed while in military service.

Microaggressions. Regarding interactions with classmates, another consistent sub-theme was that at one time or another, each participant experienced some form of microaggression from a classmate after revealing they were a veteran (i.e., look of surprise, silent treatment, look of disbelief, an outright "you don't look like a veteran", etc.). For example, Alley stated that she mentioned she was a veteran to a fellow classmate, and he was quiet for 20 minutes. She said this experience "...really kind of affected me a little bit. I was like, 'well, ok. That's fine.'... I think it was more disbelief." She said that was not the only time it happened. She said she had mentioned it to multiple students who were men, or somehow it would come up that she was a veteran and they just sat there in silence, and it would make her feel bad. She

stated “I’m like, I don’t mean,... it’s just part of my identity, you know, I can’t take away that life experience that I’ve had.”

Rose expressed a different type of experience. She explained that during a class discussion, another student veteran shared their veteran identity, so she felt comfortable sharing hers. But when she tried to share her experiences as a service member, the other student veteran brushed her off and said, “well, I didn’t do that,” and belittled her experience as a veteran. This experience made Rose feel like she had to hold back that part of herself, so she said, “oh, okay, well never mind,” and said nothing after that. She said she also felt like people treated her differently once they found out she was a veteran.

For Mary, when she revealed or “admitted” she was a veteran, it caused a little bit of “side eye” in some of her more “liberal classes.” She also said she had an odd experience with one particular student in one of her classes. Due to her quiet and reserved nature, a civilian student came up to her and said, “Well, I don’t wanna be taken out in case you ever decide to do anything weird,” so he kept slipping her candy and trying to be her friend.

Indifference. In another sub-theme relating to classmates, several participants shared they experienced indifference from their classmates when disclosing their veteran identities. Bonnie stated, “I feel like they’re mostly indifferent and they don’t really care.” Bonnie said she had never had a bad experience sharing her veteran identity with her classmates; they were just indifferent about it. Joy recalled that she mentioned her veteran identity to two classmates in passing but she didn’t know if the students remembered the encounter or not, nor did she bring it up to them at any other point during the semester.

Inability to relate. As another sub-theme, multiple participants shared that they experienced challenges in being able to relate to their civilian classmates and found there to be a disconnect between them. All seven participants described challenges associated with relating to their classmates, mainly due to their peers’ *ignorance of the military, lack of life experiences, complaining,* as well as the participants’ *age difference, and marital and family status.*

Participants shared that their experiences in the military helped them learn how to *be adults* and provided them with an abundance of life skills and cultural experiences, including time management, accountability, and motivation. They described how their civilian classmates often made ignorant comments about the military and veterans, waited until the last minute to complete their work, and complained about trivial things. Several of the participants described the challenges associated with relating to their peers due to the complexities that are specific to being married and having children, being significantly older than their classmates, and/or simply being in a completely different stage in life with more responsibilities.

Alley shared several reasons why she felt disconnected from her civilian peers. She said she often gets frustrated at the disconnect between her understanding of the world and their understanding of the world. She clarified by stating she has to provide for herself and put in the work to achieve her accomplishments, whereas she feels a lot of her classmates don't have the same understanding of what it means to work hard. She also noted:

> Sometimes the comments the students make just send me for a loop. Honestly, pretty hard to make a connection with people… One of my labs this semester, we're in the field two days a week, every week. Which for me is magnificent, it's wonderful. I get to be outside in the woods but when I'm there, usually the students are complaining about one thing or another. There hasn't been one class that students aren't complaining about, and the adult in me is like "well you just got to do, what you got to do." But you know, they're still learning and going through their adult life. Figuring it out.

AJ shared similar experiences with fellow classmates and her challenges being able to relate to them, particularly due to their uninformed views, complaints, and lack of life experience. She commented:

> I have already got 20 years on them. So, um, there's that disconnect, but if students are speaking out with, um, and this reflects, like, my thoughts as well, that if, if people and students are speaking out with close-minded worldviews or making assumptions about

> this or that group, or making assumptions about a country, that does create distance. I just try to remind myself, like, when I was their age, I hadn't lived overseas yet either. I try, I just…there have been times where I just have to remind myself, you know, "you've lived a lot, a lot more than they have." I just get those feelings when I hear just ignorant, uniformed views, or complaints about, um, if we wanted, if anyone wanted to engage in, like, the suck Olympics, like "Well, I've had it worse than you. Like, I could win." Uh, they have no idea.

When sharing her interactions with classmates, Mary expressed challenges of her inability to relate to her peers in a different way. She stated that communication and understanding the lingo and technology that the students were using made her feel awkward and disconnected. She explained:

> I'm so awkward. I know I'm awkward because I have to ask, like, "What does that mean? Like, what are you saying?" … They'll [other students] say, what rock do I live under, you know? I just feel like I'm a grandma now. I feel like, I guess, how my grandma felt when cell phones came out. Like, people are inviting me to GroupMes, and I'm like, I don't know what that is.

When interviewing Joy, she, too, discussed challenges relating to her classmates. She explained that even though she and her fellow peers are roughly the same age and they are going through the same program, those are about the only ways she's able to relate to them. She explained further that her classmates, particularly women classmates, would complain about their teachers being a "stickler" about how they should wear their hair in nursing school and how they were called out on it. Joy said she tried not to belittle them because their experiences were just regular civilian experiences or normal college experiences. Joy said,

> And then there was me, where half of my instructors [in the military] made me run miles and were knocking on my door at 2:30 [a.m.] to make sure I wasn't somewhere I wasn't supposed to be. And just having to wear the uniform everyday. And the amount of

> pressure on, like, on me to just look a certain way. Not even just like appear, like, make sure your hair is brushed, you know, make sure your teeth are brushed and things like that. But um, my actual, like, body composition and stuff like that. So I can't really relate to any of my peers even though I am the same age as them, going through the same program.

Joy continued to explain that her classmates would talk about their college experiences and she would reflect on her time in the military. Shealso recalled a time when an administrative leader in her academic program pulled Joy into her office and almost fired her from the program because someone had told her that Joy had said something that she had not actually said. Joy commented, "I would have been kicked out and had to go work on tanks, you know? Stuff like that, no one can really relate to in my class because none of them are veterans." She was referring to the severity of the consequences that her actions, or perceived actions, had in the military and how her classmates had no comprehension of that kind of pressure.

The concept of age was mentioned by several participants as a challenge in being able to relate to their traditional classmates. Emma shared that age often comes up in conversations with her classmates because she's typically significantly older than most of them (she's in her early thirties). She described an experience in several classes where they would be having a class discussion about a given topic that she had experience in from the military:

> Depending on the professor, they'll talk about some experience. They'll be like, "Oh, let's go around the room and talk about our experiences that we have in this field," or stuff like that… Or just sometimes they'd [classmates] be like "Oh, how old are you?" I'm like, "Oh, I'm pretty old… I was in the military, so I'm a little ancient.'

Emma continued sharing that her age separated her from her classmates in that she had a better sense of time management and how to prioritize her responsibilities and school work. She explained that her classmates would ask her for help the night before an assignment was due and she would have to explain to them that she had to take care of her child or other things to

work on. When referring to her age, she added that because she gets good grades and has everything together, her classmates reach out to her for help:

> ...because of my age, they think you can help them with whatever…Because you already understand how it works, people don't seem to understand that you can't, like… you know how college students are, like, they do things the day before. You know what I mean? And you're just like, 'Oh, no. I gotta do these things Monday, Tuesday… I got things every day to do.'

During the interview with Rose, age came up as well. She mentioned that she does not share her previous military experience unless a topic like age is brought up in conversation. At 24 years old, she tends to blend in with many of her fellow classmates, and they do not realize that she is slightly older. She also explained that she doesn't offer the information unwarranted and said, "I just wanted to, like, blend in and be regular, I guess".

Alley expressed having similar experiences. She explained that it was difficult to build connections with her classmates because of her age and her marital status:

> Usually it ends up stating that I'm married and then people are like, "You're married? How are you married?" And then they ask my age. Then they're like, "Why are you old and married and at school?" And I'm like, "Well, 25 isn't that old, but yeah."

Alley went on to talk about how her fellow classmates would give her the silent treatment out of disbelief that she was not only older and married, but that she was also a veteran. She said as soon as she would tell them her age, all of the other questions would immediately follow and she inevitably would have to disclose her veteran identity. She said the same was true if she disclosed that she was married.

When speaking with AJ, she explained that age was an obvious differentiating factor between her and her classmates. She stated that she has almost two decades on most of the other students in her classes (she's in her early forties) and "they probably just see, like, just an older woman who is dressed loudly and has blue hair." She explained that when her veteran

identity is shared in one way or another through conversation in class, the other students are usually just surprised because she doesn't look the part, or they think she's only a little bit older than them. She explained that the other students try to guess how old she is and will end up saying something to the effect of "What? You don't look…", and she'll reply with "Well, what do you think it looks like?" AJ elaborated and said that she does not alienate herself from her fellow students by saying things like "Oh, like, just you wait." She said she is very interested in the clothes they are wearing, the music they are listening to, and the things they say. She also stated that her overall feeling towards them is like an "auntie" and she has made friends with some of them, but she was quick to explain:

> They're just friends at school. I can be partners with them on projects. I can text with them and talk with them in class. But in some ways, there are like, hard and fast limits for me. There's just so much that they just can't even, they haven't experienced yet. They're just little guys. They're young. I have soft and fond feelings for most of them.

With the exception of AJ, age seemed to be a barrier for several of the participants in their ability to connect with their classmates. With AJ, it was not so much a barrier to *creating* connections with fellow peers as it was to the *depth* of connections made with her peers.

Being a parent also emerged as a challenge for three of the seven participants as an additional barrier to being able to relate to their peers. Mary shared that she has had three children and has to take some extended breaks from college to raise her children. As a result, not only does Mary have an age gap between her and her fellow classmates (by almost a decade), but she also shared, "I've been pregnant through some of my in-person classes. And I'm just, I'm just there. I'm existing in the moment." She shared she was awkward when trying to connect with her peers, and she had a difficult time building relationships with them.

Ignorance*.* As a final sub-theme related to participants' classmates, two participants stated they experienced challenges and frustrations with their civilian classmates due to their

ignorant comments and lack of knowledge regarding veterans and the military. Alley went on to share:

> Most of the time people just don't, they don't, they either don't have a family member that's a veteran or they don't have a friend that's a veteran or an acquaintance or they don't know anything about veterans. So most of the time it's just, they ask the same common questions that you get as a veteran, you know. "Have you ever been in combat? Were you active duty?" Which by active duty they mean, "Have you ever been in combat?" You know, the really intense scenarios people ask like the most inappropriate, "Ever hurt somebody?", anything like that. Or, "What did you do?" A lot of stuff like that. Most of them are very surface level questions and just like, very super basic. But yeah, most of them, the very first question is either "Were you active duty?" or "Were you in combat?", which both mean the same thing. Which, I was active duty, but active duty doesn't mean combat.

AJ also shared that she felt frustrated with some of her classmates due to their ignorance. She talked about how civilian students have spoken negatively about the Armed Forces in class and have looked at her directly. She stated

> It's more fellow students, where there have been a few times where, um, I just - I just remind myself, like 'it's just — it's just a kid who has never deployed, who hasn't…." Just you know, it's, at that point, it's easy to speak from a point of ignorance because they haven't served and they clearly don't know anyone who has served well enough to change how they're speaking about veterans.

AJ also shared another experience she had with a civilian student in a different class. She said it was probably the worst experience she's had with a fellow classmate with regard to her veteran identity:

> There were certain students who, to me, it sounded like they wanted to show off to the professor of how much they knew and just show how eloquently they could speak and

> one of the students did, like, devolve into making stereotypes about how uneducated and stupid veterans must be, and I just bit my tongue. Like, I wanted to react emotionally and raise my hand and counter that, ‘cause it was… the atmosphere was, like, you could speak your piece, but I didn’t want to engage like that, ‘cause I didn’t think that it would be worth my time and that was really probably the worst of it. This kid…he had bragged about, like, living abroad and it seemed to me, like, one or more of his parents was involved with the State Department in some capacity. So he used those experiences to, you know, show how cultured and educated he was, and I just thought… I thought it was just a shame that he was making… that he had these comments about veterans, like, you go because you can’t do school, because you can’t, you’re not smart enough for college, like, that kind of attitude. I did stew about it for a while. I still know, that, you know, this is a kid, like, he hasn’t lived long enough to meet enough veterans that would change his mind.

Overall, participants had a range of experiences with their classmates in the classroom and in their courses.

Faculty. In addition to their classmates, participants described a range of experiences with faculty members. Like the interactions with their classmates, participants’ interactions with faculty members aligned with several subthemes. The first subtheme was *indifference.*

Indifference. When referencing their experiences in the classroom, three participants noted that they did not specifically mention to their professors or faculty that they were veterans. Joy stated that she does not typically make it a point to inform her faculty that she is a veteran. She said, “It’s in my file that I’m a veteran, but I don’t think it really matters to anyone.” When speaking with Emma about whether she shared her veteran identity with her professors, she reflected,

> I don’t think I let them know because I don’t know them like that, I guess. I don’t really bring it up. It’s not something that I actually casually bring it up to them. They wanna

> know, they can get to know me, They're so busy that I feel like they…"That's their life. That's their business." You know? But they never ask "Hey, have you, has anybody ever been in the military?" I don't think…they're really not interested.

Overall, the students stated they had not had any negative experiences with faculty, nor did it influence their experiences inside the classroom. However, they did not go out of their way to inform their professors about their veteran identities, simply because they did not feel their faculty were interested in the information. Shirley noted that most of her professors had been indifferent to her veteran identity, commenting, "they don't seem to be neither here nor there for it. I'm assuming it's because they've dealt with veterans during their time as professors." She was just another student in their class, which was fine by her.

Positive interactions. Six of the seven participants described experiencing positive interactions with their professors. When talking about these interactions, several of the participants spoke about the impact the professors and their kindness had on their classroom and educational experiences. Two shared how their professors assisted them with accommodations, which significantly improved their academic performance, and how the kindness of the professors made a real difference to them as far as they appreciated the fact that their professors *cared*. Another participant appreciated the fact that her professor asked questions and was *genuinely interested* in learning about her experiences and provided him with a firsthand account on what it was like to be at a foreign embassy. In addition, all of the participants mentioned that at no point were they *outed* in class by any of their professors, nor did they experience their professors criticizing the military during class or criticizing the participants' military-related topics for class assignments. AJ talked about her experience with a world history professor and how she was able to connect her military experience with questions her professor had about the Geneva Conventions and how he appreciated gaining the "inside scoop" and the time she took to talk to him about her experience as an embassy security guard when she was deployed in Iraq. AJ stated, "I'd say that's probably the best experience because

he was curious and interested and just willing to talk, and overall I just loved how he taught. You had to be on your toes."

Two students sought accommodations due to military-affiliated disabilities and remarked that their professors were more than willing to assist them. Shirley shared that she is deaf in one ear and although she sits in the front row, she asked her professor if he would stay on her side of the room when he lectured so that she could hear him more clearly during class. She said that he was very accommodating for the rest of the semester. Mary also experienced military-related challenges that resulted in her needing some accommodations in school. She shared that she needed more time taking tests and spoke to her professors, and they immediately changed the length of time her tests were available without question. She explained that the addition of the extra time helped to eliminate a lot of stress and anxiety, and she was able to go into her tests with more clarity.

Another participant, Rose, shared the importance and impact of having faculty that take the initiative to reach out. She explained that there was a point where she was going through a rough patch with her transition, and she was in the middle of a test and froze and couldn't finish it. Her professor noticed and reached out to her to check on her. Rose opened up to her and explained that she had served in the military and she was having a hard time, and her professor was understanding and reopened the test for her at a later time. Rose also mentioned that her professor kept checking on her throughout the rest of the semester to make sure she was doing okay. She said it made a big difference because she could tell her professor genuinely cared about her and the other students, and this helped Rose feel like she could open up about what she was going through.

Experiences with the Campus Environment Beyond Coursework

There were several sub-themes that emerged within this theme: *"veteran-friendly" campus, disability support services, and liberal environment.* These sub-themes influenced how

the participants experienced their campus environments in a way that may have contributed to their desire to “blend in,” as well as how they experienced their classrooms.

“Veteran-Friendly” Campus

In addition to course-related interactions with faculty members and students, many participants had significant experiences outside of their classes with the campus environment, including co-curricular engagement with peers, access to student activities and organizations, and experiences with veteran-related policies and services on campus were significant topics for many of the participants. Five out of the seven participants disclosed they did not participate in student veteran activities on campus because they were either too busy and/or they lived off campus and did not want to commute back to campus simply to attend an event. More than half of the participants expressed that during their time on campus, they had not, to their knowledge, met another student veteran or another woman student veteran. They suspected this was because women do not “advertise” their veteran status and they are more difficult to recognize or identify. The participants who had children stated they go to class, go home, and when they are at home, they spend time with their families and do schoolwork. In addition, three of the seven participants disclosed that they had not met another veteran while attending their institution, and two participants did not know if their institutions had any student veterans groups on campus.

Each of these participants described how the lack of social connection on campus with other veterans made them feel alienated from their civilian peers due to the inability to relate. Joy reiterated this when she stated,

> I feel like there should be more opportunities for social support. Like, financial support, you can get that from the VA. But like I’ve said, I have not met a single other veteran besides my coordinator who works at my college. I have no idea of anyone else. I think if I had, if I was able to have like, maybe like, not even a support group, but just like, you know, like, there’s this here if you’re interested, this is a group for female veterans. I

> could relate to them a lot more than I think I could relate to my peers that I have now. And not something, like, I would have to go out of my way to set up. I think that would be very helpful in higher education.

Only one participant, Mary, had a negative experience with gender inequity regarding policies related to her education. When asked to explain, she talked about how she had started her education at a community college but realized that she did not want to use all of her GI Bill benefits on an associate's degree, so she stopped using them and paid out of pocket before attending her current four-year institution. Once she enrolled there, she had to take extended breaks to have her three children. As a result, at the time of our interview, she only had one semester left to use her benefits before the timeframe to use them ran out. She continued:

> You know, one thing I did notice, because, like, a male veteran doesn't have that issue. He can start a family. He's not growing a child. His GI benefits are not gonna expire on him because he took, you know, a semester off to nurture an infant. And there's no, like, exemption for us as female veterans to pause our benefits. So there's, like, a lot of pressure and limitations. That's the main issue that I've ran into is the fact that there's no way for me to pause any of my benefits, especially also, considering the fact that I've had to take time out to do therapy intermittently for depression, which is service-related.

Other than Mary's experience with the GI Bill and the lack of flexibility with motherhood, the other participants did not mention any policies that made them feel oppressed as veterans. Mary was visibly upset and frustrated when talking about this challenge in her pursuit of higher education and how it added additional unnecessary pressure and stress on her mental health.

Disability Support Services

There were mixed reviews from participants when it came to their experiences working with DSS on campus. Two participants mentioned their experiences with disability support services (DSS) on campus. Mary described having a positive and simple experience working with the office to receive her accommodation letter for her challenges with reading and

comprehension, particularly when it came to timed tests. Mary stated, “maybe young minds can do this, but I feel like I have an over-vaccinated Army brain.”

Unfortunately, Alley described having a different experience working with her DSS office. After numerous emails, phone calls, and completing the necessary paperwork to receive accommodations due to service-related mental health challenges, DSS denied her accommodations. Alley stated she went to their office multiple times and provided the necessary documentation showing she had been diagnosed with service-related disabilities through the military and was still denied assistance through DSS. Visibly frustrated, Alley stated:

> I sent them emails and some paperwork, but they were kind of unresponsive and that just kind of adds on to my anxiety…I personally was just like, I’ll just deal with it. I’ll just deal with my anxiety and I will make through the rest of my college experience with it…They were not of help. So you’re like, I’ll just do it by myself and not reach out again.

At the time of the interview, Alley had not received any assistance from DSS, even after multiple attempts and documentation by the military of a service-related disability.

Student veterans, particularly those who have documented military-related disabilities, who persistently seek accommodations from DSS, should not feel as though they need to “just do it by myself,” or somehow *justify* their need for assistance when it comes to taking care of their mental health on a college campus. Given the longstanding stigma against seeking mental health treatment, the fact that these students are asking for assistance takes courage and trust. However, when these students put forth the effort to seek assistance and are denied accommodations by offices such as DSS, what message are they receiving? How much “proof” of service-related disabilities such as PTSD, anxiety, depression, and the like are student veterans required to provide in order to be adequately assisted while on campus? This type of student neglect, especially for these students, may not only exacerbate their mental health issue(s) for students, as it did in Alley’s case by increasing her already high levels of anxiety and stress, but may also contribute to students feeling as though they have no other choice but to

suffer through their disabilities on their own. Not to mention, the lack of support from such a critical campus resource may lead to a breakdown of trust between student veterans and their institutions, further amplifying their feelings of isolation, disconnect, and their need to "just do it by myself."

"You don't look like a veteran"

Another sub-theme that emerged in participants' experiences was the concept of being told "you don't look like a veteran" by civilians and other veterans. Several participants discussed the notion that civilians often think of veterans as being muscular men who saw combat in Iraq and now have PTSD, and they do not think of women as being veterans, particularly those who are young and petite or those who are married with children. Joy mentioned this when she stated, "I don't think I look like this, specifically because I feel like the trademark veteran is an old dude." Similarly, several participants noted that when interacting with older men veterans either in public or even at the VA, they often do not acknowledge them as veterans even though they should be considered equals. Rose spoke about an experience she had during Veterans Day one year:

> So sometimes like, around the older veterans, I'm sitting there in line, like, trying to make myself look big, you know? I even got my little hat now, so I look like actual military, like a veteran. Like sometimes I'm like, "Man, like, I promise I served. Like, I promise I'm a vet."

Another participant stated there is still an attitude that "women aren't supposed to serve" and when out with her husband, people always assume that her husband is the veteran and not her (even though they both are veterans). Another participant stated there is a feeling amongst older veterans and civilians who think that if you never saw combat, you're not a veteran and that you shouldn't claim it, and that if you were never deployed, you shouldn't get VA disability or benefits. She said the younger you are as a veteran, the more looks you get at the VA. She described going to the VA and having people think she is either the daughter or wife of a man

who served or is currently serving. She went on to say that women don't flaunt their veteran status and don't broadcast it so they don't "look like a veteran."

Liberal Environment

Throughout the participant interviews, three of the seven women mentioned the word *liberal* when describing their institutional or geographical environment. Mary described being in several "liberal classes," Alley made reference to her school as being a "liberal school" and AJ stated her institution is in a "southern liberal area." Each of these women made reference to being in a *liberal environment* as it related to being anti-military in some way. Although AJ stated that she lives in an area that is strongly affiliated with the military, she explained, "Colleges tend to be liberal, and Gen Z, my experience, in particular, they are - they are very liberal, very open minded, you know, anti-war, anti-violence." While AJ referred to colleges in general, Alley and Mary mentioned their schools specifically and how they were in a southern environment where, as Alley put it, "A lot of people can be anti-military." Along those same lines, Mary described her feelings on campus when she stated, "Being a veteran or admitting, like, veteran status has caused a little bit of side-eye in some of the very liberal classes."

The "liberal" campus and surrounding anti-military environments that women described may be contributing to their desire to not advertise their veteran status both in the classroom and around campus. Their need to *blend in* may also be a subconscious self-preservation mechanism due to the uncertainty of how those around them will respond if their veteran status were to be revealed. This could also contribute subconsciously to their desire to come to campus only for class and immediately leave and not get involved in other on-campus activities. Just knowing their campuses are *liberal environments* may induce feelings of stress, anxiety, and fear.

Q2: How do gender and student veteran identity influence women student veterans' experiences in the classroom?

The following findings discuss how the participants internalized the influence of gender and veteran identity on their experiences within the classroom. They discussed how their worldviews, perceptions of self, and experiences as a veteran influenced their decisions, opinions, and experiences as a student as they attended college.

Gender Identity. Participants did not explicitly discuss gender, however it was mentioned throughout our interview conversations in a variety of contexts: sexism and gender inequity in the military/as a veteran, being told they "don't look like a veteran", and gender inequity as it relates to GI Bill benefits. Two participants briefly touched on it when referring to their personalities, stating they were raised to be soft-spoken, calm, more shy, and to act like a lady. Joy reiterated this by sharing:

> The way I was raised personally, it was kind of the whole, you know, act like lady like, you know, be kind of soft, being soft spoken, not being super abrasive or anything like that… Like, if you're super loud and blonde and bright and abrasive kind of woman, then typically, you're not called the most nice names.

She also continued by saying that for women, society tells you to be more feminine, and if you broadcast your veteran identity, that's inherently masculine and frowned upon for women. For Joy, these societal messages about her gender and her veteran identity aligned with how she was taught to not be braggadocious and humble and to maintain a quiet confidence. Similarly, disclosed how she was extremely shy, not extremely outgoing, and how being loud and yelling in the military was one of the biggest challenges for her - something she never really got accustomed to.

With regard to their gender identity as students, participants did not outright express these same feelings towards their experiences in the classroom. Most of the participants seemed to feel their gender did not influence their experiences in the classroom or on campus in any significant way. However, their previous experiences with gender inequity and sexism would suggest otherwise - particularly their desire to *blend in*. When asked if and/or how their

gender identity influenced their experiences in the classroom, each participant responded with a similar answer, stating that they didn't think anything of it because they blended in with their classmates. Abby was the only participant who provided a distinct response regarding her gender when she stated,

> Having that prior military experience… I mean, it's a good experience, being a female in there [her engineering program], being kind of proud. There's not a lot of girls in here. You know, like, 'Wow. You're really making it. You're really doing it'. You have a lot of pride in that.

Although most of the participants did not feel that their gender had a direct influence on their classroom experiences, the narratives and counternarratives of the participants suggest that gender was a key influence in how the participants experienced their college classrooms and campus environments. Each participant spoke at length about their military experience and how their gender played a role in those experiences. In one way or another, each participant was highly aware of her gender during her military service. They spoke of having to act less like a woman and more like "just another bro," not getting singled out, working twice as hard to earn the same respect, taking extra care to avoid becoming the subject of rumors or derogatory/sexist names, as well as being body shamed and being told they get their accomplishments handed to them. Having experienced these types of sexist atrocities in the military, it is reasonable to assume these women are probably focusing on their other identities (i.e., student, mother, friend, etc.,) now that being a woman is no longer a major factor in their ability to go about day-to-day lives as it had been in the military. Being a woman no longer makes them a minority, particularly in the classroom or on their campuses; therefore, they probably do not find that it is as influential to their college experience as perhaps their age, marital status, or being a mother might be.

Sexism. Though not necessarily found in the classroom, another finding that emerged from the data was *sexism* in the military. Oftentimes, sexism came in the literal statement "you

don't belong here" [referring to women not belonging in the military] or variations of this expression. Several participants talked about having their worth as a service member or their ability to do their job judged because of their gender when they would hear statements such as, "Oh, you don't really do that much," or, "Because she's a female Marine, she gets promoted…female Marines kinda get things handed to them." The women in this study stated they were constantly having to prove themselves. They had to prove that they could do the physical fitness aspect, that they could do the job they were assigned, and that they were not "barracks bunnies" or other derogatory names that were given to many of the women service members along with unsavory rumors and sexist perceptions of their behavior. Several participants shared they had to work twice as hard to earn the respect of their peers for doing the same amount of work. All seven participants said that during their service, they worked exceptionally hard at focusing on doing their job to the best of their abilities, watching their backs, keeping their heads down, and not drawing attention to themselves.

Other participants described instances where they had negative interactions with military leadership. One participant described an incident where she was publicly humiliated by her Sergeant Major about her weight in front of the whole command group, implying that she was fat. Another described how she got reprimanded by the military for receiving mental health treatment after a mission had gone south due to poor leadership. She said it ultimately made her feel like she was being punished for receiving treatment, as though she should be able to handle a significant health concern without medical assistance. In addition, four other participants mentioned that they experienced poor mental health in the military, or that the military contributed to the decline of their mental health.

Veteran Identity. When asked about their veteran identity, each participant had a unique, yet similar response. These responses aligned with several subthemes, beginning with *blending in.*

Blending in. Regarding their veteran identity as students, each participant stated they wanted to “blend in” and not “advertise” their veteran identity so as to not be seen as “other than” or different. When asked if she shares her veteran identity with others on her campus, Rose stated, “I just want that to be separate from my life… that part of me is like, I don’t want to be seen different, like because of that, I think.”

Mary explained that not only does she not usually share that she’s a veteran because she wants to blend in, but she typically doesn’t share because she feels like she’s the “wrong kind of veteran.” She elaborated,

> A couple of other student veterans, they’ll be male, that I’ve had in classes with me, they’re still in shape. They’re still pretty gung ho and “Oorah.” And I’m just, like, grumpy and fat. I’m wearing sweatpants and I show up and I have, like, milk stains on my shirt. I’m just here, the wrong kind of veteran. I just don’t feel like I necessarily fit. So I just kind of leave it alone now. This semester I didn’t introduce myself or share that I was a veteran at all until I started doing my triadic assignments, but that was done privately with two other students and not openly.

Alley shared that she too wanted to blend in and not disclose her veteran identity, particularly to her professors, not because she felt like the wrong kind of veteran, but because she felt if she brought up her service-related disabilities, her professors would feel she was using her veteran identity and her disabilities as excuses. She explained,

> I feel as though if I bring something up [service-related disabilities] like that to my professors, it’s more like an excuse. So I haven’t really. I see it as an excuse. I see it as they think it’s going to be an excuse, but that just might be my own mindset, you know. It definitely is my own mindset. But I did last week, um, talked to one of my professors and say that I couldn’t make it to class because of some anxiety issues and stuff, but I didn’t state that it was because I was a disabled veteran with anxiety. I debated it for a while typing it in because I felt though, as though that might have made him realize how dire of

> a situation it was and really how intense it was. But um, I decided against it… It still makes me feel like I'm just giving an excuse as to why I can't do something.

Other participants shared they wanted to blend in with their classmates as much as possible because other factors like age, marital status, and parental status differentiated them in a far more obvious way than their veteran identity.

Fear. Another predominant subtheme was the concept of fear, or participants being "worried" when they disclosed that they were veterans to others. The majority of the participants either used the word "fear" or "worried" when describing how they felt when they were in a situation where they had to tell someone they were a veteran because they were not sure how that individual or group of individuals would react or respond. AJ explained,

> There are a couple of times that I've worried about my level of comfort… just because it's a college environment and, you know, colleges tend to be liberal, and Gen Z, in my experience, in particular, they are very liberal, very open minded, very anti-war, anti-violence… I do fear that sometimes if they find out, like, without getting to know me first, if they find out that I'm a veteran, they might make assumptions about me… 'Cause a lot of these assumptions are negative in such a liberal space… For those that have zero connection with the military at all, I think it is easy for them to assume or it's shorthand for like, veteran support, like, the far right politics and they're all war hawks.

Joy echoed AJ's concerns about people's responses to her veteran status and her affiliation with the military. Although she clarified that she hasn't experienced any type of negative encounter herself, she has seen many nasty comments online. She stated that the things she sees online that other veterans have gone through makes her very uncomfortable to share her own veteran identity, particularly in a southern liberal area. She explained,

> I'm a little bit of a reserved person sometimes. But I guess I feel like I can't really branch out because I just don't know how people are gonna react, especially, which I don't know why, I worry about this sometimes, but like, a lot, some people just aren't proud or just

> don't like anyone who has anything to do with the military. And if, like I say 'Oh, I'm a veteran.' and then they're just like, 'Oh, you're an idiot. You sold your soul for an oil company' or whatever they say. You know, things like that.

Joy went on to explain that while she was active duty, they were taught that when they were on leave, even within the states, they were not supposed to wear their uniform and were to take off anything that would identify them as someone who was currently serving, even their dog tags, because it would put them as a target. She went on to explain, "I guess my fear is, a little bit, is that my experience as a veteran aren't going to be so different that it just leads to feeling more like I can't talk about it."

As with Joy, the remaining participants stated that even though they had not had many negative experiences revealing their veteran identities to people, they still had fear and anxiety in doing so because they weren't sure how people would respond to the news, particularly because they were women in southern liberal environments.

Reactions to "Thank you for your service". The final subtheme relating to veteran identity regarded two participants' feelings towards the civilian phrase, "thank you for your service". Participants shared that although they understood the intent of appreciation behind the phrase, it made them feel uncomfortable and awkward. Several said they put on their uniform and were "just doing their job." Others said they never know how to respond because saying "you're welcome" seems snooty, and saying "thank you" is an odd response to someone saying "thank you" to you. Alley elaborated when she stated, "I don't get it that often, so most of the time I'm just like 'Well, ok, no problem.' I don't really go out seeking it... But yeah, because it's just, there's not really anything that you could say to that, you know."

Joy spoke at length about how the saying makes her uncomfortable because she never deployed, never saw combat, and was "never in the trenches." She talked about how she wore her uniform, went to work as a nurse, and took care of people who were deployed and were over there, but that she didn't do any of those things. She said,

> It's always just kind of like, "for what? What did I do?..." This was voluntary. I wasn't drafted. I didn't even need to go. It's the same as if I signed up as like a contract agency, just with guns and idiots. In every situation it's an awkward exchange. But really, I feel like for a lot of people, it is kind of like a compulsory, like, oh, someone says you're a veteran, "Oh, thank you for your service." And it's just kind of a statement that you just say. It's just something that's kind of, like, culturally normal… I didn't say I was a veteran for you to just like thank me and tell me that, like, you're thankful for me, like enjoy my presence. But that's kind of the compulsory thing to do, is like, "Oh, so thank you." And it's like, 'Okay, I'm just telling you a funny story."

Overall, not knowing exactly how to react to the statement and wanting to quickly move past the encounter was the common feeling from the participants. There was an element for some that their work did not garner the same appreciation as some soldiers, while others simply felt that the encounter was awkward and there was no easy way to respond.

Conclusion

Women student veterans continuously negotiate and renegotiate their identities as women, veterans, students, friends, caretakers, and oftentimes as mothers and spouses. Their experiences in the military, interactions with civilians both on and off campus, and with other veterans influence how they experience their classrooms, how they interact with their classmates and faculty, and which identities they choose to reveal to those around them.

The following chapter discusses recommendations for administrators practitioners in higher education, as well as the Department of Veterans Affairs on how to better support and serve women student veterans on college campuses across the country.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the lived experiences of women student veterans inside the college classroom, and if/how their gender and veteran identities influenced those experiences. To do so, this study used a narrative inquiry approach, and the following research questions guided the study: (1) What experiences do undergraduate women student veterans have in the college classroom; and (2) How do gender and student veteran identity influence women student veterans' experiences in the classroom? Through semi-structured interviews, I gathered data from seven women participants about their lived experiences as former service members in the various branches of the United States Armed Forces, their decisions to attend college, their experiences in their college or university classrooms, and their interactions with their classmates and faculty.

Throughout this final chapter, I discuss the findings from chapter four and how they address both research questions. I also discuss the correlation between the findings and existing literature. Next, I discuss how this study adds to the current research, and I provide detailed recommendations for future research and implications for policy and practice as they relate to this study and studies moving forward. Finally, as I close out the chapter, I share my own gratitude for my study participants.

Discussion

The findings revealed that the participants' lived experiences inside the college classroom were similar to other student veterans' experiences as noted in previous studies (Guzzardo, 2020; Hinton, 2020; Moore, 2017; Morris et al., 2019). During data analysis, several themes emerged that described the participants' experiences inside the college classroom. These themes and sub-themes not only included the experiences inside the literal classroom, but also experiences prior to coming to college (i.e., the military, civilian interactions, interactions with other veterans outside of the military, etc.), as well as their geographical environment, that influenced the way participants experienced the college classroom. The following section is a

discussion of the relationship of these findings to relevant literature as well as the study's unique findings.

Relationship of Findings to Relevant Literature

Most of the findings from this study are supported by the literature described in Chapter Two, specifically as they relate to women veterans experiencing microaggressions (Blaaw-Hara, 2017; Hammond, 2016; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2020; Jenner, 2019), their feelings of isolation and invisibility (Buckley, 2021), challenges finding common ground with classmates (Dean et al., 2020; Medley et al., 2017), experiences with sexism in the military (Albright et al., 2018; Heineman, 2017; Moghul, 2020), as well as feelings of awkwardness and discomfort associated with "thank you for your service" (Mercurio, 2019). In conjunction, these findings aid in reinforcing existing literature on these very topics as they specifically relate to women student veterans, and not just to student veterans as a homogeneous group.

One of the main ways that the findings in this study varied somewhat from existing literature related to the interactions between faculty and the participants. Some prior studies found women student veterans reported higher levels of course engagement and campus inclusion when their faculty created supportive relationships with them (Guzzardo et al., 2020). However, other studies have found that women student veterans still experience "chilly climates" when faculty express negative views of the military openly in class (Kapell et al., 2017) or belittle their service due to their not having seen direct combat (Iverson et al., 2016). None of the participants in this study experienced any of these types of situations with their professors. As mentioned previously, the participants described their professors as either being indifferent about their veteran identities, more than accommodating to their service-related disabilities, and taking the initiative to learn more about the military and the participant's time in the service. As a result of these interactions, the participants may have built a positive rapport with the individual professor, but these experiences did not seem to have increased their participation in either their course(s) or the larger campus environment.

Unique Findings

In addition to both affirming and challenging existing literature on women student veterans' experiences in the college classroom, this study provides two unique findings. To situate these findings, it is important to remember that VCT focuses on the narratives and counternarratives of the student veterans' lived experiences as individuals and not as a homogenous group, and acknowledges the systems, structures, and constructs through which the students engage in the transition from service member to college student. While I chose two of the eleven tenets of VCT due to their alignment with the research questions of the study, (1) *Structures, policies, and processes privilege civilians over veterans;* and (2) *Veterans experience various forms of oppression and marginalization including microaggressions,* the findings that emerged also connect with several other tenets from VCT, including: (3) *VCT values narratives and counternarratives of veterans;* (4) *Veterans experience multiple identities at once;* (5) *Veterans are constructed (written) by civilians, often as deviant characters*; and (6) *Veterans are more appropriately positioned to inform policy and practice regarding veterans.* These tenets were helpful in making sense of these unique findings, as they acted as a set of evaluative measures, truisms, or principles to help me better articulate what I observed in the field (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017).

As stated in chapter two, there is limited research specifically on women student veterans, and next to none on their lived experiences inside the college classroom. The goal of this study was to aid in filling the gap. However, one of the unique findings of this study was that none of the participants in the study felt that their gender or veteran identities played any significant role in their classroom experiences. When asked to describe their classroom experiences, each of the participants provided limited descriptions of their time in their physical classroom spaces with their classmates and professors. They often described encounters with classmates who made ignorant comments about the military or complained about trivial things like having to be outside for a lab. One participant mentioned showing up to class in sweatpants

with milk stains on her shirt and “just existing” through class because she was so physically tired from being a mom of three. Other than these sparse reflections, many of the participants were more interested in talking about them as a student and how they are different than their peers and why. These brief descriptions may indicate that because women student veterans often refrain from revealing their veteran identities to their classmates and faculty, they are better able to *blend in* with their civilian classmates and have more traditional classroom experiences. They may also have not spent a great deal of time commenting on their classroom experiences because they were not experiencing “chilly climates” inside the classroom. Though the women student veterans were aware of some of their civilian peers and faculty’s feelings of ignorance and indifference toward veterans, they may have chosen to focus on the content and course discussions within their classes.

The findings above correlate to the sixth tenet of VCT (*Veterans experience multiple identities at once)* in that the participants were not focused on being veterans while they were on campus, but students, moms, wives, and friends. They discussed being older, having children, and finding it difficult to relate to their peers due to these and other differences. They were on a new chapter in their lives and most of their salient identities did not include “veteran” (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017).

In conjunction with the sixth tenet, the eighth tenet (*Veterans are more appropriately positioned to inform policy and practice regarding veterans)* also applies to these findings. When discussing their salient identities, several of the participants stated that being a mother was a top priority for them. One participant shared their experience of having to “stop out” several times due to having her three children, as well as to get service-related mental health treatment. Unfortunately during this time, her GI Bill benefits did not pause and the time clock to use the benefits continued. At the time of the interview, Jackie was struggling to complete her degree before the time limit to use her educational benefits expired. Not only is this federal policy discriminatory against women who are both mothers and students (roles that each often

demand exorbitant amounts of time, energy, and attentiveness), but it also disadvantages veterans who have to “stop out” due to service-related disabilities. Jackie and her fight against the GI Bill clock is a prime example of how a federal policy can have harmful effects on a veteran’s lived experiences. Jackie’s experience, though it may be less common than other challenges for women veterans, will likely become a more prevalent issue in the decades to come as more and more women veterans enroll in college. The eighth tenet of VCT acknowledges that these women student veterans, who tend to be older, married, and often have children, are appropriately positioned to inform policy and practice regarding their needs as women and as students (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017).

The other unique finding was the correlation between the participants’ experiences in the military and with civilians and their desire to *blend in*. The women described how in the military they were taught to keep their heads down, not draw attention to themselves, do their jobs well, and blend in. Their experiences with sexism and how many of them had to work twice as hard to earn their place amongst their peers in the military may have contributed to their conscious or unconscious desire to *blend in* once again on their college campuses. The idea of not wanting to *advertise* their veteran identity was interesting and yet another correlation and nod to the military in that they did not want to draw attention to themselves. Several participants also expressed that after spending so many years having to wear a uniform and having to wear their hair a certain way, they were finally able to look and dress how they chose and *blend in* with the rest of the world.

The final unique finding was the use of the words *fear* and *worried* that the participants used when describing how they felt when revealing their veteran identity to others. As mentioned earlier, none of the participants had actually had negative experiences when revealing their veteran identities to others but they still had a *fear* and were *worried* that others would respond negatively to the news.The fact that several participants used the actual word *fear* was concerning for multiple reasons. First, one participant used it in the context that the

military had taught her to be fearful of the civilian public and that being associated with the military could make her a target in some way implying her safety was in some way at risk. Secondly, another participant used it in the context of her concern regarding civilians' responses and behaviors when she revealed her veteran identity due to their ignorance and dislike of the United States military and the southern liberal environment they were in. Another participant described her *anxiety and worry* based on what she had seen happen to other veterans online and on social media and was concerned it would also happen to her — particularly because she was a women veteran and men and older men veterans didn't/don't regard women veterans with the same respect as they do amongst themselves.

The unique findings regarding the participants' need to *blend in* and the *fear* or *worry* that many feel when confronted with revealing their veteran identity to others are supported by the second tenet of VCT (*veterans experience various forms of oppression and marginalization including microaggressions; Phillips & Lincoln, 2017*). Not wanting to draw attention to themselves, having feelings of anxiety because they are unsure of how their veteran identity will be received by others, or receiving blank stares or ignorant comments as a result of revealing their veteran identities are forms of microaggressions. In some instances, simply being associated with the military was marginalizing for these women due to the civilian attitudes and geopolitical climates of their campuses.

These unique findings shed light on additional explanations as to why women student veterans may want to *blend in* and not *advertise* their veteran identities not only on campus but inside the college classrooms. These findings provide further insight as to why women student veterans may be hesitant to reveal their veteran identities to their classmates and professors, get involved in class discussions, and/or be more engaged in campus activities or group activities, particularly considering the southern liberal campus environments they find themselves in.

The notion of the southern *liberal environment* mentioned by the participants suggests a broader, more deeply ingrained attitude held by the vast majority - more specifically, an undercurrent of *privilege*. As with many of the participants in this study, many individuals enlist in the military due to a lack of privilege (i.e., lack of college funding, poor home environment, low socioeconomic status, minimal employment opportunities that offer a living wage, low-quality healthcare, inadequately prepared for college both mentally and academically, etc.). In many of these southern *liberal environments*, colleges and universities are attended by students who come from various degrees of privilege, many of whom do not have any immediate family members or close relatives in the military, or even know a single person who is associated with the armed forces. Also, many students who attend the colleges and universities in these areas may also come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, households where at least one parent holds a college degree, and families who may not support the military or military conflicts overseas. As a result, some of these students enter college with or without comprehension of their privilege, ignorance, or prejudices, thus creating *liberal environments* of unease for student veterans.

The term “veteran” is perceived by civilians by what they know, or rather do *not* know, about the military, and can often be constructed as deviant. The *liberal environment* is also a by-product of the ignorance of and disrespect towards veterans and military-affiliated personnel on social media and online. The feelings of *fear* and *worry* when having to reveal their veteran identity, as well as their desire to *blend in on college campuses* are real and harmful effects of this construct. The seventh tenet of VCT (veterans are constructed (written) by civilians, often as deviant characters) situates these findings by recognizing that civilians often write about veterans based on what *they* perceive to know about them, not what is based on the veterans’ perspectives or lived experiences. In this study, the privileged civilian classmates and faculty who make ignorant and derogatory comments about veterans and the military are the civilians “writing” or constructing women student veterans as *deviant characters* and are creating the

liberal environments in which these women refrain from revealing their veteran identity due to feelings of *fear* and *anxiety.* The seventh tenet also states, “Student veterans then become characters in a civilian story or caricatures of civilian assumptions” (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017. P. 662). In order to be their authentic selves in southern *liberal environments* running fraught with undercurrents of privilege and civilian peers full of misguided assumptions and ignorance, what choice do many women student veterans have but to *blend in,* keep their veteran identities to themselves, and try to get through one class at a time?

Implications for Future Research, Policy, and Practice

Implications for Future Research

This study focused on women student veterans’ lived experiences inside the college classroom and if/how their gender and veteran identities influenced their experiences. Each of the seven participants in the study provided thick rich data regarding their unique experiences; however, the findings are not comprehensive of all women student veterans’ lived experiences in college classrooms, as they are not a homogenous group. Also, while the tenets of VCT that guided this study were affirmed (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017), the unique findings of *blending in* and *fear* and the correlation to women student veterans’ experiences within the military and their interactions with the civilian populus should be taken into account when framing future research regarding college and classroom experiences.

As colleges and universities continue to navigate how to better serve and assist women student veterans in their pursuit of higher education, it is imperative that administrators, faculty, and staff learn more about the challenges these women face before and during their time on campus. To start, these individuals should begin listening more to the narratives and counternarratives of the women themselves, as they are the most appropriately positioned to inform policy and practice regarding women student veterans (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). As highlighted in this study, participants shared their experiences in the military and how those experiences may have inadvertently correlated with them performing certain behaviors on

campus (i.e., feeling the need to blend in), or, with being moms, spouses, and working and not having time to engage in campus activities or the opportunities to build connections with other student veterans. More studies involving additional undergraduate women student veterans from other parts of the country and different types of institutions of higher education (i.e., Minority-Serving Institutions [MSIs], for-profit, online, trade/technical, private, etc.,) will add further insight in identifying more efficient and effective ways to support this student population on campus and aid in increasing value to their college experience. Gaining insight into colleges and universities who have a tight-knit community with high levels of engagement from their women student veterans would also aid in conversation around helping women student veterans feel more connected when enrolled in college, even with busy schedules and intersecting identities.

One additional recommendation for research would be to continue studying the harmful effects of *Thank you for your service* and the undercurrent of *privilege* that is so often found on college campuses. Future research should include a comprehensive study of the harmful psychological effects that this seemingly benign statement can cause on active service members and veterans, particularly those who did not deploy or did not see hazardous duty. Through increased awareness, a study of this nature might be able to assist administrators, student affairs professionals, faculty, and staff in better supporting and appreciating those students who have served and are currently serving in the armed forces, as well as helping them to articulate their own narratives. Further, this study could assist in changing the way colleges and universities celebrate their military-affiliated students by encouraging them to use phrases such as “Salute to service” instead of “Thank you for your service”. These types of studies can only aid in the continued efforts to help change the narrative and deconstruct the notion that veterans are *deviant characters.*

Implications for Policy

In relation to the findings of this study, an area of policy that needs further attention is that of Chapter 33 of the GI Bill, which states that one would need to use their benefits within 36 months (or within 48 months with an extension) once the veteran begins using their benefits. As mentioned earlier by a participant, this is not conducive for women veterans who need to take time off from school due to pregnancy and raising infants, or for any veteran (including herself) who had to take time off for service-related mental health treatment. Although this is a policy that can only be changed at the federal level, additional research at the collegiate level can provide documentation supporting the need to change the policy to better support veterans, particularly women veterans. At the institutional level, colleges and universities can create scholarships or tuition waivers specifically for student veterans whose GI Bill education benefits expire during their time of enrollment. Also, ensuring women veterans have access to lactation spaces and increasing child care support on campus are two additional ways that colleges and universities can revise their policies to better support this student population.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings from this study, I offer a few recommendations for practice. Although every college and university is different, and not all have as many military-affiliated students as others (and some may not have any at all), I present these recommendations as suggestions to support those institutions who do have military-affiliated students on their campuses. In response to the findings from this study, I have recommendations in several areas: classroom environment, Veterans Resource Centers, Disability Support Services, peer culture, faculty training, and the “liberal environment.”

Classroom Environment

A positive finding from this study is that in general, the participants did not seem to experience a “chilly climate” in their classrooms even though some did experience certain amounts of indifference, ignorance, and microaggressions from their peers and faculty

members. I recommend that colleges and universities invest in learning more about the perceptions of the civilian faculty and students as they relate to military-affiliated students and women student veterans. When institutions have a deeper understanding of how civilian faculty and staff perceive and understand student veterans, they can assist in creating constructive and respectful ways to dialogue within the classroom to help bridge the gap between civilians and veterans on campus. Also, when institutions have a more clear understanding of how their faculty, staff, and students perceive student veterans, they can help provide guidance on how faculty can create curriculum and pedagogical practices that are inclusive and supportive of student veterans.

Veterans Resource Centers

Another positive finding from this study is that most of the participants stated they found their Veterans Resource Centers (VRCs) to be friendly and helpful with regard to helping them with their GI Bill benefits. Unfortunately, most of them also said they did not participate in any student veterans activities, they did not know of any other veterans on campus, and two participants stated they did not know of any student veterans organizations on campus. In response to this finding, I recommend that VRC faculty and staff find new and creative ways to engage women student veterans on their college campuses. As the findings in this study have highlighted, the women student veteran participants in this study expressed they do not advertise their veteran identities on campus and actively try to blend in, nor do they do attend student veteran activities due to their busy schedules. However, each participant did express a disconnect with their civilian peers and said it would be nice to know at least one other student veteran, particularly another woman student veteran to have a feeling of support. It would be advantageous for campus Veteran Resource Centers to take an active role in creating women student meet and greets, luncheons, study groups, or listservs. Being that women veterans are not easily identifiable, these opportunities would enable women students to get to know other women veterans on campus and build connections (and find support groups, should they

choose to participate), without having to do the heavy lifting on their own through social media, after class activities, or general student veteran programming.

Partnering with other resources on and off campus is another way that VRCs can help support women student veterans. Women's and gender centers, multicultural centers, food pantries, daycare facilities, mental health and physical health partners, community volunteer groups, local and national women veterans organizations, family services (parenting classes, playdates, nannies/babysitters, financial planning, family planning, etc.), and others. By connecting women student veterans to these resources, it not only reduces the burden on them to find the resources themselves, but may also increase social support and community engagement.

Another recommendation for VRCs would be to help change the narrative of what a veteran *looks* like. Throughout the findings of this study, the theme of *You don't look like a veteran* has come up multiple times in various contexts regarding women veterans. Women are constantly reminded while in the military that they don't belong there, then when they separate from service, they are often told by civilians that they don't *look like a veteran* whether out in public or on their college campuses. This is an opportunity for campus VRCs to help mitigate. Being inclusive with pictures of women veterans on their websites and in their lounges is one thing, but institutions need to be more intentional and visible about what it means to be a veteran and how women are included in that narrative. Women student veterans need to be able to look around and see themselves represented at veterans events, roundtable discussions, symposiums, and conferences, and they need to have seats at the table when decisions are being made regarding military-affiliated topics, even if their numbers are significantly smaller in comparison to the overall veteran population on campus. It is the responsibility of the VRC to help change the narrative of what a veteran *looks* like, so that the civilian stigma and stereotype shifts from the young, physically fit, cisgender man, straight out of combat, who walked out of Afghanistan yesterday, to the realistic range of genders, ages, and

body types who may or may not have been deployed or have seen hazardous duty but are equally as valued and appreciated.

Disability Support Services

Although only one participant stated she had a negative experience with her disability support services (DSS) office on campus, one out of seven participants is a significant finding. A recommendation for practice is that campuses and universities assign specific staff within DSS to assist student veterans as their accommodations and challenges may be substantially different than those of their civilian counterparts. Student veterans should not be “denied” or made to feel as though they have to “just deal with it” {mental health or other service-related disabilities} themselves. The burden of “proof” should not be placed upon these students when the stigma for seeking assistance and accommodations is already a massive obstacle to overcome. Often these offices are overwhelmed with the number of students who need assistance, appointment dates for assessment are available for months, and email responses are delayed from days to weeks. However, student veterans are an exceptionally vulnerable population. If institutions genuinely want to become more “veteran-friendly,” improving how DSS supports their student veterans, and the quality of that support, are actions in the right direction.

Peer Culture

The findings in this study suggest that peer culture is an important area in need of improvement for student veterans, particularly women veterans. A recommendation for practice is to focus on educating civilian students on veterans, military culture, and how to support their classmates who are student veterans. Educational opportunities can include information on student veterans during general new student orientation sessions that all new students attend, Green Zone training or similar trainings throughout the year, providing guided workshops to student organizations and fraternities/sororities, trainings and information provided by multicultural/student centers, and having a student veterans column or section in the school newsletter/newspaper. Educating the civilian student population on student veterans, their

experiences and culture, and on the military in general is an important step in mitigating ignorance within peer culture.

Congruently, educators should be helping civilian students understand the value that their veteran peers bring to campus. Student veterans bring a wealth of knowledge, experience, leadership, life skills, emotional intelligence, and cultural competence to the classroom. They often have a plethora of real world experience working in teams, solving problems, meeting deadlines, and working effectively with people from different backgrounds. By educating civilian students on the value that their veteran peers bring to campus and into their classes, civilian students may gain a more positive perception and appreciation for their classmates. It is important that educators stress the value and positive attributes that student veterans contribute to the student body, and not always approach training and education about veterans from a deficit perspective of what's wrong with them or why they're different.

Faculty Training

Based on the findings in this study, another recommendation for practice focuses on faculty training regarding student veterans, their experiences, and how to support them while on campus. Many institutions now offer Green Zone training or similar training to help faculty, staff, and students better understand and support student veterans at their institutions. As highlighted by the participants in this study, the positive interactions they had with their professors were significant and memorable. The participants appreciated being able to write about military-related topics during course assignments and having professors who were understanding about their service-related disabilities and/or mental health challenges. It is important for faculty and staff to understand that it is okay that they not know everything about the military or the service members who have served. However, it does make a difference to military-affiliated students when faculty take the time to show some interest and check on them every now and then, as they are more likely to relate to those students as adults than many of their classmates. Further, veteran students may be more inclined to open up to a faculty

member due to that connection more so than anyone else on campus. What might seem like a small gesture of checking in on a student veteran to see how they are doing could be the moment that gets that student back on track from falling behind with their school work, or it could be the moment that saves their life from a mental health crisis. Showing genuine interest and care matters to these students.

Liberal Environment

Based on the findings in this study, the final recommendation for practice is to take action against the construct of the *liberal environment*. While this phrase is often connected with political ideology, participants were referring to a more complex set of issues having to do with an undercurrent of privilege on campus. When referring to a *liberal environment*, I do not believe the participants were trying to comment on their own political ideologies, but rather referring to a pragmatic decision to serve (i.e., improve social environment, financial status, increase cultural awareness, receive funding for higher education, etc.), not necessarily a moral one. The *liberal environment,* as referred to by the participants, is one that consists of privilege and a variety of complexities. Being anti-war doesn't always mean anti-military, nor does it necessarily mean that person or organization is anti-veteran. In environments like college campuses where student veterans can often feel the effects of anti-war sentiments from classmates and faculty, anti-war can be perceived as also meaning anti-veteran. Ignorant comments about veterans and the military, civilian privilege, and the inability to have adequate access to necessary services such as DSS and GI Bill benefits can make student veterans feel disconnected, unwelcome, and isolated. Higher education leaders and administrators need to take the initiative to evaluate their campus climate, the effectiveness and accessibility of the resources that are available to their military-affiliated students, and the undercurrent of privilege that may be causing some student veterans feelings of *fear* and *anxiety.* In doing so, college and university leaders can improve campus environments by creating training and educational opportunities that inform civilian students and faculty on veterans and military culture, which may help mitigate southern

gender norms, anti-veteran sentiments, and the perceived negative civilian perspective of the military. Institutions can provide additional funding and resources to VRCs to increase their ability to assist student veterans in sharing their narratives and counternarratives on and off campus, not only providing student veterans more opportunities to get engaged in their campus communities, but also enabling classmates and faculty the opportunity to learn more about authentic veteran perspectives and experiences. Higher education institutions can also set aside funding to support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts and refrain from falling prey to geopolitical influences that cause schools to sacrifice the well-being of their students and the student body.

At the time of this study, it is not only a tumultuous presidential election year, but there have been state-level attacks on legislation against DEI and many colleges and universities are dismantling their DEI offices. As a result, institutions may lose ground in supporting military-affiliated students, particularly those with intersecting marginalized identities (i.e., students of color, LGBTQ+ students) as their DEI efforts and subsequent funding shift elsewhere. In addition, schools may be less inclined to publicly advertise their support of military-affiliated students due to *fear* of losing major donors with certain political ideologies. As schools face the bureaucratic war between providing a quality educational experience and navigating political red tape, student veterans may end up being the collateral damage. Without DEI offices to assist in actively recruiting and supporting underrepresented and minoritized students (including student veterans), institutions will regress back to enrolling only students of privilege - thus further exacerbating the civilian culture of ignorance and anti-military sentiments against veterans and military-affiliated students. *Fear, anxiety, stress,* and the need to *blend in* will only be heightened for student veterans, and the disconnect amongst their peers will only increase. It should not fall on the shoulders of those who are triggered most by the slander to correct those who are ignorant.

As mentioned previously, VCT's second tenet states, *Veterans experience various forms of oppression and marginalization including microaggressions*. As women student veterans continue to experience microaggressions, sexist comments, and feelings of fear and anxiety while on campus, I urge educators to continue their DEI efforts to improve campus environments. DEI efforts are essential to creating supportive and engaging environments where women student veterans' ability to thrive depends on a positive peer culture. Also, VCT holds that women student veterans, like all students, experience multiple identities at once. By continuing their DEI efforts, educators can provide more affirming environments for students' multiple identities. Educators should also become more trauma-informed, and not just for the benefit of cisgender women student veterans. Many students come to college having experienced trauma, while others may experience trauma in college. By increasing DEI efforts across the board, all students will benefit from the reduction of a negative peer culture and *liberal environment*, and the improvement of inclusive and accessible resources. Should institutions refrain from continuing their DEI efforts, the influence of the undercurrent of privilege affecting the participants in this study will only become more harmful to a larger portion of student veterans (and other underrepresented and marginalized students), and could overshadow and potentially negate additional efforts to support them in their pursuit of higher education.

It is my recommendation that institutions follow the tenets within VCT, particularly tenet five which values the narratives and counternarratives of veterans. Colleges and universities do not need to align with a conservative policy agenda to value the narratives and counternarratives of their students, regardless of their salient identities. Educators need to create environments that help faculty and peers understand that every student needs to feel welcome and to feel they belong.

A recommendation for future research would be how educators might navigate the tension between the attack on DEI offices, while also combating ignorant peer culture and

privilege (i.e., *liberal environment*).On one hand, DEI offices are under attack on campuses across the country which is being backed by conservative political movement. On the other hand, campuses are trying to combat ignorant peer culture and privilege. While institutions are fighting both sides of the same coin, the messages that are being sent to student veterans are implying A) “You’re not welcome here *because* this is a liberal place.” and B) “This is *not* a liberal place because our DEI offices are getting shut down.” The conservative political movement that is dismantling DEI offices on campuses across the country are essentially telling students, faculty, and staff “those who are ‘other’, are less than”, and that includes student veterans. The women student veterans in this study described feelings of fear and anxiety when talking about revealing their veteran identity on their *liberal campus environments* - environments that I can only assume to be anti-military and anti-veteran based on contexts provided by the participants. However, in order to combat students feeling as though they are “other” or “less than” due to ignorant peer culture and privilege, DEI offices need to be in place. Being a *liberal* campus should mean that students and educators should embrace change and reject inequity. With effective DEI offices, staff, and resources, campuses can create supportive, inclusive, and environments of belonging for everyone. When DEI offices get shut down, campuses are at risk of becoming environments that only support students of privilege, students who fit the normative cultural mold, and students who don’t will fall by the wayside.

To be clear, the point is when we advance diversity, inclusion, and belonging efforts on campus, everyone wins - including conservative white students, wealthy students, and students of privilege. DEI offices don’t just ensure that student and faculty quotas get met, they help to ensure that students like the women in this study have the accommodations, assistance, and resources they need to be successful students. These offices also help institutions mitigate the toxic peer culture and cancerous undercurrent of privilege on campus, and create environments where all students feel safe expressing their authentic selves. As a result, women student veterans begin to feel comfortable sharing their extraordinary life experiences, add to the

richness of class discussions, bring leadership and work experience to labs, group projects, and course assignments, as well as provide insightful first-hand knowledge of the military to civilian students and faculty.

Closing Acknowledgements

As I close out this dissertation, I would like to take a moment to share my appreciation and gratitude to each of the seven women who so graciously participated in my study. I was honored not only by their willingness to share their time, but the candidness of their stories and experiences. As a higher education professional, I was amazed at each woman's motivation and dedication. As a woman and mother, I was amazed by their courage, strength, and perseverance. Although I did not serve in the armed forces, I recognized the challenges that many women student veterans endure on college campuses, and how often they are overlooked or left out of research, and I hope this study has done these women justice.

Conclusion

In closing, this study sought to better understand cisgender women student veterans' lived experiences inside college classrooms. The study also aimed to better understand if the participants' gender and veteran identities influenced their classroom experiences. Overall, the findings of the study showed that the cisgender women student veterans in the study were more concerned with *blending in* and not *advertising* their veteran identities than because that made their classroom environments relatively typical. Further, due to blending in, their gender made no difference in their college or classroom experience.

This study reinforced many findings from previous studies of women student veterans, and of student veterans in general, regarding challenges such as connecting with their peers, dealing with ignorant comments from classmates, and being older and having more life experience than most of their peers. This study also reinforced the idea that the college classroom is no longer a "chilly climate" as described by previous researchers from decades ago - at least for participants of this study. However, the new concept of *fear* and *worry* was

introduced by the participants when describing their feelings of having to disclose their veteran identities to others. As such, all of these findings contributed to the overall experience the participants described both during and outside of their classes. The fact that most of the women had not met other veterans, particularly other women student veterans on their campuses, further exacerbated their feelings of isolation and disconnect with their peers and even with their campus. There were times during their interviews where they reiterated their desire to just want to get through their classes so they could be done with school and move on with their lives.

These stories, reflections, and candid experiences made this study not only valuable for the sake of contributing to the body of literature on women student veterans, but I hope that colleges and universities can strive to provide women student veterans with more opportunities and resources to connect with one another on campus, share their information/stories/experiences, and build their own support groups and networks. These women have the fortitude and tenacity to get through college and make it to graduation, but they should not have to do it alone, nor should they have to do it in isolation when they could have each other.

References

Absher, J. (2020). Post-9/11 GI Bill Overview. Retrieved from https://www.military.com/education/gi-bill/new-post-911-gi-bill-overview.html

Ahern, J., Worthen, M., Masters, J., Lippman, S. A., Ozer, E. J., & Moos, R. (2015). The challenges of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans' transition from military to civilian life and approaches to reconnection. *PloS one*, *10*(7), e0128599.

Albright, D. L., Thomas, K. H., McDaniel, J. T., Fletcher, K. L., Godfrey, K., Bertram, J. M., & Angel, C. (2018). When women veterans return: The role of education in transition in their civilian lives. *Journal of American College Health*. 1-7.

American Psychiatric Association (2022). What is posttraumatic stress disorder? Retrieved from https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd

Ardener, S. (2005). Ardener's "muted groups": The genesis of an idea and its praxis. Women & Language, 28(2), 50–54

Atkinson, R., Mobley, C., Brawner, C., Lord, S., Main, J., & Camacho, M. (2018). I never play the 'girl card': Experiences and identity intersections of women student veterans in engineering. In Proceedings of the 2018 American Society for Engineering Education, Paper #21760.

Ayala-Austin, E. (2007). Validating the experiences of male Mexican American community college transfer students studying at Catholic universities. (Unpublished dissertation). University of San Diego, San Diego. CA.

Barkman, L.L.S. (2018), Muted group theory: a tool for hearing marginalized voices. *Priscilla Papers, 3*(4), 3-7

Barnett, E. (2011). Validating experiences and persistence among community college students. *The Review of Higher Education. 34*(2), 193-230.

Barry, A.E., Whiteman, S.D., Wadsworth, S.M. (2014). Student Service Members/Veterans in Higher Education: A Systematic Review. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice. 51*(1), 30-42. http://doi.org/10.1515/jsarp-2014-0003

Birks, M., Chapman, Y., & Francis, K. (2008). Memoing in qualitative research: Probing data and processes. *Journal of research in nursing*, *13*(1), 68-75.

Blaauw-Hara, M. (2016). "The Military Taught Me How to Study, How to Work Hard": Helping Student Veterans Transition by Building on Their Strengths. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice. 40*(10), 809-822. http://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2015.1123202

Blaauw-Hara. M. (2017). "Learning Shock" and Student Veterans: Bridging the Learning Environments of the Military and the Academy. *Composition Forum, 35.* Retrieved from http://compositionforum.com/issue/35/learning-shock.php

Boon, K. A. (2005). Heroes, metanarratives, and the paradox of masculinity in contemporary Western culture. The Journal of Men's Studies, 13(3), 301–312. https://doi.org/10.3149/jms.1303.301

Buckley, M. (2021) Empowering Female [Student] Veterans through Community Writing and Experiential Learning in the Classroom. *Journal of Veterans Studies. 7*(2). 44-59. DOI: http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i2.268

Burke, Peter J. and Jan E. Stets. 2009. Identity Theory. New York: Oxford University Press

Catalano, D. C. J., Haslerig, S., Jourian, T. J., & Nicolazzo, Z. (2021). An affirmation of trans livelihood in and beyond postsecondary education. Association for the Study of Higher Education.

Charmaz, K. (2014). Constructing grounded theory (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Chen J. C. (2017). Nontraditional adult learners: The neglected diversity in postsecondary education. *SAGE Open*, *7*(1), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017697161

Chua, J., & Evans, L.J. (2018). Collaborative research between student veterans and faculty in higher education. Journal of Veterans Studies, 3(1), 122–138.

Church, T.E. (2009). Returning veterans on campus with war related injuries and the long road back home. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 22,* 224-232.

Clandinin, J., Caine, V., Estefan, A., Huber, J., Murphy, M. S. & Steeves, P. (2015). Places of Practice: Learning to Think Narratively. Narrative Works, 5(1), 22–39

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Clark, D.A, Walker, K. (2020). Veterans in Classrooms: Post Traumatic Stress, Seating Preferences, and Achievement. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, *6*(1), 259–270. DOI: http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i1.153

Collaco, C. M. (2017). Increasing student engagement in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice. 17*(4). 40-47.

Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). Intersectionality (key concepts). Malden, MA: Polity Press

Council on Foreign Relations (2020. Demographics of the U.S. Military. In https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/demographics-us-military

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating, quantitative and qualitative research* (5th ed.). Pearson.

Crockett, E. (2015). "No exceptions": Women can now serve in all military combat roles. Retrieved from https://www.vox.com/2015/12/3/9844404/women-military-combat-no-exceptions

Culver, V. R. (2013). Woman-warrior: Gender identity development of women in the American military. *Journal of the Indiana University Student Personnel Association*, 64–74

Cuseo, J. (2018). *Student - Faculty Engagement.* New Directions for Teaching and Learning. *154,* 87-97. DOI: 10.1002/tl.20294

Dandridge Rice, R. C. (2002). *The applicability of Rendón's model of validation with African American community college students.* (Unpublished thesis). California State University, Long Beach, CA.

Dean, T., Sorgen, C.H., Zinskie, C.D. (2020). Social integration of student veterans: the influence of interactions with faculty on peer-group interactions. *Journal of Veterans Studies,* 6(2), 20-29. DOI: https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i2.188

Department of Defense. (2019). 75 years of the GI Bill: How transformative it's been. Retrieved from https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/Story/article/1727086/75-years-of-the-gi-bill-how-transformative-its-been/

Dillard, R.J., Yu, H.H. (2018). Best Practices in Student Veteran Education: Faculty Professional Development and Student Veteran Success. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education. 66.* 122-128.

Dillon, P. A., & Advocate, V. (2017). Veterans in the workplace: Myths and realities. In *Conference of The Many Futures of Work: Possibilities and Perils, Chicago, IL*.

DiRamio, D., Ackerman, R., & Mitchell, R.L. (2008). From combat to campus: voices of student-veterans. *NASPA Journal*, *45*(1), 73-102.

Dortch, C. (2012). GI Bills enacted prior to 2008 and related veterans' educational assistance programs: A primer. *Congressional Research Service.* Retrieved from https://static1.squarespace.com/static/556718b2e4b02e470eb1b186/t/5568f0eae4b0163cc58348a8/1432940778789/CRS-comparison-GI-Bills.pdf

Dunklin, S. B. (2012). The transfer veteran student experience: Exploring college choice, transition, and collegiate experiences of veterans.

Durham, S. W. (2010). In their own words: Staying connected in a combat environment. *Military Medicine, 175*(8), 554–559.

Elder, G.A, Ehrlich, M.E, Gandy, S. (2019). Relationship of traumatic brain injury to chronic mental health problems and dementia in military veterans. *Neuroscience Letters.* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neulet.2019.134294

Ellis, H. (2019). Pursuing the conundrum of nontraditional students' attrition and persistence: A follow-up study. College Student Journal, *53*(4), 439-449.

Elliott, M., Gonzalez, C., & Larsen, B. (2011). U.S. military veterans transition to college: Combat, PTSD, and alienation on campus. Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 48(3), 279–296. https://doi.org/10.2202/1949-6605.6293

Elnitsky, C.A., Blevins, C., Findlow, J.W., Alverio, T., & Wiese, D., (2017). Student veterans reintegrating from the military to the university with traumatic injuries: How does service use relate to health status? *Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, 99*(2), S58-64. Retrieved from https://www.archives-pmr.org/article/S0003-9993(17)31329-1/fulltext

Fernandez, F., Merson, D., Ro, H.K., & R,S. (2019). Do Classroom Interactions Relate to Considerations of Institutional Departure Among Student Veterans and Service Members? *Innovative Higher Education. 44*. 233-245. http://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-019-9460-8

Foster, L. K., & Vince, S. (2009). California's women veterans: The challenges and needs of those who served. In https://www.policyarchive.org/handle/10207/95752

Goldin, C., Katz, L.F., & Kuziemko, I. (2006). The homecoming of American college women: The reversal of the college gender gap. *Journal of Economic Perspectives. 20*(4). 133-156.

Gonzalez, C.A., & Elliott, A. (2016). Faculty attitudes and behaviors towards student veterans. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, *29*(1), 35-46.

Griffin, N.N. (2018). Feminism critical theory. Retrieved from https://sites.wp.odu.edu/griffinengl333/theory-3/

Gross, N. (2019). Your GI Bill benefits: Everything you need to know. *Military Times.* Retrieved from https://www.militarytimes.com/education-transition/2019/07/20/gi-bill-benefits-guide/

Guzzardo, M. T., Khosla, N., Adams, A. L., Bussmann, J. D., Engelman, A., Ingraham, N., Gamba, R., JonesBey, A., Moore, M. D., Toosi, N. R., & Taylor, S. (2021). “The ones that care make all the difference”: Perspectives on student-faculty relationships. *Innovative Higher Education, 46*(1), 41–58. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-020-09522-w PMid:33012971 PMCid:PMC7525228

Hammond, S.P. (2016). Complex perceptions of identity: the experience of student combat veterans in community college. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice. 40*(2). 146-159. http://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2015.107891

Haskell, S. G., Gordon, K. S., Mattocks, K., Duggal, M., Erdos, J., Justice, A., & Brandt, C. A. (2010). Gender differences in rates of depression, PTSD, pain, obesity, and military sexual trauma among Connecticut war veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. *Journal of women's health*, *19*(2), 267-271.

Hermann, D., Raybeck, D., & Roland, W. (2008). College is for veterans too. Chronicle of Higher Education, 55(13), A99. Retrieved from http://chronicle. com.proxy.gw.wrlc.org/article/College-Is-for-Veterans-Too/31872/

Heineman, J. (2017). From boots to suits: Women veterans’ transitioning to community college students. Eddy, P. L. (Ed). *Constructions of Gender. New directions for Community College.* 77-88.

Heitzman, A.C & Somers, P. (2015). The Disappeared Ones: Female Student Veterans at a Four-Year College. *College and University.* 17-24.

Herbert, M. S. (1998). *Camouflage isn't only for combat: Gender, sexuality and women in the military*. NYU Press.

Herman, A., & Yarwood, R. (2014). From Services to Civilian: The Geographies of Veterans' Post-Military Lives. *Geoforum. 55*, 41-50.

Hinojosa, R. (2010). Doing hegemony: Military, men, and constructing a hegemonic masculinity. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, *18*(2), 179-194.

Hinton, C. E. (2020). "I Just Don't Like to Have My Car Marked": Nuancing identity attachments and belonging in student veterans. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, *6*(3), 84–100. DOI: https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i3.211

Hittepole, C. (2019). Nontraditional students: Supporting changing student populations. *NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.* https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/Hittepole_NASPA_Memo.pdf

Hoffman, E. M. 2014. Faculty and Student Relationships: Context Matters. *College Teaching*. *62* (1), 13–9.

Hunter-Johnson, Y., Liu, T., Murray, K., Niu, Y., & Suprise, M. (2021). Higher education as a tool for veterans in transition: Battling the challenges. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, *69*(1), 1-18.

Iverson, S. V., Seher, C. L., DiRamio, D., Jarvis, K., and Anderson, R. (2016). Walking a gender tightrope: A qualitative study of female student veterans' experiences within military and campus cultures. NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education, 9(2), 152-168. doi:10.1080/19407882.2016.1213644

Jenner, B.M. (2019). Student Veterans in Transition: The impact of Peer Community. *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition. 31*(1). 69-83.

Johnson, S. (2020, September, 23). How many military branches are there and what does each branch do? United Services Organization. Retrieved from https://www.uso.org/stories/2855-how-many-military-branches-are-there-and-what-does-each-do.

Jones, A.P, James, L.R, Bruni, J.R. (1975). Perceived leadership behavior and employee confidence in the leader as moderated by job involvement. *Journal of Applied Psychology. 60*(1). 146.

Jones, K. (2013). Understanding Student Veterans in Transition. *The Qualitative Report. 18*(74). 1-14. http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR18/jones74.pdf

Jones, M. (1990). Understanding social work: A matter of interpretation? *The British Journal of Social Work. 20*(3). 181-196.

Josselson, R. (Ed.) (2010). Narrative research. *Encyclopedia of research design. 1*(0). SAGE Publications, Inc., https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412961288

Kamarack, K. N. (2016). Women in combat: Issues for congress. Congressional Research Service, 7-5700. Retrieved from https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42075.pdf

Kapell, J., Boersma, J., Devita, J., & Parker, M. (2017). Student veterans' participation in high-impact practices: veterans' experiences at three institutions of higher education in southeastern North Carolina. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 2*(1). 30-49.

Kelly, U. A., Skelton, K., Patel, M., & Bradley, B. (2011). More than military sexual trauma: Interpersonal violence, PTSD, and mental health in women veterans. *Research in nursing & health*, *34*(6), 457-467.

Kim, Y. K., & Lundberg, C. A. (2016). A structural model of the relationship between student-faculty interaction and cognitive skills development among college students. Research in Higher Education, 57(3), 288–309.

Kim, Y. K., & Sax, L. J. (2009). Student–faculty interaction in research universities: Differences by student gender, race, social class, and first-generation status. *Research in Higher Education, 50*, 437–459.

Lim, J. H., Interiano, C. G., Nowell, C. E., Tkacik, P. T., & Dahlberg, J. L. (2018). Invisible cultural barriers: Contrasting perspectives on student veterans' transition. *Journal of College Student Development, 59*(3), 291–308.

Livingston, W. G., Havice, P. A., Cawthon, T. W., & Fleming, D. S. (2011). Coming home: Student veterans' articulation of college re-enrollment. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *48*(3), 315-331.

López, O.S., Springer, S.B., & Nelson, J.B. (2016). Veterans in the college classroom: Guidelines for instructional practice. *Adult Learning, XX*(X). 1-9.

Lüger, H.-H. (1983). Some aspects of ritual communication. Journal of Pragmatics, 7(6), 695–711. https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(83)90091-7

Marshall, C. & Rossman, G. B. (2016). *Designing qualitative research.* (6th. Ed.) SAGE Publications.

McAndrew, L. M., Slotkin, S., Kimber, J., Maestro, K., Phillips, L. A., Martin, J. L., Credé, M. & Eklund, A. (2019). Cultural incongruity predicts adjustment to college for student veterans. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 66*(6), 678–689.

McCullough, M. E., Kimeldorf, M. B., & Cohen, A. D. (2008). An adaptation for altruism: The social causes, social effects, and social evolution of gratitude. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 17(4), 281–285. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2008.00590.x

Medley, J., Cheney, A.M., Abraham, T., Grubbs, K., Hunt, J., Lu, L., Fortney, J.C., Curran, G.M. (2017). The Impact of the Psychological Sequela of Trauma on Veterans Seeking Higher Education. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability. 30*(1), 83-96.

Mercurio, N. (2019). Beyond "Thank you": Recommended Modalities for Meaningful Civilian-Military Discourse. *Journal of Veterans Studies. 4*(2), 1-33.

Merriam-Webster (2022) Definition: Hero. Retrieved from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hero.

MilitaryBenefits. (2021). Post 9/11 GI Bill Overview. Retrieved from https://militarybenefits.info/post-911-gi-bill-overview/

Miller, A. L., Williams, L. M., & Silberstein, S. M. (2019). Found my place: The importance of faculty relationships for seniors' sense of belonging. Higher Education Research and Development, 38(3), 594–608

Mobley, C., Brawner, C.E., Lord, S.M., Main, J.B., & Camacho, M.M., (2019). Digging deeper: qualitative research methods for eliciting narratives and counter-narratives from student veterans. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education,* 32:10, 1210-1228.

Moghul, A. (2021). Student veterans. In J.A., Vaughn & A. J. Viera. (Eds.), *Principles and Practice of College Health*. p.149-159. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56309-7_11

Moore, B. A. (2011). Understanding and working within the military culture. In B. A. Moore & W. E. Penk (Eds.), *Treating PTSD in military personnel: A clinical handbook* (pp. 9–22). The Guilford Press.

Morris, P., Albanesi, H.P., & Cassidy, S., (2019). Student-veterans' perceptions of barriers, support, and environment at a high-density veteran enrollment campus. Journal of Veterans Studies, 4(2), 180– 202. doi: http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.V4i2.102

My Chapter Room. (2023). The history of women in college. Retrieved from https://mychapterroom.com/blog/history-women-college/

Naphan, D. & Elliot, M. (2015). Role Exit from the Military: Student Veterans' Perceptions of Transitioning from the U.S. Military to Higher Education. *The Qualitative Report, 20*(2). 36-48. http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss2/4

National University. (2023). Women in higher education. Retrieved from https://www.nu.edu/blog/women-in-higher-education/

National Women's History Project. (2017). Retrieved from http://www.nwhp.org/

Olsen ME. Process of social organization, 1968

Peréz, P.A., & Ceja, M. (2010). Building a Latina/o student transfer culture: Best practices and outcomes in transfer to universities. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 9*(1), 6-21.

Persky, K.R. & Oliver, D.E. (2010). Veterans Coming Home to the Community College: Linking Research to Practice. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice. 35*(1-2), 111-120. DOI: http://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2011.525184

Phillippi, J., & Lauderdale, J. (2018). A guide to field notes for qualitative research: Context and conversation. *Qualitative health research*, *28*(3), 381-388.

Phillips, G. A., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2017). Introducing veteran critical theory. International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 30(7), 656–668. doi: 10.1080/09518398.2017.1309586

Pittman, J. O., Goldsmith, A. A., Lemmer, J. A., Kilmer, M. T., & Baker, D. G. (2012). Post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and health-related quality of life in OEF/OIF veterans. *Quality of Life Research*, *21*, 99-103.

Prividera, L. C., & Howard III, J. W. (2006). Masculinity, whiteness, and the warrior hero: Perpetuating the strategic rhetoric of US nationalism and the marginalization of women. *Women and Language*, *29*(2), 29.

Race: Power of an Illusion (2019). Retrieved from www.racepowerofanillusion.org. 2019.

Redmond, S. A., Wilcox, S. L., Campbell, S., Kim, A., Finney, K., Barr, K., & Hassan, A. M. (2015). A brief introduction to the military workplace culture. *Journal of Prevention, Assessment & Rehabilitation*J, *50*(1), 9–20.

Riggs, S.A., Carver, K., Romero, D., Morissette, S.B., Wilson, J., Campbell, R., & McGuffin, J. (2019) Attachment, Communication, and Relationship Functioning Among College Student Veterans and Nonveterans. *Journal of College Counseling*. P.110-124. DOI: http://10.1002/jocc.12124

Romero, D. H., Riggs, S. A., & Ruggero, C. (2015). Coping, family social support, and psychological symptoms among student veterans. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *62*(2), 242.

Rosenberg, M., & Phillipps, D. (2015). All combat roles now open to women, Defense Secretary says. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/04/us/politics/combat-military-women-ash-carter.html

Rumann, C., Rivera, M., & Hernandez, I. (2011). Student veterans and community colleges. New Directions for Community Colleges, 2011(155), 51–58. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.457

Rumann, C. B., & Hamrick, F. A. (2010). Student veterans in transition: Reenrolling after war zone deployments. The Journal of Higher Education, 81(4), 431–458. doi:10.1353/jhe.0.0103

Saldaña, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. (3rd. ed.) SAGE Publications.

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

Seidman, I. (2013). Interviewing as qualitative research (4th ed.). Columbia University.

Sherman, N. (2015). Afterwar: Healing the moral wounds of our soldiers (1st ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press

Soeters J.L., Winslow D.J., & Weibull, A. (2006). Military culture. Handbook of the Sociology of the Military: Springer, 237-254.

Strong, J. D., Crowe, B. M., & Lawson, S. (2018). Female veterans: Navigating two identities. *Clinical Social Work Journal, 46*(2), 92–99. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-017-0636-3

Today's Military, (2021). Ways to Serve. Service Branches. Retrieved from https://www.todaysmilitary.com/ways-to-serve/service-branches

United States Department of Defense. (2022). Department of Defense releases annual demographic report - upward trend in number of women service continues. *U.S. Department of Defense News Release.* Retrieved from https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3246268/department-of-defense-releases-annual-demographics-report-upward-trend-in-numbe/

United States Department of Veterans Affairs. (2023). Forever GI Bill - Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act. Retrieved from https://www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/FGIBSummaries.asp

United States Department of Veterans Affairs. (2015). 2015 veteran economic opportunity report. In https://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/docs/VeteranEconomicOpportunityReport2015.PDF

United States Department of Veterans Affairs (2013). Education and Training: History and timeline. Retrieved from https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/history.asp

University at Buffalo. (2023). Step 5: attend welcome weekend. Retrieved from https://www.buffalo.edu/studentlife/new-to-ub/first-year-and-transfer-students/welcome-weekend.html

Vaccaro, A. (2015). "It's not one size fits all": Diversity among student veterans. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *52*(4), 347-358.

Vergun, D. (2023). Military celebrates women's history month. *Department of Defense News.* Retrieved from

https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3326203/military-celebrates-womens-history-month/

Wallace, J. (2021). History of the GI Bill. *Military benefits.info.* Retrieved from https://militarybenefits.info/history-of-the-gi-bill/

Weatherton, M., & Schussler, E. E. (2021). Success for all? A call to re-examine how student success is defined in higher education. *CBE-Life Sciences Education, 20*(1), es3.

Wheeler, H. A. (2012). Veterans' transitions to community college: A case study. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *36*(10), 775-792.

Wong, L. (2005). Leave no man behind: recovering America's fallen warriors. *Armed Forces & Society*, *31*(4), 599-622.

Young, L. B. (2017). "Thank a veteran": The elevation and instrumentation of U.S. military veterans. Journal of Veterans Studies, 2(2), 58–75.

Zuckerman, C. H. (2021). Phatic, the: Communication and communion. *The International Encyclopedia of Linguistic Anthropology. New Jersey: Wiley–Blackwell*.

Footnotes

[1]Throughout this document, and in keeping with the VetCrit theoretical approach undergirding this study (Phillips & Lincoln, 2022), I have attempted to make accurate distinctions between sex/gender and female/woman, and to use the word 'cisgender' when I am referring to cisgender women specifically. However, I reference numerous secondary sources that conflate sex with gender and female with woman, as well as many references that discuss women without any discussion of trans* or cisgender identities. When referencing such sources, I do not attempt to correct them since there is no way to ensure accuracy.

Appendix A

IRB Approval

VIRGINIA TECH.

North End Center, Suite 4120 (MC 0497)
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-3732
irb@vt.edu
http://www.research.vt.edu/sirc/hrpp

MEMORANDUM

DATE:	February 14, 2024
TO:	Claire Kathleen Robbins, Ashley Lauren Frost
FROM:	Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)
PROTOCOL TITLE:	Women Student Veterans' Lived Experiences Inside the College Classroom
IRB NUMBER:	**23-1362**

Effective February 14, 2024, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104 (d) category(ies) 2(ii).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit an amendment to the HRPP for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm

(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As:	**Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(ii)**
Protocol Determination Date:	**February 14, 2024**

ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this protocol, if required.

Appendix B

Veteran Services Recruitment Email

TO: [insert student veteran liaison email]
FROM: Ashley Frost
SUBJECT:Response Requested: Dissertation Research Gatekeeper

Dear [insert student veteran liaison name],

My name is Ashley Frost, and I am a doctoral candidate at Virginia Tech in the Higher Education program. I am reaching out to request your assistance as a gatekeeper for my dissertation research.

My research topic focuses on women student veterans' lived experiences inside the college classroom. Specifically, my study seeks to examine how gender and student veteran identity influence women's experiences in the classroom. Currently, there is no research on this topic (and very little research on women student veterans in general), and my hope is that my study will aid in filling the gap in the literature on this often overlooked and underrepresented student population.

I plan to interview registered students who self-identify as both women and veterans. My advisor (Dr. Claire Robbins) and I believe that you would be an excellent gatekeeper for recruiting participants for my study. Knowing that your office has worked with many student veterans over the years, I believe this would be an excellent opportunity for your office to support my study and add to the very limited research surrounding women student veterans and women students alike.

I would appreciate your assistance and support as I identify women student veterans for my study. Can we schedule a time to meet to discuss your involvement in my research? Please let me know when you are available to meet, and we will get it scheduled. I can be reached by email at frost@vt.edu or by phone at (###) ###-####.

If there is someone else in your office or department I should work with for this type of inquiry, I would appreciate an introduction.

Warm regards,

Ashley Frost
Doctoral Candidate - Higher Education Program
Virginia Tech

Appendix C

Participant Recruitment Email

Date:

Subject: Invitation to Discuss Your College Classroom Experiences

Hello,

This is a special opportunity for women student veterans! I am writing today to invite you to participate in my research study about your lived experiences in college classrooms. I am conducting this study as a requirement for a doctoral degree in the Higher Education program at Virginia Tech.

If you are 18 years or older, self identify as a woman, served (or are actively serving) in the U.S. military, attend a higher education institution in Virginia or North Carolina, and are willing to participate, you will be asked to complete a basic questionnaire and join me for an approximately one-hour interview. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and confidential. The interview will be recorded, and once transcribed, will be deleted. The interview will only be used for the purpose of my research for my dissertation. Also, no participant name or information will be shared with any other participants of the study or members of the institution.

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the lived experience of women student veterans' lived experiences inside the college classroom. The information gleaned from this study will add to the very limited literature on women student veterans, assist colleges and universities better understand and assist women student veterans on campus, and help faculty and instructors find ways to improve their classroom environments, syllabi, and curriculum to be more inclusive and accommodating for women student veterans.

If you are interested in participating, please email me at frost@vt.edu or call/text me at 540-239-1266 to let me know of your interest, and/ if you have any questions/concerns. Thank you for your time.

Warm regards,

Ashley Frost
Doctoral Candidate - Higher Education
Virginia Tech

Appendix D

Introductory Email to Gatekeepers

TO: [insert gatekeeper email]
FROM: Ashley Frost
SUBJECT:Response Requested: Dissertation Research Gatekeeper

Dear [insert gatekeeper name],

My name is Ashley Frost, and I am a doctoral candidate at Virginia Tech in the Higher Education program. I am reaching out to request your assistance as a gatekeeper for my dissertation research.

My research topic focuses on women student veterans' lived experiences inside the college classroom. Specifically, my study seeks to examine how gender and student veteran identity influence women's experiences in the classroom. Currently, there is no research on this topic (and very little research on women student veterans in general), and my hope is that my study will aid in filling the gap in the literature on this often overlooked and underrepresented student population.

I would appreciate your assistance as I identify women student veterans for my study. Would you please send the attached information flyer to any student groups on campus? Additionally, if you know any students who may be interested in my research, I request you send the flyer to them.

If you have any questions or want to meet to discuss my research, I can be reached by email at frost@vt.edu or phone at (###) ###-####.

Additionally, if there is anyone else at your institution that I should work with for this type of inquiry, I would appreciate an introduction.

Warm regards,

Ashley Frost
Doctoral Candidate - Higher Education Program
Virginia Tech

Appendix E

Participant Questionnaire

Women Student Veteran Participant Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. All of your information will remain confidential and will only be used for research purposes.

1. Email *

2. First Name

3. Last Name

4. What pseudonym would you like to have used in place of your name and corresponding information throughout this research study?

Education Demographics

5. Name of School/Institution Currently Enrolled

6. State in which school is located

7. Which type of institution do you attend?

Mark only one oval.

- Technical school/Institute
- Two-year community college
- Four-year public university
- Four-year private university

8. Which type of program are you enrolled in?

Mark only one oval.

- Technical/career program
- Associates degree
- Bachelors degree
- Masters degree
- Graduate degree
- Doctoral degree
- Other: _____

9. What is/are your major(s)?

_____

10. Which format of classes do you attend?

Mark only one oval.

- Online only
- In-person
- Combination of online and in-person

11. Are you the first in your family (mother/father/guardian) to attend college?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Veteran Demographics

12. Do you self-identify as a "veteran"?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

13. Which branch(s) of the Armed Forces did you serve/are you currently serving? (Check all that apply)

Check all that apply.

- [ ] Air Force
- [ ] Air Force Reserves
- [ ] Air Force National Guard
- [ ] Army
- [ ] Army Reserves
- [ ] Army National Guard
- [ ] Coast Guard
- [ ] Coast Guard Reserves
- [ ] Marine Corps
- [ ] Marine Corps Reserves
- [ ] Navy
- [ ] Navy Reserves
- [ ] Space Force

14. Please list the dates you served:

15. What was your MOS?

16. Were you deployed to an area of (or ever experience) "hazardous duty"?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- I decline to answer

17. Any additional information about your veteran identity and/or veteran demographics you'd like to share?

Identity Demographics

The following questions pertain to your various identities and personal demographic information.

18. What is your race/ethnicity?

_____

19. What is your current age?

_____

20. What is your sexual orientation (i.e., heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, queer, asexual, etc.)? Please list all that apply.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

21. What is your gender identity (i.e., cisgender woman, transgender woman, non-binary, etc.)?

_____

22. Do you self-identify as being disabled or as having a disability? (This does not need to be officially "documented" or "diagnosed".)

Mark only one oval.

- ( ) Yes
- ( ) No
- ( ) I decline to answer

23. Please select your marital status:

Mark only one oval.

- Single
- Married
- Divorced
- Widowed
- Other: _____

24. Please select your parenting status:

Mark only one oval.

- Do not have children
- Have children
- Have step-children
- Other: _____

25. Tell us about other identities that are important to you (e.g., spouse, care giver, teacher, dancer, etc.):

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for completing this survey. Again, all information will be kept confidential and will only be shared under your pseudonym.

Appendix F

Interview Protocol

Interview

- Thank participant for agreeing to participate in interview.
- Review informed consent. Ask participant if they have any questions regarding informed consent before signing.
- After participant signs informed consent form, begin recording.
- Remind participant of the purpose of the study.
    - The purpose of this study is to fulfill the research requirement for my doctoral degree in Higher Education at Virginia Tech. The study will examine the lived experiences of women student veterans inside the college classroom. Specifically, this study seeks to examine how gender and student veteran identity influence women student veterans' experiences, if at all, in the classroom. The overarching aim of the study is to shed light on and gain understanding on how women student veterans' experiences in their college classes are impacted by their gender and/or veteran identities.
- Ask participant if they have questions before beginning.
- Interview questions:

"Thank you for your interested in this study. I'm curious, what led you to decide to participate?" and then,

"Thank you for sharing that! With that in mind, I'm curious about your background. Can you tell me a little bit about your decision to join (military branch)?"

1. Overall, how would you describe your experience in the military?
    a. What was your MOS?
    b. How, if at all, did being a woman influence your experience in the military?
    c. What precipitated your transition from the military?
2. Why did you choose to attend college?
3. How did you decide to choose [institution]?
4. My next few questions have to do with your interactions on campus as a student veteran. First, I'm curious, when you are on campus or interacting with people at [institution], do you tend to share that you are a veteran?
    a. If yes, how so?
    b. If not, why?
    c. If "it depends on the situation", how so?
5. To what extent do you participate in veteran-related activities, use veteran resources, or engage in the veteran center on campus?
    a. If yes, please elaborate on why.
    b. If not, why?
6. How, if at all, do you think that being a woman influences your experience as a veteran on campus?
7. Now that I understand more about your experience on campus, the next questions focus on your experience in the classroom, the main focus of my study. My first question is, could you describe your comfort level within a typical classroom?
    a. What do you think contributes to those feelings?

8. in classes, to what extent do you tend to inform your professors/instructors of your veteran status?
    a. If yes, how do you inform them?
        i. How would you describe your faculty/instructors' attitudes and behaviors towards your after finding out your veteran identity?
        ii. Do you request any particular accommodations?
            1. Do you feel your professors/instructors are understanding and accommodating to your needs?
        iii. Describe any particular positive experience(s) with a professor/instructor that have stood out to you with regard to your veteran identity.
        iv. Describe any particular negative experience(s) with a professor/instructor that have stood out to you with regard to your veteran identity.
        v. To what extent do you feel supported as a student veteran by your professor/instructors?
9. To what extent do you make your veteran identity known in class to your classmates?
    a. If yes, please explain why.
        i. How would you describe your fellow students' attitudes and behaviors towards you once they became aware of your veteran identity?
    b. If not, why?
    c. Describe any particular positive experience(s) with your classmates class that stood out to you with regard to your veteran identity.
    d. Describe any particular negative experience(s) within class that stood out to you with regard to your veteran identity.
    e. How, if at all, has your veteran identity influenced your experience in the classroom?
    f. To what extent do you feel supported as a student veteran in class by your classmates?
10. Overall, how do you feel that your veteran identity has helped or hindered your pursuit of higher education?
11. Overall, how do you feel that being a woman has influenced your experience in the classroom?
12. So far, we've mostly focused on your identity as a woman student veteran. How, if at all, have other identities or parts of your identity influenced your experience in the college classroom?
13. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your identities and experiences in higher education so far?
14. Is there anything else you would like to share in this interview regarding anything we've discussed today?

- Thank the participant for participating in the interview and stop the recording.

Appendix G

What if I say 'Yes' to participating in the study?

Welcome!

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study. Below you will find detailed information about the study.

Purpose of the study:

The purpose of this study is to fulfill the research requirement for my doctoral degree in Higher Education at Virginia Tech. The study will examine the lived experiences of women student veterans inside the college classroom. Specifically, this study seeks to examine how gender and student veteran identity influence women student veterans' experiences, if at all, in the classroom. The overarching aim of the study is to shed light on and gain understanding on how women student veterans' experiences in their college classes are impacted by their gender and/or veteran identities.

Potential benefits of the study:

Potential benefits of the study include adding to the body of literature on women as student veterans, women as nontraditional students, and women students' lived experiences in higher education classrooms. Other possible benefits include how higher education administrators, faculty, and policy makers, as well as veterans administration policy makers can use the information gleaned from the study to improve on-campus resources for women student veterans, improve veteran-sensitive training for faculty and instructors to create a more inclusive classroom environment, and to create and/or improve accommodations for women student veterans as they relate to the classroom and coursework.

Potential benefits for you as the participant:

There are no benefits to you from taking part in this research. I cannot promise any benefits to others from your taking part in this research.

Potential risks for you as the participant:

The potential risks of participating in this study may include emotional discomfort from triggering topics and questions during the interview process. You may choose to answer or not answer any question during the interview. You may choose to take a break or end the interview at any time.

How will my identity be protected?

On the Women Student Veterans' Participant Questionnaire, you will have the opportunity to select your own pseudonym. This pseudonym will be your only identifying marker within the study. Your real name will not appear anywhere in the study. Demographic information that you share in the Participant Questionnaire may be shared in the study in aggregate form (for example, "Five participants identified as first-generation college students"). When necessary, limited demographic information might also be shared with your pseudonym to provide context

for data from your interview (for example, "*Pseudonym*, a community college student, described a positive interaction with a professor in a composition class"). The recorded interview will be password protected and will be deleted after three years following the completion of the study. Physical notes will be kept under lock and key in my office and your participant questionnaire will be kept in a password protected document. Your name and any other identifying information will not be shared with any participant or affiliate of the study (including my Ph.D. dissertation committee members).

How do I participate?

If you would like to participate, please complete the Women Student Veterans' Participant Questionnaire at https://forms.gle/9qVc7SbsSyt8G3AV7. Once I receive the completed form, I will email you and let you know if you have been selected to participate in the study. If you are selected to participate, I will email you a participant consent form to review and sign. The two of us will also work together to schedule a time and place to meet for an hour-long interview. Prior to the interview, I will email you a copy of the interview protocol for you to review. Several days prior to the interview, I will follow up with you to confirm the interview time and place, and to answer any questions or concerns you have about the interview.

During the interview, I (the researcher) will video record the interview and will also take notes. The interview will take approximately one hour to complete. Following the interview, the interview will be transcribed and you will be sent a copy for review. After reviewing the transcripts, you will have the opportunity to add and/or remove any comments for the final transcripts.

Additional information

If you have any additional questions or concerns regarding the study or participation in the study, please contact me by email at frost@vt.edu or phone (###) ###-####.

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Warm regards,

Ashley Frost
Ph.D. Candidate - Higher Education
Virginia Tech

Appendix H

Participant Recruitment Flyer

Attention *women* veterans!

Volunteers needed for a study of
women student veterans' experiences
inside the college classroom.

What is the study about?

The study seeks to examine the lived experiences of women student veterans inside the college classroom. Specifically, this study seeks to examine how gender and veteran identity influence women's experiences in the classroom.

Why Participate?

- You may help to improve the classroom experience for future women, women veterans, and all veteran students.
- You may contribute valuable information that may be of useful to the researcher.
- You may help contribute to the limited body of research on women student veterans and women students.

Who can Participate?

- Must be currently enrolled as a part-time or full-time student
- Must self-identify as a woman
- Must self-identify as a veteran of the U.S. Armed Forces

Want to Participate?

Scan the QR code and complete the Women Student Veterans' Participant Questionnaire

Link to form: https://forms.gle/SCzVVT36K6LYwrA47

Or contact Ashley Frost at frost@vt.edu

Appendix I

Participant Confirmation Email

TO: [insert student name]
FROM: Ashley Frost
SUBJECT: Thank you

Dear [insert name],

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study on women student veterans and for completing the Women Student Veterans Questionnaire. You have been selected to move forward in participating in the study. To do so, please review, sign, and email me the attached Participant Consent Form by [insert date]. Once you have had an opportunity to review the document, please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

The next step is to schedule a one-on-one interview with me to discuss your experiences in your college classrooms (attached is a copy of the interview protocol for your review). The interview will last approximately one hour (60 minutes) and can take place either in person or via Zoom, whichever is more convenient for you. The interview will be recorded. Is there a day and time in the next week or so that works best for you? Would you like to meet in-person or via Zoom?

Thank you again for your interest in participating in this study and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Warm regards,

Ashley Frost
Ph.D. Candidate - Higher Education
Virginia Tech

Appendix J

Email to Students NOT Selected to Participate

TO: [insert student name]
FROM: Ashley Frost
SUBJECT: Thank you for your interest

Dear [insert name],

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study on women student veterans. Unfortunately, after carefully reviewing your questionnaire, your credentials and experience don't quite meet the participant requirements for this study. I encourage you to participate in other research opportunities when they come along, as your experiences are truly valued and appreciated.

Thank you again for your interest in participating in this study and I wish you all the best in your academic endeavors.

Warm regards,

Ashley Frost
Ph.D. Candidate - Higher Education
Virginia Tech

Appendix K

Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Study: IRB # 23 - 1362

Principal Investigator: Dr. Claire Robbins robbinsc@vt.edu

Other Study Contact: Ashley Frost frost@vt.edu

Key Information: The following is a short summary of this study to help you decide whether or not to be a part of this study. More detailed information is listed later on in this form.

Women, especially women veterans, have fought hard to find their place in the American college classroom. Though acknowledged in the scholarly literature in general terms as a part of research on "student veterans" and their experiences in college, there is very little research specifically on women veterans' lived experiences in the college classroom. With more and more women veterans enrolling in college and using GI Bill education benefits each year, it is imperative for the U.S. military and institutions of higher education to understand women veterans' experiences in college in order to better assist them in their pursuit of higher education and ultimately degree completion. The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe how women veterans' experiences in the U.S. military and as women student veterans influence their lived experiences inside college and university classrooms. Findings from this study will help inform the ways higher education is and is not working to create positive learning environments for women veterans inside college classrooms.

What should I know about being in a research study?

- Someone will explain the research study to you
- Whether or not you take part is up to you
- You can choose not to take part
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind
- Your decision will not be held against you
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide

What should I know about <u>this</u> research study?

- The purpose is to gain insight on the lived experiences that women student veterans are having inside the college classroom.
- We expect that your participation in this research study will last roughly one and a half hours. First, you will be asked to complete a participant questionnaire about your personal and military-related demographics. Next, you will meet one-on-one with the researcher for roughly an hour-long interview to discuss your lived experiences in the college classroom and how, if any, your gender and veteran identities may have impacted those experiences. More detailed information about the study procedures can be found under "What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?"

- There is a risk that you might become uncomfortable or triggered as a result of talking about your experiences. More detailed information about the risks of this study can be found under “Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me? (Detailed Risks)”
- There are no benefits to you from taking part in this research. We cannot promise any benefits to others from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits to others include adding to the body of literature on women as student veterans, women as nontraditional students, and women students’ lived experiences in higher education classrooms. Other possible benefits include how higher education administrators, faculty, and policy makers, as well as veterans administration policy makers can use the information gleaned from the study to improve on-campus resources for women student veterans, improve veteran-sensitive training for faculty and instructors to create a more inclusive classroom environment, and to create and/or improve accommodations for women student veterans as they relate to the classroom and coursework.
- Taking part in research is completely up to you. You can decide to participate or not to participate. If you are a student, the decision whether to participate or not participate will have no effect on your grades or relationships with the college or university you are attending.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me? (Detailed Risks)

- There is a chance that participating in this study could result in emotional risks. Topics and/or questions presented during the interview process could trigger flashbacks or feelings of sadness, anxiety, stress, or other emotional or physical discomforts. An interview protocol will be provided prior to the interview to help mitigate these risks.

What happens to information collected for the research?

We will make every effort to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information only to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete confidentiality. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB, Human Research Protection Program, and other authorized representatives of Virginia Tech.

If you or anyone else who participates in this study shares information with the researcher about illegal and/or unethical activity (e.g., fraud, sexual assault or harassment, child or elder abuse or neglect) on the part of another participant, we are ethically and legally obligated to report this information to the appropriate authorities.

The results of this research study may be presented in summary form at conferences, in presentations, reports, and academic papers.

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

- You will be asked to complete a Women Student Veteran Participant Questionnaire that asks for your name, email address, degree and academic program (e.g., undergraduate or master’s student, engineering or sociology), military background information (e.g., enlistment dates, branch of service, exposure status to hazardous duty), limited demographic and social identity information (e.g., race, gender identity), and a pseudonym (false name) for use in publications and presentations. You will be asked to participate in an estimated hour-long, in-person interview. The questions in the interview

will ask about your lived experience as a woman in the military, a woman veteran, a woman in higher education, and how those identities influence your lived experiences inside the college classroom. After your interview, you may be contacted by email to verify information you provided or findings from the research.

What happens if I say yes, but change my mind later?
You can leave the research at any time, for any reason, without penalty.
If you decide to leave the research, please contact the researcher. If you withdraw after participating in the interview, any and all audio recordings and transcripts of the interview will be destroyed.

Can I be removed from the research without my OK?
The person in charge of the research study can remove you from the research study without your approval. Possible reasons for removal include: if you depart the institution by choice or if your program of study is terminated; or if information is shared with the researcher about illegal or unethical behavior on your part.

We will tell you about any new information that might affect your health, welfare, or choice to stay in the research.

Consent to Take Part in a Research Study

Signature Block
Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research study. We will provide you with a signed copy of this form for your records.

_____ _____
Signature of subject Date

_____
Printed name of subject

_____ _____
Signature of person obtaining consent Date

_____
Printed name of person obtaining consent

Appendix L

Student Veteran Resource Sheet
(Information will be tailored to each participant's campus)

National Resources

Mental Health resources for Veterans - https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/

Center for Women Veterans - https://www.va.gov/womenvet/

[Campus-Specific] Resources

Office of Veteran Services
[Campus address]
[Campus phone number]
[Email address]

Women's Center
[Campus address]
[Campus phone number]
[Email address]

Campus Health Center
[Campus address]
[Campus phone number]
[Email address]

Campus Counseling Center
[Campus address]
[Campus phone number]
[Email address]