

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of Education

**TRANSITIONAL EXPERIENCES OF MILITARY SERVICE
MEMBERS/VETERANS WHO BECOME ONLINE STUDENTS**

A Dissertation in

Educational Theory and Policy

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

December 2018

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the transitional experience of student service members/veterans (SSM/Vs) who become students online as they pursue a post-secondary undergraduate education. Up until now, there has been little to no research on the transitional experience of SSM/Vs who choose to study in the *online* environment. In this qualitative, multiple-case study, data were collected from undergraduate SSM/Vs studying online through The Pennsylvania State University—World Campus (or Penn State World Campus) and faculty/staff who support them. With Schlossberg's transition theory as the conceptual framework, evidence suggests that several of the themes across cases are unique to SSM/Vs who study online. First, the circumstances around the SSM/V *moving out* of their military service sheds light on an important phase of their lives that often leads them to consider enrolling online. Secondly, SSM/Vs are continuing to *move in* by trying to understand and negotiate their new role as an online college student and the cultural norms of online higher education. SSM/Vs wrestle with the differences between the military culture with which they were familiar and that of online higher education. While the cultural differences between the military and online higher education present confusion and challenges for the SSM/V, it is ultimately their personal and psychological characteristics and skills cultivated from experiences in the military that help them successfully navigate and *move through* the transition. Recommendations for colleges and universities are provided as well as topics for future research related to SSM/Vs who study online.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Arriving here as I complete my dissertation, I am so grateful for the love, support, and encouragement that so many people gave me during this process. My study would not have been possible without my participants. In particular, my student participants generously volunteered their time to help me, a stranger. Simply put, they shared their lives and their stories with me in hopes that it would help others. I am humbled and honored to know each and every one of them and to be able to say that we are no longer strangers, but colleagues and friends. Their encouragement of me throughout this process inspired me to keep going. I am so proud to know them. My work is dedicated to them.

To my committee members, Dr. Dana Mitra, Dr. Mindy Kornhaber, Dr. Adnan Qayyum and Dr. Larry Boggess, thank you for being on this journey with me. Special thanks to my dissertation chair and adviser throughout my doctoral program, Dr. Dana Mitra.

Like so many adult students, I worked full-time while completing my degree and that would not have been possible without the support, help, and flexibility of my work family at Penn State World Campus and my dear friends, especially Laura, Traci, and John. So many of them read my drafts, comforted me on hard days, pushed me to keep going, brainstormed ideas, and always listened. I am beyond grateful.

Finally, I thank my family, especially my parents, Therese and Larry, along with Cat, Shell, Doug, and Aunt Pug. Thank you for your endless encouragement and love throughout my degree program and the dissertation process. I am me because of you. I love you so very much.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Student service members/veterans (SSM/Vs) often experience difficulty transitioning from their role as service members to students *on campus* as they pursue post-secondary education (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza-Mitchell, 2009; Bauman, 2009; Church, 2009; Diamond, 2012; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2012; Jones, 2013; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). However, there has been little to no research on the transitional experience for SSM/Vs who choose to become students in the *online* environment. The purpose of this study was to investigate the transitional experience of SSM/Vs who become students online. My research question was: What is the transitional experience like for student service members/veterans (SSM/Vs) who become undergraduate students online?

The study focused on the intersection of two student groups: student service members/veterans and online students. The study investigated the experiences of SSM/Vs who became students while pursuing their undergraduate studies online. The focus was on the transitional period that starts at the time they began to consider online education through approximately their first year of study online.

Three core concepts (student service members/veteran, online students, and transition) were essential to the study. Within this study, the term student service members/veterans (SSM/V) was used. Barry, Whiteman, and Wadsworth (2014, p. 31) defined this term as “all former and currently active military personnel who are participating across the spectrum of higher education”. The term is considered the most inclusive of all military service members

whether formerly or presently serving on active duty, Guard or Reserve. SSM/Vs share many similar characteristics with other adult students. Both types of students tend to be older than traditional age students attending college right after high school, are more likely to work full-time, are more likely to have a spouse or dependents, and often attend school at a part-time basis (Walton Radford, Bentz, Dekker, & Paslov, 2016).

Likewise, online students are often a subpopulation of adult students as well (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). For the purpose of this study, online students were defined as those who pursue most or all of their courses in a web-based environment. Additionally, this study focused on the transitional experience of online students in the post-secondary environment at one large, public research institution.

According to Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2006), a transition is “any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 39). A successful transition does not have a specific end point but rather is a process experienced over time as people assess change in their lives and what it means to them (Anderson et al., 2006, p. 59). More specifically, the researchers noted that a successful transition can be examined by the type of transition, the perspective of the individual regarding the transition, the context, and the impact on an individual (Anderson et al., 2006, p. 47).

Definition of Key Terms

Throughout this dissertation, several key terms are used. Understanding these terms and their meaning is critical to understanding this topic. To assist the reader, definitions of these terms are provided below.

- Adult student is defined as those age 25 or older (*Snapshot Report-Adult Learners*, 2012).
- Military student service member/veteran (SSM/V) is defined as any former or currently active United States military personnel who are participating across the spectrum of higher education (Barry et al., 2014).
- Online students are defined as those who pursue most or all of their courses in a web-based environment.
- Transition is defined as “any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2006, p.39).
- Post-9/11 G.I. Bill is “an educational benefit program for individuals who were active duty after September 11, 2011” (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012).

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when evaluating the findings from this study. First, data were only collected from students at one institution—Penn State World Campus. Additionally, the data collection only focused on SSM/V’s transitional experience with Penn State World Campus. While both of these can be seen as a way to limit and focus the study positively, these also serve to limit the breadth of the data collected. Pursuing similar research at other institutions could contribute additional literature to the field, validate the findings in this study, or illuminate other themes.

While the study was limited to one institution, the sample size also was limited. I interviewed eight student participants as the primary source of data, but a larger sample could have provided more evidence for the study and potentially resulted in additional findings. A larger sample size also would have provided a more diverse student participant pool, especially

with regard to age, race, gender, major of study, branch of service, military background (enlisted versus officer and active duty versus veteran), first-generation college students, and first-time online students. I did consider and investigate these variables within my sample. In my analysis, I did not find significant differences based on these variables, but the reasons why were unclear from my study alone. Future research is needed to examine these variables in more detail and for any generalizable findings to emerge.

Another limitation of the study that also influenced the limited diversity and size of my sample was the recruitment method for the study. While hundreds of students at Penn State World Campus met the criteria to participate, it is likely that only some were made aware of the study or others chose not to participate. I relied on colleagues to share information with potential student participants on my behalf. This procedure was followed so as not to take advantage of my access to student information available to me through my full-time job responsibilities at Penn State World Campus in Admission Services and Financial Aid. I also avoided directly accessing student information for my study to avoid any perceived influence that my full-time position might have on students. While I am incredibly grateful for the help of my colleagues in recruiting student participants, this left some variability in the recruitment process about which students and how many were invited to participate. Only those students who volunteered for the study by reaching out to me directly were then able to be screened for participation. It is possible that those who volunteered for the study could have done so because they had a more positive experience in transitioning to Penn State World Campus and wanted to discuss it.

Additionally, I completed student data collection in three phases. While I followed the same interview procedure throughout the study, I did collect fewer data from Phase 1 student participants. I learned so much from the participants I interviewed in Phase 1 and even more

about how I could have done a better job as a novice researcher at that time. Reflecting on it now, I let too much time elapse before securing additional interviews with them. Therefore, I spent less time interviewing this group, which limited the data I collected. I learned from this quickly and took more time to build rapport with my Phase 2 participants. I also secured interviews with them as we finished an interview or shortly thereafter. In an effort to increase the data collected from Phase 1 participants, I circled back to my student participants and tried to collect more data in Phase 3.

Relevance and Importance of the Study

The empirical literature includes information on studies conducted on the barriers, challenges, and support services needed for military students and for higher education professionals who work with students in the face-to-face environment. There have been few to no studies on military students studying online (Brown & Gross, 2011; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; van Asselt, Johnson, Duchac, & Coker, 2009). Even broadening the scope of the literature to include reports and non-empirically based articles yielded little information about the experiences of SSM/Vs who transitioned into online higher education.

This area of research needs further investigation now as the number of online students is expected to grow, the number of military veterans in the United States is also projected to grow, and additionally, military veterans are choosing to study online more often than other students. As the expansion of online programs broadens access to higher education, the number of students choosing to study online is increasing (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut 2016, p. 4). Additionally, military veteran students “participated in online education at a higher rate than their non-military peers” where “some eighteen percent of military undergraduates took all of

their courses online compared to twelve percent of non-military independent students” (Walton Radford et al., 2016, p. 4).

The United States Veterans Administration (VA) reports that of over 4.2 million post-9/11 era veterans, over one million are using educational benefits. The VA estimates that the population of post-9/11 veterans will be just under 5.1 million by 2021 (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2018). This suggests that the number of veterans using educational benefits will also grow.

The transitional experience for new students is an important topic of investigation for both researchers and higher education professionals as previous research has shown that many students leave college because they are unsuccessful in navigating the many transitions in college life (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schlossberg, 1984; Shreiner, 2012). Schreiner (2012) stated that transitions are an important contributing factor for students who want to get the most value from their college education. Schreiner (2012) reflected on findings from Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson (2006) in asserting that the college experience is full of transitions and that “times of transition can be positive experiences that involve movement toward one’s full potential, but they can also be negative experiences that shatter a student’s confidence or lead to disengagement from the environment” (p. 1). Additionally, a successful transition can reduce individual stress and increase the likelihood that students will engage with the school community, both of which are important factors in retention and student success (DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Rumann & Bondi, 2014). Tinto (2006) added that student engagement and interaction with the institution, especially during the first year when many transitions occur, can be critical to longer-term student success (p. 3).

More specifically, several researchers have noted a lack of research on military students. Ackerman et al. (2009) stated that “an urgent need to share best practices, to exchange ideas, and to conduct research that will provide campuses with the information needed to promote the academic achievement of veterans who are students” (p. 13). Ford and Vignare (2014) pointed to a particular lack of research specifically related to military online learners. In addition, McMurray (2007) indicated that “few academic studies deal specifically with the general concepts of distance learning and the military student” and that “the role of scholars in refining distance education for military personnel cannot be overstated” (p. 149).

Research Question

The primary question to be asked and answered in this study was: What is the transitional experience like for student service members/veterans (SSM/Vs) who become undergraduate students online?

Theoretical Framework

Schlossberg’s transition framework (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012) was used as the theoretical basis for this study. Schlossberg’s theory fits this study because it focuses on the unique characteristics of adults and the complexities of the transition process. The theory then combines these two concepts with an understanding that adults continuously experience transitions throughout their lives. This transition theory was also chosen because of its generalizability and applicability to adults across a variety of disciplines from psychology, sociology, human development, social work, and education. Finally, the theory has continued to evolve over the last thirty years, with the original research published in 1981 (Schlossberg, 1981) and the latest in 2012 (Anderson et al., 2012).

Before I explain Schlossberg's transition theory in more detail, it is important to note that other research was explored and considered before a conceptual framework was chosen. In addition to considering Schlossberg (Anderson et al., 2012), Cross' chain of response model (COR) (Cross, 1981), Tinto's theory of student departure (Tinto, 1993), and Bean and Metzner's conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition (Bean and Metzner, 1985) were also considered. While all of these researchers published important work that contributes to the field, only Schlossberg focused on exploring and understanding the experience of adults who are going through a transition.

Cross' important contributions to the field of adult learning are in part due to the creation of her COR framework (1981, p. 234). She explained that the framework considers that an adult's participation in learning "is not a single act, but the result of a chain of responses" (Cross, 1981, p.125). The chain of response model included seven areas of investigation that can frame thinking about an adult as a learner. They are a) self-evaluation, b) attitudes about education, c) importance of goals and expectations, d) life transitions e) opportunities and barriers, f) information and g) participation (Cross, 1981, p. 124). Each variable may play a positive or negative role in the adult's participation, but Cross believed that opportunities and barriers have significant influence (Cross, 1981, p.127).

I agree with Cross' model and that opportunities can have a significantly positive influence and barriers may have a negative influence on a student's journey. I ultimately did not use Cross because of her emphasis on barriers that an adult learner might face. I did not want to begin my study with the assumption that these barriers would negatively influence student service members/veterans who studied online. First, many of these barriers faced by adult students are external and outside of the control of the student or the institution. Many adult

learners simply have to cope with these variables such as work and family obligations. Oftentimes, these commitments are non-negotiable for an adult learner and can be viewed subjectively *either* as an opportunity or a barrier. For example, work may restrict the time that an adult can work on school assignments (barrier), but it also may provide tuition reimbursement (opportunity). While these other commitments may pull them away from school, I wanted to explore how my participants thought about these individually before presuming that they would have a negative influence.

Tinto (1993), Bean and Metzner (1985) focus on student attrition or the departure of students from a college or university. Both theories take into account background variables that students bring to their college experience and the variables that may influence a student's entry. They do not, however, provide a frame to look into what the actual lived experience is like for a student between and among those variables during their transition to student life.

Tinto focused almost exclusively on traditional age, residential students and their departure from these institutions. While he does acknowledge the enrollment growth of older, part-time students, the majority of his published work used datasets that only include traditional, first-time, full-time freshman such as the ACT (American College Testing) data (Tinto, 1993, p.14). Therefore, I decided to chose a framework that was built with adults as the focus.

Tinto's work also focused on the social integration of students into the physical campus community (Tinto, 1993, p.119). I considered this part of his theory as my participants studied at an online "campus" but upon reflecting on my research question, I was reminded that I wanted to know more about what their general transitional experience was like. I chose not to limit the focus of my study to looking at the connectedness that my participants felt to their "campus" but

rather cast a wider net based on my research question and let the data emerge and ultimately guide my conclusions.

Bean and Metzner (1985) build on Tinto's theory but focus less on social integration and more on the external, environmental variables such as finances, employment and family responsibilities that may influence their collegiate experience (Bean and Metzner, 1985, p. 491, 530). Their model is also built around "non-traditional students" or those that do not fit the criteria of being a recent high school graduate enrolled and living on a residential campus. They note the importance of studying the "older, part-time, and commuter students" as more of these students enroll (p. 485) and their work focused on the development of "a conceptual model of the dropout process for the nontraditional undergraduate student" (p. 486). They even specifically highlight the influence of the G.I. Bill that passed in 1944 that influenced military veterans to enroll in unprecedented numbers (p. 486).

Because of these aforementioned factors, Bean and Metzner's conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition seemed to be a promising choice for my conceptual framework. I chose not to apply this conceptual framework for similar reasons previously explained about Tinto's theory of student departure (Tinto, 1993). Bean and Metzner's focus on external variables made sense to me and is evident when I work with students in my full-time job in Admission Services and Financial Aid at Penn State World Campus. Again, though, I went back to my research question. In reflecting on how I wrote it, I realized that I wanted to learn more generally about my participant's experience as they became students in the online post-secondary environment. I assumed that I would hear about how external factors influenced their online student journey, but I felt strongly that focusing on the broader transitional experience would allow those factors and others to organically emerge from the data.

With these broader transitional ideas in mind, it is important to understand the major components of Schlossberg's transition theory. These components were the frame used to make meaning from and understand the transitional experience of SSM/Vs who pursued post-secondary education online. Anderson et al. (2012, p. 39) defined a transition as “any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles.” Further, a transition can be considered “anticipated, unanticipated, or a nonevent” (p. 38). As adults *approach transitions* in their lives, identifying the type, perspective, context, and impact of the transition is important to understanding the experience and how they might manage throughout the process (p. 38).

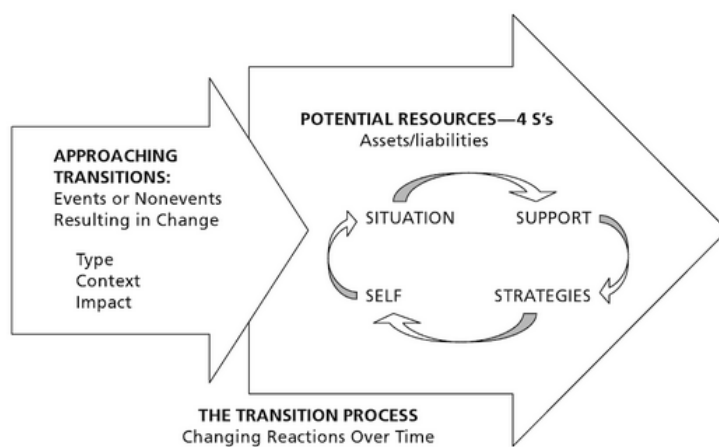


Figure 1-1: The Individual in Transition (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 39)

In looking at how adults approach the transition and move throughout the transitional process, Anderson et al. (2012, p. 61) discussed four factors that can help an adult manage and cope with the change. The 4s model defines the coping resources as *situation*, *self*, *support*, and *strategies*. As adults each have their own strengths and weaknesses, the 4s resources are

considered potential assets or liabilities depending on the availability, use, or presence of each (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 61; Schlossberg, Chickering, & Lynch, 1989, p. 17).

The first resource in the 4s model is the *situation*. This factor is characterized by examining the context surrounding the adult during the transitional process. Situational circumstances such as whether the transition was expected and whether the adult sees the transition as positive, negative, or neutral can influence how the adult copes. Other considerations may include the timing of the transition and what other concurrent stress is occurring (Anderson et al., 2012, pp. 61–62; Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 17).

The second coping resource is *self*. This resource is described through the personal and psychological characteristics of the adult, which may influence how they manage the transition. Factors such as age, outlook on life, and overall health are examples that may prove to be an asset or a liability for the adult (Anderson et al., 2012, pp. 73–74; Schlossberg et al., 1989, pp. 17–18).

The next resource in the 4s model is *support*. The *support* resource can come in many different forms. Resources may include emotional support from family, friends, employers, etc., or lack thereof. The level of financial support an adult has from their own income, an employer, or by other means can also be a factor in coping with a transition. Institutional support may include support from a variety of organizations based on circumstances. These may include assistance or encouragement from a church community, workplace, or a college or university. Even within these organizations support may be in the form of people, programs, or other resources (Anderson et al., 2012, pp. 84–85; Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 18).

The final resource within the 4s model is *strategies*. *Strategies* used to cope with transition can include attempting to change their outlook or perspective on the transition. Some adults may ask for help, seek information, develop new routines, or plan a schedule. Others may use exercise or other stress-relieving activities as a way to manage.

Now that the process of *approaching transitions* and the coping resources (*situation, self, support* and *strategies*) have been established and defined, the overall transition process can be described. The transition process occurs in three phases known as *moving out*, *moving in*, and *moving through* (see Figure 1-2). *Moving out* of one situation, environment, or organization requires adults to disengage from familiar roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions in order for new beginnings to occur (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 57). There may be a period of grief during the *moving out* stage as the adult is leaving the familiar behind to embark on something new and potentially unfamiliar (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 57). The *moving out* stage can also be a “period of disruption” (Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 18) as an adult considers what happens next and attempts to reconcile this change and its impact on other parts of their life.

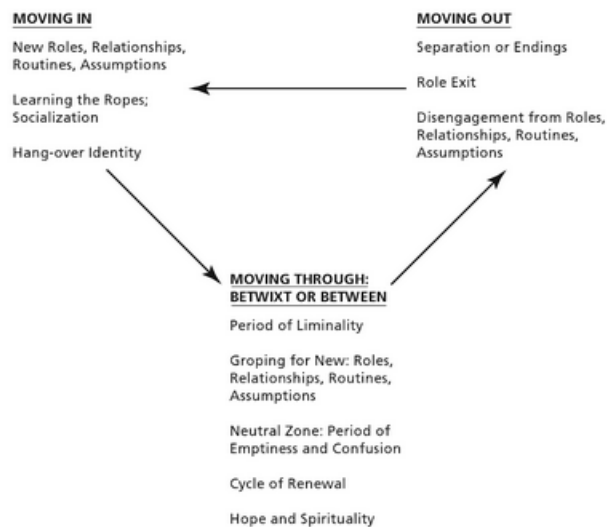


Figure 1-2: Integrative Model of the Transition Process (Anderson, Goodman, et al., 2012, p. 56)

This *moving out* phase leads to the *moving in* phase where new roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions are presented as the adult “learns the ropes” (Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 32) in their new situation. *Moving in* to new circumstances requires the adult to learn the rules, norms, and responsibilities of the new culture (Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 15). At this time, adults are looking for the expectations they need to meet as part of the new system (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 57).

The *moving through* stage occurs as the adult settles in to the new situation, environment, or organization. This stage is marked by the adjustment and negotiation the adult faces in integrating the new context into other established parts of the adult’s life. Learning how to balance and integrate a new set of responsibilities, obligations and routines can be challenging and cause stress for the adult. During this phase the adult may begin to question and re-evaluate their decision to embark on something new and leave the familiar as they continue through this period of adjustment (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 57; Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 16).

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Literature on Student Service Members/Veterans Who Study Online as a Subpopulation of Adult Students

In order to understand my study and why I chose to investigate the specific intersection between military and online students, it is important to consider the larger undergraduate student population in the United States to see where SSM/Vs who study online fit within that group. After unpacking this, my literature review highlights what is currently known from research about SSM/Vs who study *on campus*, as much of the literature is focused around that area despite the growing numbers of military students who study *online*. From there, I discuss the few publications on military students who study online. Finally, I illustrate the gaps in the literature that findings from my study will attempt to fill.

First, consider adult students as a subpopulation within post-secondary education in the United States. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (*Snapshot Report-Adult Learners*, 2012), adults ages 25 and older make up approximately 38% of all post-secondary students in the United States. Besides age, adult learners also may be described based on one or more additional characteristics. They may enroll part-time, work full-time, have spouses or dependents, support themselves financially, or be first-generation college students (Serra Hagedorn, 2015). Adult learners are more likely to have earned some college credits and attend several colleges or universities as they pursue their undergraduate degree (Wood & Moore, 2015). Adults often pursue online courses because of the flexibility doing so provides as these students balance other responsibilities (Stavredes & Herder, 2015).

Because they share many of these characteristics, SSM/Vs and online students are often considered subpopulations of adult students (Quaye & Harper, 2015). For the purposes of this study, however, the focus was on an even more specific, combined subpopulation of SSM/Vs who study online. According to Rumann and Bondi (2014) and van Asselt et al. (2009), military veteran students often balance many responsibilities similar to other adult students and for those reasons, often choose to pursue their post-secondary education in an online environment.

While they may have some characteristics in common with adult students, military veteran students do have some unique characteristics that set them apart from other students, specifically related to their military service. Actively serving military students may be called to a mission at any time with little or no notice, deploy for extended periods of time, be exposed to combat, or move frequently as part of the requirements of their military service. These students may often deploy repeatedly and spend long periods of time away from their families and others in their support system. They may also have limited access to internet service depending on their location.

Even after separating from the military, these unique experiences remain part of their lived experience and are an important part of the veteran's history and identity (Brown & Gross, 2011; Jones, 2013). Additionally, military veterans who have separated from their service may receive funding to help defray the cost of attending college. Deciphering the details of these benefits, however, can be confusing and stressful. Veterans often have to negotiate their changing identities after leaving the military and becoming a civilian and also a student.

Between their unique characteristics and the expectation that this subpopulation will continue to grow, more research is needed on military veterans and their enrollment in higher

education, especially as they continue to pursue education via the online environment. Currently, military veterans make up approximately 5% of the undergraduate student population in the United States, but it is expected that by the year 2020, an additional 5 million service members will transition out of the military and could possibly explore a return to college and increase that percentage (American Council of Education, 2014; Walton Radford et al., 2016). Additionally, military veteran students “participated in online education at a higher rate than their non-military peers” where “some eighteen percent of military undergraduates took all of their courses online compared to twelve percent of non-military independent students” (Walton Radford et al., 2016, p. 4).

Despite the growing numbers of military students who study online, much of the current research on military veteran students is focused on students who study in the *on campus* environment. While not the focus of this study, this research is significant because it demonstrates one aspect of what is presently known from the literature. This element in the literature review also begins to illuminate what is still unknown about military veteran students and how findings from this study will begin to fill those gaps.

Literature on Student Service Members/Veterans Who Study On Campus

SSM/Vs experience difficulty and stress as they transition from being service members to students on campus. Additionally, participants pointed to the difficulty in transitioning from the extremely structured life of the military to the much less controlled environment of higher education where students are expected to arrange their own schedules, manage their time, seek help on their own, and think creatively (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza-Mitchell, 2009). Jones (2013) found that as veterans began to adapt to the higher education culture, they also struggled

with their own evolving self-identity. Not only were veterans becoming students, but in many cases they were also transitioning into becoming civilians.

Another theme that emerged from the literature was the impact of active duty deployments on students' personal and academic lives (Ackerman et al., 2009). Although many of the participants noted that one of the primary reasons they joined the military was to earn educational benefits and pursue their education in the future, they often spoke of how challenging it was to balance both parts of their lives. Participants stated that they often had to withdraw from their studies if they received orders to deploy. Aside from the stress of deployment, students also talked about how they felt stress related to school in particular at that time and that developing coping strategies was an important part of balancing their responsibilities. Designated class times proved to be a challenge while preparing for a deployment or even upon returning to school. For many students, online learning became a more convenient, feasible option for those looking to complete their degree or stay enrolled while serving in the military. Some students noted that they had to suddenly withdraw during the semester, others lost scholarships because they could not remain enrolled on campus, and others indicated that deployments greatly extended the time it would take for them to complete their degree which could impact future career prospects.

In a review of the relevant literature and best practices from leading organizations such as the Student Veterans of America (SVA), Burnett and Segoria (2009) presented practical strategies "related to military students with disability-related functional limitations transitioning to college" (p. 53). Their work highlighted many unique issues vital to understanding the transition of military students in any collegiate setting or delivery format. Their primary focus

was on describing “ways support services practitioners may collaborate with a variety of individuals and groups” to meet the needs of this subpopulation of military students (p. 53) as they transition to becoming students in the face-to-face, on-campus, community college environment. They explained that military veterans with physical or psychological injuries typically do not identify as needing additional support or were not comfortable disclosing either their military status or limitations. This non-disclosure can make the transition into higher education that much more difficult for the military student. Burnett and Segoria (2009) suggested peer-to-peer support to help ease the transition—working with peers is a familiar principle in military culture. It is also recommended that faculty, staff, and administration invite students to provide continuous feedback on campus culture, since a common concern among military students is the potential negative reactions they may encounter from instructors or student support professionals regarding their military service.

While this literature makes significant contributions to the field about military veterans and the struggles they face as they transition into becoming students and engaging in post-secondary education, it also shows a need for a more systematic, theoretical investigation into the topic of military students who transition into higher education. Additionally, there has been little to no research on the specific transitional experience of military veterans who study online. My study not only attempted to examine this through the lens of Schlossberg’s transition theory, but began to fill the gap on a specific subpopulation that needs attention.

Literature on Student Service Members/Veterans Who Study Online

There is some published literature on SSM/Vs who study online, but much of it focuses on individual characteristics that help students succeed and not the transition into the online

environment. Still, findings have emerged that are worth noting. These contributions shed light on what has been published thus far and what areas have yet to be investigated about military students who study online.

One study did offer a literature review on active duty military students studying online for a master's degree in counselor education while serving (Van Asselt et al., 2009). This review contributed to the literature by discussing the unique qualities of military students in that they must complete the same work and requirements as any other student pursuing a degree, but with the additional responsibility of military obligations, frequent moves, deployments, and uncertainty around the timing of all of these variables. They also indicated that online learning is popular for military students because it provides independence regarding time and place and allows students to continue their studies in a more flexible format. They also pointed to the lack of research designed "to address the needs of military learners" and stated that "although online education provides a unique solution for active duty military learners, very little is known about specific needs and strategies that may be helpful." Finally, they recommended additional research on "the intricacies of military student life in order to more fully meet the needs of this unique group of learners" (Van Asselt et al., 2009, p. 43).

Additionally, this literature review focused on best practices such as building learning communities, engaging students in the online environment, and proactively communicating with students through a variety of technologies. While these recommended strategies would be useful for any online learner, the finding was significant because it demonstrated that best practices not designed specifically for military veterans may still be useful to them in the online environment (van Asselt et al., 2009). In another study, Artino (2009) focused on strategies that may help

military students' succeed online. More specifically, Artino examined the “motivational, emotional and behavioral characteristics” (p.147) of military service academy students who succeed in an online course. The researcher identified self-regulation as one of the most important characteristics needed to succeed in online learning.

While there are literatures on both online learning and military students, it is clear from the research noted here that much work still needs to be done about this growing and unique population. This study provided findings needed to fill a specific gap in the literature about SSM/Vs in the online environment and also looked at the important transition that occurs in the first year of study as an online student.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the transitional experience for SSM/Vs who are becoming students in the online environment. The purpose of this chapter is to explain the methodology and research procedure followed in this study. Here, I include information about the decision to engage in qualitative research, the multiple case study design, the data collection procedures, profiles of student, staff, and faculty participants, and the trustworthiness of the study.

Research Design

As I considered the research design for the study, I thought carefully about my reasons for examining the experiences of SSM/Vs becoming students in the online environment at Penn State World Campus and how that lived experience could inform the colleges and universities that support and teach them. Additionally, I wanted to address a gap in the literature. With these purposes in mind, I considered what approach, types of data collection, and analysis techniques would lend themselves best towards these goals.

I also thought about how my work experience and knowledge would influence the philosophical assumptions that I brought to the study and how that might affect my interpretation of the findings. I considered the epistemological approach, in which researchers try to learn as much as they can about their participants (Creswell, 2013, p. 20). I naturally tend to get to know my students and their stories in my full-time work. I realized this as I was planning my study and that I was already assuming this tendency would carry over into my approach with my

participants. This also led me to realize that I would likely be interpreting the information gathered from my participants through my own experience and with a constructivist lens. My goal was to understand my participants' view of the world in which they live and work and how that view was influenced through interactions with others, with institutions with which they were engaged, and with cultural norms (Creswell, 2013, p. 25).

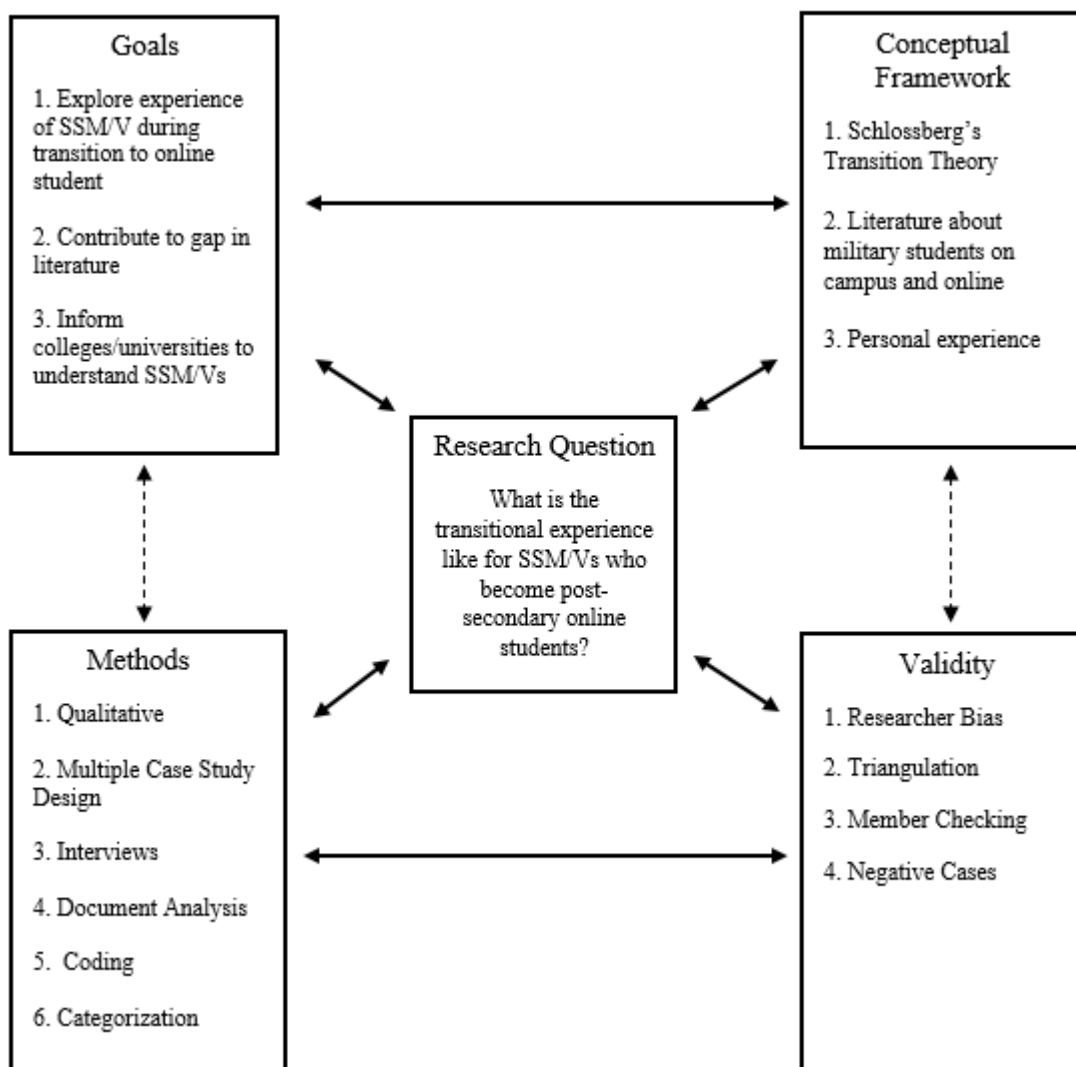


Figure 3-1: Design Map of Transitional Experiences of SSM/Vs Who Become Post-Secondary Online Students--Adapted from Maxwell (2013, p. 5)

Qualitative Research

Considering these assumptions and the interpretive framework of constructivism that I brought as a researcher, I chose a qualitative, multiple case study design. Qualitative research was the best fit for my study as it is focused on “people’s lived experiences” and the “how and why things happen as they do” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 11) Additionally, due to the limited research in this area, the “voices of the participants” (Creswell, 2013, p. 44) would provide the most authentic contribution to the literature.

Multiple-Case Study Design

Case study design was chosen because the research question was an inquiry into a contemporary phenomenon—my participants' enrollment in higher education through an online environment within the real-world context of their lives and experiences (Yin, 2014, p. 16). Another key feature of case study design is that it relies on multiple sources of evidence to support triangulation or corroborate the findings (Miles et al., 2014, p. 299; Yin, 2014, p. 17). Therefore, I chose student interviews as the primary source of data collection, but also interviewed faculty and staff who supported and taught SSM/Vs, and collected relevant documents for analysis (Yin, 2014, p. 17). In addition to triangulation, adding multiple cases to a study adds confidence to the findings (Miles et al., 2014, p. 33). With the unit of analysis being individual SSM/Vs, I chose to include multiple student cases in order to explore individuals who brought slightly different contexts and conditions to the study to see if these experiences provided unique findings within and across cases (Yin, 2014, p. 62).

Case Study Protocol

According to Yin (2014), a case study protocol document “contains the procedures and general rules to be followed” (p. 84) in the research study. The case study protocol for this study is provided in Appendix B. Not only is the case study protocol one way to increase reliability but it also “guides the researcher in carrying out the data collection” and is especially important in a multiple-case study design (p. 84).

Development of Interview Guides

Interview guides for the study can be found in Appendix F. Interview questions were based on previous research focusing especially on Schlossberg’s transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012), my own experience in working with SSM/Vs, and utilizing pilot interviews to rehearse and refine my interview questions. Details about the pilot interviews are provided in the Data Collection section. While establishing the case study protocol is distinctly different than developing the interview guide, the Data Collection Questions (Section C of the Case Study Protocol in Appendix B) were key in helping me develop the interview questions for both the student and faculty/staff participants. This process also helped me to ensure that I was tying my interview questions back to my research question and theoretical framework.

Data Collection

Overview

As is typical with case study research methods (Yin, 2014, p. 17), I collected multiple sources of data: student interviews, faculty/staff interviews, and information from a document analysis from participants affiliated with Penn State World Campus. First, I conducted pilot

interviews to prepare and refine my interview protocol for both the student participants and the faculty/staff participants. From there, I interviewed four faculty/staff participants one time each initially. After reaching saturation in responses from faculty/staff, I conducted eight student interviews.

The data for this study were collected from students, faculty, and staff at Penn State World Campus. Contextual information about the institution is provided here. As the study relates specifically to online students with Penn State World Campus who are affiliated with the military, the institutional profile focuses specifically on the online and military student services provided.

Institutional Profile

“Penn State World Campus is the second largest campus in The Pennsylvania State University system with nearly 20,000 students. Penn State World Campus provides an accessible, quality Penn State education online to address the needs of individuals who seek a higher education beyond the traditional campus experience. Partnering with Penn State's academic units and colleges allows Penn State World Campus to offer more than 150 degree and certificate programs developed and taught by Penn State faculty” (The Pennsylvania State University, n.d., n/p.). Penn State World Campus was founded in 1998 to deliver online courses, degrees, and certificate programs. This continued the University's long-standing tradition of serving students who are not on campus through correspondence-type courses that have evolved over the years.

With regard to military students, “more than 3,400 active duty and veteran students are enrolled in degree and certificate programs through World Campus” (The Pennsylvania State University, 2018, n.p.). Additionally, “Penn State World Campus has dedicated military admissions and academic advising teams and offers financial assistance, including military scholarships and the Military Grant-in-Aid program that reduces tuition for undergraduate service members and their spouses. Faculty and staff can also take a professional development course on how to better familiarize themselves with the circumstances military students face while taking classes” (The Pennsylvania State University, 2018, n.p.).

Pilot Interviews

The first part of the data collection process was pilot interviews. As recommended by Yin (2014, pp. 96–98), Stake (1995, p. 65) and Seidman, (2013, p. 42), pilot interviews were conducted with three individuals (see Table 3-1) to rehearse and then refine the planned interview protocol before recruiting and collecting data from study participants (see Appendix F). The three selected individuals were all United States military veterans who had studied online as part of their educational journey. Each participant was chosen out of convenience and due to their willingness to discuss the topic. One participant was a colleague, one was a student at Penn State World Campus with whom I had previously worked, and one was a Penn State World Campus student with whom I had not previously worked and did not know, but who was recommended to me by a colleague. I emailed the pilot interviewees requesting one 60-minute interview. During the pilot interview, I explained my study and that the goal of our session was to rehearse my interview protocol. I then asked for their thoughts and recommendations on improving the session for future data collection. I did not record these sessions but did take

written notes. I obtained verbal consent from each of the pilot participants and reminded them that they could stop the interview at any time.

Table 3-1
Profiles of Pilot Participants

Name*	# of interviews	Role	US military veteran?	Description
Jake	1	Student	Yes	Jake earned his bachelor's degree online from Penn State World Campus. He is a veteran of the United States Navy. He pursued his degree while still actively serving in the military and continued his studies during two deployments. Jake separated from the military while he was completing his degree. Jake volunteers his time to talk to prospective online military students who are considering Penn State World Campus. His openness to discussing his experience as a military student both while serving on active duty and as he transitioned to becoming a veteran is unique.
Gus	1	Student	Yes	Gus is a currently enrolled online military student at Penn State World Campus. He is nearing graduation and provided insight and reflection from his several years of part-time study at Penn State World Campus.
Ivan	1	Staff	Yes	Ivan does outreach to recruit military students for Penn State World Campus. A retired Navy veteran, Ivan is a former recruiter for the Navy. He also studied online while on active duty at another institution so he is not only able to speak to his experience in working with military students now, but also has the perspective of a former online military student.

Note: *Names listed are pseudonyms.

After conducting the pilot interviews, I refined my interview protocol and formulated the criteria for participation in the study for my student participants. I also chose to interview faculty/staff members from Penn State World Campus who work with military students as

another data source that would help with data triangulation. I also created criteria for participation by faculty and staff participants.

Faculty and Staff Participants

Criteria for Participation

To be eligible to participate in the study, faculty/staff participants needed to meet all of the following criteria:

- Currently work full-time at Penn State in a role that involves students, including those who study online
- Willing to participate for at least one 60-minute interview (in person, phone or through web conferencing) with the possibility of follow-up interviews

Recruitment Strategies, Screening and Selection

Faculty and staff participants were recruited from existing networks and relationships made possible through my full-time position with Penn State World Campus. I selected four colleagues who ranged in age, background, and experience working with online and military students. I chose two people who were military veterans and two who were not veterans. I emailed them the criteria for participation in my study along with a brief summary of what the study was about.

Interview Procedure

Since I was able to contact colleagues directly and already had a relationship with them, I interviewed the faculty and staff participants first. Once they agreed to participate, I set up a

mutually convenient time to meet. I emailed them the consent form before our meeting so they had time to review it and ask any questions about it. As most of my colleagues and I were in the same location, these interviews mostly took place in person or over the phone. During our meeting, I briefly summarized my study again, discussed any questions about the consent form, collected the signed form and confirmed that I had their permission to record the interview for later transcription and analysis. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately sixty minutes. The interview protocol can be seen in Appendix F. I took written field notes during the interview detailing questions or clarifications to discuss with the participant as part of the member-checking process. I found saturation after one round of interviews with these individuals. I also knew that I could interview them later in the data collection process and consult them for member-checking of what was found in the student interviews. As I was nearing the end of data collection, I also went back to my faculty/staff participants to gather feedback from them on the findings from the student interviews.

Faculty/Staff Profiles

Donna. Donna is a full-time faculty member. She not only teaches but also serves on the leadership team for her academic programs. She is a long-time advocate of adult, online and military learners. Donna holds a master's degree.

John. John retired from the Navy. In his current role he advises military online students about their courses and how best to make progress towards earning their degree. He also refers students to other support services such as disability services that they may not be aware of as an online student. He also teaches on a part-time basis. John was also an adult student who studied online while serving in the military. John holds a doctorate in business administration.

Melissa. Melissa works with online military students regarding their financial aid, military educational benefits, tuition, and fees. This area can be particularly stressful and confusing for online military students. Her children served in the military and she obtained her bachelor's and master's degrees as a working adult.

Rita. Rita works extensively with student veterans across the Penn State University system. A veteran and licensed social worker with a master's degree, she is able to share a unique combination of experience and perspective on military veterans and their transitional experience. Rita's husband is also a veteran.

Student Participants

Criteria for Participation in the Study

To be eligible to participate in the study, student participants needed to meet all of the following criteria:

- United States military student service member/veteran (SSM/V)
- Currently enrolled part-time (or are about to start) in an associate's or bachelor's degree program online through Penn State World Campus
- Willing to participate for at least one 60-minute interview (in person, on the phone or through web conferencing) with the possibility of follow-up interviews
- Able to reflect on and discuss what their transitional experience was like when they first became online students at Penn State World Campus

Recruitment Strategies, Screening and Selection

Student participants were recruited through my existing networks and relationships at Penn State World Campus. At the suggestion of an IRB (Institutional Review Board) analyst, I did not contact students directly so as not to take advantage of the access and position made possible due to my full-time position at Penn State World Campus. Instead, I asked colleagues who worked with SSM/Vs to forward an email to them from me, explaining my study and participant criteria (see Appendix C). Students who received this email and were interested in volunteering for the study were asked to reach out to me directly.

Once a student contacted me, I asked my pre-screening questions (see Appendix E) based on the previously discussed selection criteria. While I did pre-screen more than a dozen candidates, my ultimate case selection was based on those who met the pre-screening criteria and those who were willing to move forward with participating in the interview process. That being said, I did attempt to recruit and include a diverse group of participants, but also focused on trying to obtain participants from each military branch or service—both enlisted personnel and officers, and diverse according to age, gender, years of service in the military and previous college experience. The interview protocol is provided in Appendix F.

Interview Procedure

Interviews with student participants happened in three phases. This process was followed because initially I interviewed four participants and after the first round of interviews with them, I felt that I needed to add more cases to achieve saturation. This phased approach allowed me to work with participants over a longer period and analyze the interview data over time.

Additionally, while I did replicate the interview process by utilizing the same interview protocol guide with all student participants, I improved my pre-screening process to build more rapport with my Phase 2 participants. This helped them to trust me and resulted in richer, more in-depth responses from the student participants along with securing more interview sessions to dive even deeper with them over time.

Phase 1 Student Participants

When an SSM/V indicated their interest in volunteering for the study, I asked them several questions via email to pre-screen them (see Appendix E) and evaluate whether they met the criteria for participation in the study. Once I confirmed that they met the criteria, I emailed them the consent form to read and sign before we spoke during the interview. In some cases, we discussed via email the consent form and procedures for the study before the first interview if they had questions. From there, interviews were arranged individually between me and the participants at a date and time that was mutually convenient. In Phase 1, participants were interviewed once, with interviews lasting approximately sixty minutes. In this phase, interviews took place using a web-based software named Zoom (see Table 3-2). With the permission of the participants, the interviews were recorded digitally for later transcription, review, and analysis. I took field notes during the interview and jotted down notes and questions for both myself and to ask of the participant as part of the member-checking process. At the conclusion of the interview, audio files were saved under the assigned alias to protect the privacy of the participants. The audio files were uploaded to a secure online data storage system that was password-protected and only available to me.

Table 3-2

Phase 1 Student Participants

Name*	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4	Doc Analysis
Kurt	(Zoom)	(In-person)	No	No	Facebook post
Dale	(Zoom)	No	No	No	No
Mitchell	(Zoom)	No	No	No	No
Jeremy	(Zoom)	(Zoom)	No	No	2 assignments

Note: *Names listed are pseudonyms.

Phase 2 Student Participants

After completing one interview with each of my Phase 1 participants, I realized that I needed more data to achieve saturation. I embarked on a second phase of student participant recruiting. The Phase 1 process was replicated, where I asked my colleagues who worked with military online students to forward an email from me explaining my study and participant criteria. Students who were interested in volunteering for the study were asked to reach out to me directly.

Once a student contacted me, I asked my pre-screening questions (see Appendix E) based on the previously discussed selection criteria for Phase 1. Once I confirmed that they had met the criteria, I emailed them the consent form to review. However, differently from Phase 1, I set up a thirty-minute, introductory phone meeting to provide the participant with some more background information about me and the study, and to answer any questions about the consent form and study procedures. In addition, I asked the participant to tell me about themselves, their

background, and their interest in participating in the study. At this introductory meeting, we also discussed possible times to conduct the more formal interview.

I found that this introductory meeting with my Phase 2 participants built more rapport than when I discussed the consent form and went straight into the interview questions as in Phase 1. From here, the data collection procedures were replicated from Phase 1 where interviews were arranged individually between me and the participants at a date and time that was mutually convenient. Interviews typically lasted around sixty minutes. Most interviews took place using a web-based software called Zoom but exceptions are noted below (see Table 3-3). Questions were asked using the same interview guide as in Phase 1 (see Appendix F). With the permission of the participants, the interviews were recorded digitally for later transcription, review, and analysis. I took field notes during the interview, jotting down information and questions for both myself and to ask of the participant as part of the member-checking process.

As in Phase 1, audio files were saved under aliases to protect the privacy of the participants and then uploaded to a secure online data storage system that was password-protected and only available to me. Audio files were transcribed by a paid transcription service. While I waited for files to be transcribed, I listened to the audio files of the interviews, took notes, and wrote memos about them afterwards. A sample memo is provided in Appendix H. Once the transcription file was completed and returned to me, I validated them for accuracy and read them, taking notes and continuing to write memos as I reviewed each file.

Differently than in Phase 1, after reviewing the interview data from Phase 2 participants, I reviewed and prepared questions to be used in subsequent interviews and crafted clarifying questions specific to that participant. Then I scheduled and conducted the next interview with the

participant. This cycle continued throughout Phase 2 as each participant was interviewed two, three, or four times.

Table 3-3

Phase 2 Student Participants

Name*	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4	Doc Analysis
Kristen	(Zoom)	(Zoom)	(Zoom)	(Zoom)	1 assignment
Hayes	(Zoom)	(Zoom)	(Zoom)	No	emails
Rory	(Zoom)	(Zoom)	No	No	No
Marty	(Zoom)	(Zoom)	(Zoom)	(Zoom)	emails

Note: *Names listed are pseudonyms.

Phase 3 Student Participants

In Phase 3, I went back to my Phase 1 participants and tried to interview them again. I interviewed two of the four (Kurt and Jeremy) Phase 1 participants for a second time. In the other two cases (Dale and Mitchell), these participants were unresponsive to requests for additional interviews.

Document Analysis

During the interview process, student participants were asked if they would be willing to share any documents that might illustrate or capture what their transition was like as they became an online student at Penn State World Campus. A wide range of items were collected including a public review of Penn State World Campus that was posted on Facebook, assignments, and emails. While not all participants submitted documents, those that were submitted did provide some additional insight into the participants and their experiences.

Student Participant Profiles

Dale. Dale served in the Air Force during the Gulf War era during the late 1980s and early 1990s and was deployed to the Middle East during Operation Desert Storm. He worked in the hotel industry for years after his service and cared for his mother while taking classes at a community college before being laid off. He enrolled at Penn State World Campus after being approved to use VEAP (Veterans' Educational Assistance Program) for retraining. He is currently studying for a bachelor's degree in human development and family studies. He is currently working as a physical therapy assistant, inspired by those who cared for his mother.

Hayes. The only participant still serving on active duty, Hayes has been a Navy Seal for more than 22 years. He enlisted out of high school. He recently was stationed in Bahrain and has deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan on at least three occasions. He has two sons, ages 7 and 9, who reside in California. Hayes is pursuing his bachelor's degree in international politics using tuition assistance from the military, along with Military Grant in Aid from Penn State World Campus. He will retire from the military in 2019.

Jeremy. Jeremy served as an Army Medic and was deployed to Iraq three times. His total time in Iraq was 42 months. A first-generation college student, he enrolled at Penn State World Campus as part of his first experience attending a college or university as he was familiar with Penn State growing up in Pennsylvania and now residing in the Commonwealth after his military service. After serving for 15 years, Jeremy struggled with his transition out of the military and back into civilian life and found it difficult to find work, especially as he struggled with PTSD. He has three children. His daughter recently started college online, too. He is currently working

full-time as a delivery driver and attending school full-time. He is pursuing a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and plans to work with juveniles in the justice system within his community.

Kristen. Kristen retired from the Navy after serving more than 29 years as an aviation maintenance officer and finished out her career as the commanding officer for all of the technical training related to naval aviation. She earned a bachelor's degree from the Naval Academy and a master's degree from the Naval Postgraduate School earlier in her career. She was assigned to three different squadrons over her career but could not be aboard an aircraft carrier (even as an officer) as a woman until 1996. After her retirement from the Navy, Kristen decided to use her post-9/11 G.I. Bill to pursue a bachelor's degree in finance for her own personal growth and learning. She lives in Washington State and is married to a Penn State alumni who is a retired Navy pilot.

Kurt. Kurt served 8.5 years in the Navy as a Reactor Operator and currently works extremely long hours servicing solar panels in California. He was stationed near Pearl Harbor in the early 2000s. A first-generation college student, he is the son of a Swiss father and a Filipino mother who immigrated to the United States. Unsure of whether college was worth the value or investment, he joined the military to earn his post-9/11 G.I. Bill and learn skills that could be used in the workforce after the military. He did not have a good experience with Penn State World Campus. He felt misinformed about the number of transfer credits he would get from his military experience, which left him frustrated and upset. He attended Penn State World Campus for one semester, pursuing a specific bachelor's degree program that was of interest to him in energy and sustainability policy studies. He is not currently enrolled at Penn State World

Campus but is considering attending another institution that will accept a significant amount of his military experience towards his degree requirements.

Marty. Marty enlisted in the Army after being academically dismissed from a university where he played collegiate football. He became an elite Green Beret and served seven combat tours to the Middle East in addition to numerous missions in other extremely dangerous locations around the world. At one point during his career, he was recruited to join the officer ranks and eventually rose to Lieutenant Colonel working at the Pentagon. He was medically retired after more than 30 years of service after being misdiagnosed and incorrectly treated for several years. This subsequently created other health problems. He was eventually diagnosed with several conditions including a traumatic brain injury (TBI). He enrolled in a bachelor's degree program studying law and society but withdrew mid-semester in spring 2018 due to life-threatening complications from a medical procedure. The procedure was intended to improve his day-to-day life and mitigate some effects of the TBI and other conditions. He continues to recover at home in Missouri. He is married and has four adult children.

Mitchell. Mitchell enlisted in and served in the Navy for more than 20 years. He is currently working as a federal law enforcement officer in the Washington, D.C area. While he doesn't need his degree at this point in his career, he feels that pursuing a college education is important to him personally as a first-time college student and a first-generation student so as not to waste his post-9/11 G.I. Bill. He wants to lead by example for his two children. He is pursuing his associate's degree in letters, arts and sciences first before moving into his bachelor's degree. He is not currently enrolled at Penn State World Campus.

Rory. Influenced by the attacks on the United States on 9/11/01 when he was in fifth grade, Rory knew at a young age that he wanted to serve his country in the Marine Corps. He enlisted early while still in high school and worked intelligence attached to an infantry unit. He deployed to Afghanistan at 19 years old and subsequently served in South Korea and Japan. Returning stateside, he was about to take on a new role as a drill instructor when he was unexpectedly medically retired from service in 2016. Attempting to find work during this difficult time in a completely new field, he was hired as an analyst at a financial institution. He enrolled in college courses in the traditional face-to-face environment before enrolling online at Penn State World Campus to pursue a bachelor's degree in finance. Rory is married and lives in California with his wife.

Table 3-4
Profile Summary of Student Participants

Student	Age	Gender	Branch	Years of service	Years since separation	Enlisted or Officer	Job in Military
1. Dale	55	Male	Air Force	7	26	Enlisted	Mortuary
2. Hayes	42	Male	Navy	22+	Active duty	Enlisted	Navy Seal
3. Jeremy	37	Male	Army	15	5	Enlisted	Medic
4. Kristen	54	Female	Navy	29+	3, retired	Officer	Aviation Maintenance Officer
5. Kurt	30	Male	Navy	8.5	4	Enlisted	Nuclear Reactor Operator
6. Marty	56	Male	Army	30+	5, medically retired	Officer	Green Beret
7. Mitchell	54	Male	Navy	22	13, medically retired	Enlisted	Weapons Control & Electronics
8. Rory	27	Male	Marine Corps	7	2, medically retired	Enlisted	Intelligence Specialist

Note: *Names listed are pseudonyms

Data Analysis

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the analytic procedures in this study. Miles, Huberman, et al. (2014, p. 70) recommended engaging in data analysis concurrently with data collection, cycling back and forth between thinking about the existing data and how to collect new data and sometimes better data. Since my data collection occurred in phases, data analysis happened continuously throughout the study in an ongoing, iterative process (see Figure 3-5). In this section, I explain how I cycled through analyses of the faculty/staff interviews first, the Phase 1 student interviews, and the Phase 2 student interviews, and then engaged in document analysis—this process was followed several times.



Figure 3-5 Data Analysis Spiral—Adapted from Creswell (2013, p. 183)

Faculty/Staff Interviews

As mentioned previously, I conducted four faculty/staff interviews first—these data were processed and analyzed first. During each interview, I took field notes, writing down questions for clarification and to consider after the completion of the interview. Immediately following each interview, I reviewed these notes and wrote about my initial impressions, reactions, things that surprised me and items for possible follow-up, as well as developing clarification questions.

From there, I sent the audio file to be transcribed by a paid professional transcription service through a secure website, using an alias for the file names of each participant. While I waited for the interviews to be transcribed, I listened to the audio recording, reviewing and adding to my field notes and memos. When the transcription was complete, I listened again to each audio recording while reading the transcript to ensure accuracy.

To begin my first round of coding, I imported the interview transcripts into NVivo software. I also input codes that I had already established. These codes originated from Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012), my theoretical framework, knowledge from my past experience and the literature related to the study (see Appendix G). I defined how the codes would be used (see examples in Appendix G). Based on Miles, Huberman, et al. (2014, pp. 74–75) and Saldana (2016, pp. 102, 124, 131), first-round initial coding began using the codes I had established at that point and focused on applying these codes to keywords and phrases in the data. During this first round of coding, other codes emerged as I re-read the data. As a code emerged, I wrote an operational definition for it before I applied it to the interview data. I repeated the coding process of using predetermined and emergent codes and applying them to each faculty/staff interview. I also incorporated simultaneous coding meaning that one

phrase in the data might have two or more codes applied to the same section (Saldana, 2016, p. 83). I repeated this first round coding process using the predetermined and emergent codes and applied them to each faculty/staff interview. I coded one interview in its entirety before moving on to the next interview.

After I completed the first cycle of coding on all of the faculty/staff interviews, I reviewed that codes. I wrote memos about how it might make sense to condense and combine some of the first cycle codes into categories. I wrote about why I thought codes that had been separate previously might make more sense as a grouping. I also investigated codes and the corresponding data to flesh out a more general code such as *support* or *strategies* into something more focused. For example, upon reviewing the data coded under as *support*, I analyzed the data and realized that I could be even more specific by detailing the *types of support* such as family, peer, institutional support, etc. as seen in examples listed in Appendix G.

After reviewing the words and phrases used in first cycle coding, I applied pattern-coding techniques (Miles et al., 2014, p. 86; Saldana, 2016, p. 236) and documented emerging categories in my second cycle of coding. From there, I began to establish themes as documented in Appendix G. I applied a technique discussed by Saldana (2016). “Themeing may allow you to draw out a code’s truncated essence by elaborating on its meaning” (p. 231) by forming statements using the codes such as “Types of support mean...” or “Strategies help students to...” I completed this process multiple times cycling back and forth between the data, the codes, and memos.

Additionally, I also periodically wrote narrative descriptions for each student participant (Miles et al., 2014, p.91). This allowed me to focus on the data from each individual case and try

to summarize what emerged from them. Conducting this exercise over time allowed me to see the evolution of each case as I became more familiar with the data. This technique complimented the other analyses that were focused on themes across individual cases.

Student Interviews

In both Phase 1 and 2 of conducting student interviews, I replicated the same analytic procedure as used with the faculty/staff interviews. I took field notes during the interview, jotting down information and questions for both myself and to ask each participant. Audio files were transcribed by a paid transcription service. While I waited for files to be transcribed, I listened to the audio files of the interviews, took notes and wrote memos about them afterwards. A sample memo can be viewed in Appendix H. Once the transcription file was completed and returned to me, I validated them for accuracy and read them, taking notes and writing memos as I reviewed each. The same process documented above for the faculty/staff interviews was used with student interviews using NVivo software to code the transcribed interviews.

Document Analysis

I collected several interesting documents from student participants as mentioned previously in the data collection section. My method for analyzing them was the same as used for the interview data. First, I used first cycle coding methods focusing on words and phrases, and then wrote memos after coding each. From there, I reviewed the first cycle codes and then reviewed them again using pattern-coding with the emerging categories and themes.

Ethical Issues

Gaining the trust of participants is important to rapport-building and ensuring that volunteer subjects feel they can share their authentic, personal experiences. Part of gaining trust is discussing the precautions that will be taken as part of the study to protect their personal information. In addition to my study being approved by the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A), this section offers details on the measures taken to address possible ethical concerns that could arise in this research.

First, once a participant contacted me and expressed an interest in participating in the study, I emailed them the consent form (see Appendix D) that detailed the purpose of the study, what each participant was agreeing to if they decided to participate, compensation for their time, and how their confidentiality would be protected. I noted that I would assign an alias or pseudonym to each participant so that their real names would not be used on any documents related to the study such as file names, transcripts of interviews, or research reports. I explained that each participants' name would only be known to me and that information containing their name or other personally identifiable information would either be locked in my private office or secured behind a password-protected electronic filing and data storage system accessible and known only to me. I also made sure to point out that in addition to my contact information, the consent form contained both my advisor's contact information along with that of the Institutional Review Board in case they had concerns or questions that they did not want to discuss with me. I reviewed these items during the pre-screening process via email or phone depending on the participant and/or during the first interview. I emphasized that they were participating on a voluntary basis and could refuse to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering

or stop participating in the study at any time. I asked each participant what questions the consent form or the study brought up so that we could discuss them together.

To be as transparent as possible, I did disclose to my participants that I worked full-time in the admissions and financial aid office at Penn State World Campus in addition to my student/researcher role. While I assured them that there would be no negative consequences based on what they disclosed in the interview, I chose to work with student participants who had already been admitted to Penn State World Campus and were already enrolled. I felt that this would mitigate any concern they would have about me working at Penn State World Campus if they were already beyond the admissions stage of the enrollment process. Additionally, I emphasized that I wanted to learn about them personally and their transitional experience of being an online student whether that experience was positive or negative.

Quality of the Study

Four considerations are commonly considered in establishing the quality of a study. Three tactics applied to this study: construct validity, external validity, and reliability (Yin, 2014, p. 45). In this section, I describe how each of these areas were addressed in my study.

Construct validity. First, construct validity refers to the best practice that concepts be defined in advance (Yin, 2014, pp. 45–47). This is an especially important tactic in assuaging the possibility of a researcher subjectively interpreting findings, especially in order to confirm their own beliefs. Methods that support construct validity such as using multiple data sources, documenting a chain of evidence and having drafts reviewed by key informants were applied in this study (Yin, 2014, p. 47).

As detailed in previous sections, multiple data sources were included in this study. Student interviews were the primary method of data collection while faculty/staff interviews were also conducted. Documents were also collected from student participants for later analysis. Collecting data from several different source allows the researcher to see different perspectives and types of data but more importantly seeks “converging lines of inquiry” (Yin, 2014, p. 120) or triangulation. This means that studies may be deemed of higher quality when data from multiple, different sources meet to support the findings. As documented in my findings in later sections, this occurred often in my study.

In addition to multiple sources of evidence, I also created a chain of evidence to support construct validity. This chain is created so that it is possible “to follow the derivation of any evidence from initial research questions to ultimate case study conclusions” (Yin, 2014, p. 127). In my study, I specified details (such as authors and page numbers) taken from previous literature and also documented quotations from data collected from student and faculty/staff participants so that if a reader or others accessed my electronic case study database files, the path to this information could be traced.

The final measure relating to construct validity was having drafts reviewed by key informants. Several key informants reviewed drafts of my writing at various stages of the process. I received substantive feedback from three people. One informant was a military veteran who recently earned his doctorate in education and currently works in an academic setting. The second informant was a colleague familiar with military students, online learning, and the academic writing process, but is a civilian. She also earned her doctorate within the last several

years. My third informant is a current graduate student seeking a master's degree who is a recently separated military veteran.

Member-checking. In addition to having drafts reviewed by key informants outside of the study, member-checking procedures were employed throughout data collection and data analysis to include feedback from the participants. During interviews, I often checked with my participants to make sure I was hearing, understanding, and interpreting their words correctly. I asked participants to confirm or clarify words, phrases, or my interpretation of something they said. I also used member-checking during data analysis. I shared different stages of my findings with several of my participants. Some provided feedback over the phone and some took the time to send extended, written comments back to me.

External validity. External validity, or generalizability to other studies, can be difficult to reconcile in a case study—it is not typically a method for showing generalizable findings (Yin, 2014, p. 48). However, in this multiple case study design, the multiple participants may provide some external validity between cases. This improves the likelihood that findings may emerge among other similar participants outside of the current study.

Reliability. A critical component of trustworthiness is whether the same procedures documented in the current study may be replicated by another researcher in a future study. I constructed a case study protocol (see Appendix B) to document procedures for replication. Additionally, a case study database that included field notes, audio recordings of interviews, transcripts of interviews, document analysis, and other resources was organized so that theoretically the database could be interpreted by an outside reader (Yin, 2014, p. 238).

Role of the Researcher and Researcher Bias

Several areas of my personal positionality and the potential bias it may present should be discussed. My entire career has been spent in the field of education. I have worked with students across the lifespan from pre-school through adulthood and I enjoy helping connect people to learning.

I am a civilian and never served in the United States military, but many of my family members, including my father, and several friends did, with many of them serving during the post-9/11 era. These relationships have been an influential part of my journey towards conducting this study. I remained mindful of the potential bias that this might bring throughout this process. Also, I have worked in higher education since 2007. Since the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill became law in 2008 and was implemented in 2009, I have had direct oversight and responsibility for recruiting and enrolling SSM/Vs at two different institutions of higher learning. One is Penn State World Campus, my current employer, and also the site where my student participants are enrolled and my faculty/staff participants work. Working with an IRB analyst, I carefully navigated this process and these relationships so as not to take advantage of the access and positionality of my full-time job and the possible influence it could imply with participants.

Conversations with my military friends and SSM/Vs as part of my professional responsibilities have occurred over many years. I considered the impact that a college-level education had on their lives. Education was a motivator, a next step, a challenge, and a bridge to life after the military. I heard some of the same themes over and over. I realized that my work and my research could be a way for me to empirically investigate whether other students had

similar stories, address a gap in the literature, and help colleges and universities to understand this group of students and hopefully better serve them.

I realize that my relationships with members of the military community could bias this study. I was intentionally mindful of that as I wrote, interviewed, and analyzed my data. I pursued this research with an open mind and found many results that surprised me. As I said earlier, I am not a veteran. In addition, as a female interviewing mostly male participants affiliated with the military, I was concerned that these factors might pose a challenge in building rapport with participants. It is widely known that veterans tend to connect with other veterans and are more likely to trust another veteran, especially when speaking about their military experience. I was transparent about being a civilian with my participants and let them know that while I respect their experiences, I know that I cannot fully understand exactly where they have been or what they have experienced. I disclosed some of my personal background and professional experience so my participants knew that I worked with military students and therefore have some understanding of military culture. I shared with them that I was doing this research to accurately share their experience in hopes of improving the online student experience for SSM/Vs, but that I could only achieve that with their help.

While I have experience with student veterans, I was careful not to make assumptions about my participants that may be based on those past experiences. I took measures to check my emerging ideas, themes, and findings with others in order to challenge any bias of which I might not be aware. I also applied two different methods of validation to help avoid bias, including pilot testing and frequent and ongoing member-checking, as discussed previously.

In summary, the purpose of this chapter was to explain the methodology and research procedures followed in this study. I discussed my reasons for selecting qualitative research and the multiple case study design. I then discussed the data collection procedures, the role I played as a researcher, the bias I brought to the research, and the trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter 4

Results and Findings

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the themes that emerged from the participant data that answer the research question, “What is the transitional experience like for student service members/veterans (SSM/Vs) who become undergraduate students online?” and tie them directly back to my theoretical framework: Schlossberg’s transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012). Each theme is positioned within the integrative model of the transition process (whether at the *moving in*, *moving out*, or *moving through* phase).

My findings suggest that several of the themes across cases are unique to SSM/Vs who study online. To understand what the unique transitional experience is like, it is important to first consider some background, including what their experience in the military was like and, most notably, what the circumstances were around their *moving out* or exiting military service. From there, the foundation and context are laid for understanding how they began to *move in* to becoming a student online at Penn State World Campus. At this part of the process, SSM/Vs are continuing to *move in* by trying to understand and negotiate their new role as an online college student and the cultural norms of online higher education. SSM/Vs are wrestling with the differences between the military culture with which they were familiar and the drastically different culture of online higher education. While the cultural differences between the military and online higher education present confusion and challenges for the SSM/V, it is ultimately their personal and psychological characteristics and skills cultivated from experiences in the military that help them successfully navigate the transition and *move through*. For most

participants in this study, the process continues as the SSM/Vs assimilate into becoming an online student as a routine part of their life. For two participants, after “moving through” and assimilating, one chose not to return and another had to withdraw mid-semester from his studies due to health issues, with plans to return.

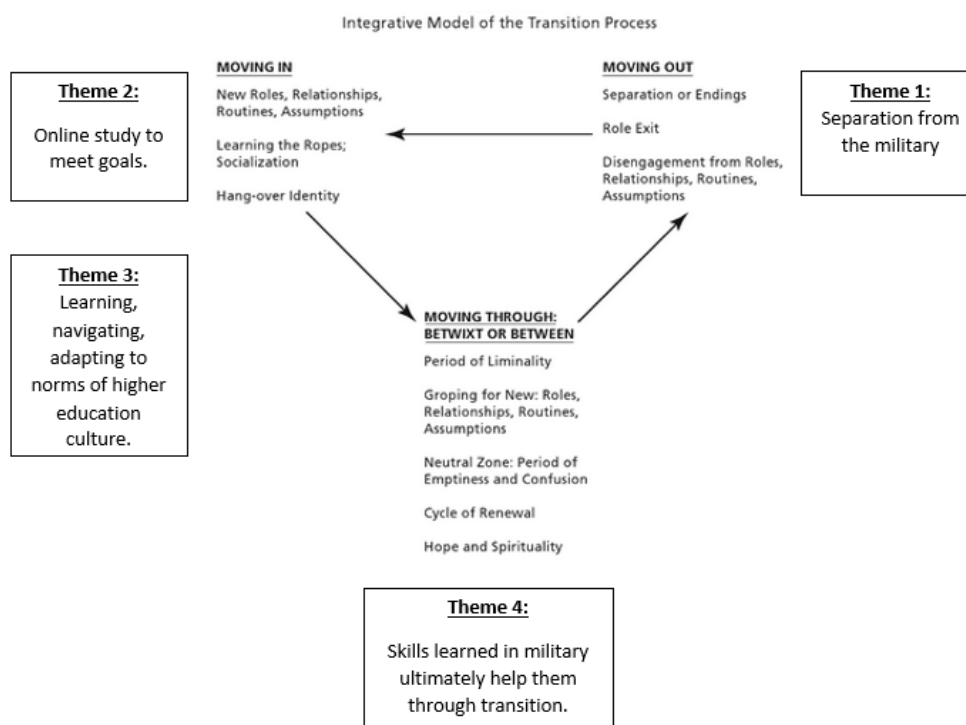


Figure 4-1: Study Findings Connected with Theoretical Framework. –Adapted from Anderson et al. (2012, p. 56)

Theme 1:

Separation from the military represents the end of one role and the beginning of another.

(Moving Out)

This first theme highlights the *moving out* phase from Schlossberg’s transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 57). Based on the data from this study, the transitional experience

begins as an SSM/V *approaches the transition* and then *moves out* of the military. For all of the SSM/Vs in this study, regardless of when they separated from the military, the end of their time in the military was significant and influenced their consideration of attending Penn State World Campus.

Often the end of one series of transitions leads to questions about what comes next in life (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 57). This first theme relates directly to this notion as it illustrates that the ending of one chapter (*moving out* of their military career) means the beginning of another (*moving in* to what happens next, including becoming an online student). For most of my cases in this study, the separation out of the military, regardless of multiple variables including gender, age, rank, military branch, years of service and even the number of years since they separated from the military, was an important “turning point” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 30) in their lives. Before I could understand the circumstances around their exit, or separation, I needed to understand what their military experience had been like for each SSM/V. After gaining some understanding of their military experience, I was then able to better understand what their exit, or separation, was like for them.

I found that this transition from the military led many of the participants to consider enrolling at Penn State World Campus after their military service. *Moving out* of the military and exiting that role allowed each participant to begin to think about what was to come next in their lives. This *moving in* and considering enrollment at Penn State World Campus happened during and after the *moving out* of their official military roles or in one case (Hayes, who is still on active duty), anticipating an upcoming retirement.

As Anderson et al. (2012, pp. 38–47) stated, the type, context and impact of the transition influence how an individual reacts to and processes a transition. In Marty's case, after serving for more than 25 years, he knew he would retire from the military. He had served all over the world during his career in the Army, including seven combat deployments as a Green Beret. He was proud of his service and the work he had been able to do as part of the ongoing efforts across the Middle East. Around this time, Marty began to experience health problems. After going through several misdiagnoses and treatments that led to other health issues, he was medically retired. By then he had served more than 30 years in the Army and many of his health problems had finally been correctly diagnosed and he was on appropriate treatment plans. The day of his separation there were several administrative tasks to complete. After signing several forms, he was told he could leave and simply pointed in the direction of the door. Marty said that this situation "felt like a divorce". He stated that he had put everything into his career, had loved the Army, and then after one final signature the relationship was over. He felt dismissed and unimportant and that he had been simply been discarded after his long career of service since he was no longer of use. The incident triggered feelings of anger and confusion and made his transition out of the military very difficult. For quite some time, Marty found it hard to move on. At this time he considered going back to school and started researching Penn State World Campus.

Rory is another example of the importance of a transition from the military influencing his journey. After serving in Afghanistan, Japan and South Korea as an intelligence specialist, Rory arrived back in the United States. He was considering whether he should re-enlist or leave the military. At this time, he was invited to take on a new role as a drill instructor, should he decide to stay in the Marine Corps. Excited about the opportunity, he proceeded with a routine physical as was necessary for the rigorous physical and mental demands of his new role. It was at

this time that several previously unreported medical issues came up and it was decided that not only could he not accept the drill instructor position, but he actually had to be medically retired from service. Although the change was unanticipated, Rory reflected on this past experience positively:

So it was all pretty quick and shocking. But I am a firm believer that everything happens for a reason and I mean it's worked out great for me. You know, I questioned it when I was only going to school and I had all this free time. I really missed the Marine Corps. I missed doing productive things. But now that I am where I am in my career and in my education, this is probably working out way better than if I had decided to get out on my own.

Kurt also wanted to leave the Navy. He felt it was time to move on to the next chapter in his life. He had met his goal when he entered the service: to gain access to the post-9/11 G.I. Bill and acquire skills that could help him get a good job in the civilian workforce. Despite feeling positively about his separation, it was difficult for him as he had spent more than eight years with the Navy. While his separation was expected and in his control, his feelings afterward were not what he expected.

Yeah, it took me a while to consolidate what happened when I got out of the military. When I first got out, I thought when I got my papers and everything, I was done. It was going to feel like a weight coming off me. It actually took me a while to kind of fight with that...separating from the culture and structure and now you're going to something totally different.

Similarly, Jeremy also had felt ready to leave the military after 15 years as an Army Medic serving three tours in Iraq for a total of 42 months in country. While he was excited for the transition, it turned out differently than he had expected:

It was rough. I got out of my own recognizance, but it was just really a whole new lifestyle. Like everything, from the military side to the civilian side, totally different. At the same time I had some PTSD stuff kicking in that I didn't realize that I actually had when I was in. So it was a rough start, but after three tours and being away all the time, I felt that I had enough time in...so it was just what was I going to do with myself and that kind of stuff...I'm still in counseling actually. And I was really coming back and searching for jobs and when I got out it was kind of rough. The whole PTSD issue was really getting a lot of bad press here in the States so a lot of the people didn't want to employ veterans because of that. So it took me a while when I came back to find a decent job. I mean I didn't know what I wanted—I always knew in the long run was school, but at that time I was just trying to set up a job and be stable. I actually had to take three years off before I started school to deal with all of it.

Theme 2:

SSM/Vs pursue their degrees online because it is the most convenient way for them to achieve their goal.

(Moving In)

The second theme relates to the *moving in* part of the transitional experience, according to Schlossberg's theory (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 56). SSM/Vs suggest that they pursue undergraduate degrees online because it is the most convenient way for them to earn their degree

while balancing the other responsibilities in their lives. This finding is also supported by the existing literature (Rumann & Bondi, 2014; Stavredes & Herder, 2015; van Asselt et al, 2009). Studying online posed fewer barriers for SSM/Vs compared to a face-to-face collegiate environment, and therefore made their transition to higher education slightly smoother.

SSM/Vs detailed several reasons why attending college online was the most convenient option in earning their degree, including taking care of children and family members, work responsibilities, quality of the institution, and their comfort level with being in a classroom. For Dale, attending college online was critical as he was caring for his mother while working full-time. He had previously taken college courses on campus at another institution but considered the time away from his mother along with the added cost of commuting when he chose to finish his degree online. Similarly, Jeremy also chose to study online while raising his children and working a new job. Jeremy felt that studying online was his only viable option. He did not see any other possible way to attend college while balancing these other responsibilities. He knew that attending classes at designated times on campus would be difficult to manage. Likewise, Hayes, still on active duty and stationed abroad, had limited options for pursuing his degree given his location. It also was important for him to attend a rigorous, high-quality institution that also offered online degrees. Given these factors and the specialized military support services, he chose Penn State World Campus.

Marty considered attending college in the face-to-face classroom setting. While he wanted to have the campus-based student experience, he ultimately decided against it and chose to study online. He explained that his job as an Army Green Beret with over thirty years of military experience had required that he be vigilant at all times and constantly assess his

surroundings for potential enemy threats. When he separated from the military, he had a difficult time letting his guard down in everyday circumstances back at home. He worried that a classroom setting might trigger some anxiety and cause him to lose control of his surroundings. He worried about how he might be perceived by his classmates and instructors. He explained:

I kept going I can't do this because I can't settle down. I can't be comfortable in the classroom. I would be seen as different. I wouldn't be accepted. I wouldn't be able to control outcomes. Then the online version was kind of this hey, well I can still have this mission. I can still be in control. I certainly can be comfortable in my own little office setting and I won't worry about people or exits.

Theme 3:

Becoming a successful online student for SSM/Vs requires learning, navigating and adapting to the norms of higher education culture as it is different than military culture.

(Moving In)

One recurring theme especially as SSM/Vs are *moving in* (and continues as they are *moving through*) and getting started as new online students is trying to make sense of a new culture. Data from both student participants and faculty/staff participants suggest differences in military culture and online higher education culture. These differences pose challenges for the new SSM/Vs as they transition to online higher education. Military culture is highly regimented, with orders issued from the top down. Conversely, online higher education requires individual students to create their own schedules and time. Self-direction and management are essential for students in this bottom-up structure. Military culture is structured and team-oriented and clearly

defined, whereas online higher education requires individual responsibility. The military chain of command clearly defines roles whereas online higher education may not.

Mitchell, age 54, was a first-time, first-generation college student. He described differences between military culture and online higher education:

For the most part every waking moment you're on a tight schedule. Probably a significant portion of the day, the schedule is being dictated to you by somebody else, whether it's operational or from a command structure and here you are now, you're in charge of your own destiny, and if you don't get the schedule right you're the one that's going to pay the price for that.

Rita, a staff member who works with military students and is also an Army veteran, noted:

Their entire lives are altered. They're getting culture shock from going from military to civilian and so just taking that in, on top of making this major transition from being told what to do and having this very regimented lifestyle to now moving toward education where it's all left in the air.

A universal language does not exist in higher education. While some administrative terms (such as add/drop period, withdraw, enroll, register, audit, branded names of systems such as Canvas) and academic terms (such as degree plans or audits, major requirements, electives, general education courses) may be similar between institutions, each college or university has their own distinct offices, roles, staff, systems, vernacular, etc. Thus, SSM/Vs may not know the roles of faculty/staff, or the protocols for when to ask questions or of whom to ask questions at an institution. SSM/Vs may be expecting this information to be given to them during an

introduction, orientation, or “briefing” as they are accustomed to in the military versus seeking them out. Navigating administrative language (titles of offices such as Bursar and Registrar), processes (how to register, add, or drop classes) and procedures (when is it time to register, how to contact their online academic adviser, etc.) is something veterans do not always account for or expect, and without assistance, this lack of insight and information can add significant time, delays, and stress that can interfere with and affect academic course work.

Additional variables such as being a first-time college student, a first-time online student, or a first-generation student can further compound misunderstanding and frustration. Like Mitchell, Kurt (age 30) and Jeremy (age 37) also were first-time, first-generation college students. They described what they knew about online higher education and how that had affected their transition to Penn State World Campus. Citing his confusion when starting as an online student, Kurt said:

I don't think the confusion is something that you can really account for because it's the same confusion I would have had if I had gone to college at 18, I guess. I just recently figured out that people don't go to college classes at the same time every day, it's not even a five day a week thing. I had no idea. I thought you signed up for classes, go five days a week just like high school.

Similarly, Jeremy shared:

I honestly didn't know what to expect in any way. I didn't know anybody that's ever done online. There is a big difference between taking military courses and college

courses. So it was just everything—the terms and everything were totally different to me so it was stressful at first, it really was.

Mitchell also added:

Also, it wasn't until I actually started getting serious about getting my degree that I realized you have to have 60 semester hours for an associate's and 120 give or take for your bachelor's, but core requirements? And what are free electives? That wasn't clear to me until I actually started doing some research on it so if you're right out of active duty into the academic environment, somebody is telling you need to get these classes done but maybe they don't have the full picture in place...so it's a new language.

Donna, a faculty member, noted this with her students. She said, "Well, I think one of the things that we make assumptions about is that everybody knows the language of the university. We just assume students know all of these things. Audit or transcript or transfer credits...what does that really mean?" She discussed how in addition to explaining frequently used terms in online higher education, she taught her students ways to advocate for themselves within the university system. She explained:

One of the things I learned is that students who were successful knew how to navigate the system. They knew they had a right to ask questions, they have a right to challenge, to have the best academic advising, they have a right to say to the faculty member "I don't understand this assignment, could you please clarify?" But the student who feels that I am just so lucky to be here, doesn't do that.

Even those SSM/Vs who had previously taken college courses experienced confusion, including Rory (age 27), who had already earned approximately 60 semester credits at another institution when he enrolled at Penn State World Campus. He explained:

I get the emails but I honestly don't have much of a good understanding. I did do the pre-enrollment stuff and they tell you what everything is but I still don't have much of an actual idea on what the right resources are...it's confusing too, so to have an admissions counselor and a coach, which one does what? What's the difference? Who can I contact if I have a sudden question or something like that? Who's going to be more responsive or have the immediate answers?

Kristen came to Penn State World Campus as a retired, highly ranked officer in the Navy who had already earned a bachelor's degree and master's degree and was earning a second bachelor's degree in an unrelated field to what she had done in the Navy. She said:

I haven't had to apply to college in 30-something years...since 1981! Then I thought, you know, what if I'm not the kind of student they're looking for? I didn't want to be overconfident because I didn't know what I didn't know even though I had my degree.

Theme 4:

While the cultural differences between the military and online higher education make the initial transition challenging for SSM/Vs, evidence suggests that it is ultimately the skills learned in the military culture that help these students be successful in online higher education.

(Moving Through)

As SSM/Vs *move through* the transitional process and become online students, they “learn the ropes” (Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 32) and understand what is expected of them more than they did when they began the transition. Evidence from this study suggests that using skills learned in the military is key to helping the SSM/V work through this transition. While the differences in culture between the military and higher education initially make the transition difficult, SSM/Vs apply skills developed during their military careers to their life as an online student as part of their transitional process. These strategies not only help SSM/Vs through the transition process, but ultimately contribute to their success as online students.

Data from student interviews illuminated several skills and characteristics applied by SSM/Vs from their military experience to online higher education, such as discipline, focus, time management, planning, self-confidence, and ability to adapt. Interview data from faculty/staff participants also indicated that that these skills and qualities tend to help SSM/Vs transition into roles as online higher education students. Additionally, some SSM/Vs reflected on the life experience and maturity they developed in the military and how that also aided them as online students. For example, Jeremy, a first-generation, first-time college student, said:

I mean just the discipline to know what I have to do and keep track of that...I think just being an adult learner makes a difference, too, because you're more focused and you're not worried about going out and partying like your average college kid... We're just really goal oriented. We're going to get whatever we need done. We're going to make it happen. That's just the way we're trained.

Similarly, Rory explained:

With time management, I was terrible at it before the military...so, I think that's probably the biggest thing that I directly apply from the military to going to school and I guess the self-confidence that the military gave me. I always had okay grades but never the grades I've had in college classes and that's definitely due to time management and then just the pride and the confidence I have in myself now.

Mitchell described trying to work through his courses without a plan or structure at the beginning of the semester. He recognized that he needed to modify his process to complete his work and manage school with the rest of his life. He said:

I would go two days without logging in and then the third day I log in and I'm cramming three hours of work into it so I realized, okay, I need to set a schedule for 6:30 when I get home or if I'm at the office, log in from there. As I progressed through there I found out that I was actually getting a little bit ahead of some of the discussion groups...and that it's up to the student to determine how much time they're going to dedicate to it and make it a fixed schedule.

John, a staff participant who is a military academic adviser, instructor, and Navy veteran, noted that "if they bring the same structure from the military to their coursework, they tend to do a lot better". He explained that during advising sessions he often educated his students on applying specific strategies from the military to their courses:

You remember when you went to your tech school? They gave you a binder and you started putting it together, right? It was all categorized and you knew what was going to be discussed the next day, you knew you had everything in a calendar right up

front, right? Well, so when you get to the online courses because it can be sort of self-managing, the first thing you want to do is print out the syllabus. Then go back and there's a calendar in the syllabus, click and paste the calendar in its own document and put that right up in front and put boxes in front of every deliverable you've got to do, everything that you've got to turn in, all the way from the first day to the last day, everything. Put it right up in front. Do that for each class just like you would your tech school.

Rita noted that she also discussed relating concepts from the military to online student life:

We talk a lot about time management. When you're in the military everything was very much structured. You've got chow at this time you and you do PT (physical training) at this time so establishing that kind of day now. It's important I think regardless if they're going to school or if they're just getting out, I think you have to establish a new routine.

In addition to these skills, Rory and Jeremy talked about the life experiences gained while serving in the military and the ways in which those perspectives influenced them as they became online students. Each discussed their method for applying these experiences in their classes and assignments. Drawing on his seven years in the Marine Corps as an intelligence specialist, Rory said, "I think for me as a veteran I am able to have a lot more life experience to talk about in these discussions where we talk about hypotheticals in the business world or in life." Similarly, Jeremy reflected on his fifteen years as an Army medic serving three tours in Iraq. He explained,

“I spent nine years as a leader in the military. It really taught me how to look at different perspectives, different ways of doing things.”

In summary, this chapter discussed the themes that emerged from the participant data that answer the research question, “What is the transitional experience like for student service members/veterans (SSM/Vs) who become undergraduate students online?” and tied them directly back to my theoretical framework: Schlossberg’s transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012). Each theme was positioned within the integrative model of the transition process (whether at the *moving in*, *moving out*, or *moving through* phase).

Chapter 5

Recommendations, Future Research and Summary

As I draw to a close, I reflect back on the purpose of my study and my research question, “What is the transitional experience like for student service members/veterans (SSM/Vs) who become undergraduate students online? In addition to contributing to the literature on SSM/Vs who study online, my research will help colleges and universities and their student services professionals to understand SSM/Vs who study online and what their transitional experience is like as they begin their journey with institutions of higher learning. Gaining some additional insight into this group of students will help colleges and universities to better serve them. With these comments in mind, my recommendations for colleges and universities are offered below.

Recommendations for Colleges and Universities

In the same way colleges and universities support any other unique student population, consider specialized military student support services staff. Penn State World Campus is comprised of an extensive military team that includes military-specific staff members in each office who work with students in Admission Services, Financial Aid, Bursar, Registration, and Academic Advising. While this may be unrealistic for many institutions with smaller enrollments, budgets, and staff members, it can be done. Consider the military veterans who work at your institution as one place to start. At many institutions, simply identifying military veterans on staff might need to come first. Even then, some people may not want to disclose that information to their employer, which is their choice and right. However, those who do indicate their veteran status could serve as an initial point person for military veterans when they interact with a particular office.

If additional job responsibilities in this capacity cannot be managed, a volunteer mentor program might be another option. Military veterans who serve as volunteer mentors regardless of the office in which they work may be a good connection for military students, especially in their first semester and year of enrollment. Simply introducing themselves to these new students via a phone call or email and letting them know they are a military veteran also can be reassuring.

Consider formally welcoming new military veteran online students to the college or university community. This may be done via a mailed letter or other communication from the President or other leadership, congratulating them on their acceptance, welcoming them to the institution, thanking them for their service, and pointing them to staff and faculty contacts should they need help. Remember that for many veterans, leaving the familiarity of the military community when they separate and become civilians can be challenging. As being part of a community and a group is familiar to military veterans, letting them know that an institution values them as a student and wants them to be a member of the community is important and noteworthy, especially when it comes from top-level leadership.

Define the higher education vernacular early and often. Colleges and universities often make assumptions or forget that for many new students, including adult and online students, the higher education vocabulary is a new language for them and their families. Administrative and academic language can be confusing for prospective and current students alike. This is especially important during stressful times for students such as add/drop periods, medical or military withdrawals, reenrollment after a period of being out of school, registration, and graduation. Consider writing role statements and definitions (i.e., “The Bursar's Office handles questions about your tuition bills at the University”) on your prospective and current student material.

Encourage staff and faculty to do the same regardless of course level, to ensure feelings of inclusivity among all students (online, on campus, first-generation, international, transfer students from another institution).

Invite military online students to engage throughout their career. In addition to welcoming them, continue to invite them to engage in student activities, Dean's lists, awards presentations, co-curricular activities, faculty research, etc. If institutions have the ability to offer online classes, they also should be prepared to have those online students engage in other activities. Consider online chapters of student clubs specifically for military students such as Student Veterans of America (SVA), academic honor societies, career-focused organizations, and networking opportunities with employers. A peer-to-peer mentoring program is another consideration. Pairing SSM/V students with more experience at an institution with new, incoming SSM/Vs would provide another initial contact for new students during the transition process. Connecting SSM/Vs to one another while they also are learning the new culture of an institution, particularly for those who study online, could provide a familiar military connection within the new organization. A mission-driven, student-led program also could provide leadership experience for students who manage the organization and those who serve as mentors.

Ask for their opinion. Once you know who your SSM/Vs are, ask for their input as you expand your programming and services for them or for any adult and online student population. Whether they live near or far, online students want to feel connected to the college or university they attend.

Recommendations for Future Research

Many opportunities for future research should be considered. As stated previously in the limitations section, this study could be replicated at other post-secondary institutions with online instruction units. Studying SSM/Vs at other institutions is critical in order to understand what the transitional experience is like for these online students as they study at institutions with different characteristics. Examining what the transitional experience is like for SSM/Vs online at for-profit institutions, private schools, and community colleges would provide important contextual knowledge needed in the literature.

Additionally, any future research could be conducted with a larger sample size to include more diversity in age, race, gender, major of study, branch of service, military background (enlisted versus officer, active duty versus veteran), first-generation college students, and first-time online students. Focused studies on one or more of these variables specifically related to the transitional experience could also address the gap in the literature about SSM/Vs who study online. Further research on these particular variables could validate findings presented in this study, add to the literature, or possibly illuminate different themes not found in the current study.

Other areas of future research emerged during my data analysis. I identified a few themes that I considered including in this dissertation, but ultimately elected not to do so since the evidence was not as strong as for the other findings. I also identified themes unique to an individual case that did not have enough data to substantiate them here, but would be interesting areas for future exploration. For example, Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) contains several layers and angles that can be used for analysis. While I focused on the holistic, integrative part of the model (*moving out, moving in, and moving through*), I was intrigued by

the coping resources known as the 4s model (*situation, self, support, and strategies*). As I looked at these data through the lens of the 4s part of the model, I found that they were not telling me the whole story. Yet, I do think future research could focus on one or all of these coping resources in more depth related to SSM/Vs who study online. Studying these four coping resources in greater detail could provide additional insight into what the transitional experience is like for this population.

Identity establishment and renegotiation for SSM/Vs both in general terms and within the transition process could be a future area of research. Identity as a military member came up often in my conversation with students. Some struggled with their identity as a veteran who also was now a civilian and an online college student. This role confusion was stressful. Reintegration back into civilian life and roles was challenging but to then add the role of online college student was even more difficult. SSM/Vs thought deeply about and often worried how they would be perceived by their online instructors and their classmates. For this reason, some chose to disclose their military experience while others preferred not to do so.

While this study explored the transitional experience of new students who began studying online, another area of future research could include a look at what the student experience is like for SSM/Vs after this transitional process as they continue their online studies. Findings would address another aspect of the gap in the literature on SSM/Vs in general and expand the knowledge base about these students' experience. Findings may also lead to further understanding of patterns in enrollment, retention, persistence, stopping out, and graduation. In addition to qualitative studies, quantitative studies that include analyses of enrollment patterns and the variables mentioned earlier such as age, race, gender, major of study, branch of service,

military background (enlisted versus officer, active duty versus veteran), first-generation college students, and first time online students also would fill a gap in the literature.

While this study focused on analyses across cases, individual case-level data illuminated some specific topics that would be valuable areas for future research as well. For example, academic writing emerged as a challenge for several SSM/Vs in this study. As online SSM/Vs are a subpopulation of adult students, many had not been exposed to academic or college-level writing in many years. Some of the first-time and first-generation college students described a lack of understanding about how to compose academic college-level writing, worried about citing sources, using sources not deemed as credible, and the different expectations for professional writing in the military (direct, succinct, and in “brief” formats) compared to academic writing styles (descriptive, formal paragraphs, MLA or APA format).

Conclusion

In summary, the purpose of this study was to investigate the transitional experience of military students who pursue post-secondary education online. My research question was, “What is the transitional experience like for student service members/veterans (SSM/Vs) who become undergraduate students online?” As previously noted, there is a lack of research on these transitional experiences. Although research does show that a successful transitional experience to college correlates with retention and student success, almost all of the literature refers to SSM/Vs who study in the on-campus, face-to-face environment. This study is significant in beginning to fill the research gap on military students who study online (Ackerman et al., 2009; McMurray, 2007). Using Schlossberg’s transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) as the conceptual framework, evidence suggests that several of the themes across cases are unique to SSM/Vs who

study online. First, the circumstances around the SSM/V *moving out* of their military service sheds light on an important phase of their lives that often led them to consider enrolling online. Second, SSM/Vs are continuing to *move in* by trying to understand and negotiate their new role of online college student and the cultural norms of online higher education. SSM/Vs wrestle with the differences between the military culture with which they were familiar and that of online higher education. While the cultural differences between the military and online higher education present opportunities for confusion and challenges for the SSM/V, it is ultimately their personal and psychological characteristics and skills cultivated from their military experiences that help them successfully navigate and *move through* the transition. As online learning continues to be a priority for SSM/Vs, more research is needed to understand and support these students. Additionally, as more service members return home and use their military educational benefits to earn a post-secondary degree, colleges and universities must continue to learn how best to serve this unique subpopulation of students.

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APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Approval

PENNSTATE



IRB Program
Office for Research Protections

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EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

Date: February 20, 2017
From: Philip Frum, IRB Analyst
To: Margaret Oakar

Type of Submission:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Transitional Experiences of Military Students Who Pursue Post-Secondary Education Online
Principal Investigator:	Margaret Oakar
Study ID:	STUDY00005695
Submission ID:	STUDY00005695
Funding:	Not Applicable
Documents Approved:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Interview questions for faculty and staff_Margaret Oakar.docx (0.01), Category: Data Collection Instrument ▪ Interview questions for student participants_Margaret Oakar.docx (0.01), Category: Data Collection Instrument ▪ Oakar IRB 2.19.17.pdf (Version 2.19.17), Category: IRB Protocol ▪ Prescreening protocol for faculty and staff_Margaret Oakar.docx (0.01), Category: Data Collection Instrument ▪ Prescreening protocol for student participants_Margaret Oakar.docx (0.01), Category: Data Collection Instrument

The Office for Research Protections determined that the proposed activity, as described in the above-referenced submission, does not require formal IRB review because the research met the criteria for exempt research according to the policies of this institution and the provisions of applicable federal regulations.

Continuing Progress Reports are **not** required for exempt research. Record of this research determined to be exempt will be maintained for five years from the date of this notification. If your research will continue beyond five years, please contact the Office for Research Protections closer to the determination end date.

Changes to exempt research only need to be submitted to the Office for Research Protections in limited circumstances described in the below-referenced Investigator Manual. If changes are being considered and there are questions about whether IRB review is needed, please contact the Office for Research Protections.

Penn State researchers are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual ([HRP-103](#)), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within CATS IRB (<http://irb.psu.edu>).

This correspondence should be maintained with your records.

ID00000027

APPENDIX B

Case Study Protocol

The following case study protocol was developed based on Yin (2014) in order to detail “procedures and general rules to be followed” (p. 84) in this qualitative, multiple-case study.

A. Overview of the Case Study

1. The purpose of this study is to investigate and understand what the transitional experience is like for student service members/veterans (SSM/V) who become students in the online environment as part of their post-secondary education. The goal of the study two-fold. The first goal is to contribute to a gap in the literature about military students who study online. The second goal is to provide information to colleges and universities about military online students so that these institutions can better understand these students as they teach and support them. The audience for this research is first, my dissertation committee but also colleges and universities who teach and support military online students. There is no sponsor for my research and the study was self-funded.
2. The research question is “What is the transitional experience like for student service members/veterans (SSM/Vs) who become undergraduate students online?”
3. The theoretical framework for the case study is Schlossberg’s transition theory focusing mostly on the coping strategies piece of the framework that considers the 4s model (situation, self, support, and strategies) as transitions are examined. Key reading:

Anderson, M. L., Goodman, J., & Schlossberg, N. K. (2012). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking Schlossberg's theory with practice in a diverse world* (4th ed.).

New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company.

4. The role of this protocol is to provide a “standardized agenda for the researcher’s line of inquiry” (Yin, 2014, p. 84). The protocol provides a guide to the procedures followed in the study to increase confidence that the study was carried out methodically and reliably. The protocol is also intended for those who may wish to understand the details, purpose, goals and procedures of the study.

B. Data Collection

1. All fieldwork will be conducted by the author and researcher of this study. Contact information will be provided along with an explanation of the study to all participants. The contact information of the author’s dissertation chair will also be shared with all participants.
2. Expected Preparation Plan Prior to Fieldwork
 - a. Because the study will require staff, faculty and students at Penn State World Campus, I will discuss my plan with leadership there to gain their permission to conduct the study.
 - b. I plan to construct an interview protocol guide based on previous research, my own experience in working with students and key informants who have insight into student service members/veterans.

- c. I plan to rehearse and then refine interview protocol questions by conducting pilot interviews with both students and faculty/staff members to mirror my plan of collecting formal data from these groups.
- d. Define criteria for participation in the study for both student participants and faculty/staff participants.

3. Data Collection Plan

- a. I plan to collect evidence in the form of student interviews, faculty/staff interviews from people who work with students, and any relevant documents that might further illustrate what the transitional experience is like for student service members/veterans who become students in the online environment.
- b. After completing pilot interviews and defining criteria for participation, I will begin formal data collection which will include:
 - i. Recruit faculty/staff participants from known connections and relationships.
 - 1. Contact potential faculty/staff participants to see if they are interested in participating in the interview and provide study summary to them.
 - 2. Email study summary, study procedures, contact information and consent form to those who agree to participate.
 - 3. Schedule interviews in-person, phone or via web-conferencing at a mutually convenient time.
 - 4. Answer any questions about the study and obtain signed consent form.

5. Conduct interview using interview protocol guide. Take notes during the interview just in case audio recording does not work properly.
 6. Record interview for later transcription and analysis with permission of the participant.
 7. Answer questions that the participant may have at any point in the process.
 8. Conduct member checking of information during and after formal interview to confirm understanding of participant responses.
 9. Ask if the participant would be willing to be interviewed in the future.
 10. Thank the participant for their time and insight.
 11. Save audio recording to secure data storage using alias of participant to ensure privacy.
 12. Listen to a few seconds of the recording to make sure audio recorded properly
- ii. Recruit student participants.
1. Ask colleagues to forward email to potential student participants that includes summary of study, procedures, recruitment flyer and contact information.

2. Contact students who indicate an interest in volunteering for the study, introduce myself, and ask pre-screening questions to confirm whether or not they meet criteria for participation.
3. Select student participants based on those that meet pre-screening criteria.
4. Send summary of study, procedures, and consent form to student participants.
5. Schedule interviews in-person, phone or via web-conferencing at a mutually convenient time.
6. Answer any questions about the study and obtain signed consent form.
7. Conduct interview using interview protocol guide.
8. Record interview for later transcription and analysis with permission of the participant.
9. Answer questions that the participant may have at any point in the process.
10. Conduct member checking of information during and after formal interview to confirm understanding of participant responses.
11. Ask if the participant would be willing to be interviewed in the future.
12. Ask the participant if they have any documents (emails, assignments, journal entries, etc.) that they would feel

comfortable contributing to the study that may further help me understand what their transition to higher education online has been like for them.

13. Thank the participant for their time and insight.

C. Data Collection Questions

1. Reminder: Yin (2014) says that these questions are to reflect my actual line of inquiry for the study. This is different than the survey instrument. These questions are to help remind me of the information I am collecting and why (p. 89-90).

a. Student Participants

1. How can background information on each participant help me learn about their transition to online higher education?
2. What is the most important thing to know about their transition to online higher education?
3. What do I need to know about their family background and military experience? Why is that important to the study?
4. How does learning about their motivation to attend college relate to the study?
5. How can I make sure to ask them to cover each of the 4s coping strategies?
6. What is the best way to understand what their first few semesters were like at Penn State World Campus?

b. Faculty/Staff Participants

1. How can make sure I am aware of my bias since I know each of these participants in my work experience?
2. How can background information on each participant help me understand their role in helping students?
3. What is the best way to ask them what they think the transitional experience is like for the students they work with online?
4. What unique perspectives do they have that a student participant would not have? What's the best way to tap into that?

D. Guide for the Case Study Report

1. Consider Audience for Report

- a. Dissertation Committee
- b. Colleges/Universities who teach and support military online students
- c. Readers of the academic literature. Consider publication in journals related to higher education, adult and online students.

2. Tentative Outline of Report/Dissertation

- a. Introduction, Purpose and Relevance of the Study
- b. Literature Review
- c. Methods
- d. Data Analysis and Findings
- e. Summary, Future Research, Recommendations, and Implications for Practice

APPENDIX C

Email Forwarded to Potential Student Participants

Hi [Name},

I'm in the data collection phase of my dissertation and was wondering if you would be willing to help me recruit student participants. Basically, I'm just hoping that you and those that you forward this to students that might meet the criteria (if you are willing, of course). From there, the students would reach out to me directly (mml2@psu.edu) if they meet the criteria listed below.

Compensation is \$10/hour of their time, provided as a gift card.

Here is a quick summary of what my study is about:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the transitional experience of military veterans who become students online. I am interviewing both World Campus students and faculty/staff that work with them. The research question is: What is the transitional experience like for student service members/veterans (SSM/Vs) who become undergraduate students online?

I am looking for...

- United States military veterans
- are currently enrolled part-time (or are about to start) in an undergraduate degree program through the World Campus
- willing to complete at least one 60 minute interview with me (in person, phone or over Zoom)

- able to reflect on and discuss what their transitional experience was like when they first became online students at Penn State World Campus

Let me know what you think or if you have any questions or concerns. We can certainly talk over the phone about this too. :)

Gratefully,

Margaret

APPENDIX D**Consent Forms**

Consent for Exempt Research

The Pennsylvania State University

Consent Form for Student Participants

Study Title: *Transitional Experiences of Military Students Who Pursue Post-Secondary
Education Online*

Principal Investigator: *Margaret Oakar* Telephone Number: *216-xxx-xxxx*

Advisor: Dr. Dana Mitra

Telephone Number: 814-xxx-xxxx

You are being invited to volunteer to participate in a research study. This summary explains information about this research. Thank you for your interest!

• What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to learn more about the transitional experience that military veterans go through as they become online, bachelor's degree seeking students.

• What are you signing up for if you participate?:

If you choose to participate voluntarily, you will be asked to:

- Complete an interview with me for a **minimum of one, 60 minute interview** with the possibility of more time for additional interviews, follow-up or clarification in the future. Ideally these interviews will be conducted in person at a mutually agreed about time and location where others cannot hear our conversation. If in-person interviews are not possible, web-based video

technology (such as FaceTime or Skype) may be utilized. Phone interviews will be used if in-person or video is not possible. Interviews will be recorded.

- **Review transcripts of your interview** or other documents that I send you to ensure that your experience has been documented accurately. This will provide an opportunity for you to clarify anything that we have discussed related to your experience. This could add an additional, variable amount of your time.
- **Provide at least one example of a written document** that tells me more about what your experience has been like as you transition to becoming an online student who is a military veteran. As this information could be classified as FERPA* protected, you will need to remove all identifying information before you share it with me. For example, you could provide an assignment, a journal entry, a poem, blog or discussion post/interaction with an instructor or classmate, an email exchange with an instructor or classmate, a social media interaction, etc. If FERPA protected information is included in the material you share with me, I will seek written consent from that individual with your help.
- **You will be compensated for your time at the rate of \$10/hour in the form of a gift card of your choosing at the completion of your participation in the study.** If you choose to withdraw at any time, this compensation will still be given to you and prorated based on the hours you participated. If you withdraw, I may still utilize the data I collected from you unless you request that I do not use it in writing.
- **How will your confidentiality be protected?**

Your real name will not be shared in any of the research reports from the study, but rather an alias will be assigned to you by me. Only I will know which alias is assigned to which participant name.

Although it is not anticipated, there is a risk of loss of confidentiality if your information or your identity is obtained by someone other than me, but precautions will be taken to prevent this from happening. The confidentiality of your electronic data created by you or by me will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. If there is a loss of confidentiality, I will alert you to this and how it may affect your privacy.

If you have questions or concerns, you should contact me, Margaret Oakar, at 216-xxx-xxxx or mmo12@psu.edu. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant or concerns regarding your privacy, you may also contact the Office for Research Protections at 814-865-1775.

Your participation is voluntary and you may decide to stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer.

By signing below, I agree to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may decide to stop at any time. I understand that I do not have to answer any questions that I do not want to answer.

Signature of Participant

Printed Name of Participant

Date

Consent for Exempt Research

The Pennsylvania State University

Consent Form for Faculty and Staff Participants

Study Title: *Transitional Experiences of Military Students Who Pursue Post-Secondary Education Online*

Principal Investigator: *Margaret Oakar* Telephone Number: *216-xxx-xxxx*

Advisor: Dr. Dana Mitra Telephone Number: 814-xxx-xxxx

You are being invited to volunteer to participate in a research study. This summary explains information about this research. Thank you for your interest!

- **What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of the study is to learn more about the transitional experience that military veterans go through as they become online, bachelor's degree seeking students.

- **What are you signing up for if you participate?:**

If you choose to participate voluntarily, you will be asked to:

- Complete an interview with me for a **minimum of one, 60 minute interview** with the possibility of more time for additional interviews, follow-up or clarification in the future. Ideally these interviews will be conducted in person at a mutually agreed about time and location where others cannot hear our conversation. If in-person interviews are not possible, web-based video technology (such as FaceTime or Skype) may be utilized. Phone interviews will

be used if in-person or video is not possible. Interviews will be recorded.

- **Review transcripts of your interview** or other documents that I send you to ensure that your interview has been documented accurately. This will provide an opportunity for you to clarify anything that we have discussed related to your experience. This could add an additional, variable amount of your time.
- **Provide at least one example of a written document** that tells me more about what you think the experience has been like as for military veterans who are transitioning to becoming an online student. As this information could be classified as FERPA* protected, you will need to remove all identifying information before you share it with me. For example, you could provide an assignment, a journal entry, a poem, blog or discussion post/interaction with an instructor or classmate, an email exchange, a social media interaction, etc. If FERPA protected information is included in the material you share with me, I will seek written consent from that individual with your help.
- **You will be compensated for your time at the rate of \$10/hour in the form of a gift card of your choosing at the completion of your participation in the study.** If you choose to withdraw at any time, this compensation will still be given to you and prorated based on the hours you participated. If you withdraw, I may still utilize the data I collected from you unless you request that I do not use it in writing.
- **How will your confidentiality be protected?**

Your real name will not be shared in any of the research reports from the study, but rather an alias will be assigned to you by me. Only I will know which alias is assigned to which participant name.

Although it is not anticipated, there is a risk of loss of confidentiality if your information or your identity is obtained by someone other than me, but precautions will be taken to prevent this from happening. The confidentiality of your electronic data created by you or by me will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. If there is a loss of confidentiality, I will alert you to this and how it may affect your privacy.

If you have questions or concerns, you should contact me, Margaret Oakar, at 216-xxx-xxxx or mmo12@psu.edu. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant or concerns regarding your privacy, you may also contact the Office for Research Protections at 814-865-1775.

Your participation is voluntary and you may decide to stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer.

By signing below, I agree to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may decide to stop at any time. I understand that I do not have to answer any questions that I do not want to answer.

Signature of Participant

Printed Name of Participant

Date

APPENDIX E

Pre-Screening Protocol

Pre-Screening Process for Student Participants

All questions must be answered “yes” to be eligible to participate.

1. Are you a United States military veteran? If yes, when did you separate from the United States military?
2. Are you a current student at Penn State World Campus pursuing a bachelor’s degree online?
3. Are you currently enrolled?
4. Are you willing to be interviewed at least once with the possibility of additional interviews?
5. Are able to discuss what your transitional experience was like as you became an online student at Penn State World Campus?

Pre-Screening Process for Faculty and Staff Participants

All questions must be answered “yes” to be eligible to participate.

1. Are you currently working for Penn State (part-time or full-time) in a role that works with military veterans who are pursuing their bachelor’s degrees online through the World Campus?
2. Are you willing to be interviewed at least once with the possibility of additional interviews over the course of the study?

APPENDIX F

Interview Guides

Student Interview Protocol Guide

This pool of questions was used as a guide for several interviews with student participants depending on time and how the interview went. This allowed room for specific follow-up questions with individuals based on the participants' responses.

1. I'd like to hear about your background. Take me back to the time in your life when you decided to join the military and the circumstances of your life around that time.
 - a. Ask why they joined the military if they don't mention.
 - b. Listen for other previous college/university experience prior to Penn State World Campus.
 - c. Listen for mention of other family members going to college or if they are first-generation.
2. What happened next?
3. Walk me through the circumstances of you separating from the military.
 - a. How were you feeling about that?
4. How did you decide you wanted to start/finish your college degree?
 - a. Why did you want to start/finish your degree?
5. What kind of feelings and emotions did you have about going back to school?
 - a. What was that like for you at the time?
6. Tell me about your experience as you considered Penn State World Campus.
7. Did you consider face-to-face courses on a campus? Why or why not?
8. How did the application and admissions process go for you?

9. After you were admitted, what happened?
10. What kind of experience did you have with online courses before starting at Penn State World Campus?
 - a. If they had face-to-face experience, ask what is different about that compared to online?
11. How were you feeling about getting started in your first semester?
12. What kind of support did you have as you made this transition to being an online student?
 - a. What resources did you use from Penn State World Campus?
13. What strategies did you use to help you with the transition?
14. What was the most challenging part for you in the first few semesters?
15. What surprised you?
16. What were your classes like?
17. Tell me about your experiences with your instructors/faculty.
18. Do you discuss that you are a military veteran in your courses or assignments? Why or why not?
19. Did you use any skills from the military as an online student? Can you give me some examples?
20. What kind of advice would you give to another military student who is just getting started at Penn State World Campus?
21. What kind of advice would you give to faculty staff that work with military students?
What would you want them to know about you as a military online student?
22. What will finishing your degree mean for you?
23. What do you want your degree to do for you?
24. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about this transitional time?

Faculty and Staff Interview Protocol

This pool of questions was used as a guide for interviews with faculty and staff participants depending on time and how the interview went. This allowed room for specific follow-up questions with individuals based on the participants' responses.

1. Tell me about your job responsibilities and how that relates to working with military students at Penn State World Campus.
2. How long have you worked with military students and how did that come to be part of your work?
3. Based on your role, what do you think the transitional experience is like for military students who become new students at Penn State World Campus?
4. How do your new military students feel during this transitional time during the first few semesters? Can you give me an example or tell me a story about a student that you remember?
5. What motivates your new military students to complete their degree? What do you hear from them about that?
6. What kind of support systems do you see that help students be successful?

7. What about students that struggle? How are they different than the successful students?
Why do you think they struggle?

8. What strategies do you typically recommend to new military students to help them
through this transitional time?

9. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about this? Any other student stories you'd
like to share?

APPENDIX G

First Round Codes
1. Academic Rigor
2. Access
3. Active Duty
4. Adult learner
5. Aggressive
6. Anxiety
7. Apprehension
8. Balance
9. Choosing classes
10. Civilian culture
11. Communication
12. Cultural capital
13. Culture shock
14. Different
15. Discipline
16. Employment
17. Engagement
18. Excitement
19. Expectations
20. F2F (face-to-face)

21. Faculty
22. Feelings of connection to others
23. First generation
24. First time college
25. Flexibility
26. Focus
27. Frustration
28. Getting through first semester
29. GI Bill*
30. Grit
31. Higher education culture
32. How to study
33. Instructors
34. Job responsibilities
35. Lack of literature
36. Life experience
37. Listen
38. LMS (learning management system)
39. Math
40. Military culture*
41. Military preparing for civilian life
42. Motivation
43. Negative experience

44. Non-disclosure of disability*
45. Non-disclosure of military status*
46. Online
47. Persistence
48. Safety and security
49. Self*
50. Service
51. Situation*
52. Sports
53. Strategies*
54. Support*
55. Time of separation
56. Transfer credit
57. Universal design
58. Veteran

*=codes established before data collection

Example of operational code definitions

GI Bill—used when this federal legislation is referred to by a participant

Non-disclosure of disability—used when a participant mentions that they do not feel comfortable discussing or disclosing a disability to someone that works at a college/university

Non-disclosure of military status—used when a participant mentions that they do not feel comfortable discussing or disclosing that they served in or are a veteran of the United States military to someone that works at a college/university

Military culture—used when a participant describes a process, event, tradition, concept, idea, tangible item, etc. that is unique to a specific branch or in general related to belonging to part of the United States military community

Self—used when a participant refers to anything related to their personal view of themselves including

First Round Coding—Data Condensation
1. Academic Rigor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Writing b. Time commitment
2. Adult learner
3. Aggressive
4. Cultural capital
5. Concerns <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Communication b. Balance c. Active Duty d. Civilian culture e. Choosing classes f. Culture shock g. Higher education culture h. How to study i. Expectations j. Faculty

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> k. Math l. Transfer credit
6. Discipline
7. Emotions/Feelings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Excitement b. Culture shock c. Frustration d. Negative e. Anxious f. Apprehensive g. Unsure
8. F2F (face-to-face)
9. Feelings of connection to others/Engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Alumni b. Clubs
10. First generation
11. First time college
12. Focus
13. GI Bill <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Other benefits
14. Grit
Instructors

Lack of literature
15. Listen
16. LMS (learning management system)
17. Military culture
18. Military preparing for civilian life
19. Motivation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Better life for family b. Goal c. Purpose d. Value of degree e. Better job
20. Non-disclosure of disability
21. Non-disclosure of military status
22. Persistence
23. Why online <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Safety and security b. Job responsibilities c. Employment d. Flexibility e. Life experience f. Access
24. Self <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Positive attitude

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> b. Pride c. disappointment
25. Service
26. Situation
Sports
<p>27. Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Rapport-building b. Start early, be proactive c. Structure and routine d. Time management e. Discipline f. Details oriented
<p>28. Types of Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Disability b. Family c. Institutional d. Peer e. Employer f. Financial
29. Time of separation
Universal design
30. Veteran

Examples of Second Cycle Coding

—From Codes to Themes (Saldana, 2016, p. 231) and Pattern Coding.

1. “Types of support” means a variety of things to students and could come in many forms from family, peers, employers etc. Why are these important? Types of support help a student through a specific part of the transition. Family and peer provides emotional support an encouragement. Employers may provide encouragement and financial support that helps students pay tuition allowing them to have one less thing to worry about.

2. “Strategies” help students to be productive, help them survive the first semester and other semesters. Strategies help students with organization which can save time and resources in their busy lives.

3. Why does online matter to students and what does this mean? It means that students may have wanted to study face-to-face. It means that online is more convenient. Online means they have access to education when they otherwise may not have.

Narrative Descriptions and Emerging Themes by Case

1. Dale—Engagement and connection to the university community assisted with positive transition even though he was studying online.

2. Jeremy—Writing skills needed significant stylistic refining for academic work compared to military writing, but once accomplished with faculty help was an important means of expression for him. Improving this skill helped his overall confidence as a first-generation, first-time ever attending college, and first-time studying online student.

3. Kristen—Even though she already earned a bachelor's and master's degree many years ago, she experienced online higher education and pursuit of a bachelor's degree in the same way many others do who do not have college experience.

4. Kurt—Kurt experienced a negative transitional experience with university staff and transfer credits. Although he enrolled, he dropped out after one semester as these factors along with having no support (institutionally and none from his family or friends), being a first generation college student, working long hours and questioning the value of a degree outweighed the reasons to stay enrolled.

5. Rory—Highly motivated, ambitious and driven before, during and after his military service are evidence of characteristics that may help drive some students to be more successful than others. Additionally, Rory's unexpected medical retirement from the military forced him to quickly find a way into the civilian job market which further motivated him to finish his degree.

APPENDIX H

Sample Memo

Saturday, February 24, 2018

I got an email today from Marty that he had to withdraw from the semester. I knew that he was going for a neurological procedure and he was only supposed to be there for a week. His wife was not accompanying him and they decided if something happened she'd come.

Apparently he had six mini-strokes during the procedure. They aren't sure if it was a reaction to the anesthesia or to the procedure, but he was unconscious for three days. He doesn't remember anything. He woke up to his wife at his side and he said he knew that was not a good thing. He was there for several extra days for observation. They were going to drive back home but decided to fly after he was cleared to travel. He said he was having issues with his vision and memory and was experiencing some pain. He's going to need to take a break to rest and recuperate but was in good spirits when I talked to him on the phone. He called me after he saw that I had replied to his email. I'm so glad I got to talk to him on the phone and told him if there was anything I could do, I would. I told him I'd check in on him soon.

Analytically, this is one example of an experience of a military student. Marty copes with PTSD and TBI from his seven deployments and this procedure was supposed to address some of those. He wanted to continue with school but with his vision and memory impaired he simply could not, but as of now plans to return in the summer 2018 semester.

I've been wrestling with and thinking a lot about what, if anything, makes military online students different than other students. On one hand, they are different or unique (if different implies something negative perhaps) because they have military experience which only a small

number of the American population has. Some have combat exposure, like Marty, that non-military members simply will not experience. Even non-combat experiences are something that most American students will never experience. Perhaps the connection is that this unique experience impacts how they view themselves, their lives, the world and how they experience education...and that, therefore, makes them different and worth looking at as a specific subpopulation.

However, I have to consider an alternative explanation too, right?! Maybe they aren't all that different. Other students certainly could have injuries that make learning difficult for them. Other students could also have PTSD, TBI and procedures that go wrong and impact their health enrollment. I guess they are more similar to other adult and online students than not. What does that mean, really?

Emotionally and personally, this news about Marty was hard to hear. I care about his well-being and success. I tried to state the facts of the above without being emotional but I did find this news very upsetting. Marty and his family have endured a lot during and after his military service. That is a fact. His children are adults now and they have been able to connect and get to know one another again now that Marty is retired from the military. They, I'm sure, are very concerned. He was just telling me about how some of the children were celebrating his birthday a few months ago and it was a joyful time for all of them.

I wonder how this setback will affect Marty. I keep thinking about how transitions he and I have talked about that have happened in his life. I guess I started thinking about that because it could give some indication of how he'd handle this unexpected transition? One key point we've discussed is how pivotal his separation from the military was due to a medical discharge. He felt

dismissed and said it was as if he was going through a divorce. One day it was just over. He knew it had to happen because he was nearing retirement anyway but he was hurt and sad. He loved the military and devoted so much of his life to it so to sign a separation paper and be shown where the exit was upsetting to him.

School was turning out to be something he enjoyed and he felt was expanding his world view. It was a new mission of sorts for him now that his military chapter had come to a close. Dropping out this semester is certainly unanticipated. He wasn't without his challenges before and had already been connected to disability services when he realized he was having some trouble with numbers appearing flipped on the page to him, but he was doing well and enjoying it. It was important to him. I suppose it is yet unknown based on his recovery about him coming back to Penn State World Campus and what meaning he may make of this later or what meaning I will make of this later. I look forward to keeping in touch with him.

VITA

MARGARET M. OAKAR

EDUCATION

Ph.D. Educational Theory and Policy The Pennsylvania State University	December 2018
M.Ed. Education University of Notre Dame	July 2002
B.A. Psychology University of Notre Dame	May 2000

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

The Pennsylvania State University—World Campus University Park, Pennsylvania

Associate Director, Admission Services and Financial Aid	2015–Present
Assistant Director, Admission Services	2012–2015
Instructor, Summer Semester, College of Education	2014
Military Admissions Counselor	2011

Notre Dame College

South Euclid, Ohio

Associate Dean, Adult Enrollment	2011
Director, The Finn Center for Adult, Graduate and Professional Programs	2009–2011
Adjunct Faculty & Course Coordinator, Division of Professional Education	2008–2012
Director, Adult and Graduate Admissions	2007–2009
Education Recruitment Specialist	2007

21st Century Learning

Phoenix, Arizona (based in Cleveland, Ohio)

National Account Manager and Educational Consultant	2004–2006
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Diocese of Cleveland—Office of Catholic Education

Cleveland, Ohio

Curriculum Integration Specialist	2002–2004
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St. Pius V Catholic School

Jacksonville, Florida

Teacher	2000–2002
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LEADERSHIP, AWARDS, PRESENTATIONS, AND PUBLICATIONS

Presenter—CCME Annual Symposium	2016
Interim Membership Chair, Council of College & Military Educators (CCME)	2015
Co-Leader—UPCEA Emerging Leaders Project (1 st Cohort)	2013
Presenter—Hendrick Conference for Adult Learners	2012
Recipient—President's Appreciation Award, Notre Dame College	2011

Block, C. C., **Oakar**, M., & Hurt, N. (2002). The expertise of literacy teachers: A continuum from preschool to grade 5. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37(2), 178–206.

Lounds, J., **Oakar**, M., Knecht, K., Moran, M., Gibney, M., & Pressley, M. (2002). Journal editors' views on the criteria a paper must meet to be publishable. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 27(2), 338–347.