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Counternarratives of Success: A Narrative Inquiry into the Life Experiences of Prior-enlisted Reserve Officers Navigating Higher Education

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COUNTERNARRATIVES OF SUCCESS: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE
LIFE EXPERIENCES OF PRIOR-ENLISTED RESERVE OFFICERS NAVIGATING
HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Adam B. Fullerton

A DISSERTATION

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Major: Educational Studies
(Educational Leadership & Higher Education)

Under the Supervision of Professor Deryl K. Hatch-Tocaimaza

Lincoln, Nebraska

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Counternarratives of Success: A Narrative Inquiry into the Life Experiences of Prior-enlisted Reserve Officers Navigating Higher Education

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University of Nebraska, 2020

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The current extant literature on student veterans describes the student veteran population in monolithic terms through a deficit perspective. With reserve servicemembers making up 33% of the veteran population (VA, 2018), reservists move beyond tokenism (Kanter, 1978;1987) and need to be explored separately. This separation enhances the understanding of their experiences in working towards educational attainment and the differences from the traditional student veteran identity. To engage in the study of this subpopulation, a narrative inquiry into the lived experience of three Marine officers who obtained their degrees while serving as enlisted reservists was conducted.

This study used Veteran Critical Theory (VCT) (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) as a framework to engage with literature and meaning making of the experiences of the participants, thereby developing a counternarrative to the deficit perspective, focusing on pathways to success. While generalizable themes cannot be created based on the exploration of the lived experiences of three participants, themes within the individual's stories can be developed. The use of these themes allows for commentary on the narratives through conceptual inferences (Riessman, 2008). By examining the experiences of the participants this way, seven themes of success were found to be

expressed in the narratives. These were: communication, planning ahead, exploration of adult learning pathways, unaided navigation of administrative minutia, understanding one's limitations, developing a support network, and mentorship. Through understanding components to the success of these participants, there are implications for the student veteran reservist, the researcher, the institution, and the policymaker.

Dedication

To my wife Brenna. Thank you for all of your support in my academic pursuits. Without you I would not be where I am today.

Acknowledgments

Throughout my own exploration of education, I have been fortunate enough to have support almost continuously. Mom and dad, thank you for your assistance in my academic pursuits growing up. Mom, your chiding me for an “A-” not being good enough was annoying as a child, but it set me up for success. Dad, without your strong work ethic and example, I would not be here today. You taught me not to procrastinate and to get the job done, a skill I will be eternally grateful for. Kathy and Tom, you are second parents to me. When I say that none of this would be possible without you, please know my sincerity. You both have bent over backward to support me in my pursuits, willingly disrupting your own lives in the process. I cannot begin to describe how grateful I am to have both of you in my life.

With regard to support, no one has been more supportive than my wife. Brenna has tirelessly put up with my late nights of writing, my deadlines, and my pursuit of education. We are a team, and I am proud to face life with such an amazing partner. I love you.

My career has been shaped by a select few individuals that I have been fortunate enough to have guided me. Lt Col Lisa Souders, without you I can honestly say that I would not have gone to college. When I was put under your command, I did not know that my life would be irrevocably altered. You put me on the path to education, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

Major Chad Clark, you were my first commanding officer as a newly minted second lieutenant. Your guidance as my mentor has been instrumental in shaping my

career. Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do. I very much look forward to our continued service together. Lt Col Dana Sanford, you have taken countless calls from me, and even helped me make the decision to stay in the Marine Corps Reserve when I felt I wanted to leave. Finally, Lt Col Jenny Storm. Ma'am, you have been a guiding force from the moment I met you. Never to mince words, your guiding hand has helped me to have an amazing career in the reserve.

In the decision to further my education, Dr. Doug Bond of Harvard University sparked my interest in lifelong learning and pursuit of knowledge. While taking courses under his tutelage, I realized the direction I wanted to take my academic pursuits. None of which would have happened, however, had it not been for Dr. Deryl Hatch-Tocaimaza. This man took me on as an advisee with my less than traditional background. He guided me and helped me to develop into the researcher that I am today. I have been privileged to work with you on so many projects and look forward to future opportunities to collaborate.

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course with you to having you become a best friend. You are humble, kind, and brilliant, and always searching for ways to help others. Thank you for everything you do my friend.

Brenna, the love of my life, deserves her own chapter here. My support through thick and thin, we accomplish everything as a team. There have been many nights of lost sleep because of my educational pursuits and she has always been there to support me. I can think of no person in this world that would make a better partner or a better friend. Thank you so much for being my wife and my best friend.

Finally, I would like to thank my children. Freya, Ilsa, Nathaniel, Thomas, and Orla, you give me the desire to move forward and better myself. I see myself in each of you and strive to provide you a template on which to model yourselves. I am proud of each one of you.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Veteran Status Defined and the Unique Perspective of the Prior-enlisted Officer	6
Statement of the Problem	11
Purpose	12
Veteran Critical Theory (VCT) as a Theoretical Framework	13
Narrative Inquiry as a Framework	14
Delimitations	15
Positionality and Reflexivity	16
Definition of Terms	18
Overview of Chapters	22
Chapter Summary	23
Chapter 2: Literature Review	25
The Reservist in Higher Education	25
The Student Reservist in Research	26
Nuance of Reserve Educational Benefits	27
A Critique of the Mainstream Narrative and Deficit Modeling	30
Education Benefits Research	33
For-profit Education – Cui Bono	35
Institutional Perspectives and Positionality	36
The Individual and Transition	39
Resilience and the Development of Counternarratives	42

Veteran Critical Theory	43
Conclusion	48
Chapter 3: Methodology	50
Theoretical and Analytical Frameworks	50
Veteran Critical Theory	50
Narrative Inquiry.....	51
Narrative Inquiry Through a Critical Lens	53
Research Design.....	54
Research Setting.....	54
Interview Design.....	54
Data Collection and Analysis.....	55
Instrumentation	55
Analysis.....	55
Participants.....	57
Sample Size.....	57
Trustworthiness.....	59
Ethical Considerations	59
Delimitations.....	60
Conclusion	61
Chapter 4: Narratives	62
Contextualizing Narratives Within the Methodology.....	62
John.....	63

John's Guide to Success.....	69
Andrew.....	70
Andrew's Guide to Success	74
Peter	75
Peter's Guide to Success.....	78
Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion	80
Communication.....	81
Planning Ahead/Predefined Goals	85
Exploration of Adult Learning Pathways and Leveraging Experience	88
Unaided Navigation of Administrative Minutia	90
Understand One's Limitations	92
Developing A Support Network	93
Marginalization at the Institution and Research	94
Mentorship	96
Implications.....	98
For the Reservist	98
For the Researcher	100
For the Institution.....	108
For the Policymaker	111
Future Research	112
Conclusion	115
References.....	117

Appendix A – Interview Protocol..... 131

Chapter 1: Introduction

“A nation that makes a great distinction between its scholars and its warriors will have its laws made by cowards and its wars fought by fools.” (Sir William Francis Butler)

Sir William Francis Butler’s quote on the education of servicemembers is as true today as it was over one hundred years ago. Whether an individual makes a career out of serving in the military, or completes a single contract, they are a veteran of the uniformed services and, as such, have lived through unique educational experiences that those in the civilian sector have not. These lived experiences, such as continuing professional development courses, along with the unique educational benefits provided to the student veteran by the many iterations of the G.I. Bill, develop the student veteran population into one of the most unique groups of students in the higher education landscape. Nonetheless, considering this population as a singular group discounts the experiences of large portions of the population, as not all individuals engage in their military service the same way, and not all servicemembers receive the same educational benefits.

Student veterans have largely been defined in the extant educational research literature in monolithic terms, disregarding the many unique pathways in which an individual can take to become a member of the veteran population. In research reports, there are comments that often appear as side notes regarding subpopulations, such as the reservist population. However, this demarcation of existence without exploration of persons on their own terms is ultimately an act of tokenism (Kanter, 1978;1987;

Guldiken, Mallon, Fainshmidt, Judge, & Clark, 2019) that obfuscates the, often stark, differences in lived experiences within the student veteran population as a whole.

Newton and Soltani (2017) defining the concept of tokenism, clarify that while a small, unique, portion of a population might have representation that gives the illusion of inclusion, the token group is still primarily excluded (James and Mannette, 2000). While in the context of the aforementioned studies tokenism was discussed regarding marginalized populations based on race or gender, the concept remains true for any population that has the group identity subsumed by the larger identity in this way. The loss of identity for the subpopulation is the case of the reservist in higher education, as they seek to exist within the student veteran identity.

The reservist is left on the periphery of research, with research occurring into the experience of this population only by proximity to other student veterans (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) or in contexts external to academia (Bull Schaefer, Wiegand, MacDermid, Wadsworth, Green, & Welch, 2013). As Bull Schaefer et al. (2013) illustrate, the reservist will often experience multiple transitions during their time in the reserves. These transitions have the potential to impact their ability to develop lasting support networks on campus, sustain employment for while they are working towards their degree, and put strain on their social and familial connections of support that simply does not occur for a student that has exited the military and is pursuing academia purely as a veteran with no service affiliation.

The reservist population in the United States comprises approximately 33% of the veteran population (VA, 2018). With over a third of the population falling into this

category, it is imperative that their unique experiences be explored, accounted for, and understood. The rationale behind this assertion comes from at least two sources. The first is a matter of equity in education. Veterans generally are recognized as protected class of students in federal code (Department of Labor, 2012), and sociologists and educational researchers too have shown how veterans are tokenized and marginalized in society broadly and as a result not being treated equitably in education despite rhetoric and intentions to the contrary (Birchrest, 2013; Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). McBain (2014) found that student veterans are marginalized and oppressed on campus. As the reservist is able to be devalued by other servicemembers for their “part-time” commitment and might come in conflict with civilians due to currently serving in the military, these concerns of equity are doubled for the reserve population.

Secondly, and in terms of how widespread the implications of this understanding are a concern for the higher education field broadly, the need for research on reservists will only increase. Many policymakers, educational institutions, and civic organizations claim to be committed to responding to the needs of the veteran population. This support can be seen through the many beneficial changes that occurred between the Post 9/11 iteration of the G.I. Bill and the Forever G.I. Bill. However, these changes created more support for the active duty veteran while continuing to limit the support for the reservist student population. Seeing this, it becomes clear that the view of reservists holding a token position within the veteran population is insufficient and works against the entire student veteran population.

To remedy the shortcomings of tokenism and monolithic essentialization prevalent in research, however, requires more than just more nuanced subsetting of the veteran population. Rather, as Philips and Lincoln (2017) argue in their development of a Veteran Critical Theory, the more fundamental deficiency in higher education veteran research is the pervasive deficit perspective used to characterize veterans and frame the studies regarding their experience and outcomes. This is similar to scholarship developed regarding other marginalized groups such as, for instance, men of color (Quaye & Harper, 2015; Harris & Wood, 2016; Maschke, 1997; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Saenz, Ponjuan, Figueroa, & Serrata, 2016), LGBT groups (Jagose, 1996; Smith, 2003; Nicolazzo, 2014), and women (McIntosh, 2019; Butler, 1990; Iverson, Seher, DiRamio, Jarvis, & Anderson 2016), among others. What these bodies of research show is the value and power of counternarratives to provide voice to those that are actually living the experience, instead of allowing those that do not fully comprehend the nuance of individuals within the group to dictate identity.

As a consequence, in this study, I argue for the need to engage in elaborating a counternarrative (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) in order to amplify the voices of individuals who have been successful in academic pursuits while performing service obligations in the reserves. As a matter of equity and consequence for veteran student support and research, the lived experiences of these individuals warrant exploration and representation in the literature. In order to accomplish this, it is necessary to operationalize and select reservists who can relate such narratives.

Typically, in veteran student research, usage of the G.I. Bill a common framing of the research problem and in identifying participants or selecting data records. However, this approach falls short of exploring success due to an important logistical challenge. Specifically, due to the Department of Veteran Affairs not tracking the completion of degrees, but only for use of benefits by the student veteran as well as when those benefits cease to be used (Cate, 2014).

In order to overcome this barrier, exploring the narratives of those officers that obtained degrees while enlisted allows for the receipt of a commission to be an identifier of success. The narrative of the officer that was enlisted as a reservist provides the ability to engage in the lived experience of those enlisted servicemembers that were able to successfully navigate higher education, while working as a reservist, and achieve a degree. Beyond attainment, success in these narratives can be seen through the individual leveraging that degree to further their civilian careers.

To become an officer in the United States military, one must first obtain a four-year degree from a recognized institution. Through obtaining a commission, these individuals illustrate not only career progression (from enlisted to officer) but also that they were able to obtain the degree they pursued, furthering civilian careers as well. As the Department of Veteran Affairs does not track degree attainment (VA, 2018), but only use of benefits, interviewing these officers affords the unique perspective of servicemembers that saw their degree through to completion and then maximized the utility of the degree by receiving a commission as an officer.

Veteran Status Defined and the Unique Perspective of the Prior-enlisted Officer

At this point, it is imperative to further clarify and define veteran and veteran status, and what these definitions mean in regard to reserve status, a notion that exists in the popular lexicon but varies in technical definition from one federal institution to the next. This can be seen through the Department of Education defining service in veteran status to not active time in service schools and the United States Census Bureau including time as a cadet at service academies as active duty time towards veteran status, but reserve or National Guard members that have only served on active duty during initial training. According to the Title 38 (U.S. Code, 1934), a veteran is defined as any individual that served in the United States military and was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable. It is important to note that these activations must occur under Title 10 of the U.S. Code (1934), and not Title 32 (U.S. Code, 1934), which defines the parameters for activation of the National Guard.

With an understanding of what is defined as a veteran, the department of Veteran Affairs (VA, 2018) does not consider an individual to have obtained veteran status with regard to G.I. Bill benefits unless the veteran has met certain time in service obligations, or was injured while serving. There is even a stipulation that states the VA will recognize a reservist as a veteran if they retire even if they do not meet the requirements for veteran status previous to the retirement occurring. A similar issue occurs with the National Guard of each state. These individuals are able to be activated for years at a time, and often are. However, if they are activated under Title 32 (U.S. Code, 1934), they are not considered veterans even if they serve twenty years of active time within their branch.

The carefully crafted nuances of these policies, then, give the appearance of supporting all veterans, while in practice alienating 30% of those that hold the title of veteran.

Regardless of the time in service, upon reaching the federal status of veteran of any of the Uniformed Services of the United States, a veteran becomes a member of a class that is federally protected against discrimination (Department of Labor, 2012), a class for which policymakers occasionally revisit the established benefits that exist in support of the educational pursuit of veterans.

The veteran population, as a group, is typically viewed as a monolithic group, and is seen to enroll in tertiary education at a higher rate than non-veteran, non-traditional peers (Cate, 2014; Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Persky & Oliver, 2010). This view of the student veteran identity belonging to a single unified group made it possible for numerous researchers (Ackerman et al., 2009; Barry et al., 2014; Currier, McDermott, & Sims, 2016; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011b; Doe & Langstraat, 2014; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013) to utilize G.I. Bill benefit usage to explore this population. This approach, however, meshes together multiple experiences in education that have the capacity to be drastically different from each another. Specifically, the use of the G.I. Bill benefits as a data point to explore this population, limits, and possibly excludes, countless student veterans that serve in the National Guard or are in the Reserve. An unintended consequence of conducting research this way is also that dependants eligible to use their parents benefits are counted amongst the student veterans even though they are not a veteran.

In 2016 there were over one million veterans that utilized their G.I. Bill benefits towards higher education attainment (VA, 2017a). While this might seem like a substantial group, these students make up only approximately 20% of all veterans that have remaining education benefits that they are eligible to use. Of the approximately four million with eligible benefits, there are currently an estimated 950,187 reservists or veterans that served as reservists (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2017a; United States Navy, 2018) who remain eligible to use a portion of their benefits. The reservist student, while usually only studied as part of the larger student veteran identity, often has substantially different experiences than the student veteran that is no longer serving in the military. These experiences have direct implication on their pursuit of educational attainment, as well as understanding the experiences of the larger student veteran population (DiRamio & Jarvis 2011).

While the difference in benefits and the employment of these benefits do separate the experiences of the reservist student veteran from their veteran peers, there are two other issues that are also faced by this population. First, the reserve or National Guard servicemember that is still under contractual obligation to the military and is required to serve on short stints of active duty intermittently, including the “two days a month, two weeks a year” that are considered the standard service obligation of a reservist. These obligations complicate the monthly schedule of the student, especially when it ends up being four to five consecutive days in a single month. Due to the mandatory two-week training period over the summer, there is also conflict with relation to potential internships, an item required for numerous educational pathways. The reality of the

scheduling is that in any single month, service obligations can be as short as half of a day, and as long as eight days (or longer depending on needs of the unit). Similarly, the summer Annual Training (AT) can last from as few as two weeks in length to as long as 29 days. Navigating these service obligations is a phenomenon unique to the reserve population and cause additional obligations beyond simply avoiding scheduling conflicts.

The second issue that this population faces is that, even with diligent planning, there is a lack of understanding by many in the higher education environment regarding policies related to these obligations, especially when scheduling conflicts are unavoidable. Between institutional gray areas regarding making up exams missed due to service, and not having the standard G.I. Bill benefits, a reservist often must develop a level of understanding of academic policy that is not required of the typical student. This lack of knowledge on how to best support students while performing their reserve military obligations creates potential barriers for students working towards educational attainment.

Though most of the complications reservists experience involve conflict surrounding their military obligation, the student veteran must also grapple with complications regarding their veteran identity, which is continuously disrupted as they alternate between active service and civilian life (Hammond, 2016). This identity crisis sometimes develops to the point where students will question whether or not they consider themselves a veteran (Moulta-Ali, 2015). This lack of solidity in identity leads to numerous complications for the reservist as they grapple with essentially being part

civilian, but also part servicemember at all times (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017; Anzaldúa, 1987).

While many researchers do articulate the difficulty in navigating benefits and credit transfer for the traditional student veteran (Barry, Whiteman, & Wadsworth, 2014; Sutton, 2018), the difficulty of navigating the unique benefits and limitations on benefits that the reservist experience have not been discussed in the literature. This problem is particularly relevant as student veterans will often need to obtain a source of income external to the reserve salary in order to pay the remainder of their education costs.

Part of the issue related to transferring in credit is a lack of understanding or acceptance at the institutional level regarding the life experience and training of the student veteran as an adult learner. The student veteran has years of experience in a field, years of continuing education that is annually evaluated by their chain of command, and formal schools that are conducted to ensure that the individual is highly trained in their respective occupational field. The issue of lack of consistent credit value, even though the courses are accredited speaks largely to underlying issues of marginalization that exist regarding the student veteran learner. Years of experience and intensive training are disregarded, or counted only as elective credits, limiting the ability of the veteran to assign value to their own experience. The value of the education of the enlisted servicemember goes beyond anything provided in a classroom, with years of real-world experience practicing those skills.

Similarly, to state that this population has difficulty thinking for themselves due to their military experience, as reported in some research (Naphan & Elliott, 2015), then,

fails to fully understand the complexity of the experiences of student veterans, and more so the reservist student veteran. This lack of understanding of the role of the reservist in the education process, simply put, comes down to the fact that despite elaborate policy analysis, widespread programmatic efforts at colleges and universities locally to welcome and support veteran students, we have little first-hand accounts from the reservist as the beneficiaries. We do not know the stories of the reservists, and the current literature does not give us access to understand them, even though much of the extant research is qualitative in nature. These individuals are required to leave their jobs and families and work long hours in service to their respective branch, only to return and have to balance family, education, and civilian occupations. To say that these student veterans have a difficult time thinking for themselves calls into question the validity of any argument about the cognitive ability of the reservist student population and furthers the inaccurate characterization.

Statement of the Problem

To explore this protected sub-population of student veterans, this study focused specifically on officers that were identified as being enlisted reservists prior to receiving their commission. While officers are engaged in this study, this is done solely in effort to explore the educational experience of those enlisted reservist that successfully navigated their educational pathway with the receipt of a commission being used to signify success. While there has been a growing body of research on the student veteran population following the 2009 implementation of the Post 9/11 iteration of the G.I. Bill, this research falls short in two key areas. First, the research lacks focus into subpopulations of student

veterans, often describing the entirety of the population as a singular group of individuals that hold the veteran identity. This marginalizes the experience of those student veterans that have multiple identities, as well as experiences as a veteran that fall outside of the parameters of the traditional active duty veteran.

Secondly, the research that does exist, which creates a single mainstream student veteran narrative that seemingly incorporates the reservist, is primarily built out of deficit modeling by researchers that have often not served in any component of the military. This narrative, therefore, further limits the voices of student veterans, and decreases the ability to fully understand this unique population of students. It is difficult to attempt to better understand this population, and to more fully explore the experiences of these individuals as they pursue their education as firsthand accounts and narratives of the lived experiences do not exist. This leaves those interested in this population to utilize the flawed overarching narrative for this population in absence of a way to better understand and support these students.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of reservist student veterans while providing a counternarrative for the reservist population of student veterans as they continue towards educational attainment, and a counternarrative of success. These narratives confront the primary narrative of broken student veterans in need of assistance and empower the reservist to share their experience as they navigate higher education while still serving.

In order to facilitate the exploration of this research puzzle, and in order to empower the reader to contextualize these lived experiences within the context of their institution, the following research question guided this project: What are the lived experiences of prior-enlisted reserve officers in pursuit of educational attainment?

Veteran Critical Theory (VCT) as a Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework Veteran Critical Theory (VCT) guided this study. VCT, was developed and articulated by Phillips and Lincoln (2017) by leveraging and adapting critical race theory and critical queer theories. As with other critical theories, VCT provides a means by which to critically exam the meta-narrative that exists in the current body of research and flaws within it, as an essential first step in articulating a counternarrative. And so, beyond critically examining the meta-narrative of the extant literature, VCT also provides the opportunity to create a lens through which to explore success instead of deficit. This model, akin to the work of scholars such as Quaye & Harper (2015) in producing narratives of successful Black men, focuses on why veteran students are successful instead of why they often struggle in light of barriers inherent in systems of oppression.

VCT not only further develops the counternarrative, but supports those other voices in the field such as Birchrest (2013) discussing the requirement of acculturation and the attempts to essentialize the veteran population and restrict the population to a singular definition, ignoring the multifaceted identity of the population, as well as of each individual student. Through the incorporation of this theory into the field, there is an ability to revisit previously discussed issues such as the feeling of alienation that student

veterans feel on campus (Elliot et al., 2011), or the importance of allies for the population on campus (Osborne, 2014). The eleven core tenets of VCT, outlined below, can be used in order to establish a critical understanding of the current landscape of higher education literature with regard to the research conducted on the student veteran population:

1. Structures, policies, and processes privilege civilians over veterans.
2. Veterans experience various forms of oppression and marginalization including microaggressions.
3. Veterans are victims of deficit thinking in higher education
4. Veterans occupy a third space on the border of multiple conflicting and interacting power structures, languages, and systems.
5. VCT values narratives and counternarratives of veterans
6. Veterans experience multiple identities at once.
7. Veterans are constructed (written) by civilians, often as deviant characters.
8. Veterans are more appropriately positioned to inform policy and practice regarding veterans.
9. Some services advertised to serve veterans are ultimately serving civilian interests.
10. Veterans cannot be essentialized.
11. Veteran culture is built on a culture of respect, honor, and trust.

Narrative Inquiry as a Framework

Though explained in detail in Chapter 3, it is important to establish here in general terms the nature of narrative inquiry methodology (Polkinghorne, 1995;

Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, Clandinin & Connelly, 2007; Kim, 2016). This understanding is paramount for this study, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that the use of additional frameworks in narrative inquiry as formulistic and confining to the narratives of those that participate in the study, limiting the ability for fully exploring the lived experience of each participant. Each narrative was explored utilizing the three-dimensional approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) wherein the experiences of the participants were nested, by the researcher, in the appropriate temporal, spatial and societal context with regard to both the initial experience and its temporal relation to the interviews. After the narratives were developed, the lens of VCT was applied to examine the experiences.

Delimitations

In order to more clearly define this study, several delimitations have been established. First, the Marine Corps officers that participated in this study were required to have served as an enlisted reservist, received a commission, and served as an officer. Secondly, the reserve officers interviewed had, at minimum, the rank of Captain, served for over ten years, and must be currently serving in the Select Marine Corps Reserve (SMCR) at a drilling unit or in an individual mobilization augment (IMA) detachment, but not on a drilling status during the interviews. There are numerous reasons for these limitations. First, by requiring the participants to have reached the rank of Captain, and have been in for over a decade, the participants are what is considered by the Department of Defense to be “careerists.” Being established as a careerist affords the researcher the ability to explore the lived experience of someone that has maximized the utility of their

undergraduate degree by leveraging their education and obtaining a commission. The second reason for these limitations is to ensure that the participants have had time to perform within their career fields. Interviewing individuals that were serving in the ranks of second lieutenant or first lieutenant would yield starkly different results with regard to lived experiences as these individuals would still be actively experiencing the transition between the ranks of enlisted service to the ranks of the officer corps.

Finally, the researcher, having served within the United States Marine Corps for greater than 13 years, has well established professional relationships within the organization. This experience afforded the opportunity to leverage existing relationships in order to facilitate research into the lived experience of these individuals. Attempting to create a study that explored the lived experiences of all seven uniformed services (to include those serving in the United States Public Health Service Commissioned Corps and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Commissioned Officer Corps) would have given the appearance of attempting to create generalizable information and would have also fallen short of exploring the numerous pathways towards educational attainment that exist within each branch of service. By focusing on a single branch, multiple avenues are able to be explored and a better understanding of the lived experience of servicemembers from that branch can begin.

Positionality and Reflexivity

As a researcher, I am an insider for this subpopulation. I joined the Marine Corps Reserve in September of 2006. I was activated in 2008 and served on my first year of active duty time outside of initial training. At the end of that active stint, I began my

pursuit of higher education utilizing my education benefits. The four-year public institution that I went to had difficulties navigating my benefits and there were times that I would not receive them until the last month of the semester, or I would be expected to repay them to the school as the institution did not realize that I was not to receive the entirety of my G.I. Bill as I had only served a year of active duty outside of training at that point. Due to experiences such as these, I have an understanding of the problems faced and the implications through my own intimate experiences.

Reflecting upon the experience on conducting this research, I find that it brought many memories back regarding my own experiences that I had forgotten. As a researcher that is an insider in the population, I could not help but to identify with many of the experiences that were shared, having had similar experiences myself. This was something that I had to be mindful of throughout the interviews, ensuring that my voice in the narrative development process was developed through the questions and guiding the interviews only.

As a researcher, developing my own path in the narrative inquiry methodology, I found that though it is not standard to do so, sharing my narratives at times throughout their development allowed for me to better explore the experiences of the participants. The shared voice of the narrative, as described by Bakhtin (1981), is more clearly obtained in this way, ensuring that the researcher's voice does not subsume that of the participant in narrative construction.

Definition of Terms

To better understand the lived experience of the student veteran, several key terms should be clearly defined. Such terms include: Active Duty, Reservist, Drill Status, SMCR, Individual Mobilization Augment (IMA) IRR, PME, Joint Service Transcripts, Military Occupation Specialty (MOS), G. I. Bill, Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH), Vocation Rehabilitation, Reserve Education Assistance Program (REAP), and Title 10 orders.

- *Active Duty.* While the concept of being on active duty might initially be understood as an individual serving on active duty, there are nuanced differences in types of active duty, and therefore nuanced differences in veteran status. While all servicemembers are, or will be considered, veterans, not all receive veteran benefits. A reservist, even if on active duty orders, is still a reservist and not an active duty Marine in the eyes of the Department of Defense and the Department of Veteran Affairs.
- *Reservist.* Every branch of the armed services has a reserve branch. The reservist is traditionally expected to perform military duties one weekend a month and two weeks a year, but this may vary on which branch of the reserve a servicemember served. While National Guard members have similar work schedules with regard to one weekend a month two weeks a year, they are distinct from the reserve population due to Title 10. This is the traditional understanding of the reservist identity.

- *Drill Status.* To be on drill status, or to be drilling, is when a reservist is on their monthly service time. A typical monthly drill obligation can be anywhere in length between one- and five-days Annual training is not considered drilling status.
- *The Select Marine Corps Reserve (SMCR)*, also known as the United States Marine Corps Reserve (USMCR), is the reserve branch of the United States Marine Corps. There are two primary categories within the SMCR, excluding the traditional reservist. These are the Individual Mobilization Augmentee and the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR). These individuals are also categorized as reservists.
- *Individual Mobilization Augments (IMA)* Reserve Detachments that allow for non-traditional drill schedules. These schedules depend on the needs of the unit and can vary from anywhere between the traditional drill schedule, a six-week activation, or even a year-long activation. These individuals are still considered reservists.
- *The Individual Ready Reserve (IRR)* has no drilling requirement for the Marine servicemember, but it does require a mandatory one-day-a-year, in-person evaluation of the servicemember to ensure that the servicemember maintains all administrative responsibilities until they are no longer under obligation to the military. The servicemember is still able to obtain a satisfactory year towards retirement in the IRR without actively drilling, however, the ability to obtain

retirement credit is typically relegated to unpaid formats including professional military education.

- *Professional Military Education (PME)* is composed of both required, and optional, education courses that further the individual's abilities in both their occupational field as well as their knowledge of their branch of service and the mission of that branch. Most, but not all, of these courses are regionally accredited and have been evaluated by the American Council on Education (ACE). Student veterans can provide a list of their credits obtained through these organizations by obtaining their Joint Service Transcripts, though these credits do not have to translate to credits in the civilian program attended by the student veteran.
- *Joint Service Transcripts (JST)* are provided by the DoD, and compile all educational credits obtained by a servicemember, regardless of which branch they were obtained from. The credits found in these transcripts come from formal school training, as well as correspondence courses that are optional and often taken as electives to further an individual's understanding of a specific field of knowledge within military sciences.
- *Military Occupation Specialty (MOS)*. In initial training for both enlisted servicemembers and officer, individuals are assigned a Military Occupation Specialty (MOS). This is the individual's primary job for the duration of their time in the service, though there is the possibility of redesignating into another field.

- *G. I. Bill.* The educational benefits of the G.I. Bill saw three iterations in the last eleven years alone. The G.I. Bill was initially developed to provide a buffer to the civilian workforce and absorb unemployment numbers of veterans returning from World War II, while also giving the servicemember skills to help reintegrate back into society. This bill will pay up to 100% of instate tuition and potentially more if the yellow-ribbon program is in effect with the specific university.
- *Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH)* The G.I. Bill also will pay the basic allowance for housing (BAH) for the rank of sergeant for a student veteran. This equates to the payment of an individual's rent based on the zip code of the institution, though there is a set standard BAH level for those attending online programs.
- *Vocational Rehabilitation.* Another, lesser-known, education benefit provided by the Department of Veteran Affairs. Unlike the G.I. Bill, this policy is designed to support veterans that received a disability rating based on injuries sustained during service that impede their ability to pursue their career. Not all student veterans are eligible to receive this education benefit as it is reserved only for those servicemembers that are not on active duty and receive disability payments for a disability that in some way limits their ability to pursue their original career pathway.
- *Reserve Education Assistance Program (REAP).* A now-defunct program which originally was implemented to provide education assistance to the reservist student that had not been activated and therefore was not entitled to the entirety

of G.I. Bill education benefits. This program ceased to exist due to an expectation of the G.I. Bill to cover this population's benefits.

- *Title 10.* Title 10 is the United States Code that establishes the federal roles and responsibilities of the military reserves for all branches of service. When on orders under Title 10, the servicemember is on Federal orders. While a National Guard member can, under certain circumstances, be activated under Title 10 if there is a need, they will traditionally be activated under Title 32, which governs state militias.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter One provides an introduction into the topic of student veterans, benefits, Veteran Critical Theory, narrative theory, and the current research narrative for student veterans. The focus of this chapter was to introduce the reader to the misuse of the deficit model with regard to this population, and the lack of access to lived experiences and narratives of the reserve student veteran. Chapter Two introduces the literature as it currently exists on the topic of student veterans. In this chapter, the themes most often found in student veteran literature, Schlossberg's (1984) Transition Theory, as well as deficit modeling, and Veteran Critical Theory are explored. Chapter Three outlines the narrative inquiry methodological approach used in this study with all of the nuance involved in the development of a cohesive shared narrative. This chapter also delves into how the critical lens is to be used through Veteran Critical Theory. Chapter Four provides analysis of the interviews through the development of shared narratives of the participants lived experiences, and Chapter Five discusses the findings, as well as the

implications of the research for the student veteran researcher with regard to practice, theory, and methodology. Further implications of this research on the reservist student veterans as individuals, the policymakers that create and navigate policy development for the student veteran population, and the administrators that engage with the reservist population regarding policy and practice, and the institution administration. Finally, calls for future research into the reservist student veteran population, as well as more granular topics related to the student veteran population are call for in the final paragraphs of this study.

Chapter Summary

This chapter contains an overview of the topic of higher education as it relates to the reserve student veteran, as well as the rationale and the scope for this study. There are clear differences, such as the education benefits a reservist is eligible to receive (VA, 2019a) which clearly alter the experiences of the reserve population from those of other student veterans. This subpopulation, still serving in the military while pursuing higher education attainment, face numerous barriers, including vague policies regarding the benefits they are eligible to receive and the navigation of existing within multiple identities simultaneously.

The topic of reservist student and National Guard students is one that is understudied, with the literature that does exist focusing on repatriation into the workforce (Bull Schaefer, Wiegand, Macdermid, Green, & Welch, 2013), but not the repatriation of the reservists into an environment of higher education. By exploring this subpopulation of student veterans, there are also clear benefits for the non-reserve

population, as it explores differences that might also account for what might otherwise be seen as inconsistencies in the data. In order to engage in developing a counternarrative for this population, Veteran Critical Theory has been used to focus the exploration of the lived experiences as shared by the participants.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

“It is important to put policies in place before issues fade out and veterans move off the radar. I encourage the higher education community to act now and reach out to senior administrators and policymakers with considerations for what will be needed to support student veteran success for the next five to 10 years.” (DiRamio, 2017, pg. IX)

The Reservist in Higher Education

While recent years have seen the development of research into student veterans, there is a dearth of research exploring the reservist population, though this group makes up approximately 33% of the veteran population (VA, 2018). DiRamio (2017) described student veteran transition research as the first wave of all research into the population, declaring that the field is saturated with information on this phenomenon and it is now time to delve into other topics regarding the student veteran population. While this description of the field is generally correct, the call to future research fails to account for large subpopulations of the student veteran population in which experiences occur that do not align with the accepted narrative of the population. Concerning the reservist, there is a lack of understanding of the multiple transitions that these individuals are capable of experiencing due to multiple deployments and discharges within the span of a typical six-year obligation in the reserve component.

In this literature review, I illuminate current deficiencies and the insidious nature of deficit modeling as it exists within the extant literature, contextualizing the implications of these issues with relation to the experience of the student reservist. To this end, this literature review begins with grounding the reader in an understanding of

the reservist identity and the education benefits associated with it. Following that, this review illuminates the extent deficit modeling exists within the field, and then a critical framework is presented that was used to develop a counternarrative to the overarching meta-narrative.

The Student Reservist in Research

Existing research that begins to reveal the lived experiences of the student reservists is extremely rare. There are two articles that, while not explicitly exploring the reservist student veteran population, provide partial insight into potential experiences of this population. Rumann and Hamrick (2010) explored the transition of students from combat to the classroom among those previously enrolled in college. The students interviewed were not required to be in the National Guard or in the Reserve of any branch, however, due to the complex identity of the reserve population, this was the primary subpopulation from which the study was able to draw participants. One issue that was identified in this study with regard to the reserve population was the difficulty of maintaining peer relationships on campus due to deployments. Finding their way back to college after going to combat, reservists saw their friends much further along in their programs, if they had not already graduated from the respective program of study.

The other study that focused on transitions specific to the reserve and National Guard populations, conducted by Bull Schaefer, Wiegand, MacDermid Wadsworth, Green, and Welch (2013), did not explore the student veteran. Instead, this study explored the repatriation of the veteran into the workforce following one or more deployments. While this transition research was not specific to the higher education

environment, the complexity of relationships and legal policies surrounding supporting the transition off of service orders and back into the civilian sector made the findings relatable to the reservist student veteran population.

Beyond the previous two articles, the focus of student veteran research is almost exclusively on the transition phenomenon as it relates to the overarching student veteran identity. The Schlossberg (1984) theory of transition permeates the student veteran literature and guides the direction of much of the field in past years (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, 2017; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Doe & Langstraat, 2014; Ford & Vignare, 2016; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wilson, Smith, Lee, & Stevenson, 2013). Variations in these studies often focus into three categories: implications of transitions on state/national level transition support, institutional policy and advocacy, and student level research. Understanding that a study might focus on one facet of the experience, each of these levels has clear implications on the others and cannot be completely separated from the others for the purposes of any study.

Nuance of Reserve Educational Benefits

To begin to understand the experience of the reserve student veteran in higher education, one must first understand the education benefits that exist for the student veteran. The G.I. Bill was introduced via the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, coming into existence following World War II. Of the many benefits available for the veteran, education benefits were but one. As the decades have passed, there have been

several iterations of the education portion of the G.I. Bill (Post 9/11 G.I. Bill and Forever G.I. Bill are two recent examples). These bills have tailored the benefits that exist for the student veteran to coincide with the needs of students from each period of time (Radford, 2009).

The G.I. Bill is awarded to a veteran based upon their individual level of service, in incremental increases for the number of months of service on active duty a veteran has. The levels of benefits by time served are currently broken down as follows:

40% - 90 days or more on active duty (excluding initial training)

50% - 180 days or more on active duty (excluding initial training)

60% - 360 days or more on active duty (excluding initial training)

70% - 540 days or more on active duty (excluding initial training)

80% - 720 days or more on active duty (including initial training except in instances where the inclusion is the singular reason for meeting the 80% threshold in which case the student will receive benefits at the 70% level)

90% - 900 days or more on active duty (including initial training)

100% - 1080 days or more on active duty (including initial training),

or 30% or more consecutive days of activation with a disability-related discharge.

(VA, 2019b)

It is critical to clarify that, while initial training is excluded from most levels presented above, all activations for training (such as the two-week summer annual training) also do not count towards these percentages. To the point, the policy also states that if an individual reaches the 80% threshold without considering their initial training, they are

then able to add their initial training to their day counts. This policy clearly establishes a further limitation through which a reservist might meet the 80% number of days but would only be eligible to use 70% as there are almost no scenarios in which this issue would apply to an active duty servicemember. Once a student rates any of their G.I. Bill, they also rate a basic allowance for housing (BAH), which is the equivalent of what the cost of housing a sergeant (with dependents) on active duty would be for the zip code that the student resides in. If the student attends school online, they will receive a set online BAH. The BAH is also prorated, like the rest of the benefits, meaning that a veteran that served 90 days on active duty would only rate 40% of whatever the BAH is for their zip code (VA, 2019a).

Expanding upon these benefits is the Yellow Ribbon Program, a program designed to empower the student veteran by giving them access to education at private institutions. The benefit, in the purest form, pays over what the typical G.I. Bill would pay for in-state tuition, with the requirement that the institution be an active participant in the Yellow Ribbon Program (VA, n.d.). For the student veteran to be able to have access to this program, they must meet the following requirements:

- Served thirty-six months or more of active duty
- Be a Purple Heart recipient with an honorable discharge
- Child using transferred benefits
- Child using transferred benefits if their servicemember transferor is at the 100% level

- Effective August 1, 2022, servicemembers at 100% and spouses whose transferor is at the 100% level

While not associated with the G.I. Bill, the Federal Tuition Assistance (TA) program is another opportunity that students have for paying for college. This program applies only to active duty servicemembers, or reservist servicemembers that are activated at the time (United States Marine Corps, 2019). Utilizing this benefit, a student veteran is able to take no more than two courses a semester, and no more than six a year. TA only pays directly for tuition and does not cover any other costs or fees associated with the courses being taken.

While all of these are policy concerns, there is a lack of understanding of how they unfold in the lives of the individual student reservist. There is an understanding in the current body of research that these complex programs can be difficult to navigate (DiRamio et al., 2008; Vacchi, Hammond, & Diamond, 2017), however, it falls short of understanding the lived experience of the individual. As people work to make sense of programs, and experience them firsthand, unique situations arise that need to be explored in order to inform future policy on implications to the individual.

A Critique of the Mainstream Narrative and Deficit Modeling

In this study, I argue that the narratives of reservists vary drastically from the mainstream narrative told of them in the text and subtext of predominate student veteran research. True to the VCT lens that informs this study, therefore, my reading of the literature is necessarily made through a critical stance as well. This is necessary in order to establish the dominant narrative to which the counternarratives respond. The dominant

narrative, regardless of the particular area or type of question that researchers pose in relation to student veterans, overwhelmingly presents a problematic deficit perspective framing the research problem, questions, and findings. For instance, whether it is Ackerman et al. (2009) finding that the most difficult transition a veteran ever experiences is coming to a college campus, or DiRamio et al. (2008) claiming that these transitions cause student veterans to be unable to retain relationships, the concept of a broken veteran is the primary narrative of student veteran research. There are even findings that state some student veterans have been trained to be angry and have difficulties switching off this anger (Demers, 2011).

Some researchers go so far as to describe assets gained from the student veteran's military experience, but then clarify that certain assets of the student veteran population are also liabilities. One such example of this occurring would be Schiavone and Gentry (2014) stating that even though the work ethic that is developed through service in the military is an asset to the student veteran, it becomes a liability due to our expectations of the non-veteran student population being at the same level. These framings, of ultimately blaming individuals for their own struggles and achievement gaps (Davis & Museus, 2019) are harmful to veterans since it misidentifies student veterans as performing at a level below their peers, and creates an environment that fails to develop the abilities that these individuals bring with them from their years of experience and training in their branch of the military.

Deficit perspectives such as this are very common to the notion of veteran transition, one of the most common phenomena studied in regard to student veterans.

However, deficit perspectives are found in relation to other questions too. Smith, Vilhauer, and Chafos (2017) found that student service members and student veterans functioned worse than their civilian counterparts when it came to integrating into the higher education environment, citing mental health issues and risks such as Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) as the major contributing factor for why student veterans could not adjust to the new environment. As with much of the research that exists in this field, the onus for change is on the student veteran with an assumption that their social and mental conditioning is inadequate and falls short of the needs of the superior culture of higher education. While this is a recurrent theme in the student mental health field (Widome, Kehle, et al., 2011; Widome, Laska, Gulden, Fu, & Lust, 2011; Wilson et al., 2013), a bias can also be found in much of student affairs research into this population.

De La Garza, Manuel, Wood, and Harris III (2016) utilized a structural equation model based on data from the community college survey of men to explore achievement in their research and conclude that there is a need for institutions to assist the student veteran population in the development of self-efficacy skills, discounting those skills that they learned through roles in the military. This position taken by the authors is detrimental to the reserve student veteran as well as the student veteran population as a whole. Having administrators believe that these individuals are in need of development of self-efficacy skills implies that these students have not served in dynamic environments where they had to make decisions, potentially life or death, while leading a team. To imply that these individuals need more help with developing self-efficacy skills than

traditional students creates a perception of ignorance that is then codified by institutions and administrators to continue marginalizing the entire student veteran population.

What follows is a review of the various areas of student veteran research and a critique of how in each one the implicit, or explicit, deficit perspective creates barriers to clearly centering the narratives of veterans themselves, and in the case of this study in particular, reservists, in their own telling and on their own merits. The areas of research reviewed are education benefits, for-profit education, the institutions position in student veteran support, transition, and the development of a counternarrative.

Education Benefits Research

The current iteration of the G.I. Bill, known as the Forever G.I. Bill, was preceded by the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill. With each iteration, sweeping changes are made to better support the student veteran in their pursuit of education. Though there are numerous studies that explore the policies and implications, Cate (2014) and the Student Veterans of America (SVA) have made one of the largest impacts on this field of student veteran research through the creation of the Million Record Project (MRP). Using information from the Department of Education, the Department of Veteran Affairs, and other federal organizations, the SVA (2019) were able to compile data and create a more fully developed site picture than a researcher could have developed by researcher data on student veterans from any one particular source of information.

It is important to understand what is provided by the MRP to understand the critical flaws that exist within the current literature on student veterans. The reality is that utilizing a single dataset yields incomplete information, which is an issue that is further

magnified in research by researchers then inadequately comparing their results to other student groups. This can be seen in research done by Radford and Weko (2011) and Radford (2009), where the researchers utilize National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to illustrate that it takes student veterans longer to graduate than other students. However, the researchers do acknowledge in their limitations that this research compares the student veteran to traditional students but fail to acknowledge that these individuals are not the actual peers of the student veteran population. Cate (2014) found that, when compared to non-traditional civilian peers, student veterans graduated at a higher rate, illustrating the need for ensuring the group is compared to their true peers from the non-traditional student population. While the research by Cate was groundbreaking, it does not speak directly to the experience of the student, instead focusing on quantitative data, which fails to account for the particulars of the individual experience navigating the process of attending an institution of higher learning.

There are two systemic issues that present themselves at the policy level and appear numerous times throughout the field of research. The first is military credit value (Barry, Whiteman, & Wadsworth, 2014; Sutton, 2018). As servicemembers come out of the military, there are set credit values for military training established by the American Council of Education (ACE), however, institutions vary on the level of credits which they will allow to transfer in from military experience. These student are told that courses taken in the military have a value, have been accredited, and transfer towards their education. This is not the reality that they experience, however, when entering into their institute of higher education. These students will face many, if not all, of their credits

being considered not applicable, and will be often forced to accept somewhere between three credits or none, even, though their Joint Service Transcript states that they have upwards of 50 undergraduate credits that are accredited through ACE. This leaves the student veteran uninformed of what their experience in education is worth, and unable to know how to translate that experience towards degree attainment. The second issue that presents itself has to do with a policy known colloquially as the 90/10 loophole.

For-profit Education – Cui Bono

The 90/10 loophole (Riegel, 2013) is a policy by which for-profit colleges and universities have their use of the G.I. Bill education benefits limited. It states that while one of these institutions is capable of receiving federal student loans, they are not allowed to have more than 90% of their student body paying entirely with these loans. To this end, the G.I. Bill benefits count as a way around finding enough individuals that would be willing to pay full price to make up for the remaining 10%. This loophole around the 90/10 policy leaves the student veteran open for exploitation (Irwin, 2016), which can hinder the educational progression of these students as funding by many intuitions is higher in advertising than it is in supporting functional areas such as library access and reference capabilities. Beyond the lack of support, the for-profit industry is the largest consumer of G.I. Bill benefits while also having the lowest student veteran graduation rates (Jones & Fox Garrity, 2017).

While gainful employment statistics have been found wanting (McGuire, 2012), and unethical practices have caused numerous institutions to lose their ability to be paid through the G.I. Bill (Schade, 2014), the mentality of judging these institutions negatively

supports a misunderstanding of why student veterans choose them. The assumption here is, again, that student veterans are not educated enough to make correct decisions on where to attend college, and therefore make the “mistake” of pursuing a for-profit education. This mentality within the research, as well as within institutions of higher education, blames an inferior student and not the inferior education that can often be offered by public and private-not-for-profit universities. Carnevale (2006) found that for-profit universities have led the field of higher education institutions regarding the education of student servicemembers, finding ways for non-traditional students that were not able to remain in one location for extended periods of time to graduate. As these individuals will often attempt to commence their educational pursuits while being transient in nature, the flexibility that these programs have offered support the student veteran in ways that until recently have not existed at other institutions. While this is not condoning the actions of for-profit institutions, it does illustrate the institutional bias that these students are incapable of knowing what they need, while discounting that the institutions that are preferred do not necessarily support the needs of this population.

Institutional Perspectives and Positionality

Beyond research into state and national level policy, a substantial amount of all research into this population is conducted at the institutional level, focused on how to best hypothetically support the student population. At the community college level, Persky and Oliver (2010) found that a difficult part of the transition for students was the unknown, including the ability to navigate the system of higher education, which discounts the student veterans ability to embrace the unknown, a skill that they have

utilized within the military. Concepts such as program streamlining, faculty, advisor, and counselor training, and veteran-friendly campus workshops were all recommended in an effort to ease the difficulty of navigation at this level, which were findings shared by Griffin and Gilbert (2015) and Hitt et al. (2015). Doe and Langstraat (2014) discuss an incident in 2011 where a community college failed to assist a student veteran in need and instead suspended him for a clear call for help, an incident which could have been avoided with better training of those that are working with this student population. The reality that is found within the current literature is that, although many institutions want to be known as veteran friendly, these institutions often develop programs that give the appearance of offering support to the community without providing tangible support in areas needed, a flaw that can be at least partially attributed to the deficit perspective that pervades the current body of research.

Doyle and Peterson (2005) called for the need of creation of programs on campus to assist this population based on their findings, while Naphan and Elliott (2015) found the need for the same, but felt that it was due to it being difficult for student veterans to transition as they are too used to taking orders and not capable of thinking for themselves. While a student veteran will have spent years following orders, the military does not create robots. These individuals are guided to become dynamic thinkers, able to create quick solutions often with only 70% of the data. This concept that student veterans are not able to think without the help of others that did not serve in the military is built on a deficit model and, it should be noted, has been contested by some researchers in the field such as Vacchi (2012) and Hammond (2016). These authors both admonish the deficit

perspective, and work to study veterans in other perspectives. By doing this, these authors lead the way in supporting future research into the student veteran population as a whole, but also into subpopulations such as reserve and National Guard servicemembers.

Regarding the concept of institutional programs of support, McBain, Kim, Cook, and Snead (2012) found that a high number of programs exist on campuses throughout the United States that claim to offer support, however, there is a shortfall in any way to evaluate the level of support that each of these programs actually presents to the student. To avoid issues such as this, Dillard and Yu (2018) explore the Green Zone Program. This program has approximately 20 colleges and universities participating, including flagship universities such as the University of Virginia. The Green Zone program not only supports student veterans but implements programs to train faculty on campus on how to best support and advocate for these students. The need for this type of training was highly supported based on the findings of Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones, and Sulak (2011) with an emphasis on support of students with PTSD. While these programs can be beneficial to many, it is important to understand that the number of veterans that are diagnosed with PTSD rests around 15%, a small portion of the veteran population (National Center for PTSD, 2018). With the focus of energy for many programs on this 15%, there is a shortage of support for those reserve student veterans that do not fit into this category.

Despite programs like those listed above, support continues to vary largely between size, location, and type of institution (Moore, 2017). While there is research at the community college, and public university (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014), students feel

that they continue to have less support than their civilian counterparts in academics, in non-academics, and within social contexts on campus (Kim & Cole, 2013). Finally, beyond the call for research in different types of institutions, Canfield and Weiss (2015) find a need for the support to be broken down to the level of single academic field, such as social work.

The reality of institutional research as explored above, is that the majority of these programs enable the institution to present itself as veteran friendly, assisting in bringing those students into the institution to use their G.I. Bill benefits. Once the veterans are at the institution, the student veteran often finds actual support lacking, and this is especially the case with the reservist who can often not even rate the minimal support that other student veterans have access to.

The Individual and Transition

Studies that focus upon the individual student veteran often do so while exploring their interactions with regard to the institutional policies, as well as their peers within the institution. Wilson et al. (2013), focusing on transition through the Schlossberg (1984) theory of transition and the theory of integration (Tinto, 1987), attempted to explore the social and academic integration of the student veteran population. Wilson argued that the students within their study prioritized military service, and veteraness, over their identity as a student of the institution. The students, holding the military as a primary concern and the college as a secondary concern, developed a scenario in which they had the potential to experience more difficulty when initially integrating into the student population at their college or university. This issue of sense of belonging within a culture is qualified by

non-veterans, expecting the student veteran to desire to fully integrate into the groups that the university would traditionally label the student into. Although the sense of belonging here is seen as important, it is premised on the singular initial identity of the student, ultimately disregarding their identity as a veteran as meaningful. While it is true that student veterans navigate multiple identities simultaneously, attempting to negotiate which identity the individual should most align with belongs to the individual, and not to the researcher or the institution. By stating that there is an inherent issue with the student veteran identifying with veterans over non-veteran students places this population in a position where they are told that associating with others that share the identity is a negative, which can cause further isolation. As the reserve student veteran further straddles an identity that walks between the civilian population and the military, it is important to acknowledge this identity in meaningful ways.

Several studies began the exploration of the transition prior to the servicemember coming off of orders. Ford and Vignare (2016), when researching first-time student veteran learners, found that the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) which is required by every servicemember coming off of active duty, did not actually prepare them for commencing with the pursuit of education as it simply states that benefits exist without explaining how access to those benefits is navigated. Furtek (2012) similarly delves into this issue, however, this author explores the need for the development of a transition course for the individual in response to this issue. While it is important for the student veteran to understand their own benefits, no other student is expected to have a registrar level of understanding of education benefits prior to enrolling at an institution, with the

institution having individuals in place to guide most students. A limited staff within the university system is not enough to support the overtly complicated benefits process that is the G.I. Bill.

Similar to the concept of developing an institution specific TAP, Ewert, Van Puymbroeck, Frankel, and Overholt (2011) explore a single specific program that has already been created, the Outward Bound Veteran Program. This program does not focus on deficit modeling, but how to best support those student veterans that have been left with issues related to PTSD and offers support for the student veteran through fully funded wilderness courses designed to help with reintegration and healing. In a similar tone, Blevins, Roca, and Spencer (2011) introduced the concept of ACT-based workshops that are designed to support success with regard to standardized tests with the desired result of college acceptance. While these workshops are beneficial to some, many institutions waive standardized test requirements for those that have served, further limiting the benefits that might stem from such a workshop.

To date, transition research and programs of assistance in transition, have focused exclusively on the student veteran leaving active duty, or services rendered to those that served on active duty specifically. As the reserve population, and therefore the student reservist population, continues to expand, the understanding of how to support the student veteran must move on from focusing on the active duty transition and move to fully understand how to support all student veterans.

Resilience and the Development of Counternarratives

While there is no single counternarrative, Vacchi (2012) offers a perspective that focuses on the strengths of this population of students. As an insider in the population, and a retired servicemember, Vacchi approaches the subject matter with an understanding of what the student veteran is capable of, what they bring to the table, and how educational attainment can best be supported. Through doing this, his research and counternarrative align with the recent research findings in the Million Record Project conducted by the Student Veterans of America.

The Student Veterans of America created a unique database in partnership with multiple federal agencies including the Department of Education and the Department of Veteran Affairs. This project would come to be known as the Million Record Project (Cate, 2014). What Cate found when analyzing this dataset was that, despite the overarching narrative of student veterans in higher education, student veterans actually graduate at a higher rate than their true peers in higher education. When comparing the student veteran to all other non-traditional students, they illustrated higher levels of degree attainment.

This counternarrative is continued in the exploration of conceptual models of the student veteran experience Vacchi et al. (2017) and through new frameworks utilized to explore the veteran identity and perception of self (Hammond, 2016), however, it is not a singular narrative of opposition. Birchrest (2013) described the field of higher education as one with an expectation of the acculturation of the student veteran using the implicit understanding on behalf of the institutions that the culture of this population does not

align with the values of higher education. This fallacy discounts that veterans are often found to have higher levels of participation, interaction, and collaborative abilities than the rest of the student population, even if they do often express a lower sense of belonging (Durdella & Kim, 2012). Similarly, Zhang (2018) found evidence that even those student veterans identifying as having a service-related disability, these students will consistently illustrate higher levels of resiliency towards academic completion.

Veteran Critical Theory

Veteran Critical Theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017), was developed utilizing the extensive theories of critical race and critical queer theories. Within VCT eleven tenets were created, which are then used to explore the student veteran population through a critical lens. These tenets are:

1. Structures, policies, and processes privilege civilians over veterans.
2. Veterans experience various forms of oppression and marginalization including microaggressions.
3. Veterans are victims of deficit thinking in higher education
4. Veterans occupy a third space on the border of multiple conflicting and interacting power structures, languages, and systems.
5. VCT values narratives and counternarratives of veterans
6. Veterans experience multiple identities at once.
7. Veterans are constructed (written) by civilians, often as deviant characters.
8. Veterans are more appropriately positioned to inform policy and practice regarding veterans.

9. Some services advertised to serve veterans are ultimately serving civilian interests.
10. Veterans cannot be essentialized.
11. Veteran culture is built on a culture of respect, honor, and trust.

Tenet one provides insight into issues that only veterans face, such as not having their accredited college courses valued. Tenet two speaks to the microaggressions that are experienced by the student veteran, such as researchers stating that abilities gained in the military could be harmful to working with non-veteran students, and must be seen as a hinderance instead of a capability added (Schivovone & Gentry, 2014). Of the first three tenets, tenet three speaks to the overarching narrative that is student veteran research, that student veterans are victims of deficit thinking.

From here tenets four and six describes the third space that a veteran occupies, where multiple identities can come into conflict with one another, and with tenet five then expressing the need to share the narratives of the individual. These narratives are key to understanding the experience of the reservist student veteran, where even multiple identities within the student veteran population come together. The need for these narratives and counternarratives is understood through tenet seven, that veteran identity is often created by civilians (here researchers into student veterans) with these individuals being identified as deviant characters. This shortfall in the researcher perspective essentially calls for insiders, as seen in tenet eight, to conduct the research. These researchers, misidentifying elements of the student veteran population, misidentify what is needed to best support these students, and will often create programs advertised to

support student veterans, but ultimately only serve the civilian interests of the school. The reality is that veterans as a whole cannot be essentialized (tenet 10) and that the current body of research denigrates the culture or respect, honor, and trust (tenet 11) that veteran culture is based upon.

This theory not only further develops the counternarrative, but supports those other voices in the field such as Birchrest (2013) discussing the prevalence of requiring acculturation and the attempts to essentialize the veteran population and restrict the population to a singular definition, ignoring the multifaceted identity of the population, as well as of each individual student. Through the incorporation of this theory into the field there is an ability to revisit previously discussed issues such as the feeling of alienation that student veterans feel on campus (Elliot, Gnzalez, & Larsen, 2011), or the importance of allies for the population on campus (Osborne, 2014).

While VCT has not been used directly in peer-reviewed empirical articles, the issues defined in the tenets of the theory have manifested in a majority of research regarding student veterans. The marginalization of this population, as well as the subpopulations of veterans within the context of multiple simultaneous identities, is one that was explored by Doe and Langstraat (2014). In their article, they discuss how systemic inequality existed even at the initial development of the G.I. Bill education benefits. Specifically, when the bill was first developed, the authors point out that if a woman were to serve, the benefits filtered to the male head of house. Other groups of minority veterans were similarly targeted to have their benefits reduced, and the bill itself acts as an incentive to entice those in poverty, or from lower income backgrounds and

neighborhoods, to join an all-volunteer force by offering free education (Wurster, Rinaldi, Woods, & Liu, 2013).

With the evolution of the benefits mitigating some of the marginalizations faced, there is still much progress to be made regarding supporting the female student veterans. DiRamio, Jarvis, Iverson, Seher, and Anderson (2015) explored this topic through the lens of help seeking on campus among the female student veteran. This study was further qualified by Iverson, Seher, DiRamio, Jarvis, and Anderson (2016) when they explored the identity of the female veteran while it is nested into the larger, hypermasculine identity that permeates the student veteran population. Demers (2013), in the same tone, explored integration and transition of the female veteran with regard to identity negotiation on campus.

Though the exploration of the female student veteran is underway, there have also been two identities that are also becoming more noticeable. Pelts and Albright (2015) explore sexual orientation and identity among student veterans, focusing on mental health. At the time this article was published, veterans had only been allowed to be open about their sexuality while in service for five years, calling for support of a student population that had long been asked to veil part of their identity even after they were discharged from the military or face potentially losing their benefits if they were still in the IRR.

Additionally, when discussing G.I. Bill usage on campus, researchers must understand that veterans are allowed to pass along their benefits to their spouse or children, a population explored by Hawn (2011), if they are willing to incur an additional

service obligation beyond their initial service contract. While this population is service related in a sense, they do not share the same experiences, or identities as the student veterans, and must therefore be separated from the student veteran population while conducting research. This can be difficult in many ways due to the way G.I. Bill usage is recorded.

Finally, the disabled student veteran is a subpopulation that is central to the current discussion of subpopulations of student veterans. While most of the research that exists concerns cognitive-related disability, such as PTSD or TBI, others have pursued research on other disabilities. Parks and Walker (2015) explored students veterans on campus that identified as disabled, with participants sharing that they were disabled, and rated disability pay through the Department of Veterans Affairs. Church (2009), instead of focusing on disability rating, chose to focus on the transition experience of the disabled student veteran as they returned home, creating a dynamic with multiple transitions occurring simultaneously. Both of these articles can be viewed along with the findings from Arminio, Kudo Grabosky, and Lang (2015), in which the authors delve into the systemic inequity of the disabled population with regard to education support for students on campuses. This is a dangerous shortfall for this population as there have been connections between disability due to service and enrollment (Zhang, 2018). While disability support on campuses often extends to physical disability, there is often a shortage of support for those student veterans that return with invisible scars and invisible disabilities.

The one thread that existed amongst each of the articles that focused on the subpopulations of student veterans was that microaggressions were often experienced based not just on the veteran identity, but also on other identities assumed by the individual (Palm, 2014). Understanding the shared experience of these unique populations, the findings of Vaccaro (2015), state that one must not assume sameness in this population, that one size does not fit all, is not only poignant, but a call to action amongst researchers.

Conclusion

While the literature above delves into multiple facets of the experience of the student veteran, it falls short of exploring the experience of the individuals as they pursue college. Research at the policy level, or even at the institutional level, does not find how the policies and programs they put into place impact the lived experience of the student veteran as they attempt to navigate their pathway toward educational attainment. Even research at the student level attempts to quantify the experiences of the individuals in order to develop themes that can be used across the entirety of the student veteran population. By not exploring the lived experience of the individual, there is room for policies and programs to fall flat in the ability to support the population they are designed to assist.

Finally, the preponderance of research that exists does so within a deficit model mentality. This idea that veterans are broken and unable to attend college due to being used to following orders, is a stereotype perpetrated upon the student veteran population. By utilizing Veteran Critical Theory in an attempt to understand the experience of the

individual, we move beyond the accepted narrative of the student veteran population, and move into a space in which these individuals are able to express their own counternarrative as they live it during their own search for educational attainment as student veterans through several unique education pathways that exist exclusively for the student veteran population.

Chapter 3: Methodology

“We are not objective inquirers. We are relational inquirers, attentive to the intersubjective, relational, embedded spaces in which lives are lived out. We do not stand metaphorically outside the inquiry but are part of the phenomenon under study.”

(Clandinin, 2013, p. 24)

Theoretical and Analytical Frameworks

Veteran Critical Theory

The tenets of Veteran Critical Theory developed by Phillips and Lincoln (2017), as detailed in chapter two, were used as a framework to explore and understand the lived experience of the participants of this study. It is important to note that, while there was a detailed list of questions to ask participants during the course of interviews, the questions were not designed to be used exhaustively and verbatim. These questions were guiding probes used to engage the participant in their own experience, drawing upon relevant topics to do so. As the conversation progressed, the participants were able to continue to develop their narratives without the use of all of the questions and using lines of inquiry that developed in the moment.

While the tenets were used to develop the probing questions asked during interviews, these questions were used only as a guide to assist in the event of a laconic participant. The tenets were central in the construction of this study and assisted in this study being able to express the need for counternarratives of reserve student veterans, and as a fundamental base upon which this project is built. As we engage in meaning making of the experiences of these three successful officers that were engaged in service during

the time, they began to pursue higher education, a counternarrative of success is developed, facilitated by the researcher. As Clandinin (2013) states, we are not objective inquirers. Acknowledging this allows for an in-depth, guided exploration of the narratives that are shared.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a methodology that, at its essence, amplifies the voices of individuals and their lived experience when those stories might otherwise not be shared. Clandinin (2013) describes the purpose of using the analytical framework of narrative inquiry as a means of drawing on the experience of the individual in a way that will capture the imagination of the audience, enabling the audience to explore not only the lived experience of the participants, but also to use those experiences to understand what it might be like to be a member of the studied population within the context of the system or institution that the audience works within.

Within the context of narrative inquiry, it is important to understand that there is an effort to avoid developing generalizations and generalizable themes, as this is not the intent of this methodology. To try to encapsulate the reservist experience in a set of generalizable themes would discount the unique difficulties and multi-faceted experience that each individual experience in their pursuit of education. Instead, these narratives give the reader the privilege of participating in the exploration of experiences that they would otherwise not have access to (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008).

While the tenets of Veteran Critical Theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) informed the structure of the study and the questions that were to assist in exploration of

experience, the analytical framework of narrative inquiry ultimately nests the lived experiences within the three-dimensional context of spatial, temporal, and social locations of the experience. The first of these, spatial, examines not only the current location of the research as it occurs, but the location of the experiences as they occurred (Clandinin, 2013). The location of the experience adds depth and complexity, which can assist the audience in more fully understanding the nuance of decisions that were made. Factors involving the spatial dimension can range from size of institution, region of institution, to the location of the participants and researcher at the time of the interviews.

The social dimension of the narrative inquiry framework places the lived experiences of the participants within the social context of the time of the experiences. Certain decisions made, or experiences that occur, might appear to the audience to not make sense within the social context of their institution, which is why understanding the social nuances of the experience is critical. The societal norms in the United Kingdom is not be the same as those in the Midwestern region of the United States and understanding this dimension allows for a clearer understanding of the participants experience.

Finally, the temporal context of the experience is essential to understanding the experience. This dimension also has major implications on the other two dimensions, as the social context of an event, or the location of the individual, shifts over time. The participants, sharing their stories from years ago, are also engaging with their own lived experience from years past, which can cause the participant to sometimes attempt to nest their own story within the current temporal context. This is referred to as having the participant “reliving” their experience (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

There are four words (Clandinin, 2013) that exist within the narrative inquiry framework that must be defined in order to understand the experience of the participants. The first of these is that a person “lives” out the experience that they share. This experience can then either actively be shared through “telling” as the events are occurring or shared by “retelling” the story at a later time. The “retelling” of a story, depending on the amount of time following the experience, can lead to the individual “reliving” the experience when they share it, nesting it in current spatial, social, and temporal contexts rather than those that the event occurred within. Understanding these terms, narrative inquiry has two starting points, beginning with living stories or beginning with telling stories. This study focuses on the later, with the three participants telling the stories of their experiences as enlisted reservist student veterans pursuing higher education.

Narrative Inquiry Through a Critical Lens

As discussed in chapter two, VCT affords researchers a critical lens through which experiences can be understood. Tenet five goes as far as stating that within VCT the development of counternarratives is supported and needed. VCT guides the exploration of the lived experience of participants, but it also affords the researcher the opportunity to add their own signature to the narratives that are developed with the participant (Kim, 2016). As the narrative is a project that is created by both the author and the participant, this balance ensures that the narrative is explored in a manner that does not restrict or misrepresent the voice of the participants, and that the researcher is able to fully explore the experiences as they are shared.

Research Design

Research Setting

Understanding the research setting nests the research instantly into the spatial context. The participants, with their geographic locations spread across the United States, were interviewed in one of two ways. The participant had the option of being interviewed via audio only, or through video teleconferencing. These options mitigated the issues of distance, while also providing the researcher and participants to find spaces that are private to explore experiences. The availability for privacy is imperative within the sharing of experience, as it allowed the participant the chance to share openly.

Interview Design

Following approval from the institutional review board (IRB), I proceeded to extend an invitation to three individuals that were known to meet the requirements for participation in the study. After explaining the study, including the scope and purpose, and receiving signed consent forms from the participants, a link to a scheduling program was shared in order to identify times during which the interviews could be scheduled. The Individuals that participated in this study engaged in two interviews, with both interviews lasting approximately one hour.

Immediately following each participant's initial interviews, each interview was transcribed. After the transcription was done, a read through of the transcribed interview was conducted, and a narrative was developed based on the responses during the interview. After this narrative was written, but before the second interview, the developed narrative was submitted to the participants for review. This allowed for the second

interview to involve not only clarifying questions to the participant but enabled to participant to expand upon the narrative as it was actively being developed.

Upon completion of the second interview, transcriptions were made. These transcripts, along with the analytical memos developed during the second interview, were reflected upon and used to refine the narratives that had previously been developed, allowing for the construction of the final narrative. This final narrative was then shared with the participants in order to allow for feedback regarding how their lived experience was represented.

Data Collection and Analysis

Instrumentation

The interviews were conducted over the audio/video teleconferencing application Zoom in order to provide an encrypted, secure network while also providing the means by which the interviews will be recorded. Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed by the researcher. The questions used during the interviews, guiding the exploration of experience are found in Appendix A.

Analysis

Narrative inquiry is unique in that the analysis and, as a consequence, the findings themselves, come in the form of the development of the narrative itself (Kim, 2016). Following the interviews, the transcripts are the essential data that are then used to form one cohesive narrative of the individual, that the audience may more easily explore the lived experience of the participant. These narratives were developed in iterations, with both the researcher and the participant involved in actively shaping the narrative development over the course of the interviews.

Immediately following each interview, the interviews were transcribed. Upon completion of transcription, the transcripts were used to develop an initial draft of the narrative of each participant. That narrative was then shared with the participant prior to the second round of interviews and used by both the participant and the researcher to further explore the lived experience of the participant and critique the initial analysis of their narrative (Kim, 2016). Upon completion of the second interview, a final narrative draft was developed and shared with the participant, affording them the opportunity to review it prior to one final call. Upon completion of the final contact with the participants, the narratives findings were finalized.

By affording the participants the opportunity to view their own narratives at multiple times, the participants were able to not only clarify and refine how they are portrayed, but also give deeper insight into areas that previously might have not been discussed in the initial interview. One such example is regarding Andrew and his interactions with the Department of Veterans Affairs. While he initially stated that he could not recall any interaction with the VA, due to this process, he recalled an interaction regarding repayment of benefits due to his dropping a course (an experience that is given more detail in the overarching Andrew narrative).

Following the analysis of the transcripts via narrative development, I conducted a meaningful exploration of the lived experience by pulling upon poignant topics from the experiences of each of the participants. These are not themes that are generalizable in the traditional use of the term, but are themes from the individual stories, allowing for commentary via conceptual inferences (Riessman, 2008). By doing this, the researcher's

voice engages the audience and guides them along the path of meaning-making from these experiences.

Participants

The three participants for this study were officers that had previously served as enlisted reservists in the United States Marine Corps Reserve in either the SMCR or IRR components as defined in chapter two. For the purposes of this study, the participants must have served as a reservist while enlisted, though they were also able to have served on active duty while enlisted or as an officer. This afforded the researcher the opportunity to explore several of the potential educational experiences of the student veteran. Finally, the participants, though they were able to serve active duty, were all reservists at the time of the research occurring. The participants that were chosen to represent three distinct approaches towards education attainment as an enlisted reservist in the United States Marine Corps. These individuals were found by leveraging my own social networks within the Marine Corps Reserve (civilian-based, outside of official Marine Corps channels and hierarchies), and finding individuals that met the research requirements, were willing, and were available to participate in the research.

Sample Size

Sample size within the field of narrative inquiry can vary. Research can be conducted in an autobiographical format, with the researcher being the only participant. There can also be as few as one external participant or as many as 12, for instance. Kim (2016) describes the expectation for sample size as something that is to be determined by the researcher and based upon the purposes of the study itself. A study that is focused on

the lived experience and sharing individual narratives in entirety of the individual participants will typically have a smaller number of participants that those that are attempting to develop a generalizable theme across the experiences of the individual participants. Understanding this, the decision for three participants in this study was to enable the reader to explore the lived experiences of these participants fully (Riessman, 2008), to understand the nuance of the individual's experience, and to make meaning from those experiences without developing something more generalizable to a larger "reserve student veteran" population. Below is the table of demographic characteristics for each of the three participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

	John	Andrew	Peter
Year Entering Service	2000	2004	1999
Time Enlisted	13 Years	8 Years	4 Years
Year Commissioned	2013	2012	2003
Time Commissioned	6 Years	7 Years	16 Years
Age at time of study	37	33	38
Race (Self-identified)	Hispanic/White	African American	White
Type of Postsecondary Credential	-Firefighter Certification -BPA	A.S. Accounting B.S. Accounting MBA	B.A. Teaching (Phys Ed & Health) MBA
Type of Institution Attended	Public 2-year Public 4-Year	Public 2-year Public 4-Year	Public 4-Year
Education Benefits Used	-Montgomery G.I. Bill Chapter 1606 (first three years) -Bank of America Student Aid	-Tuition Assistance - Post 9/11 G.I. Bill	-Montgomery G.I. Bill Chapter 1606 -OSO Officer Scholarship

	-Post 9/11 G.I. Bill (12 months)		
Commissioning Program Used	OCC-R	OCC-R	PLC Junior and Senior
Enlisted MOS	Scout Observer	Supply Administration	Engineer Equipment Mechanic
PME Credit Towards Degree	0	0	20

Trustworthiness

As an insider in the researched population, it is essential that I clarify any potential for research bias (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) and the role my positionality played in this study according to my understanding. When communicating with participants, portions of the story that might appear interesting to another researcher might be missed, or glossed over as irrelevant, based upon shared backgrounds. To ensure trustworthiness of the shared narrative of the participants, a draft of the narrative was created following the first interview and shared immediately with the participant prior to the second interview. During the second interview, clarifying questions were asked, but participants also had the opportunity to clarify and critique the narrative as written. After the final interview, they were given a second draft with the revisions and during a final follow-up call prompted to provide any clarifying remarks. Finally, the de-identified transcripts and narratives were shared with an auditor external to the project to ensure that the narratives and discussions were faithful to the transcripts.

Ethical Considerations

Permission from the institutional review board (IRB) of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) was obtained prior to any interviews being conducted. Upon

completion of the IRB process, participants were provided with the approved consent forms that explained their rights, such as not participating in the second interview or leaving the first interview prior to completion for whatever reason. Each participant was protected by a pseudonym with only the researcher knowing the names of any participants.

Delimitations

There are several delimitations used in order to develop boundaries for this study. The first delimitation is that all three participants were enlisted reservists in the United States Marine Corps. While there are five military branches in the Department of Defense, and seven uniformed services eligible for using the G.I. Bill benefits, the ability to pursue a narrative from each branch would only reduce the ability to fully explore the narratives from within one branch in relation to each other in a single coherent study. In the interest of representation and counternarratives, it is imperative to avoid monolithic characterization of the context and identities of individuals to the extent possible. Each branch has different policies, different nuance, and different programs that will create a unique learning experience for the reservist or National Guard servicemember in that branch. By focusing in on one branch, the study can explore the experiences within the context of the policies that create boundaries for this set of reservists.

The second delimitation, and the most crucial, is the need to have served as an enlisted reservist prior to having become an officer. This is relevant for numerous reasons as noted in the introductory chapter to this manuscript. Primarily, the Department of Veteran Affairs does not track graduation statistics, only usage reports on the G.I. Bill

education benefits. This leads many studies that rely on G.I. Bill usage to explore veterans to not fully grasp the implications on graduation. By focusing on this group of reserve student veterans, one can see an enlisted reservist that leveraged their experiences to go to college, to obtain a degree, to receive a commission in the military, and to become gainfully employed. These individuals maximized their learning potential and were successful in navigating complex experiences towards education attainment, making them ideal candidates to share lived experiences.

Conclusion

Chapter three described the methodology of this study, where Veteran Critical Theory and narrative inquiry were discussed. Critical race theory, as a theoretical framework, is used by developing questions based on the tenets of the theory, and then coding the shared experiences through the lens of those tenets. The use of narrative inquiry, then, affords the audience the opportunity to ground the narrative in the spatial, temporal, and social constraints as they existed during the time of the events occurring. Rationale behind sample size is shared, and the questions for the interviews are shared in the attached appendix. The chapter reaches a conclusion with understanding why the Marine reservist was chosen, and why prior-enlisted officer in particular are the group chosen as participants for this study.

Chapter 4: Narratives

Contextualizing Narratives Within the Methodology

The narratives of this study utilize narrative smoothing (Kim, 2016) in order to create a coherent, salient, and engaging narrative for the audience. Through this approach, third-person narratives were developed in a manner that was meant to focus the stories shared by the participant into a single unified narrative. The word smoothing is used here to describe removing what might be considered the “rough edges” of the shared stories, placing them within a chronologically lineal narrative. The concept of narrative smoothing is not applied to further limit the voice of the participant, but to expand their narrative and to allow for the researcher to act as a tour guide through the lived experiences of the participant, directing attention and focus on certain stops, and ensuring that the path is a fulfilling one that will leave the audience with a clearer understanding of the population. Similarly, the smoothing process, as well as the use of Bakhtin’s concepts of *novelness* and *carnival* (1981), allow for these narratives to be centered by the researcher, in both methodology and the extant literature on the student veteran population, further developing how these counternarratives interact with the primary narrative.

Utilizing the Bakhtin (1981) concept of *novelness*, these narratives exist to defy the existence of a single unifying model of the student veteran. While a singular understanding of the population might present a starting point for researchers, if used it fails to account for the potential variations that exist between the experiences of many

student veterans that have a drastically different experience from the overarching singular narrative.

The reserve population accounting for approximately 30% of the veteran population moves them from a tokenism status (Kanter, 1978;1987) and, as such a large subpopulation with differing experiences from the traditional student veteran, can be limited if the current singular narrative remains. Furthermore, the creation of these multiple counternarratives drives at Bakhtin's (1981) concept of *carnival*, which explores the totality of an experience through focusing on a primary form and the issues therein, such as focusing on a carnival to represent the entirety of human festivities. This was intended to subvert and to liberate the researched population from the primary narrative of the field. Though the research commentary during the narrative has been removed, each narrative shares the voices of both the researcher and the participant. These methods were used to develop counternarratives specifically due to the focus of the design on the subpopulation that is limited and marginalized by the use of a primary identity, or primary narrative. As the concept of a carnival cannot be used to identify the entirety of human festivities, an all-encompassing identity of student veteran will limit the voices of the reservist student.

John

“When you are ready to go into something, go into it 100 percent, because if you are 70, 80, or 90 percent committed, then when it gets too hard, you are going to quit.”

	John
Year Entering Service	2000
Time Enlisted	13 Years

Year Commissioned	2013
Time Commissioned	6 Years
Age	37
Race (Self-identified)	Hispanic/White
Type of Degree	-Firefighter Certification -BPA
Type of Institution Attended	Public 2-year Public 4-Year
Education Benefits Used	-Montgomery G.I. Bill Chapter 1606 (first three years) -Bank of America Student Aid -Post 9/11 G.I. Bill (12 months)
Commissioning Program Used	OCCR
Enlisted MOS	Scout Observer
PME Credit Towards Degree	0

John graduated from high school in May of 2000. As he was getting closer to graduation, his oldest brother, a Marine, had conversations with John about college and where John saw himself in ten years. John's answer prior to the conversation would have been that he probably wanted to play football at a college somewhere, and that was really the extent of his plan. His conversation led him to look into the Marine Corps, enlisting in March of 2000 and leaving for Bootcamp in August of that year. He returned home in May of 2001 and began going to college.

John continued his path towards educational attainment for two years while attending drill and working part-time at the Bank of America. On a Wednesday in September of 2003, however, he received a call that he was to be at his reserve unit no later than Sunday at 1200 with his bags packed, giving him four days to get his civilian life situated in preparation for a deployment to Iraq. One of the first items on his to-do list was to reach out to his institution, share his orders, and ask that he be dropped from

the courses that he was enrolled in. While he was no more than a month into the semester, there was no issue dropping the courses, but he was unable to receive any credit for the coursework that he had accomplished. He was in Iraq two weeks later.

Upon returning from the deployment in May of 2004, he was back in the classroom taking summer courses by June, roughly a month after returning from a combat zone. This semester would end up being the start of his final full year of college at the four-year level in pursuit of a degree in computer technology, as he found himself accepted for a position with the local fire department. The requirements for working at the fire department did not include a college degree, though he was required to attend the Fire and EMT College (vocational training), in order to be qualified to work for the department. This course required around 450 hours over of three months, with courses going full-time Monday through Friday. During this time, his reserve unit worked with him, allowing him to front-load his military obligation, ensuring that he did not have to attend military obligations during his three-month course. The reason that this was possible stemmed from John's openness with his command staff, explaining to them that his occupational program required a Monday to Friday commitment that he would be unable to miss it or he would not graduate the program. Following the completion of this program of study, John decided not to pursue the final year of his four-year degree as it would not prove that impactful on his career progression within the department at that time.

He did, however, work towards his A.S. in Fire Service for his job as a firefighter and was almost waylaid towards the end of his program. John was told to deploy again

with his unit, this time in April of 2008. Being towards the end of the semester only complicated things for him, but through his early engagement with instructors, John managed to take all of his finals a month early, working closely with his professors and ensuring the administration had all required documents. Because of this, John was able to graduate from his program and deploy.

Following this deployment, in 2009, the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill came into existence. John was told by the staff at his unit that, due to having gone on two deployments, and having only used three years of his G.I. Bill previously, he had one-year worth of Post 9/11 G.I. Bill benefits that could be used if he were to go back to college. Knowing that he had only one year remaining of his prior degree program, he discussed it with his wife and decided to finish a four-year degree while also applying to become a Warrant Officer in the Marine Corps Reserve.

Going back for his last year was, according to John, one of the most challenging parts of his education journey. Having been disengaged from the education process for several years, he found himself feeling as though he was a new student fresh out of high school. On top of adjusting back to student status, John found that he also had no desire to go back to the degree he had been pursuing previously, instead wanting to focus his education on public policy. This change placed him in a bit of a predicament as, even though he had three years of school completed, he only had two and a half years that were transferable to his new program. He was left with three choices. He could either decide not to go back to college, he could pay out of pocket for the final semester, or he could take extra credits every semester and maximize his G.I. Bill benefits. He was also

coming across a whole new world of benefits from what he had initially navigated. The school had a VA department on campus that walked him through the whole process from A to Z, and this helped him tremendously. He felt like a new student that had no understanding of any of the policy as it was all relatively new. Finally, he only had enough benefits remaining to cover one year. He had to figure out how to balance work, family, and education while taking double course loads. He took 21 credit semesters in fall and spring and 18 credits over the summer.

In order to make this accelerated schedule work, John once again asked the reserve unit that he drilled with to be flexible with his civilian pursuits. He needed them to allow him to not attend his two-week annual training obligation over the summer, allowing him to take 18 credits during that semester, splitting the course load into two accelerated half-semesters. The result of working with his unit and keeping them informed was the opportunity to complete the degree on time while utilizing only the education benefits that were provided for his service through the G.I. Bill. Through John's transparency and keeping clear channels of communication, this was possible.

While he had been working on obtaining a position as a Warrant Officer, having his undergraduate degree in hand now afforded John, a Staff Sergeant at the time, the opportunity to become a commissioned officer in the Marine Corps Reserve through the Marine Corps OCC-R officer recruitment program. After discussing the benefits and limitations of pursuing a position as a Warrant Officer over that of a commissioned officer with officers he knew, John decided that he wanted to pursue receiving a commission. Due to having already attended college and graduated, John was not eligible

for any of the programs that exist for those already serving to obtain a commission, such as the Reserve Enlisted Commissioning Program (RECEP). He was left to compete with other non-veteran, college graduates for a small number of positions available based on a holistic examination of each application. In 2013, John was accepted into Officer Candidate School (OCS) at the age of 31, making him approximately a decade older than the average candidate. After completing OCS, he went on to his follow-on training and became a logistics officer in the Marine Corps Reserve, returning to his full-time career at the Fire Department.

This military technical training was not, however, the end of his educational experience. While the logistics officers' course might have marked the end of his pursuit of education in classroom settings, his pursuit of career progression in his civilian career required two years' worth of self-taught courses. Whether it was his promotion to lieutenant, to captain, or to chief, he was sent around four to five textbooks that would each be worthy of having a single higher education course built around it. On his own time, without the assistance of an instructor, John self-taught everything in these books.

John read each book four or five times in entirety. He stated that studying for the lieutenant test was not as hard as the others, but for the captain and chief tests, he started preparing by reading each book front to back once with no notes and no highlights. After becoming familiar with the book in this way, a process that could take two to three weeks, he would reread it, this time highlighting areas that needed more focus or particular attention paid to them. With each subsequent reading, he would highlight in a different, unique color. By the end of the final read-through, he stated that the books

would look like Christmas trees and that he would be left to underline in pen if he still needed to focus on a particular subject. In order to engage himself and not become complacent, he would also engage in transcribing sections of the books that he wanted to focus. With years of reading done in this way, he obtained the position of Fire Chief.

John is satisfied with his pursuits, and the effort that he has put into his professional education and his careers. With three years left until he can retire from the Marine Corps, and ten years until he can retire from the Fire Department, his goals are to continue to excel at his job, and to take care of his children and his wife. John has seen obstacles to his education. He was activated for deployment in the middle of his undergraduate pursuit. He faced obstacles with the change of policy. Everywhere John found obstacles, however, he turned them into opportunities. He communicated with his unit whenever he needed to focus on education. John also communicated with the instructors at the university. He stated that his first goal was to work around an obligation conflict with the instructor and, if there was no way that the instructor or the institution could help him with it, then he proceeded to communicate with the Marine Corps to ensure that he was able to meet his obligations. The onus was on John to make the best of his educational opportunities, and he took this responsibility and ensured that the goal was accomplished.

John's Guide to Success

As John reflected upon his narrative, he stated that success was achieved for one simple reason, commitment. As is the way with many junior Marines, John received a Marine-related tattoo early on in his career. This tattoo, he said, summed up why he was

successful. It was the word commitment. John would not take no for an answer. He refused to quit. If John were going to do something in life, it would be at 100%. He felt that if he was not willing to give it 100%, then it was not worth giving his energy to as he would not succeed. His mentality was that if you were 70-90% committed, then when things became difficult, you would give up.

He also felt that his success was, in part, due to his ability to set goals. He knew he was going to be a Fire Chief early in his career, no matter what it took. He also stated that he found it okay to fail at achieving a goal, as it meant that you were pushing yourself to your limits. He left off with declaring that one should focus on setting goals that they can pursue that are difficult but obtainable. He used the illustration of running. His goal might not be to win a race, as he is not fast, but establishing a goal to beat his previous time would be realistic and achievable, though also difficult.

Andrew

“We are all capable. It takes a capable person to join the Marine Corps or any branch, really.”

	Andrew
Year Entering Service	2004
Time Enlisted	8 Years
Year Commissioned	2012
Time Commissioned	7 Years
Age	33
Race (Self-identified)	African American
Type of Degree	A.S. Accounting B.S. Accounting MBA
Type of Institution Attended	Public 2-year Public 4-Year

Education Benefits Used	- Post 9/11 G.I. Bill -Tuition Assistance (A.S.)
Commissioning Program Used	OCC-R
Enlisted MOS	Supply Administration
PME Credit Towards Degree	0

Andrew's family is from Hatti, and he is from Queens, New York but was raised in Florida. His parents, having both graduated from the University of Paris and holding graduate degrees, illustrated to him the importance of education. While Andrew enlisted in the Marine Corps Immediately following high school, he always knew that he was going to attend college and obtain a commission as an officer in the United States Marines Corps.

Enlisting into active duty initially, Andrew was stationed in Hawaii and around the time that he was halfway done with his first four-year contract he happened to see a flier on campus, exclaiming that he could go to college for free without using his G.I. Bill using a benefit for active duty servicemembers known as tuition assistance. He reached out to the community college that left the flier and enrolled in the accounting program. His timing was perfect, and he was able to leave active duty with a degree completed.

Andrew could have stayed on active duty; however, he knew that what he wanted to do meant being a civilian. He faced the obstacles of moving himself from Hawaii to the continental United States, where he was accepted to attend a public four-year institution that he had wanted to attend his entire life. With no family around and no friends locally, he found companionship and familiarity within the reserve unit he worked at in the same city.

His reserve unit, and the relationships he developed there, bled over to his experience at college. Many of his friends from the reserve unit attended the college, as did Marines from Alabama and Georgia, often courtesy drilling (drilling at a unit that you are not affiliated with) during the semester. Between these friends, members of the ROTC, and veterans that served as far back as 1970, Andrew developed his community on campus. Looking back, he pointed out that this was when he met one of his mentors, a retired servicemember from the Air Force, whom he related with more as a civilian than due to their time in the service.

When describing barriers that he had to overcome, he focused in on two key issues. The first involved the fact that the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill did not provide benefits immediately. To the institution this was simple, he was left with an outstanding balance for the majority of the semester, and then towards the very end, the G.I. Bill would pay his tuition. There is another component to the G.I. Bill, however, where it is supposed to pay the student's rent while they are in school. With his rent being paid in a lump sum at the end of the semester, Andrew was forced to find jobs that would afford him the flexibility to attend class but also pay his bills. This issue with timely payment left him attending school full-time, working as a drilling reservist, working as a part-time cashier, and working as a grill cook.

Andrew, feeling ambitious, decided one semester to take more than a full course load, and enrolled in five courses while keeping all three jobs. Prior to the final date to drop courses and be reimbursed, he decided this was too much and dropped a course. Due to a miscommunication between the institution and the VA, the VA paid for the course

even though he did not take it. The course was still required for him to take the following semester, and though the VA paid for it, they required him to pay back the previous semester out of his own pocket. He battled the Department of Veterans Affairs regarding pay for over a year; however, he was eventually informed that the cost would be recouped from him through his tax return if he did not pay it back, at which time he paid the bill.

While dealing with all of this, Andrew was also working on becoming an officer in the Marine Corps Reserve. Due to having his two-year degree already, he was ineligible for one of the primary commissioning pipelines, and it would have taken an excessive amount of time for him to pursue commission through the reserve enlisted to commissioned program (RECEP). The Officer Selection Officer (OSO) informed him that his best chance at commissioning would rest in dropping to the IRR and pursuing a commissioning through the OCC-R pathway. In agreement with the OSO, he dropped to the IRR and waited. It took over a year and a half to be accepted in this program, sending him to Officer Candidate School in 2012, and costing him a year towards being eligible to retire.

During his time navigating education, he found that both institution administration and the military were willing to work with him to achieve his goals. While on active duty he was allowed to leave work early to arrive to class on time. As a reservist, his professors would be flexible and allow him to make up assignments or tests if he had to attend to a military obligation. These experiences all set him up for success as he decided to pursue his education as an officer, leading to the eventual attainment of an

MBA. When describing the pathway to the MBA, he mentioned that his command was even more flexible. One example of this was when he had a paper due, but he was in the field with spotty connectivity. His Commanding Officer allowed him to leave the field training environment and go to the base library, where he could take his test.

Andrew used his knowledge from working in supply administration while enlisted, his expertise developed in logistics during his time as an officer, his degree in accounting, and his MBA to propel his career forward. Initially working as a state auditor, he leveraged relationships and experience to get brought on as a civilian at the Pentagon, and eventually as a civilian contractor that liaised between his company and the Department of Defense (DoD).

Andrew's Guide to Success

When asked what was essential to success, he felt that it was the ability to seek out information. The process as it exists, in his opinion, requires someone who has been through it to assist in the navigation of the policies. This is an opinion he takes seriously, having spent his time and energy to guide several Marines towards college, and towards commissioning. He even went as far as to assist one Marine in figuring out the process of becoming commissioned in the Coast Guard. The structure of these policies limits the ability of individuals to pursue education and commissioning pathways, according to Andrew. He felt that it was vital that we focus on the fact that reservists are capable. Having made it through Bootcamp, or whatever similar intake process each branch provides, Andrew felt that there was an established level of ability in the individual. One does not get into the United States Military at this point in history without being capable.

Knowing that we can see that knowledge and access to information is limiting to access, and he felt that we must try to mitigate these limitations for our subordinates. Part of being successful, according to Andrew's reflection, is to empower others to also become successful.

Peter

"I could not afford to stay in school for four and a half or five years like many of the kids that I was going to class with, with well-off families, I had to make it happen in four years. And then I had to have something lined up for after college."

Peter	
Year Entering Service	1999
Time Enlisted	4 Years
Year Commissioned	2003
Time Commissioned	16
Age	38
Race (Self-identified)	White
Type of Degree	B.A. Teaching (Phys Ed & Health) MBA
Type of Institution Attended	Public 4-Year
Education Benefits Used	-Montgomery G.I. Bill Chapter 1606 -OSO Officer Scholarship - Student Loans - Tuition Assistance (MBA)
Commissioning Program Used	PLC Junior and Senior
Enlisted MOS	Engineer Equipment Mechanic
PME Credit Towards Degree	20

Peter's parents divorced when he was three years old and, he grew up living in a single-parent household, Peter recalled being familiar at an early age with the fact that he lived in government-subsidized housing and that his mother used food stamps to purchase many of their essential grocery items. As a young child, he recalled how they would have to tear the stamps out of the book in order to pay for groceries. Growing up this way made him feel a strong desire to break the cycle of poverty, a goal that would guide many of the actions he took throughout his life.

Peter took his first job at the age of nine, delivering papers every morning. He held that until the age of fourteen, when he took his first "legitimate job" as he described it, and has not stopped working since. Driven and ambitious, Peter balanced work, education, relationships, and sports throughout high school. Looking back, Peter acknowledged that he did not have anywhere to draw guidance from about the importance of education and maintaining a high G.P.A., as no one in his family had ever gone to college. What he knew was his best chance out of his circumstances was to join the Marine Corps and become an officer. So, with a year left of high school, a G.P.A. of 2.42, and nine varsity letters, he enlisted in the Marine Corps as a 92-day reservist. He chose this particular enlistment pathway as it was designed to support enrolment in traditional course loads for college. Following high school graduation, he was sent to Bootcamp, however, he came home immediately following that training in order to start working towards his teaching degree, though he was required to attend MCT and MOS school the following summer after his freshman year.

When he arrived at his reserve unit, the training chief immediately enrolled him in two distance education courses to help support his career development. When Peter received the courses, he noticed on the front cover that they were accredited college courses. He then proceeded to find out how he could enroll in more accredited correspondence courses and how he could receive college credit for them. He credited this single event with cutting down his course load by over a semester as he was able to transfer in 20 credits from the Marine Corps.

Following his second summer of training, Peter signed a contract with his recruiter to attend the PLC program, as well as a contract to receive a scholarship in exchange for extending his future active duty obligation by a year. This version of the officer candidate course allows the student to attend six weeks of Officer Candidate School after their junior year and six weeks after their senior year. After arriving back from the first summer of PLC and starting his senior year, Peter was called for a deployment during Operation Iraq Freedom 1 (OIF1). When he arrived at his unit, his commanding officer decided that he should be demobilized and not deploy so that he could finish his training and receive his commission. While this decision assisted him in pursuing his career, it did impact his support systems on campus somewhat as many of the students that he spent time with outside of class were also Marines at his unit. He recalled there was one Marine, as far along in his college work as Peter, that did deploy as he was not in the officer program. Peter's friends returned from their deployment at the same time that he finished his second year of PLC, and he was able to receive his

commission in front of them and even receive his first salute, a naval tradition, from a close friend.

What followed the commissioning was eight years of active duty, paying off student loans, and finally deciding that he wanted to drop back into a reserve capacity with the Marine Corps. Having worked as an engineer while enlisted, as well as while an active duty officer, he felt little desire to go into the field of his undergraduate degree. Specifically, he felt that teaching was a calling, and he did not feel called to that field. He decided to maximize his time on active duty, getting the Marine Corps to pay for his master's degree through the tuition assistance program, and finally rejoined the reserves while working for his new civilian employer managing an HVAC and plumbing company where he continues to run a twenty-million dollar business.

While working, and back in the reserves, Peter felt that his mission and the goal of anyone successful in life, was to give back to those that come after you. Recalling his past eight years in the reserve, he recalled dozens of Marines that he taught to save for retirement, and dozens more he helped to enroll in college and obtain their degrees. Success, as he described it, also came with the requirement to help others achieve the same.

Peter's Guide to Success

Describing what made Peter successful, he felt that it requires one to be assiduous with regard to their career. No matter what obstacles, one must simply try to pass them, but not necessarily be the best at them. He felt that using his ability to run was an example of how one might do this. Describing himself as a mediocre runner, he said he

worked on his running, not in an effort to be the best, but in an effort to meet the requirement. He was never the fastest runner, but he was fast enough to graduate from the officer candidate course. This mentality, when applied to all things, empowers the individual to achieve more than they thought possible.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

“You know, I am not special, any reservist can be successful if they are willing to work for it.” - Peter

All three of the participants in this study experienced success in their individual pursuit of education, as well as their careers in the civilian sector, and in the Marine Corps. As each of their narratives were developed, numerous factors became apparent as keys to success shared across the experiences of all three participants. While one cannot create generalizable themes from these narratives according to narrative inquiry epistemology (Clandinin, 2013), the examination of shared means toward success found in each of their narratives can occur. While these themes are not generalizable in a statistical sense, they allow for an inference of a different kind, where the audience can explore the social processes of individuals and construct how these experiences might possibly exist within the context of the institutional environment of the audience member (Riessman, 2008). Throughout each of these narratives, common methods used to ensure success were communication, planning ahead, exploring adult learning pathways, navigation of administrative minutia, understanding limitations, developing social networks, and mentorship.

By exploring the means of success, and by nesting them within the extant literature, implications for the reserve student veteran population can be further developed. While findings in other studies might support, or contradict, the shared experiences of the reservist student veterans of this study, by understanding the relationship and dynamics of this subpopulation through these shared narratives, with

relation to the monolithic student veteran identity, further clarity to how these means might provide success can develop into pathways to success. It is important to remember, as one explores the veteran identity in other research, the multiple facets of the reservist identity. From civilian employment, serving in the reserves, family obligations, and classroom time, findings that support the narratives of the reservist must also discuss their relationship to the reservist experience as it occurs within all social dimensions.

Communication

In the extant literature, the importance of communicating with peers, as well as developing a strong line of communication with the institution, was found to be connected to success (Blevins, Roca, & Spencer, 2011). Griffin and Gilbert (2016) found that lack of communication with the institution, for participants in that study, was a hurdle that could be difficult for the student veteran to overcome if strong lines of communication were not developed early on in the relationship with the administration at the institution. This concept, of a need for communication in order to achieve success, is expanded upon by each of the participants in this study. All three of the participants discuss communication as an essential component to their success in the pursuit of higher education, as well as their career progression within the Marine Corps Reserve and maintaining a social support network.

Based on the narratives shared, a common approach that all three members took was to share all information, oversharing whenever possible, with their reserve unit regarding their education and share as much information as possible with their professors and institutions regarding their military obligations. By informing the reserve command

early and often of the needs of their educational obligations, each participant found the leadership to be flexible, attempting to assist the Marine in meeting educational objectives when possible. While Griffin and Gilbert (2016) were discussing communication with the educational institution being needed for success, by incorporating the reserve unit as a third member of the educational relationship of the reservist, and developing the same lines of communication with the reserve command that existed that they would need with the educational institution, the participants developed an extra level of support from what could be a potential obstacle to their education.

If timelines changed, or deployments occurred, each of the participants described the immediacy with which they informed their university and provided all necessary documentation. To each of them, the initial stage was to communicate verbally or through email with instructors and administration, but this was followed up immediately with providing all necessary documentation from the Marine Corps explaining the dates of activation and the policies that the institution were required to abide by when dealing with a reservist activation. Regarding communication, when discussing opening dialogue with the instructors, John stated the following:

One of the things that I did that I think helped me out every semester was the first thing I would do on the first day of school, I would approach the teachers. I would basically introduce myself and tell them, 'Listen Sir, just so you know, I serve in the United States Marine Corps Reserves and at any point I could be called for training or a deployment.' I gave them plenty of warning.

John felt that this approach to communication with the university set him up for success on multiple occasions, including both deployments. Thanks to instructors and the

university knowing this information during his first activation, he was easily able to drop classes. On his second deployment, the instructors were ready and able to give him his final exams a month early so that he could receive completion for the coursework that he had already done.

Throughout the interviews, the reservist identity is shown to be liminal, similar to other populations that have been studied that live on the borders of identities (Anzaldúa, 1987). Understanding the multi-faceted aspects of identity, the lines of communication must also extend to the military unit and the civilian employer and beyond solely exploring the communication dynamic between the student and the educational institution. As discussed above, while the military has a specific structure and expectation of obedience to orders, a commander is capable of flexibility and support of their subordinates with regard to their continuing education. This support can be seen through examples from all three narratives due to each of these individuals sharing as much as they were able to as often as they were able to with the leadership of their unit. Andrew found flexibility during a live training exercise, being permitted to leave the field environment, and go to the base library in order to take a test. After talking with his command, John was allowed to do three months of military duties at once so that he could attend the fire academy.

Of the three, Peter's story of the deployment stood out as a commander going over and beyond expectations for his junior Marine based completely on solid lines of communication between Peter, his institution, his commanding officer, and his recruiter. Peter recalled that when he arrived at his unit ready to deploy, his commander brought up

whether he should be afforded the opportunity to finish courses and the requirements to commission instead of deploying. Peter did not have to share information regarding his career choice with the commander, nor did the commander have to remove him from the deployment, however,

He canceled my deployment orders and, actually, he made sure that I was going to be able to finish my classes, go to PLC (Platoon Leaders Course) Seniors, and get my commission, all of which occurring while the unit was deployed.

Had Peter not kept his command informed of his intentions, he would have more than likely, been on that deployment and took a year off of school while potentially losing his position in the commissioning pipeline. By ensuring that his command was aware of his pursuit of a commission, the pursuit of his degree, and the needs of his program, he allowed himself the opportunity to complete his objective on his own timeline.

As seen throughout the narratives of the participants, there existed a third obligation of civilian employment outside of their duties in the Marine Corps and their requirements in the classroom. Bull Schaefer et al. (2013) discuss the many issues facing the repatriation of the reservist or National Guard servicemember coming off of active duty orders and returning to civilian employment. The authors find that there is a debate over whose responsibility it is to repatriate the reservist into the workforce, their civilian employer or the military, and the need for the two to communicate more effectively. The same argument would logically follow with regard to education based on their research, however, the narratives developed here illustrated success when the individuals did not wait for support from either institution but took the onus of responsibility onto themselves and moved forward with their education. With regard to coming off of orders

and pursuing education and employment, Andrew described the experience as being similar to letting go of a safety blanket,

I won't have the comfort of a paycheck coming in. I have to look for a job...it plays a mental game on you, where you are thinking 'oh my god I am leaving this security blanket' but you know it is something you have to do. I knew I had to move to the city. I have to go to school. I had to get a job. I knew I had to figure out a way to equate how my military experience worked towards me getting the job.

Andrew saw the shift from being on orders as placing the responsibility back on himself. He had to find a job. He had to move. He had to go to school. He had to get a job. To Andrew, his success, or his failure was fully his responsibility.

One area in which the participants experience contrasted existing literature is the development of angry communication skills that could easily be switched on (Demers, 2011). None of the participants in this study claimed any difficulty in the ability to communicate with the institution, or their peers, and did not feel the need to regress to a position of anger if they were unsuccessful with their communication. Andrew, for example, remained calm even in the face of bureaucratic red tape that impacted him financially.

Planning Ahead/Predefined Goals

"Enlisted reservists looking at college, or the next step, need to have a four- or five-year plan for what they are trying to accomplish now and where that will lead to in four or five years." - Peter

DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) found that, when coming off of orders or off of active duty, planning ahead is paramount to success for the individual veteran as they enter into tertiary education. This finding was a commonality shared amongst each of the three

shared narratives. Specifically, understanding what direction to take their life in, and designing their lives in incremental steps to achieve those goals was a shared trait of each of these narratives. Peter knew from an early age that his goal was to break the cycle of poverty.

I had to break the cycle of how my family was, and what was possible, and for me I refused to live that way. It was breaking the mold, breaking the cycle, and creating opportunities for myself to become successful... For me it (the Marine Corps) was probably the only avenue to do it. I was not great at sports. I played a lot of sports, but I was not college level, so sports were not the avenue to continue. My grades were average in high school so getting academic scholarships and moving ahead that way was not really an option so, for me, the military was probably the only option for me to better myself.

Seeing the military as the only way to rise above his circumstance, he decided that he would do whatever it took to become an officer. With that in mind and knowing that his grades were not going to make him competitive for commissioning, he enlisted in order to get more experience and to make himself more competitive. Every step from there, every decision, was made with the one goal in mind, to become an active duty officer.

One way in which he kept himself motivated to maintain momentum was through a variation on a popular enlisted tradition. Enlisted Marines will often have the insignia of the next rank pinned inside of their military cover to remind them that they are striving for that next position. When describing himself as a Lance Corporal, Peter laughed and said,

You know... I had these second lieutenant bars inside of my enlisted cover. As a lance corporal, it was always there. I kept them in my dorm room. I would look at them and say, 'this is what I want.'

This mentality, knowing what he wanted in life, was in line with the findings of DiRamio & Jarvis (2011) illustrating the importance of planning ahead and achieving success towards goals.

Not all of the participants knew what they wanted from an early age. John, specifically, was directionless as he approached his senior year of high school,

I joined in March of 2000 while still in high school. I think the biggest reason for me, at the time, was my oldest brother was a Marine and he had a conversation with me about college and where I saw myself in ten years. Honestly the direction I was going at the time was college football at a super small school with no real education and just have that as my little story to tell my kids. That is what let me to look into the Marine Corps.

His brother asking him what his ten-year plan was acted as a catalyst, and from there, he was able to use his benefits to attend college. While he was committed to the Marines, his long-term planning was more visible in his civilian career in the fire department. Once he was hired by the department, he knew he would want to be the fire chief. From that moment on, every decision he made was to that end. He focused on taking the required exams and studying countless hours to achieve these goals. This job opportunity even caused him to pause his pursuit of a four-year degree in lieu of a technical degree that would be more valuable to his civilian career.

This is not to say that he was not working towards a long-term goal in the Marines. John had decided early into his reserve career that he wanted to be a reserve warrant officer, as that particular type of officer does not require one to obtain a four-year degree but still has the ability to affect change in ways that an enlisted servicemember could not. He wanted to do this primarily to affect change in systems that he felt needed it to support the junior Marine. It was not until he found he had a year left of his education

benefits after the implementation of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, and a year left towards his bachelor's degree, that his desire shifted to obtaining a commission. This decision occurred after conversations with numerous individuals that held leadership positions in the Marine Corps, where the conversations centered on which pathway would afford him the greatest opportunity to support junior Marines and to affect change from within the institution.

Exploration of Adult Learning Pathways and Leveraging Experience

“The Marine Corps Institute courses were actually worth college credit...I did a lot of these courses to try to, number one, save money, by having some credits done for free. Number two, I did them to save time.” - Peter

Peter wanted to find the quickest, most efficient way to his degree. After being required to sign up to take courses through the Marine Corps Institute, an education correspondence program that developed into the Marine Corps University, he found that these correspondence courses were worth college credit in the civilian sector. Through using this knowledge, Peter found he was able to leverage his experience in the Marine Corps, and the education that they would provide for free, to obtain his civilian degree at a faster pace and for significantly less month than if he had to pay for the credits earned for these courses. Working with his institution, he was able to take enough of these courses to transfer 20 credits in, though most of these credits were in electives fields. By pursuing avenues of education other than purely the traditional model that were offered by his educational institution, Peter was able to save the time and money equivalent to over one semester of higher education. He was also able to shorten the time

it would take for him to receive his commission and begin his career as an officer in the Marines.

Andrew was on active duty when he started his path towards educational attainment. He stated that he was walking on base one day and saw a sign that said he could get his degree for free from the local community college, and it was this flyer that started him down his path towards tertiary education. The unit that he was attached to at the time was very supportive of his pursuit of education outside the Marine Corps, according to Andrew,

I started going to class right before I left active duty, so I was enrolled in classes at the community college nearby. They were very flexible and allowed me to leave early during the week to go to class and to come back to work. Or, if I had to go to class Tuesday morning, they would let me go to class first and then return to work. I was not deploying anymore as I was with regiment, so it was pretty easy... I had my associates in accounting right before I came off orders.

He decided to pursue this and found that there was a benefit known as tuition assistance, which would pay for his course work while he was on active duty without using any of his G.I. Bill benefits.

Due to his use of tuition assistance, Andrew obtained an associate degree prior to becoming a drilling reservist, which he felt benefited him greatly in perusing future educational opportunities using his G.I. Bill benefits. In particular, it allowed him the opportunity to use half of his education benefits on obtaining an undergraduate degree and half on a graduate degree, something he would not have been able to accomplish otherwise. This opportunity afforded him the ability to not only further his military career, but his civilian career as well.

Andrew's experience here, and his ability to transition from a community college to a four-year program and from active orders to the reserves is an issue for many according to a study done by DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) and by Ackerman, Diramio, and Mitchell (2009), which both state that these transitions are significant hurdles for the student veteran to overcome. The experience of transition being a hurdle was not the case for Andrew, or for the other participants in this study.

John's educational pathway started more or less on a traditional timeline due to his having enlisted while still in high school. He went to initial training and, upon return to civilian status, immediately started college. From training to college would have occurred within a year after graduating high school for him. John's pathway deviated when he was hired at the fire department, and he decided to pursue a two-year degree in lieu of the undergraduate degree that he had completed three quarters of. While he would eventually continue on to finish his four-year degree, a secondary educational pathway was established due to his continued pursuit of excellence in his field required him to become self-taught, spending years of his life reading, and rereading, requirements that every fire chief must have memorized. There were no courses that he could take to instruct him on fire department promotion information. He was then tested on his knowledge, with career progression being contingent on his ability to succeed, and he passed the test.

Unaided Navigation of Administrative Minutia

"To navigate the process, it should be clear to anyone who reads it. All requirements should be clear" - Andrew

There is no roadmap to benefits for the servicemember. There are few resources one can draw upon to understand what they are entitled to, and fewer still for the reservist. When individuals join the reserve expecting to receive the G.I. Bill education benefits that they have heard about, only to receive chapter 1606 benefits, which equate to approximately 300 dollars a month, it can be difficult to continue forward with one's education. Similarly, the payment of benefits is not an instant process and can create difficulties. One can be sidelined by these difficulties, or they can choose to take the onus of responsibility onto themselves and find ways to ensure that progress forward continues.

John stated that during the pursuit of his degree, initially, he found it to be easy, in so far as he wholly trusted the university to handle his benefits as he did not understand what his entitlements were. He did not know whether or not he was receiving all of the benefits that he was supposed to, but he assumed the university had a better understanding of his benefits than he did. Upon returning to college under a different chapter of the G.I. Bill, he said he felt like a first-year student, having to learn to navigate benefits he had never used. Not only did he have to learn how to navigate the administrative component of the benefits, but he also had to meticulously parse out how he would accomplish four semesters of college in only three semesters. This condensed timeline required him to become intimate with the education benefits he was eligible for so that he could maximize them.

Discussing his initial interactions with the G.I. Bill benefits as a reservist, Andrew stated that,

At first it was confusing. You do not get to see the processes; they are done in the background. I first thought I had to do a lot to receive my benefits, but the application was easy. I just had to get my certificate of eligibility from the VA and apply... The school receives the application and I never saw anything else. The only issue I had was when the time came to get BAH.

Andrew had two significant issues develop while navigating his benefits. The more difficult issue of the two he faced was that the G.I. Bill was supposed to pay his rent monthly through his monthly Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH); however, with a backlog at the VA, this rent money was coming as a lump sum at the end of the semester. Andrew could have decided he could not afford to go to college because the system was not working correctly, but instead he worked these three jobs, two of which were done in the evenings, to pay his bills while going to class during the day. Secondly, understanding that his benefits were based on time, and not on how many courses he took, Andrew decided to take five courses while working three jobs to pay his bills. The five courses served to be too much for him, and he dropped a class, only to have to spend a year working with the VA to reimburse them out of his own pocket due to complications in the system.

Understand One's Limitations

Returning to the story of Andrew dropping out of a course, there came a time in the lived experiences of the participants when they had to decide if they could accomplish something, they had set out to do. Andrew's failure to accomplish taking five classes in one semester was not a failure at all. It was for him, after two weeks of the course, realizing that he did not have the capabilities at present to complete all of the tasks he desired. Reaching, and pushing at our limits is something that John speaks to directly,

...You always start with no. There is nothing too big for you, there is nothing you cannot do. There is nothing you cannot accomplish. Then, you just push right through those difficult moments you are going through. You push through to the day, to the moment, when you realize, all right, I have done everything I can. I have tried every single angle. I just cannot do this. But that is okay, you know? I believe that sometimes, setting your bar too high, is a good thing but, your final goals need to be realistic.

To fail to achieve an objective does not mean that the entire campaign is over, simply that one must regroup and refocus their efforts. While there is scant discussion throughout the literature regarding understanding of limitations with regard to this specific topic, there has been discussion of the importance of understanding limitations with regard to mental health (Barry et al., 2013; Doyle, 2005) and the importance of social groups on developing resilience to these limitations (DiRamio & Jarvis; 2011), though these were not seen in the narratives of the participants.

Developing A Support Network

A well-developed support network was something shared as part of the experience of all three participants while they were on campus. This support system was an important factor in resilience according to much of the student veteran literature (Elliot, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Livingston et al., 2011; Grimes et al, 2011), and something each of the participants also found important to their experience. Discussing his support network, Peter drew heavily from his reserve unit, which was located hours away,

I went to school with another reservist from the unit and we would even drive down to drill together. He actually went on that deployment when it came up. He left, and I stayed, and I got to finish school. But yeah so, I would say we had a small veteran network but everyone kind of knew who the other veterans were.

While Peter found support amongst primarily reservist, Andrew used the more extensive veteran network on campus, preferring not to pursue friendship exclusively with the Marines that also attended the institution. Regarding his network, Andrew stated,

I didn't live on campus, so I had to live out in town. A lot of times I would just hang out with people out there, a lot of the veterans from different branches...some of them were in the ROTC program at the school, but they did not come out very often...I mean, one of my best mentors came from this and is a retired Air Force guy from the 70s."

The choices for social support groups that were pursued were in line with the findings of Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, and Wadsworth (2013) as well as Livingston et al. (2011) with regard to the heavy reliance on veteran networking as social support. However, the findings that it most clearly reflects occurred in the Grimes et al. (2011) article, in which the authors found that student veterans that were pursuing higher education at an institution that not only had a strong veteran population, but specifically had other servicemembers from the same unit had a higher likelihood of being successful in their academic pursuits.

Marginalization at the Institution and Research

While Peter and the others were able to achieve success through transparency and communication, the current literature illustrates that there are numerous programs that exist on campus to support the student veteran population (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012), while also claiming that veterans simply do not choose to access these programs, or communicate with their coordinators to (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). Through these narratives, one can understand that a student veteran has

the ability to access programs and support off campus that are not recorded in these studies. Peter stated,

The Marines did come up with some money to help with tuition. I did have to sign an extension for six months or a year but there was support through their putting money on the table. So yeah, that was helpful.

The officer program, and other potential programs can be seen in this context as other means of support for the student veteran.

Throughout all of the interviews, topics related to marginalization discussed in prior research came up multiple times. Interestingly all participants felt that they had the support that they needed from social and family connections, standing in contrast to the findings of Kim & Cole (2013) which indicated that the majority of veterans did not feel that they had the support that they needed in their pursuit of higher education. Similarly, Elliott, Gonzalez, and Larson (2014) stated that student veterans had a difficult time developing intimate relationships during their time in college, which was not an issue present in any of the shared narratives.

Similarly, regarding the student veteran's ability to feel secure in the classroom setting, Doe and Langstraat (2014), and Elliott, Gonzalez, and Larson (2014) stated that instructors should not share their views on the military or on veterans out of fear of alienating the student veteran. It can be inferred then that instructors are against servicemembers and against veterans, however, the reservists in this study all found that the instructors were flexible and willing to work with them to meet their military obligations. The level of support from instructors also counters the findings of Palm

(2014) where the findings presented microaggressions against the student veteran in the classroom, which was not the experience shared by the participants in this study.

Hawn (2011) found that it could be detrimental to the classroom to allow for the student veteran to share stories of their experience. The danger would occur because the sharing of experience could allow for the other students to think of the veteran as a subject matter expert with more knowledge on the subject than the instructor. By allowing for sharing from the student veterans to occur, the author states that it could possibly develop into an issue if and when the views of the veteran and instructor came into conflict on any particular issue that is being discussed. Peter, Andrew, and John all felt comfortable speaking on campus and did not recall issues in which their voices were limited or marginalized in the classroom due to their time in the military or their combat experience.

Mentorship

While all of the points up to now have focused on steps towards success as an enlisted reservist, there was a theme that developed with regard to time as an officer as well. Specifically, participants felt it was imperative to give back to the junior Marines by guiding them through numerous scenarios through mentorship. There have been several calls throughout the literature (Ackerman et al., 2009; Birchrest, 2013) for more development of student veteran mentorship. This was something that the participants also felt important to the future generation of military and civilian leaders that they had working for them. Both Andrew and Peter spoke at length of the importance of giving

back after one had obtained any level of success, working to make it easier for those that will come after us. Regarding the concept of mentorship, Peter stated:

I think what a lot of people need to realize is, when you do have success, when you do well, you have to reach back and help others...help a couple along the way. Whether that is helping a Staff Sergeant put together a warrant officer package, help a couple of kids get into college, or help another couple of kids find jobs. I have probably helped one hundred Marines in the past several years...A lot of these kids will never go to college unless someone pushes them a little bit.

Peter did not distinguish between civilian career or military career in where he offered mentorship. If his Marines needed help advancing in the military, or help becoming an officer, he worked to guide them. This, however, was only part of the solution. He desired to engage them in development external to the Marine Corps, assisting them in finding stable employment as civilians. This level of mentorship, of giving back to the community, did more than develop the individuals, it furthered the local community and the Marine Corps unit as well.

When discussing how he had mentored junior Marines in the past, Andrew reflected on one instance in particular that resonated with him:

I helped a lance corporal; he should have graduated by now. He was trying to navigate the commissioning process and I told him how to do the same thing I did. He was already a junior, so he was past PLC. I signed his paperwork and helped navigate the process. I helped him obtain a conditional release from the Marine Reserve for the commissioning process. He is at The Basic School (TBS) by now.

This junior Marine came to Andrew and sought help in finding the correct pathway towards a commission. Having been too far along in his coursework for the platoon leaders course (PLC), which requires a commitment of two six-week courses over the sophomore and junior summer sessions of college, Andrew offered his own pathway as

an option. He went beyond navigation assistance though and engaged with the command to obtain a conditional release from the Marine Corps Reserve, ensuring that if he successfully passed his courses that he would be able to fully transition and become an officer. This level of support, of already knowing what your mentees need before they do, is invaluable in assisting future generations in achieving success.

Implications

For the Reservist

The reservist that is striving for higher education attainment is met with a list of items that assisted the participants with finding success in their pursuit of education, as well as their civilian career ambitions. Throughout these narratives, the participants met numerous obstacles stemming from structures, policies, and processes that were not designed to support their access to education. While some of the obstacles, such as transitioning from active duty (DiRamio et al., 2008), also exist within the reservist population as the narratives illustrate, the reservist engages in multiple transitions from active duty over the course of their time in the military. These multiple transitions can then create further barriers to education. The narratives of the participants in this study illustrated many ways in which one might overcome some of the barriers that are unique to this population. Of the many concepts shared, those that occurred within the context of each participant's narratives were: communication, planning ahead, perusing alternative adult learning pathways, navigating administrative minutia without assistance, understanding their personal limitations, and developing social networks. However, while

each of the participants utilized these principles to achieve success, the ways in which they used them were as unique as each of their own narratives.

One participant was a reservist, both enlisted and as an officer and only served on active duty in the context of activating as a reservist. Another served on active duty as an enlisted Marine prior to joining the reserves, going to college, and receiving a commissioning in the reserves. The third was enlisted and then became an active duty officer for eight years before returning to the reserves as an officer. Each followed a unique pathway, of which there are countless more on the road to success for the reserve servicemember. In order to succeed, as John put it, the onus falls to the reservist to manifest the success. This is less daunting when we realize how capable the student reservists actually are. As Andrew stated, “We are all capable. It takes a capable person to join the Marine Corps, or any branch, really.” Moving beyond limitations, knowing when to ask for help, and acknowledging one’s capabilities and strengths that brought them to the point where they would be able to attend college for free, these are the skills that move us forward.

With regard to the development of a social support network, the need for social support has been called for in prior literature (Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, and Wadsworth, 2013) as well as by the participants of this study. As the participants expressed, they might maintain support networks and friends amongst other student veterans, but the veteran identity is not what defined them. This is important to note as while Phillips and Lincoln (2017) stated the veteran experiences multiple identities at once, but also that this population cannot be essentialized. Many of the prior studies

(Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, and Wadsworth, 2013; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008) however, have called for the student veterans to find more support amongst the veteran population. While all of the participants in this study did have fellow student veterans as support, they also relied on developing non-veteran networks. This focus should be considered when discussing success because not only did it enable the participants to develop relationships that assisted in their pursuit of education, but by extending their networks outside of the veteran population they were able to create meaningful contacts that assisted them in the pursuit of civilian careers.

For the Researcher

These are stories of success. These are individuals from varying backgrounds and varying high school academic careers. From poverty and low grades, from working three jobs, to being deployed before finals. Through the success achieved by all three participants, given these backgrounds that are traditionally linked to lower rates of success, the participants in this study illustrate why a deficit modeling perspective in researching the reservist falls short. As Vaccaro (2015) found, it is essential that this group not be assumed to have sameness across the population, and the researcher must understand that there is not a concept that will encapsulate all student veterans from all backgrounds. The identity of the veteran being developed by researchers using a deficit model enables individuals that are not a part of the population to define the identity (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017).

With the restrictions that exist on being able to enlist in the service, this population has clear advantages over peers that were not able or eligible to enlist, where

only a very small portion of the population are found eligible mentally and physically to join any of the military services (Feeney, 2014). The ability, then, of the participants in this study to access education despite the obstacles, stands in contrast to findings that student veterans will perform below peers (Davis & Museus, 2019) and that student veterans have a more difficult time integrating into higher education (Smith, Vilhauer, & Chafos, 2017). Even the ability of two of the participants to find ways to achieve a bachelor's degree at a faster pace than peers stands in contrast to Radford and Weko (2001) and Radford (2009) claiming that it takes student veterans substantially longer to graduate.

There are too many variables to make assumptions such as achievement taking longer for the student veteran. If a university counts when courses were first taken by the student, and the university is counting the credits earned by attending bootcamp, then numbers are immediately skewed. Furthermore, researchers using NCES data (Radford & Weko, 2001; Radford, 2009), are unable to account for dependents of veterans in their research, which will skew data. As a dependent can be eligible to use the G.I. Bill, a data set that focuses solely on usage of G.I. Bill to identify student veteran status will fall short of creating meaningful research that will advance the population.

With a focus on the reservist experience throughout the narratives, we engage in a number of life experiences, each of which varies dramatically from the traditional expectation for a student veteran having just come off of active duty and reentering the civilian world. The reserve veteran population is a significant component of the veteran identity. Moving to a wider lens, VCT (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) illustrates that veterans

experience multiple identities at once. Beyond the multiple experiences of the reservist, and beyond separating the reserve identity from the monolithic student veteran terminology, the monolithic understanding of the population, and research built upon it is detrimental to the population and falls short of effecting change.

One crucial implication that can come from focusing on these experiences for the researcher is the benefits that were used by these individuals in their pursuit of education. There were many years that they did not use the G.I. Bill, or rate the G.I. Bill, and relied on other programs to provide assistance. By focusing quantitative research on a population defined by the use of the Forever G.I. Bill, a large subset is automatically subsumed by the student veteran population.

For Theory

As this is potentially the first study to use VCT, having not yet been leveraged in empirical studies in the larger body of research due to the fairly recent creation of the theory, this project was able to use the theory to explore concepts from a unique perspective. Due to the use of VCT in an empirical study, an epistemological and ontological reflection on what it was like to use this theory is offered to further develop VCT and assist those in future use of VCT for research. To do this, a description of what parts of VCT were the most beneficial to this study, as well as how some portions of the theory did not apply such as tenets 11.

Throughout this process, the concept that veterans are victims of deficit model thinking in higher education (tenet three) was a guiding beacon that assisted in the development of the research question on which this study was built. Through my

evaluation of the extant literature, this tenet was further strengthened, as even those that research the student veteran in higher education do so through a deficit lens. Further research should be done in the field focusing more on the counternarratives that support success and reduce the amount of deficit modeling research that exists which can itself create barriers for the student veteran to overcome.

Secondly there needs to be an examination of how veterans live within multiple identities at once (tenet six), and how prioritization of identity is established and maintained. As reservists continue to navigate multiple identities within the context of being a veteran, there is need to understand how one assigns oneself as a veteran. For example, a reservist that never serves on active duty beyond that of initial training might not be considered to be a veteran by the government for certain purposes or benefits. This individual and their relationship with the veteran identity will operate in a fashion unique for their conditions in comparison to another reservist that has served multiple years on active duty. The participants in this study all self-identified as reservists before identifying as veterans. The navigation of these multiple identities then, even in the veteran identity, must be further refined to ensure that it is clear which portion of the population is being researched.

With regard to veterans not being essentialized (tenet 10) and the value of narratives and counternarratives (tenet 5), there is a need for further refinement of what part of the student veteran population one is researching, and how their experiences differ from other groups of veterans. Barry, Whiteman, & Wadsworth, (2014) discuss the need for further refining the definition of the group being studied by renaming the overarching

student veteran identity as student servicemembers and veterans, but referring to the population as SSV/M. This concept still falls short of parsing out the reserve population from the larger student veteran identity, however, it does take into account those that are active duty taking courses. By incorporating further narratives across active status, and branch, a better understanding of the subpopulations that exist within the population may occur.

Not all of the tenets of VCT were completely applicable to this study simply due to the size and scope of the study in comparison to the theory. Specifically, tenet 11 was not used, which states that veteran culture is built on respect, honor, and trust. It seemed that that tenet was again reaching for a generalization that might not be applicable to all veterans even though it speaks directly to the core values held by all of the military branches. Similarly, tenet eight added little to the study as, while it can be understood that one should have veteran voices making veteran policies, there are many other factors involved with policy making. Whether it is that the official is elected, or simply that there are no veterans to be representatives at the moment, this tenet makes logical sense but was not additive to the findings of this particular study.

For Methodology

Narrative inquiry is a methodology that moves with ease in postmodern research. While the definitions of what narrative inquiry is are as numerous as the ways in which one can shape a narrative for delivery to an audience, by structuring future narrative works around the concepts of Lyotard (1984), one can further explore the narrative space in a scientific manner. Lyotard goes as far as to express that even hard sciences, as they

would be defined today, are narratives that have been developed by previous scientists in a manner that is most easily consumed by future researchers in each perspective field of knowledge.

Built upon that concept, one can then pursue the narratives of those in education understanding that education is the most human of sciences. It is the pursuit of knowledge development, and therefore the exploration of the individual's narrative allows for an understanding of the educational pathway and experiences therein. Narrative inquiry further builds upon the concepts of Plato, whom used dialectic narratives in the form of fictionalized stories of Socrates and non-fictional dialogues in his later writings, to illustrate points and develop the field of knowledge. By pivoting then, to an understanding that education narratives are the creation of a product that makes knowledge consumable at a larger scale, a more user-friendly concept of research occurs. There is no need to defend narrative inquiry as a methodology as will often happen, but there is a need for a better understanding of the concept and how it fits into the larger field of research into education.

In the narrative inquiry methodology, it is imperative to understand that the lack of limitations on what the methodology is acts to strengthen the methodology. Just as there are several unique ways in which a director can present a movie, each narrative inquirer can tell the story in a different, unique way. Minor variations in technique, such as the difference in sharing the narrative in third person instead of first person are largely stylistic in nature. While the first person narrative can be used to fictionalize a narrative, assisting in the removal of intimate details that might comprise the identity of the

participant, the creation of a third person narrative is the most appropriate for this method as it conforms to the understanding that this new narrative is not the individual sharing their story, but a hybrid experience being presented by both the participant and the researcher.

This is not to call into question, however, the benefit of fictionalized first-person accounts of narratives as a sense of meaning making. Many authors have used this methodology (Kim, 2016) in an effort to develop a single narrative out of numerous narratives shared for a project, thus creating a unique story that encompasses all of the experience that the researcher desires the audience explore within the context of the participant groups experience without overwhelming them with multiple narratives to read. This is not a new concept and can be seen used as far back as Plato fictionalizing experiences of his mentor Socrates in an effort to create a narrative that would impart knowledge on the audience. However, the benefit of sharing the individual narratives as presented by the participants are many and add to the authenticity of the experience of each. It allows for the reality of their experience to shine through the narrative, with experiences both good and bad, both relevant and seemingly irrelevant to the topic at hand. By creating a joint fictionalized narrative, one will potentially augment the experiences and narratives in a way that does not create a unified narrative where both the author and the participant's voices are heard equally in the final narrative (Bakhtin, 1981).

This leads the researcher to understand that, while recent research might discuss coding data within narrative inquiry, that use of coding aligns more closely to

phenomenology on the boundaries between these two methodologies. While it has been considered the standard to code data in qualitative research for decades, and been cited as a skill that all qualitative researchers must use (Strauss, 1987), more recent researchers have argued that in certain methodologies, such as narrative inquiry, it can be inappropriate to code the data as that is not fulfilling the need that was established by the research question (Saldaña, 2016). The meaning making, in narrative inquiry, that occurs from exploring the experience is created by the individual audience member as they imagine the experience, not through coding the experience to make the narrative appear in a more quantitative light.

For this study, I took the approach of understanding that initial meaning making of the experience is done by the participant themselves. In answering the questions and sharing their narrative, the participant is sifting through the source material and deciding what is to be shared and what is relevant for the purpose of the study. Following their interviews and transcription, the creation of a unified narrative by the researcher acts as a second round of meaning making, allowing for the data shared to be organized in a cohesive narrative that is then contextualized within the extant body of knowledge on the student veteran.

While it is common for narrative inquirists to engage in embedded research with their participants, or engage in interviews during the experience, the pursuit of methods of success and the experiences that led to this success needed reflection from the participants, as well as identifiable success that can only be seen after years of continued success and achievement in their perspective field. The participants in this study were

chosen, in part, due to their proximity to retirement while also having used one of the most recent iterations of the G.I. Bill. While hindsight might alter how the participant chooses to share their experience, that is acceptable and relevant in this study as they are reflecting on what they experienced as tools for success. The ability to reflect on these moments in time, these experiences from many years in the past, and share this information after personal reflection on the experience, works to strengthen the findings of the study.

Finally, the epistemology used with relation to narrative inquiry is often either constructivism focusing on how the individual creates knowledge, or critical theory exploring the marginalized narrative. While this study focused through a critical lens, in future studies a more appropriate lens to be considered for this methodology would be pragmatism (Dewey, 1979). In this epistemology, the concern is in the construction of knowledge, but in the practical application of the knowledge gained from the narratives (Green, Camilli, & Elmore, 2006). The focus of the narrative being the lived experience of the participant, and then exploring the practical application of knowledge and understanding developed from that shared experience, falls in line with the core concepts of Dewey's epistemology.

For the Institution

Programs that exist on campuses are advertised to support veterans but will often serve civilian interests (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). Many systems that currently exist center around specifically supporting the student veteran with PTSD (Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones, and Sulak, 2011). With around 15% of the veteran population (National Center for

PTSD, 2018) being diagnosed with PTSD, these programs support a limited number of student veterans.

One area in which the participants all met obstacles on campus was with the navigation of reservist benefits. The issue of benefits navigation can be seen through events such as John simply trusting the registrar's office to find whatever benefits he was due, or Andrew being required to pay his benefits back to the Department of Veterans Affairs. By creating a program or assigning an individual as the reserve subject matter expert for G.I. Bill related policies, this population would be better supported in their navigation of administrative issues on campus. This individual could also extend their area of expertise to an understanding of what the reservist requirements and obligations to the military are in an effort to help mitigate barriers.

With regard to transitioning from orders and during two-week training events, this staff member that is familiar with reserve obligations, as well as a development of policy to support the reservist in these events, would further support success amongst the population. Summer training can make it difficult for students to take summer courses as Peter's narrative illustrated. Whether it limits the ability to take courses over the summer, or to participate in an internship required for graduation, these are factors that do not exist for other student veterans. By having policies, and exceptions to standing policy, regarding how to support these individuals during their summer obligations, a barrier to their education is removed. A staff member specifically trained in the reservist population and the rules and policies that govern the reservist, would assist the institution in

navigating support during these training events, as well as add a level of support on which the student could draw from the institution.

There is also a need for veterans to be consulted in the development of programs that are designed by the institution to “assist” the student veteran population. While programs like the Green Zone (Dillard and Yu, 2018) and ACT-based workshops (Blevins, Roca, & Spencer, 2011) look good to the general population, they do not necessarily benefit a significant part of the student veterans. An ACT workshop, for instance, would fail to assist the participants in this study as many of the institutions they attended waived ACT/SAT requirements for veterans. Shifting programs of support to a more generalizable one, such as a consolidated staff co-located in a veteran resource center, would empower the student veteran population at any institution, despite the particular student veteran’s background. The creation of programs to support the reservist student population exclusively would be a natural evolution of the concept of on campus support programs.

There are many ways in which a program could be developed to support this population. For those that have to miss courses and internships over the summer, for example, there could be a program in place to alleviate this. Perhaps it could be a partnership with faculty members that were willing to teach an accelerated course that met more often but over a shorter amount of time, to meet the scheduling needs of these students that are bound by contract to attend these annual functions. There could also be an outreach program to work with civilian organizations that usually provide internships to students at the institution in order to provide internships that meet the requirements of

the program but are flexible and willing to work around the military obligation of the student.

Finally, numerous studies (Persky & Oliver, 2010; Barry et al., 2014) call for a more streamlined credit evaluation of service experience. The participants in this study illustrate the wide range of credits that might be given for experience with John receiving no credit for his military experience and Peter receiving over twenty credits, taking over a semester off of his college experience. Programs established should make it readily accessible for the student veteran to understand how many credits they will be able to receive for their experience, and which degree pathways will support the transfer of a majority of their earned credits from their military service. A partnership with community colleges could enable an institution to assign experience credit for technical training in specific occupational fields that the student veteran worked in during their time in the service.

For the Policymaker

The military is increasing the size of the reserves for each branch (Navy, 2018). With the Reserve Education Assistance Program (REAP) recently being ended because of the creation of the Forever G.I. Bill, there is a misunderstanding of the reserve experience. With a reservist being able to serve over a year and a half on active duty order but not have any of it be considered eligible for education benefits, the reserve population is left with an obligation of service that profoundly impacts their civilian lives while also being afforded far less support than their active duty compatriots that will have

access to their educational benefits about halfway through their contracted service obligation.

One policy that needed revision according to the participants in this study was the transition assistance program (TAP), which is a program that servicemembers are required to participate in prior to leaving their active service and reintegrating into the civilian society. These findings were in line with Ford and Vignare (2016) who found that students did not find the program prepared them at all for commencing with the pursuit of education. By working with members of the education community outside of the military, the program might integrate contacts for different states, or even from different regions, that could support students as they transition back to civilian status in any region.

A second policy that would assist the student veterans is the creation of a Department of Veterans Affairs guidance officer. While this might seem similar to the position that exists to work with a registrar's office, the concept would be student centric. In particular, students would be able to reach out and develop strategies to use their benefits while also having an advocate to navigate the Department of Veteran Affairs bureaucracy.

Future Research

A comparison of the reserve student veteran population with the traditional student veteran identity is called for to further explore the boundary between the two identities. Through an examination of mental health, access to education, educational success, and other identifying marks of the individual experience, a distinction might be

defined. This would also afford for further explorations of previously understudied subpopulations of the student veteran identity. Similarly, there is a need for understanding the difference in experience as it relates across branches of service. Each branch has unique requirements for service, unique internal education systems, and separate technical fields to be trained in. By examining the difference between outcomes with regard to branch of service might illustrate best practices for internal continuing education policies for each branch.

Understanding that a deficit theme pervades the current body of literature, there is a need for a meta-narrative analysis of the field to be developed. A meta-narrative analysis would afford a clearer understanding of how suffused this field is with deficit thinking. A meta-narrative analysis would also allow for the sharing of themes developed from the counternarrative movement within the field, and in particular those that are built upon success.

At the community college level, further research is needed to explore how credits are given value towards education in different states and different regions with regard to earned credit from service. These credits might come from formal courses such as the student veteran's military occupation school, or they might come from correspondence courses taken to further the individual's knowledge of their field. However, the lack of consistency across the country leaves student veterans at a disadvantage if they desire to pursue their military occupation in the civilian sector. By further developing the picture of the landscape for the student veteran and the administrator that develops credit transfer, the student veteran is empowered to use their experience towards education and

the institution is given the opportunity to have other students learn from the life experience of this population. Examples of these programs being successfully implemented should be developed into a case study to further refine ideas for success in credit transfer application.

A qualitative study focusing on the intersectionality of identity amongst student veterans, focusing on the boundaries between multiple identities, is also needed in this field. Identity boundaries, such as those between the student veteran and the non-veteran adult learner, can often blur. As was also seen in the experiences of the participants in this study, Schiavone and Gentry (2014) found numerous reasons that student veterans do not as easily develop relationships with other students on campus are the same reasons that many adult learners that are not veterans share. The student veteran is, in almost all accounts, considered to fall within the adult learner category. Exploring the concept of boundaries between these multiple identities would further refine the understanding of the veteran identity and assist in the development of support structures for the population.

Finally, there needs to be further research on the population of dependents that has access to the G.I. Bill. This population is largely unstudied, however, if researching the student veteran population using the G.I. Bill alone, they will often be counted within the population. An understanding then of who they are, and how their education occurs in comparison to other civilians that do not have access to these benefits, would benefit the student veteran researcher. Further research into this population would also potentially yield future controls which might be used to filter dependent users of these education benefits out of the student veteran population for research purposes.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experience of three enlisted reservists that found success, not only in their path to education but also in their civilian careers. By sharing these stories, we give the reservist, researcher, administration, and policymaker the ability to imagine how these types of stories might develop within the constructs of their educational institution. These experiences, while not generalizable, are also not unique to these individuals. Obstacles to education are common, and the ability to meet and overcome new, unplanned for obstacles is something engrained in every servicemember, regardless of whether they started their military service in an active capacity or as a reservist.

These stories move beyond the primary narrative of the field. They show many different paths to the military, many different paths through the reserves, many different paths through education, and many different paths to success. There is no one recipe for what makes a reservist successful at college. There is no one recipe for what makes anyone successful. Understanding that, what these narratives do is illustrate how others did it. These stories show that individuals are not alone in facing obstacles, but that these obstacles are not insurmountable. These narratives illustrated that, as the individual reservist might expect, they are capable. With approximately 71% of youth in the United States being ineligible to join the military (Feenway, 2014), the reservist must remember that they have already proven themselves an outlier and capable of achieving success.

Finally, this study illustrated the need for further development of research into the subpopulations of the veteran identity and the need to move away from a deficit model

approach to understanding the population. Through exploring the unique approach towards education that each of the three participants took, the uniqueness of the reservist experience can be seen. There is no universal answer to how to support the reserve population, just as there is no universal answer to how best to support all student reservists in pursuit of education. The best way, then, to support the largest number of student veterans possible, is to not only understand the nuance that exists between multiple veteran identities, but also to understand that these individuals have already demonstrated success and had a career in a technical field for years regardless of their pathway to veteran status. This experience, as well as the training creates an individual that is prepared both to take on the difficulties presented in the pursuit of higher education, and to share their lived experience with other students that do not have practical experience regarding educational attainment, furthering the learning of their peers.

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Appendix A – Interview Protocol

Demographics and History Questions

- Tell me a little bit about yourself.
- What is your age?
- What race do you identify as?
- When did you enlist?
- How long were you enlisted?
- When were you commissioned?
- How long have you been commissioned?
- What type of degree, and what major did you obtain?
- What type of institution did you attend?
- What education benefits, military or otherwise, did you use?
- What commissioning source did you pursue?
- Were you able to transfer any credits from military experience?

Initiation Questions

- Tell me about your experience within the reserves while attending an institution of higher education.
- Tell me about your experience navigating higher education, and relationships with faculty and peers while serving as a reservist.
- Tell me about your experience navigating higher education with regard to administrative minutia and policy while serving as a reservist.

- Tell me about your experience navigating benefits through the department of Veterans Affairs while attending higher education as a reservist.

Probing Questions

- What was your experience like navigating military education policies?
- What was your experience navigating military financial benefits?
- What was your experience like trying to apply to college?
- What was your experience like interacting with administration during your educational experience?
- What was your experience like interacting with faculty during your educational experience?
- What was your experience like interacting with your military command during your educational experience?
- What was your experience like interacting with veteran peers during your educational experience?
- What was your experience like interacting with non-veteran peers during your educational experience?
- What was it like navigating reserve obligations, the commissioning process, and working with the Officer Selection Officer (OSO)?
- Was there a veteran center on campus?
- Were you able to transfer any credits from military experience?
- Was there anyone available to assist in the navigation of benefits?

- Did you build community primarily with student veterans or non-veteran students?