

DISSERTATION

FINDING FORMATION:

COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE AND IDENTITY NAVIGATION
AMONG STUDENT SERVICE MEMBERS AND VETERANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

FINDING FORMATION:

COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE AND IDENTITY NAVIGATION

AMONG STUDENT SERVICE MEMBERS AND VETERANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Student Service Members and Veterans (SSM/Vs) are a growing population in higher education, yet resilience research remains grounded in individual frameworks that inadequately explain military-socialized transitions. This qualitative study examined how first-semester SSM/Vs developed resilience through institutional support using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Data included semi-structured interviews and reflective journals from seven participants at a land-grant university in the Mountain West.

Findings showed resilience emerged through collective engagement shaped by military socialization, while six identity navigation modes challenged traditional transition models. The study introduces the **Collective Resiliency Model**, integrating Richardson (2002), Norris et al. (2008), Ungar (2018), and Vacchi (2013) to position the collective as the primary unit of analysis for resilience among military-socialized populations. Findings inform resilience theory, veteran services, and higher education practice.

Keywords: student service members and veterans, collective resilience, identity navigation, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, institutional support, Collective Resiliency Model, higher education transition

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DEDICATION

For every veteran who has served, returned, and found themselves standing at the threshold of a new life searching for formation, identity, and the resilience to carry on. This work was always for you.

To my daughter, Nicole McCray, retired officer of the United States Air Force. You have shown me, by example, what it means to live boldly and with purpose. You make me proud every single day.

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You were the living proof of everything this dissertation tries to say.

Your belongings are still in my garage, Michael. I am not ready to let go — and I don't think I need to be.

Semper Fidelis, old friend. Rest now.

— TK

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CHAPTER ONE: COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE IN TRANSITION

Student Service Members and Veterans (SSM/Vs) represent a growing and increasingly diverse population in higher education, reshaping institutional priorities and challenging traditional assumptions about student transition, persistence, and success. Between 2009 and 2017, more than three million veterans utilized federal education benefits, resulting in a significant demographic shift across postsecondary institutions (Cate et al., 2017). While increased access to higher education has expanded educational opportunity for military-connected students, SSM/Vs often encounter distinct challenges during their transition from military service to academic environments, including cultural dissonance, identity disruption, academic recalibration, and social reintegration (Vacchi, 2013; DiRamio et al., 2008).

Existing research has consistently identified resilience as a critical factor in student veteran persistence and well-being (Richardson, 2002; Barry et al., 2014). Simultaneously, higher education scholarship has emphasized the importance of institutional support structures—such as veteran service centers, peer networks, academic advising, and transition programming—in facilitating student veteran success (Vacchi, 2013; Vacchi et al., 2017). However, much of this scholarship implicitly frames resilience as an *individual* capacity that is supported—rather than constituted—by institutional systems.

Emerging qualitative research suggests that predominantly individualistic framings of resilience may be insufficient for capturing how military-socialized students actually experience adaptation during the transition to higher education. Studies of student veterans increasingly document resilience as a relational and socially embedded process, shaped through peer connections, shared identity, and participation in supportive institutional environments rather than as an individual coping capacity alone (Kirchner, 2015; Smith-Osborne, 2012; Ungar,

2018). Consistent with military socialization emphasizing collective efficacy, unit cohesion, and shared meaning under adversity, SSM/Vs often describe resilience as something that develops *with others*—through trusted peer relationships, veteran-designated spaces, collective engagement with struggle, and culturally familiar frameworks for making meaning of challenge (Bartone, 2006; Norris et al., 2008; Vacchi et al., 2017).

Within this framing, institutional support structures are not experienced merely as discrete services to be accessed or utilized, but as relational and symbolic anchors that provide safety, belonging, and continuity during periods of disruption. Qualitative studies indicate that student veterans may derive resilience not only from direct service use, but from the perceived availability of support, the presence of veteran-centered spaces, and opportunities for collective engagement that affirm identity and normalize struggle (Cole & Kim, 2013; DiRamio et al., 2008; Southwell et al., 2018). These findings suggest that resilience for SSM/Vs emerges through interconnected systems of support, shared meaning-making, and collective efficacy rather than through isolated individual adaptation.

This study responds to this conceptual gap by examining student veteran resilience through a collective resiliency lens, exploring how SSM/Vs experience, interpret, and engage with institutional support structures as part of interconnected resilience-building processes during their transition to higher education. By situating individual experiences within relational, institutional, and cultural contexts, the study seeks to extend existing resilience and student veteran support frameworks toward a more ecologically valid understanding of how resilience is lived, sustained, and enacted among military-connected students. This approach aligns with Masten's (2014) bio-psycho-social framework, which established that individual resilience is not an intrinsic trait *but is triggered through facilitative environments*—what she termed "ordinary

magic" operating through everyday systems of human connection and institutional support (Masten & Garmezy, 1985; Norris et al., 2008; Ungar, 2018; Vacchi, 2013).

Research Problem

Current scholarship addressing student veterans in higher education largely follows two parallel but insufficiently integrated trajectories. One body of literature focuses on psychological resilience, emphasizing individual adaptation, coping, and reintegration following disruption (Richardson, 2002; Meredith et al., 2011). A second body of research emphasizes institutional support mechanisms, examining how campus-based services facilitate access, belonging, and persistence for student veterans (Vacchi, 2013; Vacchi et al., 2017).

While these two bodies of literature offer important insights, they share a foundational assumption that resilience resides primarily within the individual, with institutional support functioning as an external scaffold that assists personal adaptation. This individual-centered framing is evident in dominant psychological resilience models, which conceptualize reintegration as an intrapersonal process buffered by protective factors (Richardson, 2002; Meredith et al., 2011).

This individual-centered orientation creates a conceptual gap in understanding how resilience is actually lived and enacted by Student Service Members and Veterans. Qualitative research suggests that military-socialized individuals often experience resilience as a relational and socially embedded process, shaped through peer bonds, collective meaning-making, and trusted institutional spaces rather than through isolated coping strategies (Kirchner, 2015; Smith-Osborne, 2012; Ungar, 2018). Community resilience scholarship similarly emphasizes that adaptive capacity emerges through networks of social capital, shared competence, and collective efficacy rather than through individual adaptation alone (Norris et al., 2008). Yet these collective dimensions of resilience remain undertheorized within student veteran transition research, which

continues to privilege individual adjustment as the primary unit of analysis (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vacchi et al., 2017).

Therefore, institutional support services are frequently evaluated through utilization metrics—such as frequency of visits or service uptake—rather than through their relational, symbolic, and meaning-making functions. Studies have shown that veterans who engage lightly with campus services may nonetheless experience these structures as essential safety nets, identity anchors, or transitional footholds, even when direct utilization is limited (Cole & Kim, 2013; DiRamio et al., 2008; Southwell et al., 2018). Moreover, prevailing transition models often assume linear identity reconstruction, obscuring the plurality and nonlinearity of identity navigation pathways that student veterans may experience, including continuity, reconstruction, oscillation, transformation, inversion, and disruption (Hammond, 2016; Diamond, 2012; Vacchi et al., 2017).

Without a framework that reconceptualizes resilience as a collective phenomenon embedded within institutional, relational, and cultural systems, higher education institutions risk designing support structures that are procedurally robust but conceptually misaligned with how student veterans actually persist, adapt, and make meaning during transition. Such misalignment may limit the effectiveness of veteran support initiatives and perpetuate deficit-oriented assumptions about help-seeking, disengagement, or underutilization. Addressing this gap requires a reconceptualization of resilience that accounts for collective efficacy, relational belonging, and shared meaning-making as central—rather than peripheral—to student veteran success in higher education (Norris et al., 2008; Ungar, 2018; Vacchi, 2013).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to examine how Student Service Members and Veterans (SSM/Vs) experience and describe their development of resilience through engagement with institutional support structures in higher education. Grounded in a collective resiliency perspective, this study conceptualizes resilience as a relational and meaning-making process that emerges through interactions with peers, institutional environments, and shared cultural frameworks, rather than as an exclusively individual attribute (Bartone, 2006; Norris et al., 2008; Ungar, 2018). This framing reflects growing scholarship suggesting that military-socialized populations experience adaptation and persistence through collective efficacy, shared identity, and relational support systems (Kirchner, 2015; Smith-Osborne, 2012).

Specifically, the study examines how components of Vacchi's (2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support—peer support, academic interactions, transition services, and institutional support—function within resilience processes conceptualized through Richardson's (2002) Resiliency Model, while extending both frameworks to account for collective and relational resilience dynamics. In doing so, the study responds to calls within the literature to move beyond individual-centered models of resilience and toward more ecologically valid frameworks that reflect the lived experiences of student veterans navigating transition (Bonanno, 2012; Vacchi et al., 2017).

Methodologically, the study employs a convergent dual-source qualitative design, integrating semi-structured interviews with reflective journaling to capture both narrated and contemporaneous accounts of student veteran transition experiences (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This design enables in-depth exploration of how

resilience development and identity navigation unfold concurrently within institutional contexts, consistent with interpretative phenomenological analysis. Findings from this study aim to inform theory development, institutional practice, and policy related to student veteran success in higher education (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Vacchi, 2013).

Research Questions

Guided by scholarship emphasizing resilience as a dynamic, contextually embedded process (Bonanno, 2012; Ungar, 2018) and by research highlighting the importance of institutional environments in shaping student veteran success (Vacchi, 2013; Vacchi et al., 2017), this study is structured around the following research questions.

Central Research Question

How do Student Service Members and Veterans (SSM/Vs) perceive and describe their development of resilience through engagement with institutional support structures in higher education?

Sub-Questions

1. How do SSM/Vs experience and interpret the transition from military to academic environments, and how do institutional support services shape their perceptions of resilience during this critical period (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010)
2. How do SSM/Vs make meaning of their interactions with specific institutional support components in their ongoing resilience-building processes (Kirchner, 2015; Smith-Osborne, 2012)

3. Which institutional support structures do SSM/Vs identify as most beneficial in their resilience-building, and how do they articulate the impact of these supports on their academic and personal development (Vacchi, 2013; Cole & Kim, 2013)
4. How do SSM/Vs interpret and navigate barriers in institutional support, and what meaning do they attribute to these experiences concerning their overall resilience trajectory (Hammond, 2016; Southwell et al., 2018)
5. How do SSM/Vs describe changes in their experiences and perceptions of institutional support over time, and what does this suggest about their evolving resilience and adaptive strategies (Bonanno, 2012; Ungar, 2018)

Methodological Alignment Statement

To address these questions, this study employs a convergent dual-source qualitative design in which semi-structured interviews provide in-depth narrative accounts while reflective journaling captures contemporaneous meaning-making across the transition period. This methodological approach emphasizes complementarity rather than triangulation, allowing multiple forms of experiential data to converge interpretively and strengthen analytic credibility (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013).

This design is particularly well suited to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as it facilitates examination of how participants make sense of significant life transitions through both retrospective narration and real-time reflection. IPA's idiographic commitment and interpretive depth enable close attention to resilience development and identity navigation as concurrent, evolving processes embedded within institutional, relational, and cultural contexts (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2022).

Significance of the Study

Theoretical Significance

Theoretically, this study advances resilience scholarship by repositioning resilience as a *collective and relational process*, extending Richardson's (2002) Resiliency Model beyond individual adaptation to encompass collective homeostasis, shared protective factors, and group-level meaning-making. In doing so, the study aligns with broader community and multisystemic resilience frameworks that conceptualize adaptation as emerging through networks of social capital, collective efficacy, and shared competence rather than individual coping alone (Norris et al., 2008; Ungar, 2018).

Simultaneously, this research extends Vacchi's (2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support by demonstrating that institutional supports function not only as service delivery mechanisms, but as *relational ecosystems* that facilitate collective resilience through perceived availability, identity affirmation, and transitional scaffolding. This integration challenges deficit-oriented framings of military collectivism and reframes collective orientation as a resilience-enabling asset rather than a barrier to civilian adjustment (Bartone, 2006; Smith & True, 2014).

Methodological Significance

Methodologically, the study contributes to qualitative research on student veterans by employing a convergent dual-source IPA design capable of capturing resilience trajectories over time. Integrating semi-structured interviews with reflective journaling enhances analytic depth, credibility, and idiographic sensitivity while illuminating how resilience unfolds through lived experience rather than retrospective abstraction alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fetters et al., 2013).

This approach responds to calls for qualitative methodologies that foreground veteran voice, complexity, and contextual meaning-making, particularly during periods of transition characterized by identity disruption and institutional navigation (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017; Hammond, 2016).

Institutional and Policy Significance

Institutionally, the findings offer actionable insights for designing veteran support systems that align with *collective resilience processes*, emphasizing cohort-based engagement, relational safety, and transitional scaffolding rather than purely individual service utilization. Such alignment has implications for how institutions conceptualize effectiveness, evaluate veteran services, and allocate resources to support persistence and belonging (Vacchi et al., 2017; Molina & Morse, 2023).

From a policy perspective, this study provides evidence to inform veteran education policy, program evaluation, and funding strategies that better reflect how SSM/Vs persist and succeed in higher education. By demonstrating that resilience is shaped through institutional ecosystems rather than isolated interventions, the study supports calls for integrated, veteran-centered policy approaches that extend beyond access to encompass sustained adaptation and well-being (Southwell et al., 2018; Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2021).

Definition of Terms

This study employs several key conceptual terms that establish the theoretical and analytical foundation for integrating Richardson's (2002) Resiliency Model and Vacchi's (2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support. These definitions clarify the core constructs that shape the study's inquiry into resilience development and institutional support utilization among Student Service Members/Veterans (SSM/Vs) in higher education.

Resilience Development

Resilience, as conceptualized within Richardson's (2002) Resiliency Model, represents a dynamic and iterative process of disruption and reintegration, through which individuals develop adaptive capabilities in response to significant life transitions. In the context of student veterans, this process is particularly salient in their military-to-academic transition, as they navigate new academic, social, and institutional environments while engaging with support structures designed to facilitate their success (Barclay, 2017; Henderson & Morris, 2024; Thompson et al., 2023). Rather than being a fixed trait, resilience is understood as a developmental trajectory, influenced by both personal agency and institutional support mechanisms (Anderson & Lee, 2023; Wilson et al., 2020).

Reintegration Outcomes

Richardson's (2002) resiliency model delineates four potential reintegration outcomes that emerge from experiences of disruption:

1. Resilient Reintegration – The individual adapts positively, emerging with enhanced coping mechanisms and greater functional capacity.
2. Reintegration Back to Homeostasis – The individual returns to a pre-disruption level of functioning without significant change.
3. Reintegration with Loss – The individual experiences a diminished capacity to function, leading to compromised adaptation.
4. Dysfunctional Reintegration – The individual struggles to adapt, potentially resulting in maladaptive coping strategies or disengagement.

For student veterans, these outcomes reflect different pathways of adaptation within higher education, shaped by institutional support engagement and resilience-building processes (Cooper et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2021).

Student Service Members/Veterans (SSM/Vs)

This term refers to both active-duty service members and veterans enrolled in postsecondary education, encompassing a diverse range of military-affiliated student identities. This inclusive definition acknowledges the varied pathways through which service members engage with academic institutions, as well as the distinct social, psychological, and educational experiences that influence resilience development and support system utilization (Evans et al., 2021). By recognizing the heterogeneity of military-connected students, this study situates SSM/Vs within a broader framework of postsecondary student transitions and academic persistence (Campbell & Watson, 2024).

Institutional Support Components

Within Vacchi's (2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support, institutional support structures are categorized into four essential components that interact with resilience development processes:

- Peer Support – The network of formal and informal veteran-to-veteran interactions that facilitate emotional, academic, and social adjustment through shared military experiences (Whiteman et al., 2013; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).
- Academic Interactions – Engagement with faculty, academic resources, and mentorship opportunities, contributing to educational success and resilience-building (Henderson & Borsari, 2020; Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2021).

- Transition Services – Institutional programs that provide targeted support during the critical disruption and reintegration phases, including orientation programs, career counseling, and veteran-specific academic advising (Barclay, 2017; Molina & Morse, 2023).
- Institutional Support – The broader organizational commitment to student veterans through policies, programs, and integrated services that promote academic and personal success (Anderson & Thompson, 2023; Barclay, 2017; Wilson et al., 2020).

Support System Integration

The dynamic interaction between these institutional support components creates an “ecosystem of support”, in which multiple, interconnected mechanisms facilitate resilience development. This systemic approach recognizes that veteran success in higher education is not solely dependent on individual resilience-building efforts, but rather on the synergistic relationship between personal adaptation and structured institutional engagement (Barclay, 2017; Cooper et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2021).

Resilience

A dynamic, relational process through which individuals embedded within collective systems navigate disruption, engage shared protective factors, and move toward adaptive reintegration (Bonanno, 2012; Richardson, 2002).

Resilience Trajectories

Resilience trajectories refer to the developmental pathways through which student veterans progress from initial disruption to various reintegration outcomes (Bonanno, 2012). These trajectories acknowledge that adaptation to academic environments occurs over time, requiring sustained engagement with multiple institutional support mechanisms (Henderson & Morris, 2024; Thompson et al., 2023). By examining resilience as an ongoing process rather than

a fixed state, this study situates veteran transitions within a longitudinal framework of academic persistence and personal development.

Collective Resilience

Resilience constituted through relational networks, shared meaning-making, institutional engagement, and collective efficacy rather than individual coping alone (Norris et al., 2008; Ungar, 2018).

Institutional Support Ecosystem

An interconnected system of peer, academic, transitional, and organizational supports that function as safety nets, relational anchors, and developmental scaffolds for student veterans (Vacchi, 2013; Vacchi et al., 2017).

Military-Academic Transition

The military-to-academic transition describes the complex process through which student veterans navigate the shift from military to higher education environments. This transition involves both the disruption phase identified in Richardson's (2002) model and the engagement with support structures outlined in Vacchi's (2013) framework (Rodriguez & Smith, 2024). As a critical period for resilience development and institutional support utilization, this transition represents a pivotal moment in student veteran persistence and success.

Convergent Dual-Source Design

In qualitative inquiry, a convergent dual-source design refers to the intentional integration of two complementary qualitative data collection methods to enhance the credibility, depth, and richness of findings (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013). In this study, the design integrates semi-structured interviews—capturing veterans' narrated accounts of resilience and support

engagement—with reflective journaling, which documents contemporaneous experiences and meaning-making over time.

By analyzing these two sources both individually and in combination, the study leverages corroboration across methods while maintaining the idiographic and interpretative focus of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This approach provides a comprehensive view of student veterans' resilience trajectories without relying on traditional three-method triangulation, instead emphasizing methodological complementarity and interpretive convergence.

Delimitations of the Study

This study is delimited by several intentional design choices that ensure a focused, conceptually coherent, and methodologically sound investigation of student veteran resilience development within institutional support structures. Delimitations reflect purposeful boundaries established by the researcher to align the scope of inquiry with the study's objectives and methodological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

First, the study focuses exclusively on first-year Student Service Members and Veterans (SSM/Vs) enrolled at a single land-grant university in the Mountain West. This population was selected to examine how veterans experience collective resilience-building and institutional support during the initial phase of military-to-academic transition, a period characterized by heightened disruption, identity negotiation, and institutional navigation (Evans et al., 2021). Excluding upper-division or graduate student veterans allows for a targeted exploration of early transition processes, aligning with Richardson's (2002) conceptualization of resilience as a developmental process initiated by disruption and followed by reintegration over time (Rodriguez & Smith, 2024).

Second, the institutional context is delimited to a single public research university with established veteran support services. This focus allows for an in-depth examination of how institutional ecosystems—rather than isolated services—contribute to collective resilience processes within a specific organizational environment (Vacchi, 2013; Vacchi et al., 2017). While the findings may offer conceptual insights applicable to other postsecondary settings, they are not intended to represent the experiences of student veterans at community colleges, private institutions, or exclusively online learning environments (Molina & Morse, 2023). This delimitation prioritizes contextual depth and ecological validity over broad generalizability.

Third, the study employs a qualitative phenomenological design utilizing a convergent dual-source strategy of semi-structured interviews and reflective journaling to explore the lived experiences of student veterans. By prioritizing deep, narrative-driven inquiry across these complementary methods, the study intentionally excludes quantitative approaches such as surveys or experimental interventions, which are less suited to capturing the relational, contextual, and meaning-making dimensions of collective resilience (Ungar, 2003; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design maintains alignment with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and its idiographic commitment to understanding how individuals make sense of significant life transitions within specific contexts (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Fourth, the temporal scope of the study is delimited to a single academic semester, which reflects both practical constraints and a theoretically informed focus on resilience as a *process rather than an outcome*. Resilience—particularly when conceptualized as collective and relational—unfolds over extended periods and is shaped by cumulative experiences, evolving identities, and sustained institutional engagement (Bonanno, 2012; Ungar, 2018). As such, this study does not attempt to measure long-term resilience trajectories or outcomes. Instead, it

captures early-stage resilience processes, including meaning-making, relational anchoring, and perceptions of institutional support availability during a critical transition window. Longitudinal designs spanning multiple years would be necessary to fully assess durability, stability, and transformation within resilience trajectories.

Finally, the theoretical framework is delimited to Richardson's (2002) Resiliency Model and Vacchi's (2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support. These frameworks were selected due to their complementary focus on disruption and reintegration processes and structured institutional support mechanisms, respectively. While additional theories—such as Schlossberg's Transition Theory or ecological models of student development—could further enrich understanding, the intentional limitation to these two models allows for a coherent and theoretically integrated examination of collective resilience as it emerges through institutional engagement (Anderson & Lee, 2023; Wilson et al., 2020).

By establishing these delimitations, the study maintains a clear and focused scope while acknowledging the complexity and temporality inherent in resilience development. These boundaries enable a rigorous examination of how institutional support ecosystems contribute to early-stage collective resilience among first-year student veterans and provide a foundation for future longitudinal research that can more fully trace resilience trajectories over time (Cooper et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2023).

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides a nuanced and theoretically grounded exploration of student veteran resilience within institutional support ecosystems, several limitations must be acknowledged. These limitations are inherent to the study's qualitative design, contextual focus, and conceptual framing and should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the study is situated within a single land-grant university in the Mountain West, which may limit the transferability of findings to other institutional contexts, including private universities, community colleges, or exclusively online learning environments (Molina & Morse, 2023). Institutional culture, resource availability, and organizational commitment to veteran support vary widely across postsecondary settings and shape how collective resilience is enacted and sustained (Vacchi et al., 2017). As such, the findings should be understood as contextually embedded rather than universally representative, with their primary contribution lying in conceptual and theoretical insight rather than broad generalizability.

Second, the study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach, prioritizing depth of understanding over breadth of representation. While this methodology allows for rich, detailed exploration of how Student Service Members and Veterans make meaning of resilience and institutional support, it necessarily limits the ability to draw statistical generalizations about the broader student veteran population (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduces potential sources of bias, including recall bias and interpretive subjectivity, which are inherent to phenomenological inquiry (Smith & Osborn, 2022). However, these limitations are consistent with IPA's epistemological commitment to understanding lived experience rather than producing objective or predictive claims (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Third, the study focuses exclusively on first-year student veterans, capturing resilience processes during the early phase of military-to-academic transition. While this focus aligns with the study's emphasis on disruption and early reintegration (Richardson, 2002), it necessarily excludes the experiences of upper-division and graduate-level student veterans who may demonstrate different resilience trajectories and patterns of institutional engagement.

Importantly, resilience—particularly when conceptualized as collective and relational—unfolds over extended periods and is shaped by cumulative experiences, evolving identities, and sustained participation in institutional ecosystems (Bonanno, 2012; Ungar, 2018). As such, the findings reflect early-stage resilience-building processes rather than long-term resilience outcomes or durability. Longitudinal research spanning multiple academic years would be required to fully examine the evolution, stability, and transformation of collective resilience over time (Rodriguez & Smith, 2024).

Finally, while this study integrates Richardson’s (2002) Resiliency Model and Vacchi’s (2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support to examine resilience within institutional contexts, the analysis is delimited to these two frameworks. Although this theoretical integration provides coherence and conceptual clarity, additional perspectives—such as Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, ecological systems theory, or student involvement models—could offer complementary insights into the multifaceted nature of student veteran transitions (Anderson & Lee, 2023; Wilson et al., 2020). Future research adopting a multi-theoretical or interdisciplinary approach may further enrich understanding of how collective resilience operates across diverse educational and social environments.

Taken together, these limitations underscore the complexity of studying resilience as a dynamic, collective process rather than a discrete individual outcome. Rather than diminishing the study’s contributions, they highlight the importance of context, temporality, and relational systems in shaping how student veterans experience resilience during transition. These limitations also point toward clear directions for future research, particularly longitudinal and multi-institutional studies capable of tracing collective resilience trajectories across time and context.

Conclusion

This chapter has established the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological foundation for examining student veteran resilience through a *collective resiliency lens*. By reframing resilience as a relational process embedded within institutional, social, and cultural systems, this study addresses a critical gap in student veteran scholarship that has historically privileged individual adaptation, coping, and service utilization as primary explanatory mechanisms (Bonanno, 2012; Richardson, 2002; Vacchi, 2013). Drawing on advances in resilience theory and community-based models, this reframing recognizes resilience as a dynamic, contextually situated process shaped through collective efficacy, relational networks, and institutional engagement rather than as a static individual trait (Norris et al., 2008; Ungar, 2018).

Grounded in resilience theory, student veteran support frameworks, and qualitative inquiry, this chapter has articulated the need for an expanded understanding of how Student Service Members and Veterans navigate transition, construct meaning, and sustain persistence through collective engagement. Prior research has demonstrated that military-socialized students often rely on shared identity, peer connection, and culturally familiar institutional spaces to negotiate disruption and reintegration (Bartone, 2006; Kirchner, 2015; Smith-Osborne, 2012). The research questions, methodological alignment, and significance statements presented here position this study to illuminate resilience not as a fixed outcome or isolated coping capacity, but as a *process that unfolds through relationships, institutional environments, and shared meaning-making over time* (Bonanno, 2012; DiRamio et al., 2008; Ungar, 2018).

By advancing a collective conceptualization of resilience, this study sets the stage for the interpretive analyses that follow and for the development of a *Collective Resiliency Model* that more accurately reflects the lived experiences of Student Service Members and Veterans

navigating higher education. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to reconceptualize resilience in ways that are ecologically valid and responsive to context, while also offering practical implications for institutional design and policy development (Norris et al., 2008; Vacchi et al., 2017). Ultimately, this work seeks to inform the creation of inclusive, responsive, and resilience-affirming environments that recognize collective engagement not as a peripheral support mechanism, but as a central pathway through which military-connected students persist, adapt, and succeed in higher education (Ungar, 2018; Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2021).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The transition from military to academic life for student veterans often involves shifts in identity accompanied by personal, social, and academic stressors, underscoring the critical importance of resilience as both a theoretical concept and a practical skillset (Vacchi, 2012; Norman et al., 2015). The extensive existing literature broadly examines resilience across diverse populations; however, the unique aspects and resilience processes specific to student veterans transitioning into higher education remain underexplored (Vacchi & Berger, 2014; Norman et al., 2015; Reyes et al., 2018).

This literature review integrates Richardson's resilience framework (Richardson, 2002) with Vacchi's conceptual model of student veteran support (Vacchi, 2012) to form an original theoretical lens uniquely suited to understanding the resilience processes of student veterans. Previous literature has often independently examined psychological resilience traits (Smith-Osborne, 2012; Reyes et al., 2018) or institutional support frameworks (Vacchi, Hammond, & Diamond, 2017). However, few have synthesized these perspectives into a comprehensive approach.

For instance, Richardson (2002) articulates resilience as a dynamic process shaped by interactions between individuals and their environments, whereas Vacchi (2012) emphasizes institutional responsibility in fostering supportive climates. Bridging these perspectives reveals critical intersections and gaps, particularly in understanding how individual resilience interacts with institutionally driven support systems within higher education contexts (Kirchner, 2015; Wurster et al., 2013).

Consequently, this review uniquely contributes to current scholarship by explicitly identifying and addressing these theoretical and practical gaps while emphasizing an applied

research approach. This integration enables a nuanced understanding of the conditions and processes necessary for cultivating resilience among student veterans, thus guiding future research and informing institutional practices (Smith-Osborne, 2012; Reyes et al., 2018; Kirchner, 2015).

Foundational Theories of Adult Development and Transition

Early scholarship on student veterans in higher education primarily drew from foundational adult learning and development theories, notably Schlossberg's Transition Model (1981) and Tinto's Interactionalist Theory (1975). These theories initially provided conceptual anchors for understanding veterans' transition challenges from military to academic environments (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Schlossberg's Transition Model

Schlossberg's model emphasizes four factors—Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies (4 S's)—that are crucial for managing adult transitions (Schlossberg, 1981). This model gained traction for its clarity in conceptualizing veteran transitions to higher education (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). However, scholars increasingly critiqued its limited applicability to veterans, highlighting its civilian-centered assumptions. Rumann and Hamrick (2010) identified tensions between the individualistic assumptions underlying Schlossberg's model and veterans' collectivist military experiences. Vacchi et al. (2017) further argued that a civilian-oriented framework inadequately captured the complexity and cultural nuances inherent in veteran transitions, underscoring the necessity of tailored theoretical lenses.

Tinto's Interactionalist Theory

Tinto's theory (1975, 1993) proposed that student persistence hinged upon successful social and academic integration into campus environments, guiding institutional support

approaches such as peer mentoring and dedicated resource centers (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Despite its wide use, critiques emerged regarding its applicability to student veterans. DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) emphasized that Tinto's model, developed for traditional residential students, inadequately addressed the realities of nontraditional student veterans. Vacchi et al. (2013) further critiqued the integrationist assumption, suggesting it reinforced deficit-oriented perspectives by placing responsibility on veterans to adapt rather than prompting institutions to adjust to veterans' unique needs and strengths (Vacchi et al., 2017).

Contributions and Limitations of Early Models

Collectively, Schlossberg's and Tinto's models significantly shaped early conceptualizations of student veteran experiences, establishing a foundational understanding of their transitional challenges. However, these models' civilian-centered perspectives revealed substantial limitations, prompting contemporary scholars (DiRamio, 2017; Phillips & Lincoln, 2017; Vacchi et al., 2017) to advocate for asset-based and culturally tailored theoretical frameworks. This scholarly critique has generated new eras of research emphasizing ecologically valid and strengths-focused conceptual lenses to capture better the multidimensional realities of student veterans in higher education (Vacchi et al., 2017)

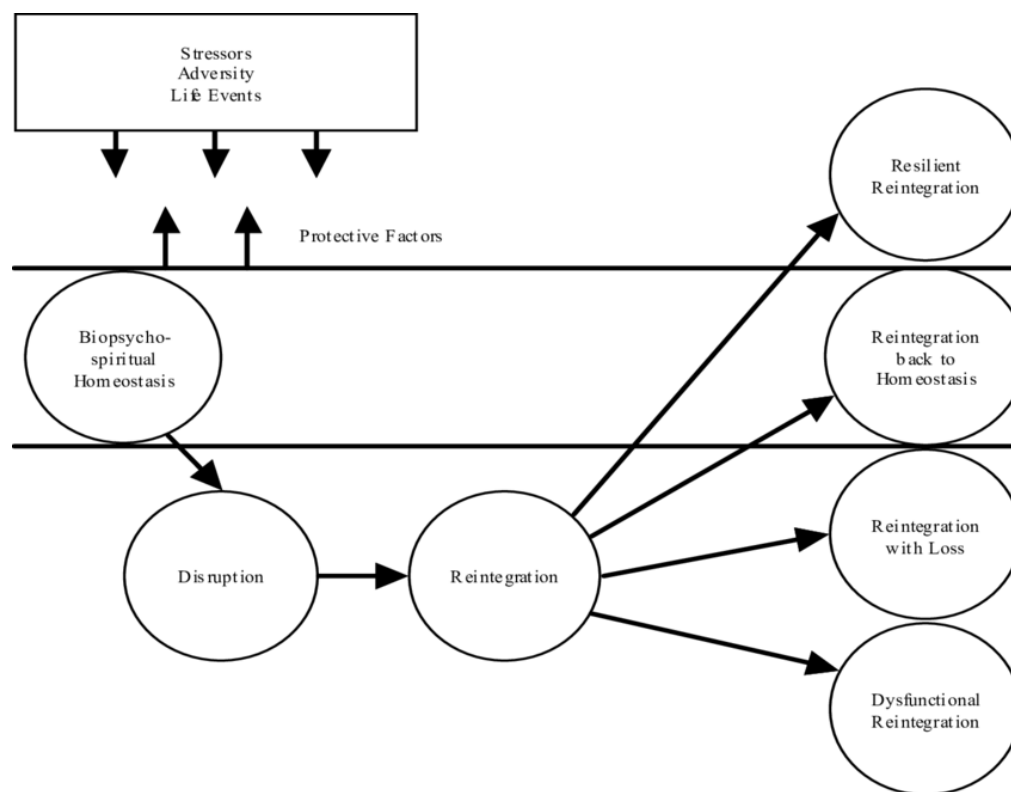
Richardson's Resiliency Model: Theoretical Foundation

Richardson's work in the 1990s established a cornerstone for resilience theory by framing resilience as a dynamic process rather than a fixed trait (see figure 1). In 1990, Richardson and colleagues introduced the Resiliency Model, a conceptual framework depicting how individuals respond to adversity (Richardson et al., 1990). The model posits that people exist in a state of "biopsychospiritual homeostasis" (a comfort zone of equilibrium), which is disrupted by stressors or adverse life events (Richardson, 2002). When disruption occurs, the outcome of the

ensuing coping process can take multiple paths: the person may reintegrate back to their prior baseline ("comfort zone" homeostasis), succumb to maladaptation or dysfunction (reintegration with loss), or achieve resilient reintegration, growing stronger through adversity (Richardson, 2002).

Figure 1

Richardson's Resiliency Model



Crucial to Richardson's model is the role of protective factors—both internal (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy) and external (e.g., social support networks)—which buffer the effects of adversity and facilitate adaptive coping (Richardson et al., 1990). The model emphasizes that with sufficient protective resources, individuals can recover from disruption and potentially emerge with enhanced capacities—a process Richardson termed "resilient reintegration" (Richardson, 2002). This conceptualization represents a significant departure from earlier deficit-

focused models, instead emphasizing the potential for growth and development through adversity when appropriate supports are in place (Richardson, 2002).

As a health science educator, Richardson (2002) emphasized the model's practical utility in educational and counseling contexts, often presenting it as a linear diagram to teach students and clients how people progress through adversity toward growth (Richardson, 2002). This educational application underscores the model's value for understanding academic resilience—a context particularly relevant to student veterans navigating the challenges of higher education (DiRamio, 2017; Vacchi et al., 2017; Norman, 2015).

The Three Waves of Resilience Inquiry

Richardson (2002) articulated his Metatheory of Resilience as encompassing three "waves" of scientific inquiry. The first wave focused on identifying resilient qualities or protective factors that predict positive outcomes in the face of adversity. This research phase was primarily concerned with cataloging personal traits and environmental conditions that seemed to shield individuals from adverse outcomes despite significant risk (Richardson, 2002). Examples included personality characteristics like optimism and hardiness and external resources such as strong family bonds and community support.

The second wave examined the process of disruption and reintegration—how individuals navigate challenges and potentially grow through them. This process-oriented perspective shifted attention from static traits to dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments during times of stress. Richardson's model visualized this process as a "V" shape, with disruption leading to a nadir of disorganization followed by various potential reintegration pathways (Richardson, 2002).

The third wave explored the concept of an innate resiliency or motivating "force" within individuals that drives growth and adaptation (Richardson, 2002). This more philosophical dimension of the theory proposed that humans possess an inherent capacity for self-righting and growth—what Richardson called a "force within everyone that drives them to seek self-actualization, altruism, wisdom, and harmony with a spiritual source of strength" (Richardson, 2002, p. 313). This dimension acknowledges the transcendent aspects of human resilience that go beyond mere survival to encompass meaning-making and profound personal transformation.

Table 1

Richardson's three Waves of Resilience Inquiry

Wave	Description	Outcome	Interventions
First Wave: Resilient Qualities	Identified people's traits and environmental characteristics related to resilience	Provided a list of traits and environmental factors to help people overcome adversity	Interventions were intended to prevent and reduce risk.
Second Wave: Resilient Processes	Focused on the processes used to overcome stress and regain balance	Established which processes contribute to recovery	Interventions aimed to return people to equilibrium.
Third Wave: Innate Processes	Identifies the motivational forces within individuals and groups that allow them to self-actualize	Distinguishes experiences that foster and activate growth-producing forces	Interventions tap innate creative and transformational processes.

Richardson (2002) submits that together, these three waves represent a comprehensive theoretical framework that considers resilience as encompassing qualities, processes, and motivational forces. This multidimensional approach makes Richardson's (2002) model remarkably adaptable to diverse contexts, including the experiences of student veterans transitioning to higher education.

First Era of Student Veteran Research: Transition Focus

The first era of contemporary student veteran research, 2005-2013, primarily investigated transition experiences as veterans moved into higher education, addressing significant cultural, social, and academic adjustments following military service (DiRamio, 2017). Qualitative methodologies dominated this era, enabling rich exploration into veterans' personal experiences and identity negotiations within civilian academic contexts distinctly different from military environments (DiRamio, 2017; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Hammond, 2016).

While these qualitative inquiries provided nuanced insights, they often produced context-specific findings with limited generalizability. Hammond (2016) emphasized the importance of complementing qualitative narratives with quantitative data to enhance policy impact. Initiatives such as the Million Records Project (Cate, 2014) responded to this call, offering statistical representations of veteran academic outcomes nationally, though primarily descriptive rather than explanatory (Cate et al., 2017).

Transition emerged as a defining theme within this research era, characterized by studies focusing on veterans' experiences of isolation, identity conflicts, and coping strategies as they transitioned into academic life (Ellison et al., 2012; Livingston et al., 2011). Schlossberg's Transition Model (1981) frequently guided analysis, providing frameworks to classify coping strategies and transitional experiences (Olsen et al., 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). However, reliance on civilian-centered transitional frameworks was critiqued for inadequately capturing the complex identity negotiations and collective cultural background characteristic of veteran populations (DiRamio, 2017; Vacchi et al., 2017).

Ultimately, first-era research substantially informed institutional practices by recommending tailored resources such as veteran resource centers, peer support networks, and

faculty training programs (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Whiteman et al., 2013). Nevertheless, critiques surfaced regarding the sustainability and inclusivity of specialized, resource-intensive approaches compared to more universal design principles applicable across diverse campus populations (Evans, Pellegrino, & Hoggan, 2015).

Second Era: From Transition to Student Veteran Success

Beginning around 2014, the second era of student veteran research shifted from transition experiences toward empirical investigations of academic outcomes and success factors (DiRamio, 2017). Landmark projects like the Million Records Project (Cate, 2014) established a foundational understanding of student veteran achievement, highlighting robust degree completion rates among post-9/11 veterans. These findings significantly challenged the deficit-oriented views of student veterans previously predominant in higher education research and underscored their resilience and persistence (DiRamio, 2017; Cate et al., 2017; Ochinko & Payea, 2020).

However, despite promising quantitative outcomes, qualitative studies revealed that student veterans' educational journeys are often nonlinear and protracted, characterized by multiple institution attendance, enrollment gaps, and varied completion timelines (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Cate, 2014; Jones, 2017; Molina & Morse, 2017). Such findings prompted scholars to advocate for research frameworks that accurately reflect these complex pathways rather than traditional retention metrics suited primarily to conventional student populations (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Molina & Morse, 2017).

Factors influencing student veteran success include effective use of GI Bill benefits, engagement with campus resources, and developing a sense of belonging. Molina (2015) highlighted higher retention and completion rates among veterans utilizing Post-9/11 GI Bill

benefits compared to peers without these benefits. However, due to significantly different sociocultural contexts, Vacchi and Berger (2014) cautioned against direct comparisons with the original post-WWII GI Bill.

Institutional support mechanisms, such as veteran-specific resource centers and community-building initiatives, have consistently correlated with enhanced academic outcomes, including GPA and persistence (Cole & Kim, 2013; Durdella & Kim, 2012). Studies further emphasize that fostering a sense of campus belonging significantly impacts veterans' academic success, underscoring the importance of inclusive campus environments designed to meet the nuanced needs of student veterans (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Southwell, Whiteman, MacDermid & Barry, 2018; Vacchi et al., 2017).

Bridging Richardson's Model to Student Veteran Contexts

The increased visibility of student veterans in higher education over the past decade has led researchers to explicitly adapt Richardson's resiliency model (2002) to student veterans' specific academic contexts. Scholars such as Smith-Osborne (2012), Wurster, Rinaldi, Woods, & Liu (2013); Kirchner (2015); Norman et al. (2015), and Reyes, Kearney, Isla & Bryant (2018) have effectively bridged Richardson's general resiliency framework with veteran-specific experiences, thus advancing theoretical and practical knowledge tailored to this population.

Smith-Osborne's Resilience-Based Interventions

Smith-Osborne (2012) pioneered a veteran-specific resilience paradigm in designing supported education interventions, strategically applying Richardson's framework to address academic barriers rooted in psychological and social challenges. Her interventions explicitly emphasized protective mechanisms—peer support, mentoring, and mental health resources—to bolster veterans' adaptive capacity within academic settings. This directly aligns with

Richardson's focus on enhancing protective factors. Smith-Osborne's unique contribution lies in explicitly linking psychological resilience with academic outcomes, framing interventions around "thriving through adversity," thereby challenging traditional deficit-centered approaches (Smith-Osborne, 2012).

Wurster et al.'s Focus on First-Generation Veterans

Extending Richardson's resilience theory, Wurster et al. (2013) explored how student veterans' first-generation status compounded their transition risks. Their research highlighted intersectional challenges—academic preparedness, financial strain, and institutional navigation difficulties—as critical adversity factors. Mirroring Richardson's (2002) risk-protection framework, their findings stressed reinforcing institutional supports such as tutoring, mentoring, and financial aid guidance as vital protective mechanisms. By addressing the compounding risks of multiple identities, Wurster and colleagues advanced resilience theory to more accurately reflect the complexities faced by student veterans who also carry the identity of first-generation college students (Wurster et al., 2013).

Kirchner's Translation to Practice

Kirchner (2015) explicitly operationalized Richardson's theoretical resilience model into practical campus strategies and interventions. He emphasized institutionally driven protective processes such as targeted advising, structured orientations, and learning communities, paralleling Richardson's emphasis on environmental supports (Richardson, 2002). Kirchner's scholarship significantly translated theoretical constructs into tangible institutional practices, demonstrating measurable impacts on veteran academic performance and persistence. His contribution stands out for pragmatically operationalizing Richardson's theoretical model into strategies readily adoptable by higher education professionals (Kirchner, 2015).

Norman et al.'s Barriers and Facilitators Framework

Norman et al. (2015) further extended Richardson's resilience framework by categorizing explicit barriers (age differences, mental health concerns, bureaucratic obstacles) and facilitators (personal grit, resource utilization, campus support) influencing student veterans' academic resilience. They framed these challenges explicitly within Richardson's (2002) dynamic adaptation model, underscoring how protective resources can buffer academic disruptions. Norman and colleagues thus offered an essential step toward comprehensively understanding student veterans' resilience by cataloging a detailed landscape of impediments and success facilitators specific to veteran contexts (Norman et al., 2015).

Reyes et al.'s Grounded Theory Approach

Employing grounded theory, Reyes et al. (2018) explored student veterans' resilience as an iterative, identity-driven adaptation process involving repeated cycles of disruption and reintegration. Their approach aligns closely with Richardson's (2002) process-oriented conceptualization, describing resilience as an ongoing journey through setbacks toward successful reintegration. Reyes and colleagues provided valuable theoretical clarity by foregrounding identity negotiation as central to resilience construction, thus uniquely tailoring Richardson's (2002) resilience model explicitly to the lived experiences of student veterans (Reyes et al., 2018).

These researchers have expanded Richardson's (2002) original resiliency theory by integrating veteran-specific insights, explicitly addressing critical gaps, and moving resilience theory toward a more nuanced understanding applicable directly to veteran populations in higher education contexts (Reyes et al., 2018). Their scholarship demonstrates how theoretical

frameworks, specifically tailored to student veterans, can significantly enhance institutional strategies and improve veterans' educational outcomes (Vacchi 2017 et al.).

Recurring Themes in Student Veteran Resilience Research

Contemporary studies consistently highlight three central themes in student veteran resilience research: transition stressors, identity adaptation, and protective factors. These themes closely parallel Richardson's (2002) theoretical constructs, underscoring their continued relevance while simultaneously illuminating unique aspects specific to the veteran collegiate experience.

Transition Stressors and Resilience Triggers

Student resilience research emphasizes the profound disruption veterans face when shifting from structured military environments to the fluid, often ambiguous academic culture (Kirchner, 2015; Norman et al., 2015). This disruption—marked by identity, social networks, and routine changes—constitutes the initial adversity that triggers resilience processes (Richardson, 2002). Norman et al. (2015) specifically documented how student veterans describe transitioning into less structured academic environments as particularly challenging after structured military life, emphasizing the need for adaptive coping strategies and institutional interventions to prevent maladaptive outcomes.

Identity Adaptation and Reintegration

Identity negotiation emerges prominently in veteran-focused literature, given veterans' transition from a collective military to individualized academic identities (Kirchner, 2015). Veterans face integrating military identities with new academic and civilian roles, a complex process frequently characterized by tension and uncertainty (Reyes et al., 2018). Kirchner (2015) illustrated this phenomenon by showing how student veterans' success often hinges upon

effectively reconciling conflicting identities, resonating directly with Richardson's (2002) notion of resilient reintegration—the transformative growth after disruption. Researchers thus advocate for resilience-informed interventions that facilitate identity negotiation and growth rather than imposing assimilation into existing campus cultures (Kirchner, 2015; Reyes et al., 2018).

Protective Factors and Support Systems

Aligned with Richardson's (2002) protective factors, contemporary studies consistently identify supportive campus environments and personal coping resources as critical facilitators of veteran student resilience (Smith-Osborne, 2012; Wurster et al., 2013). Veterans report that robust social support networks targeted academic services and positive relationships with faculty and peers significantly enhance their ability to navigate academic challenges successfully (Kirchner, 2015; Norman et al., 2015; Vacchi et al., 2017).

Kirchner (2015) notably emphasized the significance of "envirosocial protective processes," such as structured veteran resource centers, mentoring programs, and proactive academic advising, as instrumental in fostering student veterans' resilience. Additionally, internal protective traits derived from military experiences—including discipline, leadership, and goal orientation—frequently emerge as resilience enablers uniquely advantageous to veterans within academic contexts (Norman et al., 2015).

Contemporary student veteran research consistently affirms the foundational constructs articulated in Richardson's (2002) resiliency model, emphasizing the interplay of personal traits, environmental supports, and institutional resources in cultivating resilience (Richardson, 2002; Norman et al., 2015; Kirchner, 2015). These studies underscore that fostering student veteran resilience requires holistic, strategically coordinated institutional efforts explicitly tailored to the

nuanced strengths, identities, and challenges inherent in student veterans' educational journeys (Smith-Osborne, 2012; Reyes et al., 2018; Wurster et al., 2013).

Alternative Pathways: Nonlinear Conceptual Models for Student Veteran Development

Since 2005, there has been growing research interest in understanding the experiences of contemporary military veterans pursuing higher education as this population has grown substantially (Vacchi et al., 2017). Many studies initially relied upon standard conceptual models oriented around traditional student development, retention, and transition frameworks like Schlossberg's (1981) adult transition theory and Tinto's (1975) interactionalist theory (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

However, scholars have increasingly critiqued applying theories centered on normative college-aged students to explain the complex situation of student veterans. As Vacchi and colleagues (2017) argue, frequently used models like Tinto imply that veterans must socially integrate into campus contexts to succeed. However, veterans comprise a diverse subset of nontraditional learners for whom academic interactions may be more vital. Prominent retention studies also surfaced inconsistent evidence regarding academic integration's impact on persistence for nontraditional groups (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Berger & Braxton, 1998).

Hammond's Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model (CVCIM)

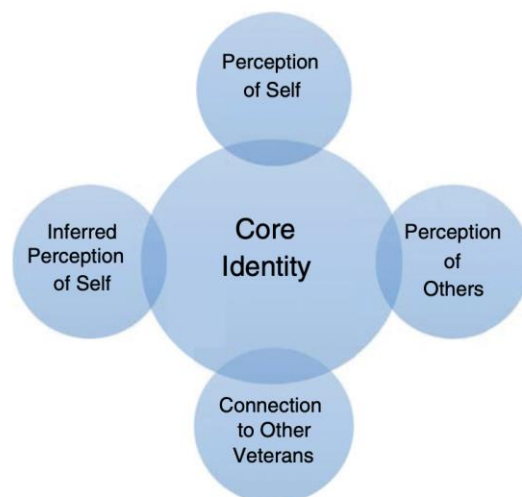
Among evolving conceptual frameworks reconceptualizing contemporary veterans' higher education experiences, Hammond's Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model (CVCIM) represents a significant paradigm evolution by capturing the complex identity negotiations that military-exposed students face amid dynamic cultural interactions (Hammond, 2015; Vacchi et al., 2017). Rather than relying upon constraints of finite developmental stages or lockstep transitions between externally imposed categorical roles, this multidimensional model

recognizes that combat veterans face ongoing, fluid processes of interactive identity negotiation (see figure 2) in direct response to fluctuating academic environments and cultural cues across contexts (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Hammond's (2015) model reveals that veterans' core sense of self manifests as intrinsically dynamic rather than stagnant or discretely transitioning. Specifically, Hammond found that identity continuously shifts for veterans across intricate gradients spanning numerous simultaneous dimensions of situational salience and social belonging (Junot, 2021). As settings rapidly evolve around combat veterans—from supportive peer clusters to disorienting class sessions saturated with unfamiliar norms—facets of self-concept presumed dormant or discretely transitioned may abruptly gain affective intensity and foregrounding, such as the trust of brotherhood when encountering fellow veterans or alienation from student identities amid apparent scrutiny about capabilities from instructors (Hammond, 2015).

Figure 2

CVCIM



Rather than assuming veterans sequentially progress through externally defined phases forfeiting their military backgrounds, the CVCIM shows daily lived experiences fluidly modulate

centrality veterans ascribe to facets like combat roles, civilian responsibilities, and academic functions within overall self-structure given contexts (Livingston et al., 2011). Salience dynamically moves between richly overlapping aspects of being veterans, students, public servants, classmates, and community members. All co-occurring dimensions of one intricately integrated yet multidimensional self-concept are continually calibrated to serve personal priorities and maintain perceived social inclusion (Vacchi et al., 2017).

This profoundly transformed conceptual framework directly challenges limitations embedded within preceding stage models like Schlossberg's (1981) highly influential Transition Theory or problematic assumptions of completed transitions in Tinto's interactionalist model. Such theories have strongly shaped past scholarship and programming decisions by assuming more fixed, sequential transitions along predictable timetables as former military personnel culturally evolve into civilian collegiate models, each associated with different behavioral expectations and discreet identities requiring reconciliation (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

The CVCIM, by contrast, reveals fluid overlapping and continual negotiation of sophisticated identity repertoires adapted contextually rather than chronologically phased displacement of military facets with strictly civilian characteristics. Student veterans do not systematically relinquish or transition dimensions of self—they actively balance personalized aspects of identity emergent from evolving situations to meet psychological priorities of purpose, integrity, belonging, and efficacy simultaneously as time progresses rather than move linearly through externally defined configurations (Hammond, 2016).

For example, perceived external validation from fellow combat veterans can heighten the positive salience of military identity and a sense of camaraderie rooted in shared sacrifice, contrasting civilian norms of competition (Flack & Kite, 2021). However, perceived scrutiny

about intellectual capabilities or contributions from college instructors may alternatively amplify self-consciousness around feared stereotyped status as problematically "othered" outsiders straying beyond tacit cultural bounds, suddenly elevating stress around identity dislocation despite no objective changes in competence (Hammond, 2015; Vacchi et al., 2017).

By illuminating the ubiquity of unpredictable forces dynamically reshaping veterans' identity negotiations across typical academic activities from classroom dialogues to accessing services, the CVCIM Framework enables more accurate contextual understandings of veterans' daily psychological experiences while managing implicit battles over legitimacy and personhood foreign to most students (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). It explains oscillating senses of alienation, hypervigilance about scorn that may suddenly emerge, and constant navigation challenges to preserve dignity institutions unaware of veterans' sacrifices take for granted.

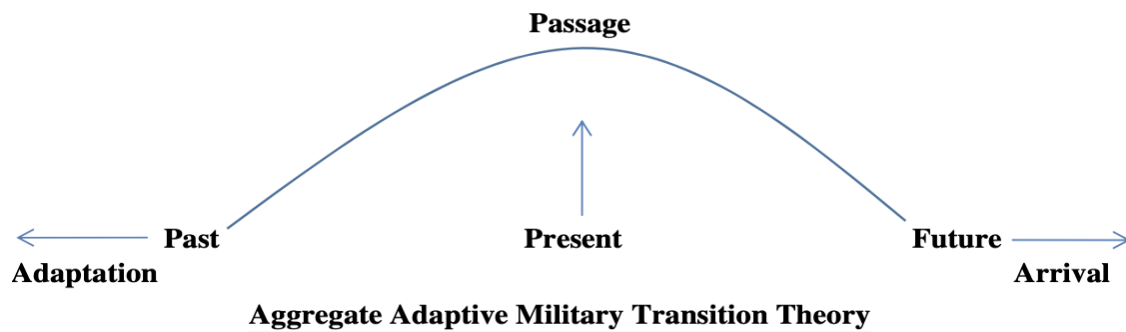
Diamond's Adaptive Military Transition Theory (AMTT)

While early scholarship frequently applied static stage models of transition, Diamond's Adaptive Military Transition Theory (AMTT) paradigm represents a momentous evolution in conceptualizing the nonlinear, multidimensional change processes continually shaping contemporary veterans over time (Vacchi et al., 2017). Rather than conceptualizing veteran transitions as predictable lockstep phases or finite steps divorced from context, the AMTT framework (see figure 3) captures fluid processes by which veterans undergo uniquely fluctuating transitions that shift focus, timing, and duration amid dynamically complex military, academic, and personal ecosystem interactions across settings (Diamond, 2012). This novel paradigm emerged directly from rigorous mixed methods analysis integrating grounded interview narratives with national veteran enrollment datasets—systematically revealing widely

divergent transition patterns defying assumptions embedded in established frameworks generalizing uniform experiences.

Figure 3

AMTT



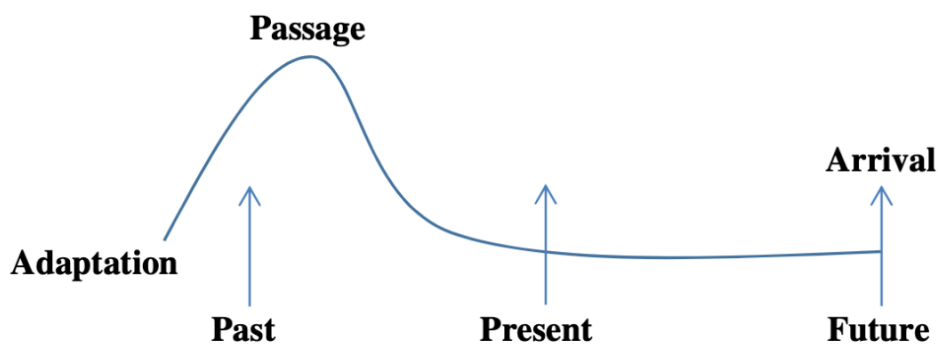
Foremost, the AMTT powerfully contests longstanding assumptions characterized in stage-based transitional models like Schlossberg's (1981) famous Adult Transition Theory, which has strongly influenced past scholarship, that all veterans navigate highly consistent, predictable transitional trajectories or tempos amenable to standardized institutional programming (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Diamond (2012) demonstrates complexity, fundamentally challenging such notions by mapping diverse empirical pathways. For instance, the AMTT surfaces a "stasis transition" profile depicting some veterans who became excessively comfortable with student identities, needing motivation to progress further with civilian integration or career pursuits rather than perpetual enrollment.

Conversely, the model reveals a contrasting "variable transition" subtype (see figure 4) reflecting veterans who rapidly transition toward self-efficacious civilian identities after initially struggling, occasionally neglecting student duties—unlike gradual "symmetrical transitions" most commonly expected in traditional phase assumptions. These insights underscore that

veterans follow highly dynamic, personalized pathways based on needs and priorities, resisting categorization into singular idealized sequences or average clocks as past research has often implicitly enforced from insufficiently interconnected data. Internalizing this fluid complexity, Diamond (2012) visually mapped veterans' transition patterns as evolving multidimensional arcs spanning recurring phases of Adaptation, Passage, and Arrival.

Figure 4

AMTT variable transition



Although directionally spanning from military to civilian contexts, these visual representations captured the idiosyncratic nature by which veterans experience varying transition processes as continually adapted negotiations of evolving situations, identities, and relationships without fixed endpoints—aligning with contemporary paradigms denying obsolete assumptions of institutional assimilation, deficit or pathology (Hammond, 2016). For example, "stasis transitions" reveal plateauing between civilian and military identities for some veterans dependent on contexts, contrasting assumptions of sequential, unidirectional progress toward externally defined civilian incorporation. The AMTT emphatically recenters understanding of transitions in veterans' perspectives, knowledge, and agency.

Through meticulous construct building, Diamond's AMTT dramatically evolves understanding of contemporary veterans' lifelong, contextualized transitional processes from outdated cognates stuck in discreet epochs (Diamond, 2012; Vacchi et al., 2017). The AMTT enriches continuity of identity alongside adaptation as veterans recurrently balance essential aspects of self in progression amid dynamic ecosystems well past initial acclimations (Diamond, 2012; Hammond, 2016). It fuels research and practices enabling well-being during perpetual transitions by delivering elegant visual, conceptual tools paired with empathetic credentialing of veterans' self-authorship over their journeys (Diamond, 2012; Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

Vacchi's Model of Student Veteran Support

While existing transitional and stage models overwhelmingly concentrate on discrete phases or episodic timeframes, Vacchi's multidimensional Model of Student Veteran Support paradigm counters such limitations by encompassing veterans' entire higher education trajectories as the primary framework (Vacchi et al., 2017). Termed using theory elaboration procedures integrating foundational premises from Bean and Metzner's (1985) highly regarded nontraditional student retention model with contemporary ecological considerations of veterans' longitudinal academic and social experiences, Vacchi's conceptual framework purposefully situates the whole student veteran within a complex, evolving context (Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

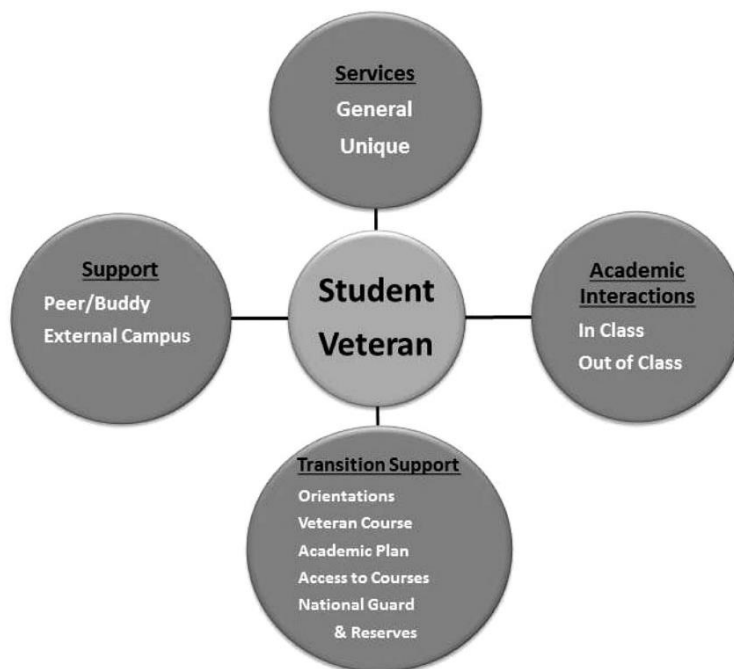
It maps vital institutional dimensions frequently discussed in the literature—like availability of dedicated veteran services, transitional programming, disability accommodations, and financial aid—against several impactful areas ranging from common obstacles veterans face and diverse sources of support they draw upon to critical on-campus academic interactions and relationships that empirically influence progress. Military-connected students' own shifting

priorities and perspectives across postsecondary pathways situate these components centrally rather than institutional assumptions imposing them (Vacchi, 2013).

This comprehensive, veteran-centric arrangement allows logically customizing dynamic responses tailored to veterans' concerns across their college experiences instead of relying on one-size-fits-all, chronologically-bound transitional models critiqued as ill-fitting this population. For instance, Vacchi's framework (see figure 5) suggests the most salient interventions effective for some veterans—such as those struggling with career trajectory uncertainties amid a multitude of competing responsibilities—could stem from consistent, specialized advising attuned to their evolving needs and goals amid fluid challenges rather than rigid timelines (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Figure 5

Vacchi's (2013) model of student veteran support



Alternatively, other veterans feeling disconnected may thrive most from facilitated peer communities, enabling navigating administrative bureaucracy and cultivating belonging in alienating environments (Whiteman et al., 2013). Critically, Vacchi's model reveals contemporary student veterans as individuals first navigating unique pathways rather than passive, homogenous collectives uniformly transitioning through predefined external steps. This granular attention to veterans' developmental diversity and agency powerfully counters the limitations of eras characterized by blanket approaches void of cultural tailoring described elsewhere (Hammond, 2016).

Bean and Metzner's foundational (1985) framework upholds the empirically validated cornerstones of nontraditional student success that strongly resonate with the model's comprehensive scaffolding, oriented around veterans' priorities. These include multidimensional aspects like the capacity to balance intensifying adult responsibilities amid school effectively, career advancement enabled through education, familial duties, and goal-oriented psychological outlooks that concentrate more on earning credentials over typical social assimilation assumptions holding less relevance for those managing external demands (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Vacchi's paradigm reflects precisely these empirically validated traits distinguishing veterans while systematically aligning appropriate institutional dimensions to nurture these success factors versus imposing transitional ideals that fail to catalyze growth for veterans not experiencing predictable sequences of identity shifts, environmental dislocations, or recovery trajectories.

Additionally, Vacchi's (2013) support model holds expansive explanatory promise for framing contemporary, holistic success metrics that veterans frequently express as priorities beyond merely persisting semester-to-semester or securing degrees, which dominate the

discussion. These multidimensional aims encompass well-being, cultivating purpose-driven pursuits, and intentionally applying education to generate broad community impacts (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Vacchi's scaffolding points toward possibilities of facilitating customized, strengths-based programming truly shaped according to veterans' inputs and lived realities across diverse developmental trajectories versus oblivious or coercive systems premised on narrow assumptions, potentially jeopardizing their sustained motivation and agency. It enables informed student veterans to control their educational paths aligned with broader life priorities (Vacchi et al., 2017).

Overall, as an ambitious conceptual anchor, Vacchi's paradigm carries both pragmatic utility for real-time applications given its precise illumination of key factors through veterans' authentic lens while fueling additional research on the dynamic equifinality influencing this unique population's college experiences amid endless uncertainty (Vacchi, 2017). It signifies a leading-edge understanding of contemporary student veterans within higher education that honors fluidity and multidimensionality.

Veteran Critical Theory: A Framework for Advocacy and Critique

Phillips and Lincoln (2017) introduced Veteran Critical Theory (VCT) as an advocacy-focused theoretical framework explicitly designed to critically assess higher education's structures, policies, and practices that marginalize or disadvantage student veterans. Emerging amid increased enrollment of post-9/11 veterans, VCT positions itself within a broader lineage of critical theories addressing marginalization in education based on race, gender, and disability status, thus filling a scholarly void in veteran-specific equity analysis (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017).

Core Tenets of Veteran Critical Theory

VCT comprises 11 core tenets that collectively critique civilian-dominant norms within academia, examine institutional privilege, and elevate veteran perspectives in policy and practice (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). Among these tenets are explicit recognition of veterans' marginalization through civilian-centered policies, identification of subtle marginalization processes such as microaggressions, and the assertion that veterans are uniquely positioned to influence policy decisions affecting their educational experiences. VCT notably challenges deficit-focused frameworks and highlights veterans' inherent strengths and ability to actively inform institutional strategies (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017).

Application and Contributions of VCT

Veteran Critical Theory has broad applicability across campus stakeholders. For administrators, VCT provides a lens for critically evaluating institutional policies and structures that unintentionally perpetuate civilian privilege and marginalize veterans (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). For student affairs professionals, VCT advocates enhancing veteran-centric programming and engagement strategies, ensuring these initiatives reflect genuine veteran needs rather than civilian-centric perspectives (Evans, Pellegrino, & Hoggan, 2015). Furthermore, VCT empowers veterans to advocate for their needs, highlighting their expertise in shaping programs and policies that directly affect their academic and social experiences (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017).

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its promise, VCT requires further refinement, particularly around defining and operationalizing core concepts such as civilian privilege, veteran marginalization, and resilience processes (Vacchi et al., 2017). Additionally, future research should delineate more precise boundaries of applicability—identifying specific contexts, institutional types, and subpopulations

of veterans where VCT tenets hold the most significant explanatory power (Vacchi et al., 2017; Iverson & Anderson, 2013). Addressing these conceptual ambiguities is essential for advancing VCT as a robust theoretical foundation that guides rigorous empirical investigation and systemic policy reform.

Collectively, Veteran Critical Theory provides valuable analytical insights that enhance understanding of student veteran experiences. Its emphasis on advocacy, empowerment, and critical evaluation complements existing resilience-focused frameworks, offering a more comprehensive conceptual approach to support student veterans effectively in higher education (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017; Vacchi et al., 2017).

From Theory to Practice: Applications in Veteran Education

Contemporary scholarship has increasingly translated theoretical resilience frameworks into concrete institutional practices and programs to enhance student veteran success. This progression demonstrates a direct application of resilience theory, specifically Richardson's (2002) dynamic model of resilience, into practical interventions aligned closely with veterans' unique needs in higher education settings (Kirchner, 2015; Smith-Osborne, 2012).

Institutional Structures for Resilient Reintegration

Many institutions have responded to the needs of student veterans by creating dedicated resources such as veteran centers, cohort-based learning communities, and structured orientation programs (Kirchner, 2015; Vacchi, 2012). These interventions directly operationalize Richardson's (2002) protective factor concept, establishing robust support networks that promote veterans' academic and social integration from the onset of their college experiences (Kirchner, 2015). Empirical findings consistently demonstrate that these institutional support structures

significantly correlate with improved student outcomes, including enhanced retention, GPA, and overall academic satisfaction (Southwell et al., 2018; Kirchner, 2015).

Kirchner (2015) highlights veteran-specific resource centers and programs as exemplary practices that systematically foster resilient reintegration by addressing academic and social integration barriers. These centers' dedicated spaces and specialized staff provide veterans with crucial support for navigating administrative processes and reducing isolation, significantly improving overall adjustment and success (Southwell et al., 2018; Kirchner, 2015).

Resilience-Building Curricula and Counseling

A critical practical evolution in veteran education has been incorporating resilience training directly into academic and support programs. Curricula featuring topics such as stress management, mindfulness training, goal setting, and coping strategies are becoming increasingly prevalent in veteran transition programs (Smith-Osborne, 2012; Norman et al., 2015). Such initiatives operationalize Richardson's (2002) principles by explicitly cultivating protective personal and environmental resources to buffer against adversity and facilitate positive adaptation.

Smith-Osborne (2012) demonstrated that structured resilience interventions improve student veterans' psychological well-being, social network development, and academic self-efficacy. Furthermore, credit-bearing courses and structured curricula focused explicitly on veteran transition and resilience skill-building have positively impacted academic persistence and student well-being (Kirchner, 2015).

Thus, the apparent movement from resilience theory to practical educational interventions demonstrates the applicability and value of resilience frameworks within veteran-specific contexts (Richardson, 2002; Kirchner, 2015; Smith-Osborne, 2012). These findings

strongly advocate for systematically integrating resilience-building practices within veteran support structures, underscoring institutions' essential role in actively facilitating student veterans' successful transitions and long-term academic resilience.

Veteran-Centered Pedagogies for Academic and Workforce Success

Hunter-Johnson et al. (2021) provides critical insights into the transitional challenges student veterans encounter when entering higher education and emphasize the potential of higher education as a vital platform for successful integration into the civilian workforce. Their research highlights that veteran students face difficulties adjusting to civilian academic norms yet possess unique strengths and experiences transferable to post-service careers (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021).

A central contribution of this work is its explicit articulation of higher education as a strategic bridge from military service to civilian employment. Veteran-centered pedagogical approaches that recognize military-derived skills (e.g., leadership, discipline, teamwork) as valuable academic assets significantly improve veterans' transition experiences and career preparedness (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021). Specifically, institutions that actively integrate veteran-friendly orientation programs targeted advising, and peer networking opportunities directly respond to veterans' unique academic and psychosocial needs, facilitating more robust transitional outcomes (Kirchner, 2015; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021).

Furthermore, Hunter-Johnson et al. (2021) suggest that effective faculty and staff training in veteran-specific cultural competencies significantly enhances student veterans' resilience and retention rates. This aligns closely with resilience theory's emphasis on protective environmental factors (Richardson, 2002) by promoting institutional practices that foster inclusive and supportive learning environments for veteran students. Thus, their findings advocate for curricula

and support services designed to cultivate veteran student resilience, directly connecting theory to actionable educational practice (Smith-Osborne, 2012; Kirchner, 2015).

Collectively, these practical implementations illustrate the significant role resilience-oriented approaches play in addressing transitional barriers, facilitating identity adaptation, and promoting academic and vocational success among student veterans (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021; Kirchner, 2015; Norman et al., 2015). This body of research underscores the ongoing need for institution-wide, theoretically informed interventions tailored explicitly to enhance resilience and fully leverage veterans' experiences, thereby addressing critical scholarly and practical gaps in supporting this diverse and growing student population (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021; Reyes et al., 2018; Vacchi et al., 2017).

Theoretical Integration and Synthesis—Looking Ahead

The theoretical discourse on student veteran resilience has advanced significantly by synthesizing and integrating multiple conceptual frameworks. Scholars increasingly combine resilience theories (Richardson, 2002) with transition theories (Schlossberg, 1981), critical frameworks (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017; Vacchi et al., 2017), and tailored veteran support models (Hammond, 2016; Vacchi, et al., 2013). This integrated approach provides a multifaceted perspective that captures the complexity of student veteran experiences, transcending the limitations of earlier, more narrowly focused investigations (Vacchi et al., 2017).

Early studies typically examined transition or resilience in isolation, lacking comprehensive analytical integration. Contemporary scholarship, however, recognizes the necessity of examining the interconnectedness of psychological, social, and institutional dimensions influencing student veteran outcomes (Reyes et al., 2018; Kirchner, 2015). For instance, combining Schlossberg's (1981) transition model with Richardson's (2002) resiliency

theory elucidates how external institutional supports (Schlossberg, 1981; Vacchi, 2012) interact dynamically with veterans' internal coping resources (Reyes et al., 2018).

Research employing Hammond's (2015) Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model (CVCIM) alongside Vacchi's (2013) veteran support framework highlights the complex interplay between institutional culture, policy structures, and veteran identities (Vacchi, et al, 2017). These integrated approaches address critical gaps left by earlier singular theoretical models, enhancing theoretical coherence and practical utility by recognizing veterans' nuanced experiences and adaptive processes (Reyes et al., 2018; Kirchner, 2015).

Ultimately, this theoretical integration marks a maturation within veteran studies, reflecting growing sophistication and responsiveness to complex identity intersections and institutional dynamics (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017; Vacchi et al., 2017). Future research can further refine these integrated frameworks through empirical validation, establishing more precise operational definitions and boundary conditions to more effectively guide policy and practice, thus improving student veterans' educational outcomes and overall experiences (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017; Norman et al., 2015; Kirchner, 2015).

Taken together, Richardson's (2002) *Metatheory of Resilience and Resiliency* and Vacchi's (2013) *Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support* highlight that resilience and transition are dynamic, meaning-making processes situated within supportive ecological contexts. Both models underscore that adaptation involves ongoing sense-making and the re-establishment of equilibrium following disruption—whether through individual reintegration (Richardson, 2002) or social validation and belonging within the campus community (Vacchi, 2013). Emerging scholarship further suggests that narrative reflection and storytelling may accompany these adaptive processes by helping individuals construct coherence, negotiate

identity, and bridge cultural discontinuities (Mezirow, 1991; Frank, 2022; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Baxter Magolda, 2008). Storytelling may therefore represent a *potential bridge* between the internal reintegration described by Richardson and the external integration emphasized by Vacchi. The following section explores this narrative dimension as a possible—but not predetermined—component of student veteran resilience in higher education.

Future Directions

The literature review reveals a significant evolution in the conceptualization and study of student veterans in higher education. Early research relied heavily on foundational adult learning and development theories, such as Schlossberg's Transition Model (1981) and Tinto's Interactionist Theory (1975), to understand veterans' transitions and experiences in college (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). However, scholars increasingly recognized the limitations of these civilian-centric models in capturing the unique challenges and diverse identities of student veterans (DiRamio, 2008; Hammond, 2016; Vacchi et al., 2017).

In response, several eras of contemporary research emerged. The first era (2005-2013) focused on qualitative explorations of veterans' transition experiences, revealing themes of cultural dissonance, identity negotiation, and the importance of tailored support services (DiRamio, 2017; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). The second era (2014-present) shifted towards empirical examination of student veteran outcomes, demonstrating strong rates of persistence, completion, and career success (Cate et al., 2017; Ochinko & Payea, 2020). This supported asset-based narratives and the need for success frameworks attuned to veterans' unique trajectories (Vacchi et al., 2017).

Concurrently, several nonlinear alternative frameworks emerged—potentially signaling a third era—including Hammond's (2016) Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model, Diamond's

(2012) Adaptive Military Transition Theory, Vacchi's Model of Student Veteran Support (Vacchi et al., 2017), and Phillips and Lincoln's (2017) Veteran Critical Theory. These frameworks offer more nuanced, ecologically oriented perspectives on veterans' fluid identity negotiations, nonlinear transitions, holistic success factors, and structural inequities affecting their educational experiences.

Richardson's (2002) Resiliency Model is a valuable framework for understanding student veterans' academic journeys. Its emphasis on disruption, protective factors, and reintegration (Richardson, 2002) resonates strongly with the challenges and opportunities faced by veterans transitioning to higher education. Bridging authors like Smith-Osborne (2012), Wurster et al. (2013), Kirchner (2015), Norman et al. (2015), and Reyes et al. (2018) have extended Richardson's (2002) concepts to veteran-specific contexts, creating a robust foundation for both research and practice.

Storytelling, Narrative, and Meaning Making in Veteran Research

The role of storytelling and narrative in veteran experience has garnered increasing scholarly attention as researchers have recognized the limitations of purely structural or quantitative approaches to understanding military-to-civilian transition. Frank (2022) argued that individuals who have endured significant disruption often reconstruct meaning through the act of narration itself—that telling one's story is not merely a research method but a form of identity work. For veteran populations, whose experiences often resist easy categorization within civilian frameworks, narrative functions as both a sense-making process and a means of asserting agency over one's own story (Gillotti et al., 2021).

Phillips and Lincoln (2017) positioned narrative centrality within Veterans Critical Theory (VCT), arguing that veterans' stories serve as counter-narratives to dominant cultural

scripts that frequently frame military experience through deficit lenses. VCT emphasizes that veterans themselves are the primary authorities on their own experiences and that research methodologies must create space for authentic voice rather than imposing predetermined categories. This aligns with broader phenomenological commitments to letting the phenomenon speak for itself (Smith et al., 2022; van Manen, 2016).

The intersection of storytelling and meaning making is particularly salient for veterans navigating identity reconstruction. Gillotti et al. (2021) demonstrated that qualitative methods designed to elicit authentic narratives—rather than responses to standardized instruments—yield richer and more nuanced understandings of how veterans construct and reconstruct identity across transition. Their key event timeline and identity circle methods revealed dimensions of experience that standard interview protocols often miss, including the nonlinear nature of identity negotiation and the centrality of relationships in sustaining coherent self-narratives.

McCormack et al. (2019) extended this argument to the ethical domain, contending that veteran-centered research must attend to the act of storytelling as an experience in its own right, not merely as a data extraction mechanism. When veterans share their stories with researchers who understand the military context, the narrative act can itself become meaningful—an experience of being heard and honored rather than studied. This observation carries important implications for both research design and interpretation, suggesting that the relational dynamics of the research encounter shape the quality and depth of narrative data (Råheim et al., 2016).

For the current study, which employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore SSM/V resilience development within institutional support contexts, the narrative and meaning-making literature provides an important conceptual foundation. IPA's commitment to understanding how participants interpret their own experiences (Smith et al., 2022) aligns with

the narrative tradition's insistence that meaning is constructed through the act of telling. This convergence positions the research encounter itself—not just the content of what is said—as a site of meaning making worthy of interpretive attention.

Expanding Resilience: Collective and Community Frameworks

While Richardson's (2002) Resiliency Model provides a robust framework for understanding how individuals navigate disruption and reintegration, the resilience literature has increasingly recognized that resilience processes do not occur in isolation. Over the past two decades, scholars across multiple disciplines have developed theoretical frameworks that position resilience as a property of collectives, communities, and systems rather than solely of individuals (Norris et al., 2008; Ungar, 2018). This expanding body of work does not invalidate individual resilience models; rather, it suggests that a complete account of resilience requires attention to the social and systemic contexts within which individuals are embedded.

Community Resilience as Adaptive Capacity

Norris et al. (2008) offered the most widely cited framework for community resilience, defining it as “a process linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance” (p. 130). Their model identified four primary adaptive capacities: economic development, social capital, information and communication, and community competence. Critically, Norris et al. argued that these capacities operate at the community level and cannot be reduced to the aggregate of individual resilience. A community may possess resilient properties that no single member holds independently, and individual members may demonstrate resilience precisely because of their embeddedness within resilient communities.

Of particular relevance to the current study, Norris et al. (2008) emphasized social capital—defined as the network structures, reciprocity norms, and shared trust within a community—as foundational to collective resilience. Communities with dense social networks, strong norms of mutual support, and high levels of perceived collective efficacy demonstrate greater capacity to absorb disruption and maintain functioning. While Norris et al. developed their framework primarily within disaster preparedness and response contexts, the underlying theoretical architecture—that resilience inheres in relational structures, not merely in individual traits—has implications for any population characterized by strong collective bonds.

Systemic and Multisystemic Resilience

Ungar (2018) advanced the theoretical conversation by articulating principles of systemic resilience applicable across contexts. Positioning resilience as occurring within and across multiple interacting systems, Ungar argued that resilience “is facilitated by the interactions between and within systems at many different levels” (p. 2). His framework emphasized that individual resilience cannot be meaningfully separated from the systems in which it operates—family, peer, institutional, cultural, and ecological. Systemic resilience, in this view, is not simply the sum of individual resilience; it is an emergent property of the interactions between systems.

Ungar’s (2018) framework is particularly instructive for populations that have been socialized within highly interdependent systems. He noted that for communities with strong collective orientations, resilience frameworks premised on individual agency may fail to capture the mechanisms through which members actually navigate adversity. When individuals understand themselves as fundamentally embedded in collective structures, their resilience processes may reflect the properties of those structures rather than individual psychological traits alone.

Resilience and Military-Socialized Populations

The military context presents a distinctive case for resilience scholarship. Military socialization emphasizes unit cohesion, collective mission orientation, and interdependence as operational necessities (Bartone, 2006; Castro & Kintzle, 2018). Bartone's (2006) research on hardiness in military contexts demonstrated that resilience under operational stress is significantly influenced by leadership and unit-level processes, suggesting that resilience in military populations has collective dimensions that individual assessment alone cannot capture.

Castro and Kintzle's (2018) Military Transition Theory acknowledged that veterans carry collectively-oriented identities into civilian contexts that frequently privilege individualism. The tension between collectivist socialization and individualist institutional expectations has been identified as a potential source of friction in veteran transition (Lancaster, 2019; Mahoney et al., 2023). Mahoney et al. (2023) directly investigated the role of collectivism and individualism in veteran adjustment to civilian life, finding that veterans' collective orientation significantly shaped their engagement with support structures and their interpretation of transition challenges.

Despite these developments, the resilience literature as applied to student veterans in higher education has remained largely grounded in individual frameworks. Studies of SSM/V resilience have primarily examined individual protective factors—coping strategies, self-efficacy, grit—and their relationship to academic outcomes (Henderson & Borsari, 2020; Reyes et al., 2018). While peer support has been consistently identified as a critical resource (Kirchner, 2015; Smith-Osborne, 2012), the theoretical framing has typically positioned peer networks as resources that support individual resilience rather than as sites where collective resilience processes operate. Whether collective and community resilience frameworks offer additional

explanatory power for understanding how military-socialized populations navigate the transition to higher education remains an open empirical question.

Note on Literature Review Expansion

Methodological note. The preceding two sections—Storytelling, Narrative, and Meaning Making in Veteran Research and Expanding Resilience: Collective and Community Frameworks—were incorporated into this literature review following data analysis to provide adequate theoretical context for emergent findings. During data collection, participants’ emphasis on the narrative act itself as a meaningful experience prompted the addition of storytelling and meaning-making literature. Similarly, themes that emerged during analysis regarding the collective dimensions of resilience among military-socialized populations prompted the incorporation of community and systemic resilience scholarship. This iterative approach to literature review development is consistent with the recursive nature of qualitative inquiry, in which findings may reveal theoretical domains not fully anticipated at the study’s outset (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The additions provide the conceptual scaffolding necessary for the reader to engage fully with the findings and discussion presented in subsequent chapters.

Conclusion

This literature review underscores the evolution and maturation of student veteran studies, reflecting a significant progression from early applications of general adult learning and development theories to the emergence and adoption of specialized, veteran-centric frameworks (DiRamio, 2017; Vacchi et al., 2017). Central among these developments is Richardson’s (2002) Resiliency Model, which has profoundly influenced the theoretical discourse surrounding student veterans’ transitions and adaptation within higher education. This model, with its comprehensive

and dynamic conceptualization of resilience as a process mediated by risk and protective factors, serves as a foundational framework that contemporary researchers continue to refine and expand upon in the specific context of student veterans (Kirchner, 2015; Reyes et al., 2018; Smith-Osborne, 2012).

The review also highlighted critical expansions upon Richardson's (2002) foundational insights through complementary frameworks such as Veterans Critical Theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017), Hammond's (2016) CVCIM, Diamond's AMTT, and Vacchi's (2013) Model of Student Veteran Support. These frameworks collectively enhance understanding by addressing nuanced dimensions of student veteran experiences, including identity reconstruction, systemic marginalization, nonlinear academic trajectories, and institutional roles in fostering resilience (Hammond, 2016; Phillips & Lincoln, 2017; Vacchi et al., 2017). The narrative and storytelling literature further enriches this landscape by positioning veterans as the primary authorities on their own experience and by recognizing that the act of narration itself functions as a form of identity work and meaning making (Frank, 2022; Gillotti et al., 2021; McCormack et al., 2019). Taken together, these complementary traditions underscore that understanding veteran resilience requires attention not only to structural conditions but also to the interpretive processes through which veterans construct coherent self-narratives across transition.

Recurring themes identified in contemporary scholarship—such as the profound disruption of military-to-college transition, identity adaptation complexities, and the critical role of protective support systems—demonstrate both the alignment with Richardson's (2002) model and the distinctive features of student veteran resilience (Kirchner, 2015; Norman et al., 2015; Reyes et al., 2018). These themes suggest a shift toward a more holistic, asset-based, and culturally responsive view of veteran education, moving beyond deficit-oriented perspectives

that historically dominated discourse (DiRamio, 2017; Vacchi et al., 2017). At the same time, the expanding resilience literature has increasingly recognized that resilience processes operate not only at the individual level but also at collective, community, and systemic levels (Norris et al., 2008; Ungar, 2018). For military-socialized populations—whose identities and operational competencies were forged within collectivist structures emphasizing unit cohesion, interdependence, and shared mission (Bartone, 2006; Castro & Kintzle, 2018)—the question of whether collective resilience frameworks offer additional explanatory power beyond individual models remains an important and largely unexamined empirical question.

The review identified several practical implications for higher education institutions aiming to support student veterans effectively. Evidence-based institutional interventions, resilience-focused curricular innovations, and intentionally designed support environments were highlighted as essential mechanisms for translating theoretical insights into tangible practices (Kirchner, 2015; Smith-Osborne, 2012; Southwell et al., 2018). Future research must prioritize empirical validation of these interventions, employ interdisciplinary methodologies, and explore intersectional variations within the veteran population to refine and adapt practices across diverse educational contexts (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021; Molina & Morse, 2017).

Ultimately, this integrative review reinforces that effectively supporting student veterans requires institutions to cultivate environments where protective factors are actively fostered, resilience is explicitly nurtured, and veteran identities and experiences are authentically valued (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017; Richardson, 2002; Smith-Osborne, 2012; Vacchi, 2013). The literature further suggests that veteran resilience may be most fully understood when examined through multiple lenses simultaneously—individual process models that trace how disruption and reintegration unfold, narrative frameworks that honor how veterans make meaning of those

processes, and collective and community perspectives that attend to the relational and systemic contexts within which resilience operates. By committing to theoretically informed, veteran-centric approaches that engage these multiple dimensions, higher education institutions can create conditions under which student veterans not only persist academically but flourish personally and professionally, fully realizing the potential for post-service growth and success (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021; Kirchner, 2015; Smith-Osborne, 2012).

The review of literature in Chapter 2 highlighted both the strengths and limitations of existing scholarship on student veteran transitions, resilience development, and institutional support. While prior research has established the importance of resilience as a developmental process (Richardson, 2002), the critical role of institutional structures in facilitating veteran success (Vacchi, 2013), and the expanding recognition that resilience may operate at collective as well as individual levels (Norris et al., 2008; Ungar, 2018), less is known about how these domains interact to shape the lived experiences of Student Service Members and Veterans (SSM/Vs)—or how veterans themselves narrate and make meaning of resilience within institutional support contexts. To address this gap, the present study employs a qualitative phenomenological design, grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to examine how veterans make meaning of resilience and support in their academic journeys.

Chapter 3 details the methodological framework guiding this inquiry, including the integration of these theoretical perspectives and the use of a convergent dual-source design that incorporates both semi-structured interviews and reflective journaling to capture narrated and contemporaneous accounts of veteran experience.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

As outlined in Chapter 1, this study seeks to understand how Student Service Members and Veterans (SSM/Vs) develop resilience through engagement with institutional support structures in higher education. Guided by Richardson's (2002) Resiliency Model and Vacchi's (2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support, the inquiry is designed to explore both the personal and institutional dimensions of veteran persistence. To address these aims, the study employs a convergent dual-source design, integrating semi-structured interviews and reflective journaling as complementary methods of data collection. This methodological approach, introduced in Chapter 1 and elaborated here in Chapter 3, provides both depth and breadth of insight: interviews capture narrated accounts of the transition experience, while reflective journals document contemporaneous meaning-making over time. Together, these sources enhance interpretive rigor and ensure alignment with the study's phenomenological commitment to amplifying veterans' lived experiences.

This chapter outlines the research methodology employed in this study, which investigates the lived experiences of Student Service Members/Veterans (SSM/Vs) (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008) as they navigate the intersection of personal resilience development and institutional support structures during their transition into higher education (Richardson, 2002; Vacchi, 2013). The research design is grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative approach well-suited for exploring the subjective meaning-making processes of student veterans (Smith 1996; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA allows for an in-depth exploration of how individuals interpret and construct meaning from their experiences, particularly as they navigate significant transitions such as entering higher education after military service (Eatough & Smith, 2017).

To enhance the credibility and depth of findings, this study employs a convergent dual-source design, integrating data from semi-structured interviews and complimentary insights from reflective journaling (Denzin, 2012, Smith, et al., 2009; Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013). The integration of complimentary data collection methods strengthens methodological rigor and ensures a comprehensive understanding of how student veterans construct their resilience narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Morse, 2015). This approach aligns with contemporary developments in IPA methodology, which has evolved to embrace dual-method corroboration design while maintaining its commitment to idiographic analysis (Palmer et al., 2010; Love et al., 2020). This chapter details the methodological framework, research design, data collection and analysis strategies, as well as trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Methodological Framework

This study utilizes Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a methodological approach rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, et al., 2009). IPA is particularly effective in exploring how individuals interpret and make sense of significant life transitions, making it an appropriate framework for understanding the academic resilience of student veterans (Smith et al., 2009; Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Phenomenology serves as the foundation by capturing the essence of participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994), while hermeneutics (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) informs the interpretative process by allowing both the researcher and participant to co-construct meaning through what Smith and Osborn (2022) describe as a "double hermeneutic"—the researcher making sense of the participant making sense of their experience. The idiographic nature of IPA ensures that the study remains focused on the depth of individual cases, emphasizing the uniqueness of each veteran's experience before moving to cross-case analysis (Eatough & Smith, 2017).

The study draws upon the original conception of IPA as developed by Jonathan A. Smith in the mid-1990s, whose seminal works (Smith 1996; 1999) established IPA's focus on how individuals make sense of significant life experiences. Smith's (1999) study on identity development in new mothers used diary entries alongside interviews—a methodological precedent for the current study's use of reflective journaling to capture evolving experiences over time. The approach has gained international credibility over the past decade, with researchers across psychology, nursing, and education embracing IPA for its person-centered insights (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

In addition to IPA, this study is informed by Richardson's Metatheory of Resilience (2002), which conceptualizes resilience as an adaptive process influenced by protective factors, risk factors, and reintegration outcomes. This theoretical framework aligns well with phenomenological inquiry because it emphasizes the subjective process of navigating challenges—a natural focus for IPA's emphasis on meaning-making (Smith et al, 2009). Richardson's (2002) theory guides the development of interview questions that trace veterans' journeys over time (disruptions experienced, responses, outcomes) to mirror the resiliency process.

Vacchi's (2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support further contextualizes resilience within the academic environment, emphasizing the role of institutional policies, support services, and community engagement in student veterans' transitions. This model directs attention to contextual and structural factors, suggesting the need to incorporate methods that capture institutional contexts alongside individual experiences (Vacchi & Berger, 2014; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). The integration of these theoretical models strengthens the analytical lens through which data are interpreted, ensuring a robust understanding of the factors contributing to

student veterans' resilience-building in higher education (Hammond, 2016; Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). This approach constitutes a form of theoretical complementarity (Denzin, 2012; Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012), wherein different theories provide multiple "lenses" to examine the phenomenon, an intentional strategy to enrich analysis by highlighting distinct but complementary facets of student veterans' experiences (Denzin, 2012; DiRamio, et al., 2008).

Research Design

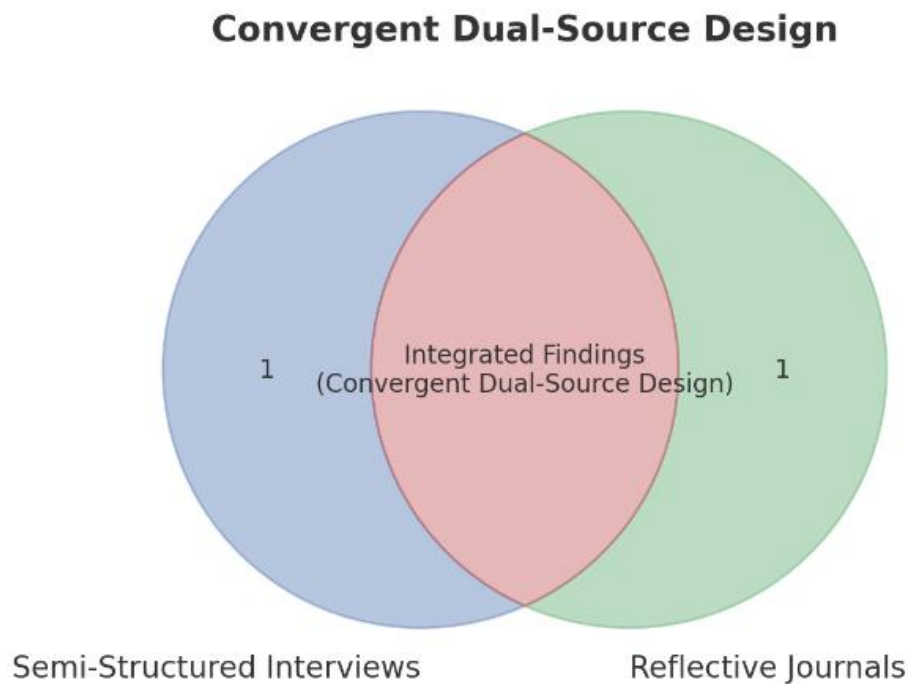
A qualitative, phenomenological research design was chosen to align with the study's objectives of capturing veterans' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes (Crotty, 1998; Vagle, 2024). The phenomenological approach emphasizes understanding how participants make sense of their lived experiences, allowing for an in-depth exploration of resilience and institutional support structures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the complexity of student veterans' transitions into higher education, the study employs a dual data approach (see figure 6) using multiple qualitative methods to enhance validity and depth (Denzin, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Smith et. al. (2009) report recent methodological innovations in IPA support this multi-method approach. While IPA traditionally relied heavily on in-depth semi-structured interviews, contemporary IPA scholars have demonstrated the value of incorporating multiple data sources. Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, and Fadden (2010) pioneered the integration of focus group data into IPA studies, showing that careful analysis of individual contributions within group contexts can still preserve IPA's idiographic focus. Phillips, Montague, and Archer (2016) further developed a "worlds within worlds" strategy for using focus groups in IPA, acknowledging the additional interpretative layer of group dynamics while maintaining individual meaning-making. Similarly,

Morrell-Scott (2018) has demonstrated the value of participant diaries in phenomenological research, noting that "diaries can provide an unadulterated insight into a phenomenological perspective, to gain perceptions and insights into the required phenomenon."

Figure 6

Integrating Interviews and Reflective Journals



This dual-source data design ensures that findings are not only based on singular perspectives but rather on a convergence of evidence from diverse data sources, thereby strengthening the credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Bekhet and Zauszniewski (2012) note that using more than one kind of method or data in a study has "been found to be beneficial in providing confirmation of findings, more comprehensive data, increased validity and enhanced understanding of studied phenomena." The current design incorporates this wisdom by using two complementary data collection methods to capture different dimensions of veterans' experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Site and Participant Selection

The study will be conducted at a land-grant institution in the Mountain West, selected for its comprehensive veteran support services, including peer mentorship, academic transition programs, and dedicated veteran resource centers (Evans et al., 2021). The institution's robust veteran-oriented programs provide an ideal environment for examining the role of institutional support structures in student veterans' resilience development. This site selection aligns with Vacchi's (2013) framework, which emphasizes the importance of examining how institutional structures interface with individual resilience development.

Participants will be recruited using purposive sampling, a strategy suitable for phenomenological research that prioritizes information-rich cases (Patton, 2014). The inclusion criteria for participation require that individuals be current student veterans enrolled in at least one academic course, have a service background in any branch of the U.S. Armed Forces, whether active duty, reserve, or National Guard, and be first-year Student Service Members and Veterans (SSM/Vs) as this population was selected to examine how veterans experience resilience-building and institutional support during their initial transition into higher education (Evans et al., 2021).

A sample size of seven was interviewed, aligning with IPA's recommendation for in-depth individual case analysis (Smith et al., 2009). This sample size is consistent with recent IPA studies of student veterans, such as Armstrong's (2017) investigation of help-seeking behaviors among women student veterans, which included nine participants, and similar phenomenological inquiries into veteran experiences in higher education. The selection process will ensure demographic diversity across military branch, gender, academic major, and service-related

experiences to maximize the representativeness of findings (Rodriguez & Smith, 2024), while maintaining sufficient homogeneity for IPA's idiographic focus.

Smith et al. (2022) suggested that a sample size of approximately ten participants is suitable for dissertation research. This recommendation aligns with other studies that have found that a sample of approximately twelve participants typically achieves saturation in qualitative interviews (Francis et al., 2010; Guest et al., 2006). Participant eligibility will be confirmed during the first of three interviews using the protocol outlined in Appendix B. IPA's modest, homogeneous sample size is designed to provide the deep and rich findings called for in qualitative research (Smith et al., 2022).

Data Collection

The data collection process consists of semi-structured interviews and reflective journaling, creating a two-source integrative approach (Denzin, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) that captures multiple dimensions of the veterans' experiences. This design draws on recent methodological innovations in IPA, which has become more flexible and robust, capable of incorporating various qualitative data sources without losing its philosophical foundation (Palmer et al., 2010; Love et al., 2020; Morrell-Scott, 2018).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Each participant will complete three interview sessions (see Appendix A) over the course of an academic semester, allowing for a longitudinal examination of their resilience development. This approach mirrors the work of Smith (1999), whose seminal study on identity development collected data at multiple time points to capture evolving experiences. As per Appendix A, the first interview will focus on identity transition and military-to-civilian shift; the

second will explore resilience formation and coping strategies; and the third will examine institutional support utilization and integration experiences (Smith, et al., 2009).

This longitudinal approach aligns with Richardson's (2002) conceptualization of resilience as a process that unfolds over time. The semi-structured format (refer to Appendix B) will include open-ended questions designed to elicit rich, descriptive narratives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015), with flexibility to follow unexpected but relevant directions in the conversation—a hallmark of good IPA interviewing (Smith et al., 2009). Sample questions include: "Can you describe a challenging situation you faced during your transition to university life?" and "What resources or supports have been most valuable to you during difficult academic periods?" Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and facilitate rigorous interpretative analysis (Smith et al, 2009, Vagle, 2024).

Reflective Journaling

Drawing on Morrell-Scott's (2018) work on using diaries in phenomenological research, participants will be asked to submit weekly journal entries documenting their resilience strategies and interactions with institutional support systems. The reflective journaling component (as outlined in Appendix C) will capture the longitudinal development of veterans' coping mechanisms, providing a nuanced view of their adaptive processes over time (Cudjoe, 2022).

Journaling offers several methodological advantages: it captures contemporaneous lived experience in the participant's own voice, free from interviewer influence; it provides real-time accounts rather than retrospective reflections; and it may reveal day-to-day fluctuations and contexts that interviews might miss (Morrell-Scott, 2018). As Smith et al. (2009) acknowledged early on, written accounts constitute a valid IPA data source, and recent applications underscore their value in providing a window into evolving experiences.

These entries will serve as valuable supplementary data, offering insights into participants' daily experiences and reflections on institutional engagement (Zhang & Hyland, 2023). Combining these journal entries with interview data will allow for methodological triangulation: the journals might reveal immediate reactions to events, while interviews enable deeper probing and clarification of those experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Visual Elicitation Tools: Identity Circles and Event Timelines

To deepen the phenomenological exploration of student veteran resilience, this study incorporates optional visual elicitation tools—specifically, identity circles and event timelines—during the first semi-structured interview. These tools are grounded in qualitative inquiry traditions that prioritize participants' agency, meaning-making, and co-construction of knowledge (Gillotti et al., 2021). As expressive and reflective instruments, identity circles and timelines have proven particularly useful in student veteran research for revealing layered identity formations, disruption-to-reintegration trajectories, and emotionally salient transition points often obscured in verbal-only interviews.

Identity circles invite participants to diagram facets of their identity (e.g., “veteran,” “father,” “student,” “disabled,” “Latinx”) by placing them within concentric circles based on personal salience. This process encourages reflection on how participants perceive, negotiate, and prioritize identity elements as they transition into higher education. Event timelines, on the other hand, guide participants in mapping key moments from their military exit to their current semester, highlighting milestones, turning points, disruptions, and moments of resilience. These visual formats act as narrative anchors, helping participants better recall, organize, and reflect on complex life transitions (Gillotti et al., 2021).

Aligned with the constructivist and phenomenological foundations of this study, visual elicitation honors the first-person, meaning-making orientation of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2022) while facilitating participant-led knowledge construction. As Gillotti et al. (2021) noted, visual methods not only help participants surface narratives that may remain latent in traditional interviewing but also invite the co-creation of “counter-narratives” that challenge dominant perceptions of military-to-college transition.

Audio Capture and Transcription Procedures

To ensure accuracy, trustworthiness, and auditability of the verbal data collected through semi-structured interviews, all participant interviews were audio-recorded using a two-tiered capture system. Primary recordings were made using Zoom’s “Record to Cloud” functionality, which produces high-quality .m4a or .mp4 files stored locally on an encrypted device. In parallel, a secondary device (a Yuga connector) served as a backup, ensuring data redundancy in the event of technological failure. All recordings were immediately renamed using pseudonym-based identifiers (e.g., P01_Int1_Zoom.m4a) and organized in secure folders corresponding to each participant and interview sequence.

Upon completion of each interview session, recordings were reviewed, renamed, and prepared for transcription. Otter.ai, a secure, web-based automated transcription tool, was utilized for generating initial transcripts. Otter.ai has demonstrated significant utility for qualitative researchers due to its rapid processing, speaker diarization, and editability. Importantly, only pseudonymized audio files were uploaded to Otter.ai to mitigate any risk of confidentiality breach. Access to the platform was secured via encrypted login credentials and used exclusively over secure internet connections (HTTPS).

Transcripts were reviewed in-browser, corrected for technical or transcriptional errors, and exported as Microsoft Word documents (.docx) for local archival. Final (enhanced) transcripts were stored alongside their corresponding audio files in structured, encrypted directories. All files were retained locally on password-protected, external solid-state external drive and organized according to participant ID and data collection type (e.g., Interview 1, Journal Prompt 2). Transcripts and recordings were removed from Otter.ai within 72 hours of upload to maintain alignment with ethical research guidelines and institutional review board (IRB) standards.

Throughout the process, a secure data handling protocol was followed to ensure participant anonymity, data integrity, and compliance with IRB expectations for research with human subjects (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were informed during the consent process that Otter.ai would be used exclusively for transcription purposes and that all audio recordings and transcripts would be de-identified and stored in secure environments.

This transcription workflow served as a bridge between data collection and interpretive analysis by producing reliable, high-fidelity representations of participants' lived experiences. In conjunction with journal entries and visual elicitation artifacts (see "Visual Elicitation Procedures"), this process ensured a rigorous foundation for thematic interpretation and the subsequent idiographic and cross-case analysis stages described below.

Ethical and Practical Considerations

The use of visual elicitation in this study is strictly opt-in, meaning participants may choose to engage with these tools—or decline—based on their comfort and preferences. Participants will be informed of the voluntary nature of this portion of the interview and reminded that their decision will not impact their participation in the study. Visual tools may evoke sensitive or emotional responses; therefore, interviewers will follow trauma-informed interviewing protocols, including offering breaks, reframing prompts gently, and pausing if distress is observed (Gillotti et al., 2021).

Participants will have the option to retain, submit, or withdraw their visual products. If retained, visuals will be included as qualitative data, analyzed in alignment with IPA and transcendental phenomenological procedures. For ethical transparency and methodological rigor, visual materials will be treated as participant-authored artifacts and stored under the same confidentiality protocols as interview transcripts and journals. Visual elicitation, as implemented here, is consistent with qualitative rigor and reflects best practices in researching marginalized, transitional, or multiply-situated populations such as student veterans (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Gillotti et al., 2021).

Informed Consent

Informed Consent Participants selected for this study will be required to complete an informed consent form (see Appendix A) before participating in any data collection activities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Upon selection, the researcher will distribute the informed consent form electronically via email or the institution's Learning Management System (LMS), outlining the study's purpose, the procedures for data collection, analysis, retention, and disposal in [accordance with the directives of the Colorado State University (CSU) Institutional Research

Board (IRB)], as well as potential risks and benefits associated with participation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

At the beginning of each interview, participants will be reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. Participants will be requested to voluntarily sign and return their consent forms via email prior to any data collection. Interviews, focus groups, and journal entry data collection will proceed exclusively with participants who have successfully completed and returned the informed consent form (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Analysis

The study's data analysis follows Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) seven-step IPA method, and will maintain IPA's commitment to idiographic detail by first examining each participant's data set (interviews and journal entries) individually before moving to cross-case analysis (Smith et al, 2009). This preserves the unique voice and experience of each veteran while allowing for identification of shared patterns. The approach aligns with contemporary IPA practice, which emphasizes close attention to individual cases even when working with multiple data sources (Love et al., 2020).

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) data analysis consists of seven methodical steps (see figure 7), beginning with confidential interviews and accurate transcription of conversations by an impartial third-party transcription service. Step two involves meticulously reading and re-reading transcripts multiple times to remain intimately connected to each participant's account, accompanied by reviewing audio and text formats and noting non-verbal cues (Smith et al., 2022). Step three, exploratory noting, produces detailed commentary by actively engaging with the participant's semantic content, language use, emotional expressions,

van Manen's (1990) qualities of themes as focused, simplified representations of the phenomenon. This step mirrors coding practices in qualitative research, identifying categories and synthesizing data into themes through heuristic exploration (Saldaña, 2021).

The sixth step involves assigning clear labels to these PETs, substantiated with direct quotations from transcripts to maintain evidentiary support, including the strategic use of "gems"—noteworthy excerpts highlighting key insights within thematic narratives (Smith, 2011). Finally, step seven involves developing Group Experiential Themes (GETS) through cross-case analysis, identifying patterns of convergence and divergence across participant experiences, thus capturing both communal and unique dimensions of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022).

Following the IPA seven-step analysis process, the identification and refinement of themes are crucial. Smith et al. (2022) detail how individual experiential statements are synthesized into personal and subsequently group experiential themes. This thematic organization relies heavily on coding as a methodological bridge, aligning Smith et al. (2022) IPA guidelines with Saldaña's (2021) coding heuristics. Saldaña (2021) emphasizes how coding helps researchers uncover patterns and relationships in qualitative data, supporting the systematic grouping and interpretation processes central to IPA. Table 2 (below), adapted from Beck (2021), provides a succinct overview of specific analytical methods—such as abstraction, polarization, contextualization, and numeration—that guide researchers through this thematic structuring and refinement phase, ensuring a rigorous and transparent analytical approach.

Table 2*Methods for Identifying Emerging Themes in IPA*

Method	Description
Abstraction	Clustering like with like in a "superordinate" theme and assigning a new label.
Subsumption	Using one emerging theme as a "superordinate" to assist in the cluster of related themes
Polarization	Exploring oppositional relationships among emergent themes
Contextualization	Identify contextual elements, such as temporality or culture, to connect emergent themes
Numeration	Count the frequency of occurrence of an emergent theme
Function	Examining the particular function of a the theme within the structure of the transcript.

Note. Adapted from *Introduction to Phenomenology: Focus on Methodology* by C.T. Beck, 2021, p. 96 Copyright 2021 by Sage Publications.

The coding process will follow Saldaña's (2021) framework, incorporating initial, Nvivo, and pattern coding techniques to ensure a systematic approach to data analysis (Saldaña, 2021). Initial coding will identify significant statements and meanings, in Nvivo coding will preserve participants' voice by using their exact words as codes where appropriate, and pattern coding will help organize related codes into more conceptual themes (Saldaña, 2021).

While the analysis will be primarily inductive, following IPA's commitment to grounding interpretation in participants' accounts (Smith et al., 2009), the theoretical frameworks of Richardson (2002) and Vacchi (2013) will serve as complementary lenses. Richardson's theory will guide the identification of resilience processes, protective factors, and reintegration outcomes (Richardson, 2002), while Vacchi's model will help interpret how institutional structures interface with individual experiences (Vacchi, 2013; Vacchi et al., 2017). This

approach constitutes a form of theoretical triangulation (Denzin, 2012; Flick, 2018), wherein emergent themes are examined through multiple theoretical perspectives to enrich interpretation (Carter, 2014).

The integration of these frameworks allows for a more comprehensive understanding of student veterans' experiences while maintaining phenomenological rigor (Larkin et al., 2019; Shaw, 2010). A cross-case thematic analysis will be conducted to ensure a robust interpretation of patterns across participants, thereby enhancing the study's analytical rigor (Smith et al., 2009). This process involves identifying recurrent themes (those present in at least one-third of participants) while preserving idiosyncratic voices that might offer valuable insights despite being less common (Smith et al., 2009). The analysis will specifically examine how personal resilience factors interact with institutional supports, seeking to map connections between internal processes and external structures.

Analytical Sufficiency in IPA

In Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the concept of saturation differs from its use in grounded theory and other qualitative methodologies. Whereas grounded theory emphasizes saturation as the point at which no new categories emerge, IPA emphasizes *analytic sufficiency*—the point at which the researcher has engaged deeply enough with idiographic cases to responsibly move toward cross-case analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). In Smith et al.'s (2022) process model, the “S” symbol indicates this sufficiency point, representing the researcher’s judgment that idiographic exploration has been adequately achieved before advancing to group experiential themes (GETs).

This study, which includes seven participants completing three semi-structured interviews and reflective journal entries, meets IPA’s expectations for depth and adequacy.

Smith et al. (2022) suggest that between six and ten participants is typical for IPA studies, balancing idiographic richness with cross-case analysis potential. With multiple rounds of interviews, reflective journaling, and visual elicitation activities, each participant contributes a substantial narrative corpus. This allows for rigorous development of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) and, ultimately, robust GETs while remaining faithful to IPA's idiographic commitment. Thus, rather than seeking statistical saturation, this study emphasizes sufficiency, transparency, and depth as markers of analytic rigor (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

NVivo-Facilitated Data Analysis Using IPA Methodology

Following transcription and verification, all interview and journal data were imported into NVivo qualitative analysis software to facilitate systematic Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA emphasizes an idiographic approach to understanding the lived experiences of individual participants before considering patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009). In this study, NVivo served as an organizational tool to support the analytic process while preserving the philosophical foundations of IPA.

The first phase of analysis focused on the idiographic level. Each participant's interview transcripts and reflective journals were coded individually using an iterative process aligned with the personal experiential themes (PETs) of IPA. NVivo's case node structure was employed to keep each participant's dataset distinct, supporting close reading, memoing, and initial theme development. Codes emerged both inductively from participant language and deductively from the research questions and theoretical framework (Vacchi, 2012; Richardson, 2002). Reflexive journaling accompanied this phase to bracket researcher assumptions and maintain transparency.

In the second phase, once individual case analyses were complete, the researcher engaged in a cross-case analysis to identify Group Experiential Themes (GETs). NVivo's matrix coding and node comparison tools aided in identifying patterns, divergences, and shared meanings across participants. This dual-layered approach allowed for a balance between idiographic depth and analytical generalization within the sample, consistent with Smith et al.'s (2009) guidance on moving from PETs to GETs.

Throughout both phases, memo writing and audit trail documentation were integrated directly into NVivo to ensure methodological transparency. Memos included interpretations, thematic decisions, and reflections on possible researcher influence. Visual models within NVivo were also employed to map emergent themes and relational dynamics among them.

Ultimately, the use of NVivo supported a rigorous, transparent, and theoretically grounded process of IPA, enabling the researcher to engage deeply with participant narratives while developing transferable insights about student veteran resilience.

Analysis Timing Protocol

The timing of analysis in this study followed the idiographic commitment of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which emphasizes engaging deeply with each participant's account before moving to cross-case patterns (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). To maintain this focus, interview transcripts were first transcribed, cleaned, and lightly annotated immediately following each session to preserve contextual detail, field observations, and reflexive insights (Moustakas, 1994).

Full idiographic analysis, including horizontalization, clustering of meaning units, and development of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs), was conducted only after each participant had completed all three interviews and journal submissions. This approach ensured that theme

development was grounded in the entirety of each participant's narrative arc rather than fragmented impressions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Once idiographic analysis was complete for all cases, Group Experiential Themes (GETs) were derived through cross-case comparison, while remaining attentive to both convergence and divergence (Eatough & Smith, 2017). This sequencing allowed for reflexive awareness, reduced premature closure, and provided a systematic foundation for interpretive rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yardley, 2000).

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure trustworthiness, the study incorporates Guba's and Lincoln's (1994) qualitative criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility will be established through member-checking, prolonged engagement, and peer debriefing (Anderson & Thompson, 2023). Member checking involves sharing preliminary findings with participants to verify that the interpretations resonate with their experiences. Prolonged engagement comes through the semester-long data collection period, allowing for development of rapport and sustained observation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Two-source integration, using two complementary methods (interviews and journals), strengthens credibility by providing corroborating evidence from different sources (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). When a theme emerges across dual data sources—for example, if a veteran's described experience of transition stress appears in their interview and journal entries—the researcher can be more confident that this theme authentically represents their reality (Morse, 2015).

Transferability will be ensured through thick description, allowing findings to be applicable beyond the study sample (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell, Norris, White & Moules,

2017). Detailed accounts of the research context, participant characteristics, and rich excerpts from the data will enable readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings or veteran populations (Tracy, 2010; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This approach aligns with Smith and colleagues' (2009) emphasis on contextualization and transparent reporting of participant narratives to support knowledge transfer across settings.

Dependability will be maintained through an audit trail that documents methodological decisions, analytical process notes, and reflections on emerging interpretations (Carcary, 2009). This transparent documentation of the research process allows readers to follow the researcher's decision-making and analytical journey (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993; Cope, 2014), thereby establishing what Yardley (2000) identifies as coherence and transparency in qualitative analysis. For IPA specifically, this process supports what Smith et al. (2009) term the "paper trail" that connects raw data to final interpretations.

Confirmability will be upheld through reflexive journaling to acknowledge researcher positionality and mitigate bias (Finlay, 2002; Ortlipp, 2008). Given the interpretative nature of IPA, it is essential to recognize how the researcher's background, assumptions, and theoretical orientations might influence the analysis (Shaw, 2010; Berger, 2015). Regular reflexive writing will document these considerations and help maintain awareness of their potential (Reid, Elliot, Witayarat & Smith, 2018), particularly important in veteran research where insider-outsider dynamics may affect interpretation (Bager-Charleson, 2015; Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017).

Sample Size Justification

The final sample for this study includes eight student veterans who provided informed consent to participate in three in-depth, semi-structured interviews and submit weekly reflective journals over a nine-week period. This sample size is aligned with interpretative

phenomenological analysis (IPA) guidelines, which emphasize idiographic depth and rich individual accounts over breadth or generalizability (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022).

IPA studies typically include between six and ten participants to allow for detailed within-case analysis and meaningful cross-case comparison (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Additionally, saturation in phenomenological inquiry is evaluated by the emergence of meaningful themes across cases rather than statistical redundancy (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). With multiple, temporally spaced data sources per participant and the use of visual elicitation tools, this study exceeds the recommended depth for analytic rigor, while maintaining ethical and logistical feasibility for a vulnerable population. This approach preserves the integrity of idiographic commitment and supports thematic saturation without compromising participant voice.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are central to this research, beginning with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval process, which will be completed before data collection commences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Beauchamp, 2017, APA, 2017). Participants will be fully informed of the study's scope, risks, and voluntary nature before consenting to participate, adhering to established ethical principles for research with human subjects (Beauchamp, 2017). Given the potential sensitivity of military experiences and transition challenges, particular attention will be paid to minimizing psychological risks (Legerski & Bunnell, 2010), especially considering that veterans may constitute a vulnerable population in research contexts.

Confidentiality will be preserved through the anonymization of data and secure storage procedures to protect participant privacy (Evans et al., 2021; Kaiser, 2009). All identifying information will be removed from transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms, following best

practices in qualitative research ethics. Participants will be informed that while direct quotes may be used in publications, they will not be linked to identifiable information (Wiles, Crow, Heath & Charles), 2008; Morse & Coulehan, 2015), thus balancing the methodological need for rich data with ethical commitments to privacy protection (Sanjari et al., 2014; Petrova et al., 2016).

The researcher acknowledges the potential power dynamics and will strive to create a respectful, collaborative research environment that honors veterans' voices and experiences (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009; Råheim et al., 2016). This approach is particularly important in phenomenological research, where the goal is to access participants' authentic lived experiences without imposing researcher preconceptions (Finlay, 2002; Smith et al., 2009). Participants will be reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequences (Orb et al., 2001; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007), and they will have the option to review and comment on their interview transcripts (Birt et al., 2016; Candela, 2019), thereby incorporating member checking as both an ethical practice and a validation strategy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Kornbluh, 2015).

Researcher Positionality

Phenomenological research necessitates a deep engagement with subjectivity while maintaining methodological rigor through reflexive practices (Finlay, 2002; van Manen, 2016). As a veteran studying student veterans, my positionality influences every stage of the research process—from data collection to analysis and interpretation. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) recognizes the double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2009), wherein participants interpret their own lived experiences, and I, as the researcher, interpret their interpretations. This iterative process demands careful self-reflexivity, bracketing, and bridling (Smith et al., 2009;

Vagle, 2024) to balance insider knowledge with an analytical distance that allows participant voices to emerge authentically.

Insider Positionality and Reflexivity

As a veteran, I possess an insider perspective that affords a unique lens into the lived experiences of student veterans in higher education. This perspective can enhance rapport, build trust, and facilitate richer data collection (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). However, it also presents risks of over-identification (Berger, 2015), wherein prior experiences might unintentionally shape or bias interpretations. Insider research inherently involves tensions between closeness and criticality (Unluer, 2012), necessitating intentional reflexive strategies to ensure methodological integrity.

To address these challenges, I engage in ongoing bracketing and bridling (Vagle, 2024), recognizing that complete neutrality is neither achievable nor desirable in phenomenological inquiry (Giorgi, 2009). Throughout the research process, I maintain a reflexive journal to document personal reactions, emerging assumptions, and shifts in interpretation, creating an audit trail that enhances transparency and methodological accountability (Smith, Blevins, Werse & Talbert, 2021). This reflexive practice is particularly important given my dual identity as both researcher and member of the population under study.

Bracketing: Suspending Preconceptions in Phenomenological Inquiry

Bracketing, derived from Husserlian phenomenology (Husserl, 1931), refers to the process of setting aside one's assumptions, theoretical predispositions, and prior knowledge to allow the phenomenon to present itself as purely as possible (Giorgi, 2009). In qualitative research, bracketing is employed to minimize researcher bias and ensure that data interpretation

remains grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than the researcher's pre-existing beliefs (Tufford & Newman, 2012, Vagle, 2024).

However, complete suspension of bias is neither possible nor desirable (Finlay, 2002).

Instead, I adopt an active approach to bracketing by:

- Engaging in reflexive journaling (Smith et al., 2021) to document and critically examine my assumptions before, during, and after data collection.
- Systematically identifying and setting aside military-related biases that could shape questioning, interpretation, or coding processes (Berger, 2015).
- Deliberately delaying interpretation during initial transcript analysis, ensuring that themes emerge inductively from participant narratives rather than being shaped by my own expectations (Giorgi, 2009).

This approach informed by Vagle (2024) allows me to temporarily "bracket" my personal lens while engaging with participant experiences on their own terms, fostering greater phenomenological authenticity. For example, when participants describe challenges with institutional support systems, I consciously set aside my own experiences with these systems to prevent projecting my interpretations onto their narratives.

Bridling: Sustained Reflexivity and Interpretive Openness

Bridling, as conveyed by Vagle (2024), builds upon bracketing but differs in its ongoing and fluid nature. Whereas bracketing suggests temporary suspension of bias, bridling emphasizes the continuous, conscious process of questioning and restraining preconceptions throughout the research journey (Dahlberg et al., 2008).

In this study, bridling is essential for:

- Maintaining interpretive openness—I actively pause, reflect, and recalibrate my understanding as themes develop to prevent premature closure (Vagle, 2024).
- Avoiding over-identification with participants—As a veteran, I resist the temptation to assume shared meanings by asking clarifying questions and seeking participant elaboration rather than filling in gaps with personal knowledge (Berger, 2015).
- Engaging in ongoing self-dialogue—I regularly return to my reflexive journal to analyze how my evolving interpretations might be influenced by my experiences (Finlay, 2002).

By incorporating bridling as prescribed by Vagle (2024), I acknowledge that interpretation is an iterative process—not a fixed, neutral act—and strive to preserve the emergent nature of participant meaning-making. This approach is particularly relevant when examining resilience narratives, where my own resilience journey could potentially influence how I interpret others' experiences of adversity and adaptation.

The Double Hermeneutic: Navigating the Researcher-Participant Interpretation Cycle

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is inherently hermeneutic, meaning that understanding is constructed through a recursive cycle of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). The double hermeneutic refers to the dual-layered meaning-making process in IPA, wherein:

1. Participants interpret their own lived experiences and construct personal meanings through reflection (Smith et al, 2009).
2. I, as the researcher, then interpret their interpretations, engaging in a deeper phenomenological analysis that situates individual meaning within broader thematic structures (Larkin et al., 2019).

This two-tiered interpretative process requires heightened awareness of my role as both an insider and an external analyst. While my veteran status enables empathy and contextual

understanding, I must ensure that interpretation remains participant-driven rather than researcher-imposed (Shaw, 2010). To achieve this balance, I incorporate:

- Member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): Seeking participant feedback on initial interpretations to verify accuracy and authenticity in meaning construction.
- Dual theoretical corroboration (Fetters, Curry & Creswell, 2013): Comparing interview and journal data to ensure that emerging themes are coherent across multiple sources rather than singularly influenced by my perspective.
- Peer debriefing (Smith & Osborn, 2008): Engaging academic mentors and research colleagues to critique and challenge my interpretations, ensuring that findings remain grounded in participant narratives rather than my assumptions.

By carefully navigating the double hermeneutic, I aim to honor participants' lived realities while offering a nuanced, interpretive analysis that contributes to the broader discourse on student veteran experiences in higher education.

Balancing Subjectivity with Methodological Rigor

Phenomenological research acknowledges that the researcher is the primary instrument of interpretation (van Manen, 2016). While complete objectivity is neither attainable nor the goal of qualitative inquiry (Giorgi, 2009), methodological transparency and reflexivity serve as essential safeguards (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). By employing bracketing, bridling, and interpretative reflexivity (Vagle, 2024), I ensure that my role as a researcher remains methodologically accountable while preserving the integrity of participant narratives.

This study is not an autobiographical account but a rigorous phenomenological investigation into the lived experiences of student veterans. By balancing insider insight with critical distance, I seek to amplify participant voices while adhering to the epistemological

foundations of IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2022; Smith et al., 2009). This balance is particularly important when examining resilience and institutional support—domains where my personal experiences could potentially influence how I interpret participants' narratives of challenge and adaptation.

During data collection, I will be transparent with participants about my veteran status, acknowledging the shared identity while emphasizing that the research seeks to understand their unique experiences rather than confirming my own (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Vagle, 2024). This approach aligns with Smith et al.'s (2009) emphasis on maintaining the idiographic focus of IPA while recognizing the inevitable interpretative nature of phenomenological research.

Conclusion

This chapter has articulated the methodological architecture guiding this phenomenological study, grounded in the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and enriched through contemporary methodological innovations. Building on the foundational work of Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), this study maintains an idiographic commitment to student veteran narratives while incorporating a convergent dual-source design that integrates semi-structured interviews and reflective journaling (Morrell-Scott, 2018; Love et al., 2020).

Key methodological enhancements were introduced to promote rigor and transparency. These include the use of Otter.ai for secure transcription of de-identified audio recordings, supported by a two-tiered recording workflow (Zoom and Yuga connector-recorder). This system ensured data fidelity, while aligning with IRB expectations for working with a vulnerable population. Transcripts were uploaded, reviewed, corrected, and pseudonymized before being imported into NVivo software for analysis.

NVivo served as a vital tool for facilitating idiographic and cross-case thematic analysis, consistent with IPA's interpretive procedures (Smith et al., 2009; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Individual case transcripts were coded for Personal Experiential Themes (PETs), followed by cross-case comparison

to identify Group Experiential Themes (GETs). Memoing and reflexive commentary were integrated throughout using NVivo's audit trail and case node structures, ensuring methodological transparency.

This study is situated within a dual-theoretical framework drawing on Richardson's (2002) Metatheory of Resilience and Vacchi's (2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support. These theoretical lenses informed both data collection and interpretive analysis, offering a framework for understanding how resilience is formed, sustained, and supported institutionally. The dual-source design captures both narrated and contemporaneous accounts of veteran transition, enhancing interpretive depth and epistemological diversity (Denzin, 2012; Flick, 2018).

This methodological framework aligns with qualitative best practices for ensuring trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yardley, 2000). Reflexive journaling, idiographic attention, and visual elicitation artifacts (identity circles and event timelines) further supported ethical, rigorous, and contextually grounded inquiry.

With these methodological commitments established, the next chapter presents the study's findings. These are organized into thematic interpretations developed through iterative IPA analysis and supported by narrative exemplars from both interview and journal data.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) that examined how Student Service Members and Veterans (SSM/Vs) perceived and described their development of resilience through engagement with institutional support structures in higher education. Seven participants shared their lived experiences across three semi-structured interviews and three written reflections during their first semester at the University of Wyoming. The analysis revealed both convergent patterns that illuminate shared aspects of the SSM/V experience and divergent pathways that honor the idiographic commitment central to IPA methodology.

The findings are organized to address the central research question and five sub-questions guiding this study. Following Smith et al.'s (2009) recommendations for IPA findings presentation, the chapter begins with individual participant profiles to situate readers within each veteran's unique context, then proceeds to a cross-case analysis organized by superordinate themes. Throughout, participant voices are foregrounded through verbatim extracts, with interpretive commentary that moves between phenomenological description and hermeneutic interpretation.

To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms (P1 through P7) are used throughout this chapter. The pseudonym key is maintained separately and is not included in this document.

This chapter begins with a presentation of participant demographics, followed by individual participant profiles that situate each veteran's unique context. A summary of transition metaphors and identity navigation modes then bridges these profiles to the cross-case thematic analysis, which is organized by six superordinate themes and supplemented by common and

idiographic themes. The chapter concludes with a research question alignment section and a discussion of implications that set the stage for Chapter 5.

Participant Demographics

Table 3 presents demographic characteristics of the seven participants in this study. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 47 years, with military service spanning from 4 to 22 years across four branches. Six participants had separated from military service; one remained actively serving in the National Guard.

Table 3

Participant Demographic Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Branch	Years of Service	Service Status	Academic Major
P1	46	Male	Army	21	Retired	History
P2	47	Male	Navy (Nuclear)	11	Separated	Psychology
P3	38	Male	Navy (Nuclear)	20	Medical Retirement	Nursing
P4	19	Male	Air National Guard	2	Currently Serving	Agricultural Business
P5	25	Male	Marine Corps	4	Separated	Agricultural Business
P6	40	Male	Navy (ATC)	22	Retired	Zoology
P7	25	Male	Marine Corps (Infantry)	6	Separated	Astronomy/Astrophysics

Note. N = 7. ATC = air traffic controller. All participants were enrolled in their first semester at the University of Wyoming at the time of data collection. Years of service includes all active duty, reserve, and National Guard time.

Participant Profiles

Understanding the findings requires situating each participant within their unique biographical and experiential context. The following profiles provide essential background while preserving the idiographic richness of each case.

P1: “Embrace the Suck”

P1 is a male veteran in his mid-40s who served 22 years in the United States Army, including multiple combat deployments as a medevac crew chief. He retired in 2019, worked as an automotive technician, and enrolled at the university within one week of leaving his civilian job after encountering what he described as toxic leadership. P1 maintains a continuous warrior identity, explicitly rejecting the past-tense implications of the term “veteran:”

“I still identify more as a warrior than somebody who used to be in the military... That’s who I am.”

His transition metaphor—“same life path but with new terrain and a change of season”—captures his experience of continuity across changing contexts rather than fundamental identity reconstruction.

P2: “The Healing”

P2 is a 47-year-old male Navy veteran who served 11 years in the nuclear submarine fleet before working as a power plant operator. He carries significant wounds including unprocessed grief from his daughter’s death 22 years prior and childhood emotional neglect. His fourth marriage to his wife Alice represents a corrective emotional experience that enabled his educational pursuit:

“She saw in me the potential that I couldn’t see in myself.”

P2’s mid-semester pivot from computer science to psychology marked a fundamental reorientation from seeking accolades to pursuing service to others.

P3: “Moving Forward”

P3 is a 38-year-old male Navy veteran who served 20 years as a nuclear propulsion plant mechanical supervisor. His transition followed a psychotic break on a ship in Japan, two years of

intensive therapy, and deep suicidal ideations in May 2024. Already holding a bachelor's degree in nuclear engineering technology, P3 represents a returning student whose prior academic experience and post-crisis stability created a categorically different transition experience:

“I haven't struggled with belonging like so many veterans have because I've done college before successfully.”

P4: “Cowboy Up”

P4 is a 19-year-old male currently serving in the Air National Guard who signed at age 17 and completed basic training, technical school, and on-the-job training before enrolling in college. As the youngest participant and the only currently serving member, P4 presents a unique case of ongoing dual identity navigation:

“Having a shift from scholar to warrior to scholar in the matter of a weekend is difficult at times... It's always one foot in both doors.”

Unlike other participants who experienced a single transition, P4 oscillates monthly between student and airman identities, with his packing ritual marking the threshold between worlds.

P5: “Warrior in a Garden”

P5 is a 25-year-old male Marine Corps veteran who served four years as a motor transport operator. Despite pursuing every qualification and certification available, he never deployed—an experience he describes as “identity fraud.” His transition was compounded by family rejection, including a college fund revoked as punishment for enlisting:

“My mom's famous quote is to look at me and say, Well, you chose to do it. You chose to leave me. That's on you.”

P5's primary attachment is to his therapist-prescribed dog, who provides what human relationships have not: unconditional support without triggering burden shame.

P6: "The Squirrel"

P6 is a 40-year-old male Navy veteran who served 22 years as an air traffic controller. He carries wounds from training trauma—daily verbal abuse witnessed by colleagues who never intervened—that devastated his self-esteem:

"I have a really bad self esteem. It's like so low you could dig oil."

As the oldest student in all his classes, P6 navigates the tension between age-based expectations of competence and the reality of needing to ask questions after two decades away from academic environments. His chosen metaphor—a squirrel—captures his experience: "terribly confused... but yet they just go in a direction."

P7: "Hearing the Music"

P7 is a 25-year-old male Marine Corps veteran who served six years as infantry. Unlike most veterans, he carries a negative relationship to his service, using it as a template for who he does not want to become:

"I did not enjoy my service at all... it mostly showed me who I don't want to be."

An astronomy and astrophysics major, P7 arrived at college exceptionally prepared—having completed the Warrior-Scholar Project twice and created spreadsheets comparing universities. His Oppenheimer-inspired metaphor captures his transformation from purposelessness to purpose: algebra is like sheet music—"it's not about if you can read the music, it's about if you can hear the music."

Cross-Case Thematic Analysis

Having introduced each participant individually, this section turns to the cross-case thematic analysis. The analysis identified six superordinate themes present across four or more participants, four common themes present across two to three participants, and several idiographic themes unique to individual cases. The following sections present each level of thematic analysis in turn, beginning with a summary of transition metaphors and identity navigation modes that bridge the individual profiles to the shared patterns that emerged across cases.

Table 4 summarizes the transition metaphors elicited from each participant alongside their corresponding identity navigation modes, providing an interpretive bridge between the individual profiles presented above and the cross-case thematic analysis that follows.

Table 4

Participant Transition Metaphors and Identity Modes

Participant	Metaphor	Interpretation	Identity Mode
P1	<i>“Embrace the Suck”</i>	Continuity across changing terrain; collective endurance	Continuous
P2	<i>“The Healing”</i>	Education as therapeutic journey; reconstructing self through service to others	Reconstructed
P3	<i>“Moving Forward”</i>	Systematic forward motion after crisis; pragmatic recovery	Reconstructed
P4	<i>“Cowboy Up”</i>	Active domination of challenge; dual cultural framing (military + Wyoming)	Oscillating
P5	<i>“Warrior in a Garden”</i>	Military skills redeployed to civilian terrain; identity transformation	Transformed
P6	<i>“The Squirrel”</i>	Confused but moving; gathering what’s needed without clear direction	Damaged
P7	<i>“Hearing the Music”</i>	Transformation from purposelessness to purpose through intellectual awakening	Inverted

Note. Metaphors were elicited during semi-structured interviews when participants were asked to describe their transition experience using an image or comparison. Identity modes were derived through interpretive phenomenological analysis of cross-case patterns.

Superordinate Themes

Cross-case analysis revealed fifteen emergent themes organized into six recurrent superordinate themes present in four or more participants, five common themes present in two to three participants, and four idiographic themes unique to individual participants. Table 5, visualized in figure 8 (below) presents the theme prevalence matrix showing the distribution of themes across participants. This section presents findings organized by these superordinate themes, beginning with those demonstrating the highest recurrence across cases.

Table 5

Theme Prevalence Matrix Across Participants

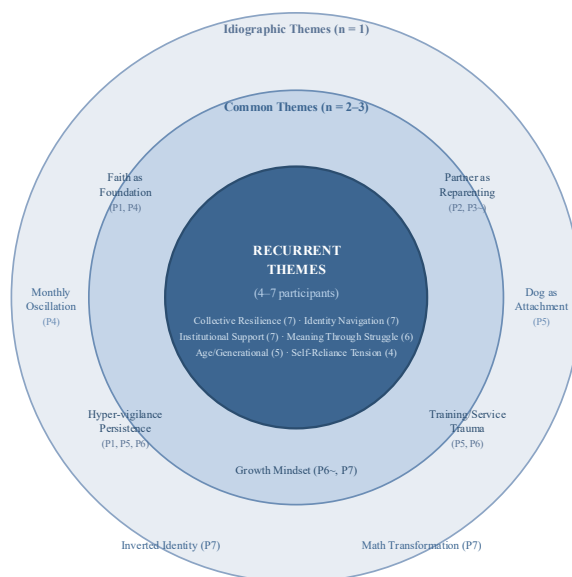
Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	n
<i>Recurrent themes (4+ participants)</i>								
1. Collective resilience	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7
2. Identity navigation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7
3. Institutional support as necessary but complex	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7
4. Meaning-making through struggle	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	~	✓	6
5. Age/generational position	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		5
6. Self-reliance tension	✓			✓	✓	✓		4
<i>Common themes (2–3 participants)</i>								
7. Faith as foundation	✓			✓				2
8. Partner as reparenting		✓	~					2
9. Hyper-vigilance persistence	✓				✓	✓		3
10. Training/service trauma					✓	✓		2
11. Growth mindset						~	✓	2
<i>Idiographic themes (1 participant)</i>								
12. Monthly identity oscillation				✓				1
13. Dog as primary attachment					✓			1

14. Inverted military identity	✓	1
15. Math transformation as proof	✓	1

Note. ✓ = theme present in participant’s data. ~ = theme partially present or emerging. n = number of participants for whom theme was identified. Themes are organized by prevalence: recurrent (4+ participants), common (2–3 participants), and idiographic (1 participant), following Smith et al.’s (2009) recommendations for IPA theme classification.

Figure 8

Thematic Structure: Convergence and Divergence Across Participants



Note. Concentric rings represent theme prevalence levels per Smith et al. (2009). Inner ring = recurrent themes shared across 4+ participants; middle ring = common themes (2–3); outer ring = idiographic themes unique to individual cases. The visual structure illustrates the convergence–divergence pattern central to IPA methodology.

Superordinate Theme 1: Resilience as Collective, Not Individual

The most robust finding across all seven participants was the unanimous rejection of individualistic conceptions of resilience. Every participant explicitly articulated that resilience requires others—that no one can be resilient alone. P4 stated this principle most directly:

“No one can be resilient on their own.”

P1 grounded this understanding in military experience, where collective achievement was definitional rather than optional:

“The team wins, not individuals. So going through something hard, going through a hard deployment, you don’t do it as an individual, you do it as a group.”

This collective understanding manifested through varied support sources across participants. While the principle of collective resilience was universal, its application was idiographic:

Chosen Family (P1). After his biological family fractured, P1 constructed alternative kinship:

“Our chosen family here in Laramie, we’ve got some really close friends that we’ve been friends with for 20 years, we would do anything for them and they would do anything for us.”

Reparenting Partner (P2). P2’s wife Alice provides what his family of origin never did—patient presence, emotional attunement, and belief in his worth:

“She’s my foundation. She’s always there when I need her, and she’s like a rock in my life.”

Faith (P4). P4 identified Jesus as his primary support, providing spiritual presence that fills gaps in physical support:

“My biggest support is Jesus... Even when you are physically alone, you’re not always alone spiritually.”

Animal Attachment (P5). P5’s most unusual support pathway involves his therapist-prescribed dog:

“That dog’s been more support than my family has my siblings. I’m the black sheep of the family.”

Institutional Support (P6). P6 explicitly stated that institutional veteran services were prerequisite to his enrollment:

“If there wasn’t a VSC here on campus, I don’t think I would have come here.”

Discipline Community (P7). P7 found his primary community not among veterans but among physics students who share his intellectual passion:

“Like minded people, they’re all interested in physics. They all love math.”

This divergence within convergence—the same fundamental truth (resilience requires others) manifesting through radically different channels—exemplifies IPA’s capacity to illuminate both shared patterns and individual pathways. Table 6 summarizes the primary resilience support sources identified by each participant.

Table 6

Primary Resilience Support Sources by Participant

Participant	Primary Support Source	How It Functions	Representative Quote
P1	Chosen family	Alternative kinship replacing fractured biological family	<i>“We would do anything for them and they would do anything for us.”</i>
P2	Partner (Alice)	Corrective emotional experience; reparenting	<i>“She saw in me the potential that I couldn’t see in myself.”</i>
P3	Institutional resources	Systematic navigation of full support suite	<i>“I use everything they offer.”</i>
P4	Faith (Jesus)	Spiritual presence filling gaps in physical support	<i>“Even when you are physically alone, you’re not always alone spiritually.”</i>
P5	Dog (therapist-prescribed)	Unconditional attachment without triggering burden shame	<i>“That dog’s been more support than my family.”</i>
P6	VSC + teacher relationship	Institutional prerequisite; teacher acceptance healing training trauma	<i>“If there wasn’t a VSC here on campus, I don’t think I would have come here.”</i>
P7	Discipline community	Shared intellectual passion rather than shared military past	<i>“Like minded people, they’re all interested in physics.”</i>

Note. Primary support sources were identified through participants' own descriptions of what or whom they relied on most during their first-semester transition. The diversity of sources demonstrates the idiographic nature of collective resilience.

Superordinate Theme 2: Identity Navigation and Reconstruction

All seven participants grappled with identity reconstruction—the question of who they are now that they are no longer defined by their military role. However, the analysis revealed six distinct modes of identity navigation across participants.

Mode 1: Continuous Identity (P1). P1 maintained an unbroken warrior identity that requires no reconstruction:

“I still identify more as a warrior than somebody who used to be in the military... I don't think that warrior spirit, or that identity, goes away.”

For P1, the warrior identity is spiritually grounded and ontologically stable, persisting regardless of context. He approaches the university not as identity reconstruction but as identity application—being the same person on new terrain.

Mode 2: Reconstructed Identity (P2, P3). P2 is actively rebuilding his sense of self through his educational journey:

“I'm still trying to figure out who I am... I'm in a phase of reconstruction.”

His mid-semester pivot from computer science to psychology marked a fundamental shift from pursuing accolades to pursuing service—from trying to prove worth to finding purpose in helping others. P3's reconstruction followed crisis and stabilization, representing systematic forward motion after intensive therapeutic work.

Mode 3: Oscillating Identity (P4). P4's continued Guard service creates a fundamentally different identity experience. He never fully transitions because transition is never complete:

“It’s kind of hard to kind of form who you think you are, because you’re always changing.”

His monthly oscillation—marked by the packing ritual of pulling out uniforms—represents ongoing navigation rather than single transition. For four years of college and beyond, P4 will make this monthly shift between student and airman.

Mode 4: Transformed Identity (P5). P5 reframed his wound (training for combat that never came) into asset:

“I’d rather be a warrior in a garden than a gardener in a war.”

The warrior skills remain; the context has changed. His training serves different terrain—the vigilance that prepared him for combat now serves navigation of civilian challenges.

Mode 5: Inverted Identity (P7). P7’s relationship to military identity is inverse to other participants. Rather than carrying forward positive identity elements, he uses his service as negative template:

“It mostly showed me who I don’t want to be.”

This inversion creates unique challenges—P7 cannot share stories authentically even among veterans because his relationship to service is opposite from theirs. His identity reconstruction proceeds through negation rather than continuation.

Mode 6: Damaged Identity (P6). P6’s military experience wounded his identity through training trauma that devastated his self-esteem. The transition from answer-giver (NCO responsible for others) to question-asker (student needing help) created disorienting role reversal:

“When you leave that environment, when you’re no longer responsible for people anymore... you don’t have the answers anymore. You’re one of the people that have questions.”

These six modes demonstrate that identity navigation in SSM/V transition is not unitary but plural—multiple pathways through the common challenge of reconstructing self after military service. Table 7, visualized in figure 9 (below) provides a comparative summary of these identity navigation modes.

Table 7

Identity Navigation Modes Across Participants

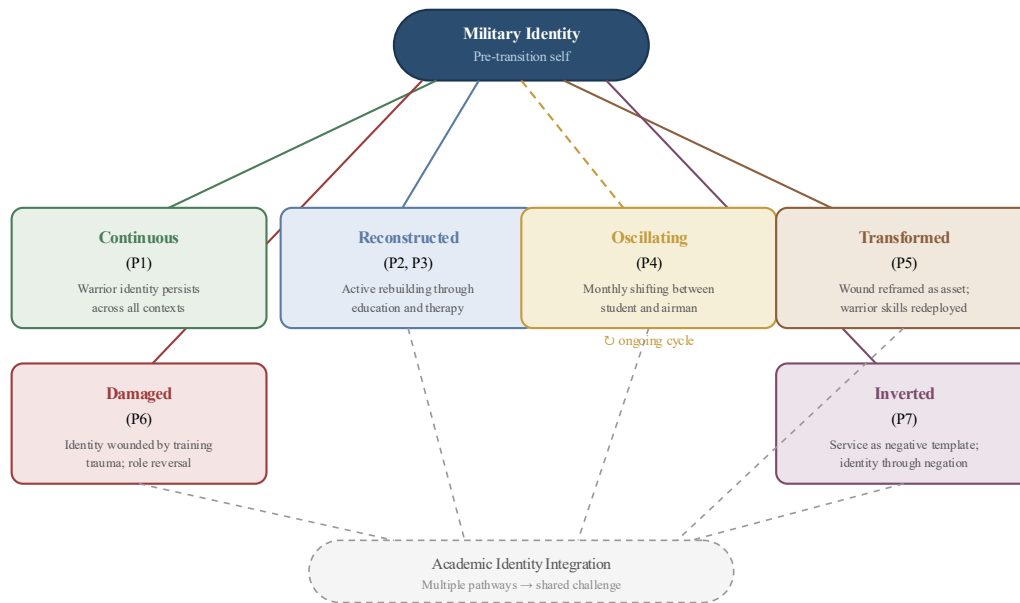
Identity Mode	Participant	Description	Representative Quote
Continuous	P1	Unbroken warrior identity persisting across contexts	<i>“I still identify more as a warrior than somebody who used to be in the military.”</i>
Reconstructed	P2, P3	Active rebuilding of self through education and therapeutic recovery	<i>“I’m still trying to figure out who I am... I’m in a phase of reconstruction.”</i>
Oscillating	P4	Monthly shifting between student and airman identities due to ongoing Guard service	<i>“It’s always one foot in both doors.”</i>
Transformed	P5	Military wound reframed as asset; warrior skills applied to new terrain	<i>“I’d rather be a warrior in a garden than a gardener in a war.”</i>
Inverted	P7	Service used as negative template—defining self by who he does not want to become	<i>“It mostly showed me who I don’t want to be.”</i>
Damaged	P6	Identity wounded by institutional betrayal during training; disorienting role reversal	<i>“You don’t have the answers anymore. You’re one of the people that have questions.”</i>

Note. Six distinct modes of identity navigation were identified through cross-case analysis. Modes are not

hierarchical; each represents a qualitatively different pathway through the common challenge of post-military identity reconstruction.

Figure 9

Six Modes of Identity Navigation in SSM/V Transition



Note. Six identity modes emerged from cross-case interpretive phenomenological analysis. Dashed line to P4 represents ongoing oscillation rather than single transition. All modes converge toward academic identity integration through distinct pathways.

Superordinate Theme 3: Institutional Support as Necessary but Complex

All seven participants acknowledged the value of institutional support structures, particularly the Veteran Service Center (VSC). However, their relationships to these supports varied significantly in intensity, function, and trajectory.

Heavy Users (P2, P3, P6). Some participants described the VSC as central to their daily experience:

P2: “The VSC is family to me.”

P6: “I still go there every day.”

For these participants, the VSC provided primary community, daily structure, and essential navigation support.

Light Users (P1, P4). Other participants valued knowing supports existed without heavily using them:

P1: “It’s there if I need it.”

P4: “The important thing is I know that they’re there.”

The safety net function—confidence from knowing support is available—operated even without activation. This finding suggests that institutional support value cannot be measured solely through usage metrics.

Specific Function Users (P5). P5 identified a particular VSC function—as “smoke pit” where veterans can express themselves authentically:

“The smoke hole of the campus is the VSC. It’s where we can all sit there and we can do what we need to do.”

This space allows release of frustration with others who understand, without requiring explanation or navigating civilian sensitivities.

Steppingstone Users (P7). P7 articulated a trajectory that other participants may follow:

“The VSC has been a benefit in finding an initial place to find community on campus, but... it’s meant to be a steppingstone.”

For P7, the VSC provided initial landing zone before migration to his true community: physics students who share his intellectual passion rather than his military past. This steppingstone model suggests that healthy veteran transition may involve moving beyond veteran-specific spaces toward discipline-based communities.

These varied usage patterns have implications for how institutions conceptualize and measure the value of veteran support services. Heavy use is not the only indicator of value; safety net awareness and steppingstone function serve important roles in SSM/V resilience development. Table 8 presents a comparative summary of VSC usage patterns across participants.

Table 8

Veteran Service Center Usage Patterns

Usage Pattern	Participant	Function	Frequency	Representative Quote
Heavy use	P2	Community, family, daily structure	Daily	<i>"The VSC is family to me."</i>
Heavy use	P3	Navigation, resource access	Daily	<i>"I use everything they offer."</i>
Heavy use	P6	Community, healing space	Daily	<i>"I still go there every day."</i>
Light use	P1	Safety net awareness	As needed	<i>"It's there if I need it."</i>
Light use	P4	Safety net confidence	Occasional	<i>"The important thing is I know that they're there."</i>
Specific function	P5	Authentic expression ("smoke pit")	Moderate	<i>"The smoke hole of the campus is the VSC."</i>
Steppingstone	P7	Initial landing before discipline migration	Decreasing	<i>"It's meant to be a steppingstone."</i>

Note. VSC = Veteran Service Center. Usage patterns were derived from participant self-reports across three semi-structured interviews. Frequency categories are descriptive and based on participant language rather than quantitative tracking.

Superordinate Theme 4: Meaning-Making Through Struggle

Six participants explicitly described struggle as meaningful rather than merely obstructive. Military experience had taught them to engage difficulty as growth opportunity rather than obstacle to be avoided.

Active Engagement with Difficulty (P1, P4). P1 articulated the military concept of "embrace the suck" as collective phenomenon:

“Embrace the suck together... knowing that we’re all kind of embracing the suck together, I think that’s huge.”

P4 distinguished his approach with Wyoming cultural framing:

“Embracing the suck is managing to make it through... Cowboy up is eating the hell out of it.”

The distinction matters: “embrace the suck” suggests endurance; “cowboy up” suggests active domination of challenge. Both frame difficulty as something to be engaged rather than merely survived.

Crisis as Catalyst (P2, P3). For P2 and P3, crises accelerated rather than derailed transformation. P3’s near-breakdown became turning point:

“I was this close to just having a breakdown, and I chose to go get help instead.”

P2’s family emergencies (grandson’s surgery, stepson’s suicide attempt) forced confrontation with buried material and clarification of values, ultimately cementing his pivot from pursuing accolades to pursuing service.

Growth Mindset as Survival (P7). P7 articulated struggle in explicitly cognitive terms:

“Telling myself I can’t do this, that’s the brain killer, that’s the ego death.”

His math placement exam transformation (scores of 20 → 46 → 90) provides concrete evidence that self-limiting beliefs can be overcome. This growth mindset philosophy enabled P7’s transformation from a student held back in high school math to one who is calculus-ready and engaged in astronomical research.

Adaptive Navigation (P6). P6 represents a partial exception to this theme. While he demonstrates resilience through ongoing forward motion despite confusion, he articulates growth less explicitly than other participants. His squirrel metaphor captures his experience: confused

but moving anyway. This may represent a different relationship to meaning-making—one of accommodation rather than transformation.

Superordinate Theme 5: Age and Generational Position as Factor

Five participants explicitly discussed how age or generational position affected their transition experience, though in markedly different ways.

Older Veteran Visibility (P1, P3, P6). Older veterans are visibly different from traditional students. P6 captured the challenge this creates:

“I’m the oldest person in the class, and it’s like the oldest person is always raising his hand. This guy doesn’t know anything, like, what’s his deal?”

P3 noted different priorities from traditional peers:

“I’m not going to go out after the football games and just be crazy.”

Age creates both expectations (from others) and self-imposed standards. The gap between assumed competence (older should mean wiser) and actual position (novice student needing help) creates dissonance that must be navigated.

Same-Age Invisibility (P4). P4’s position is uniquely opposite. At 19, he looks identical to traditional freshmen:

“Nobody really thinks that I have a story, but I do.”

His military experience is invisible unless disclosed. This creates different challenges: not standing out but not being seen. P4 often chooses normalcy—being “just a student”—but this choice means his experience goes unrecognized.

Generational Judgment (P5). P5 judged the COVID generation harshly:

“These kids... they’re mentally weak. They’re emotionally weak.”

Whether accurate assessment or projection, this judgment creates social distance. P5's pre-COVID socialization generated expectations that post-COVID students do not meet, creating frustration and isolation.

Superordinate Theme 6: Self-Reliance as Strength and Barrier

Four participants described military-trained self-reliance as both asset and obstacle in their academic transition.

The John Wayne Mindset (P1, P4). Both P1 and P4 explicitly invoked the “John Wayne mindset”—independence, self-sufficiency, reluctance to seek help:

P1: “I don’t use those resources super often, just because I don’t feel the need to being an independent person and kind of just a John Wayne mindset.”

P4 similarly described handling things himself, reflecting Wyoming cowboy culture as much as military training.

Self-Reliance as Barrier (P5, P6). For P5 and P6, self-reliance became obstacle to help-seeking:

P6: “As soon as I’m shown that I’m a burden on anybody, I shut down.”

P5: “Every single time a vet actually tries to... they always tell you share with people... But we all, all the veterans, look at it like... you’re a burden to somebody else.”

The same independence that enabled military success creates isolation in academic environments where asking for help is expected and healthy. P5’s “burden shutdown” represents systematic withdrawal from potential support whenever his problems seem to impose on others.

Forced Self-Reliance (P5). P5’s self-reliance has particularly complex origins:

“I’ve been a broke kid my whole life. I had to learn how to do it, to fix it myself.”

His independence was survival necessity before military service refined it. Growing up poor, working since age 12, learning to fix everything—this was childhood adaptation, not military training. The military extended what poverty began. Table 9 presents the dual-functioning nature of self-reliance across the four participants who exhibited this theme.

Table 9

Self-Reliance as Dual-Functioning Phenomenon

Participant	Self-Reliance as Strength	Self-Reliance as Barrier	Adaptive Strategy
P1	Independence; handles challenges without external support	Underuses available resources	John Wayne mindset acknowledged; safety net awareness maintained
P4	Self-sufficiency grounded in military and Wyoming cowboy culture	Reluctance to seek help	Recognizes collective resilience need despite independent orientation
P5	Survival skill from childhood poverty and military training	Burden shame triggers systematic withdrawal from support	Therapist-prescribed dog bypasses human relationship triggers
P6	Forward motion despite confusion and damaged self-esteem	Shuts down when perceived as burden; avoids classroom participation	Office hours instead of public participation; teacher relationship as safe space

Note. Self-reliance tension was identified as a recurrent superordinate theme across four participants. The dual-functioning nature—simultaneously enabling persistence and preventing help-seeking—represents a key finding for institutional support design.

Common Themes (2–3 Participants)

In addition to the six superordinate themes identified across four or more participants, five common themes emerged across two to three participants. While these themes did not reach the threshold for superordinate classification, they illuminate important dimensions of the SSM/V transition experience—particularly the role of faith, intimate relationships, trauma, and mindset in shaping how individual veterans navigate resilience and identity within institutional contexts.

Faith as Foundational Support

Two participants (P1, P4) identified faith as central to their resilience. Both framed spiritual support as primary rather than supplementary:

P4: “My biggest support is Jesus.”

P1: “That’s part of my spiritual identity... part of who I am spiritually as a believer.”

Faith provides constant foundation that does not shift with context. Where human relationships may trigger abandonment fears or burden shame, divine acceptance is understood as unconditional.

Partner as Reparenting Figure

P2’s relationship with his wife Alice represents therapeutic attachment that provides what his family of origin could not:

“My wife is the one who encouraged me to pursue my education. She saw in me the potential that I couldn’t see in myself.”

Alice’s patient presence, emotional attunement, and consistent belief in P2’s worth function as corrective emotional experience—reparenting that enables healing from childhood wounds.

Hyper-Vigilance Persistence

Three participants (P1, P5, P6) described persistent threat awareness that transfers from military to civilian environments:

P5: “It’s like you have three bars open. You have the bar of the conversation going on. You have the visual of wherever the entrance and where your exits are, and you have a good view of the area around you.”

P5 described campus as a “free shooting around” and noted that his friends observe he looks “through them” rather than at them. For P6, classroom participation triggered threat assessment learned during training trauma. This hyper-vigilance, while potentially protective, creates barriers to full academic engagement.

Training and Service Trauma

Two participants (P5, P6) carry wounds from military experience itself—not combat, but training and service conditions. P6’s disclosure was particularly harrowing:

“It was literally almost every day I’d be on position with my trainer, and then the trainer and the soup would just call me names every fucking day... Nobody cared. Nobody cared.”

This institutional betrayal—witnessed abuse with no intervention—shaped P6’s academic experience. The classroom incident where he answered incorrectly, experienced silence and a student turning to look at him, crystallized fears created by training:

“I told myself, that is exactly why I don’t say anything out loud.”

P5’s “identity fraud” wound—training obsessively for combat that never came, then being forced out—represents a different kind of service trauma: the warrior fully prepared but never tested.

Growth Mindset as Explicit Philosophy

P7 articulated growth mindset as core survival strategy:

“Telling myself I can’t do this, that’s the brain killer, that’s the ego death.”

His math transformation (placement scores of 20 → 46 → 90) provides behavioral evidence of the philosophy’s effectiveness. Where he was held back in math in high school, P7 is

now calculus-ready and conducting research at the campus observatory. P6 is attempting to adopt similar orientation—“slowly doing better”—though his growth mindset is less fully articulated.

Idiographic Themes

While the superordinate and common themes above captured shared patterns across participants, several idiographic themes emerged that illuminate individual experiences not reducible to cross-case patterns. These themes honor IPA’s idiographic commitment by attending to the distinctive contributions of particular participants, each of whom revealed dimensions of the SSM/V transition experience that enrich the broader thematic findings.

Monthly Identity Oscillation (P4)

P4’s continued Guard service creates a fundamentally different transition experience. Unlike participants who made single transitions from military to civilian life, P4 navigates ongoing dual identity:

“It’s always one foot in both doors.”

The packing ritual—pulling out uniforms, checking they are ready—marks the threshold between student and airman. As he walks across campus in uniform after drill weekends, friends see transformation they do not fully understand: “So you’re back to scholar with a shorter haircut.” This oscillating identity will continue for four years of college and beyond—a qualitatively different developmental challenge than single-transition veterans face.

Dog as Primary Attachment (P5)

P5’s therapist-prescribed dog provides what human relationships cannot:

“She’s my responsibility. That’s my child.”

When family relationships trigger burden shame and rejection, the dog relationship works: unconditional attachment that does not confirm burden status. P5 is buying a house

specifically so his dog can live with him—a major life decision driven by this attachment. The dog provides reason to come home, motivation to improve, emotional regulation that human relationships have not provided.

Inverted Military Identity (P7)

P7's negative relationship to service creates unique challenges:

“In the Veteran Center, a lot of them... look upon their service with pride. I'm not that case. I hated it. So it's like, it's hard to connect there and like, share that story authentically.”

Where other veterans share war stories with pride, P7 cannot. His authentic story is that he hated his service. This inversion isolates him even within veteran community, driving his migration to the Society of Physics Students where identity is shared passion rather than shared past.

Math Transformation as Proof (P7)

P7's math placement exam trajectory ($20 \rightarrow 46 \rightarrow 90$) provides concrete evidence that growth mindset works. The student held back in high school math is now conducting astronomical research his first semester. This transformation serves as P7's proof case against self-limiting beliefs:

“I just assumed I was bad when that's not necessarily the case.”

Research Question Alignment

The central research question for this study was:

How do SSM/Vs perceive and describe their development of resilience through engagement with institutional support structures in higher education?

The findings reveal that SSM/Vs perceive resilience development as fundamentally collective—no participant described developing resilience in isolation. Engagement with institutional support structures manifested through multiple pathways: direct heavy use (P2, P3, P6), safety net awareness (P1, P4), specific function use (P5), and steppingstone trajectory (P7). Resilience development was perceived as intertwined with identity navigation; participants described reconstructing, maintaining, oscillating, transforming, or inverting their military identities while simultaneously building resilience. These processes were not sequential but concurrent—identity work and resilience development occurring together through engagement with institutional supports.

Sub-Question 1: Transition Experience

Sub-Question 1 for this research study was:

How do SSM/Vs experience and interpret the transition from military to academic environments, and how do institutional support services shape their perceptions of resilience during this critical period?

SSM/Vs experienced transition through six distinct identity modes: continuous (P1), reconstructed (P2, P3), oscillating (P4), transformed (P5), inverted (P7), and damaged (P6). Institutional support services shaped resilience perception by reducing isolation through community with like-minded individuals, providing navigation assistance for bureaucratic complexity, creating safety net confidence from knowing support exists, and offering landing zone before discipline-based integration. The age factor created different transition challenges: older veterans navigated visibility and assumptions, while P4 navigated invisibility—his story going unrecognized among same-age peers.

Sub-Question 2: Meaning-Making of Interactions

Sub-Question 2 for this research study was:

How do SSM/Vs make meaning of their interactions with specific institutional support components in their ongoing resilience-building processes?

SSM/Vs made meaning of institutional support through function rather than category. The VSC served as community (P2: “family”), navigation resource (P3: systematic use), safety net (P1, P4: “there if I need it”), smoke pit (P5: authentic expression), and steppingstone (P7: initial landing before migration). Teacher relationships provided academic support and, for P6, healing opposite of training trauma—acceptance where training provided abuse. Meaning-making was shaped by prior experience: P6’s teacher relationship meant more because it contrasted with witnessed abuse during training; P5’s VSC experience meant more because civilian friends failed where veterans showed up without questions.

Sub-Question 3: Most Beneficial Structures

Sub-Question 3 for this research study was:

Which institutional support structures do SSM/Vs identify as most beneficial in their resilience-building, and how do they articulate the impact of these supports on their academic and personal development?

Participants identified varied supports as most beneficial depending on individual needs. Community-seekers (P2) found VSC as family. Systematic users (P3) valued full suite of resources. Safety-net users (P1, P4) benefited from knowing support exists. Specific-need participants found teacher relationships (P6) or discipline communities (P7) most valuable. Impact was articulated across academic (resource access, skill building, accommodation), personal (belonging, identity validation, community), and resilience (collective support enabling

persistence) domains. Notably, beneficial was not synonymous with heavily used—light users still identified institutional supports as valuable through safety-net function.

Sub-Question 4: Barriers and Navigation

Sub-Question 4 for this research study was:

How do SSM/Vs interpret and navigate barriers in institutional support, and what meaning do they attribute to these experiences concerning their overall resilience trajectory?

SSM/Vs interpreted barriers through agency and adaptation. Self-reliance preventing help-seeking was recognized as both strength and limitation; P6 worked around it through office hours rather than classroom participation. Hyper-vigilance in open spaces created academic barriers that P5 navigated by forcing himself into uncomfortable environments. Application complexity was attributed to institutional failure rather than personal deficit, motivating extensive preparation (P7). Classroom participation fear led to accommodation rather than cure (P6). SSM/Vs demonstrated resilience through adaptive navigation of barriers—working around rather than only overcoming. This accommodation represents sophisticated strategy, not failure.

Sub-Question 5: Changes Over Time

Sub-Question 5 for this research study was:

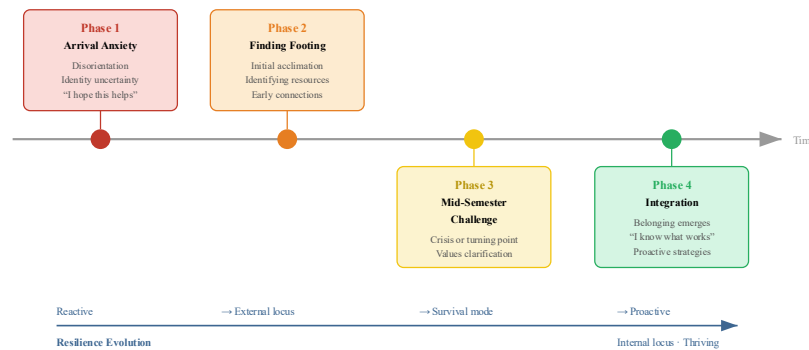
How do SSM/Vs describe changes in their experiences and perceptions of institutional support over time, and what does this suggest about their evolving resilience and adaptive strategies?

Participants described a common temporal trajectory, see figure 10: initial arrival anxiety gave way to finding footing, followed by mid-semester challenge or crisis, then integration and belonging. Support perception evolved from “I hope this helps” to “I know what works for me” and, for some, “I’m ready to migrate.” Evolving resilience indicators included movement from reactive to proactive, external to internal locus, survival to thriving, and isolation to integration.

P6's trajectory exemplified adaptive strategy evolution: from "I don't want to be a burden" to "I know the teacher understands; I use office hours instead"—accommodation that works around rather than through the barrier.

Figure 10

Common Temporal Trajectory of First-Semester Resilience Development



Note. Temporal trajectory synthesized from cross-case analysis of seven participants' first-semester experiences.

Phases are not strictly sequential; participants moved through them at different rates, with some phases overlapping.

Synthesis of Findings

Universal Patterns

The analysis revealed four universal patterns across all seven participants:

1. Resilience is collective. No veteran succeeds alone; support systems are necessary condition for resilience development, not merely helpful addition.
2. Identity must be navigated. Whether through continuation, reconstruction, oscillation, transformation, inversion, or repair, identity work is central to SSM/V transition.
3. Institutional support matters. Even minimal users value knowing support exists; the safety net function operates through potential as much as actual use.

4. Struggle creates meaning. Military experience prepared participants to engage difficulty as meaningful rather than merely obstructive; struggle becomes catalyst for growth.

Divergence Within Convergence

Every universal pattern manifested differently across participants. Support sources varied (chosen family, partner, faith, dog, institution, discipline community). Identity modes varied (continuous, reconstructed, oscillating, transformed, inverted, damaged). Usage patterns varied (heavy to minimal, with different functions emphasized). What united participants was not identical experience but shared challenge engaged through individual pathways.

Implications of the Findings

The findings suggest several implications for practice and theory that will be developed in Chapter 5. For practice, the findings indicate need for multiple support pathways (different veterans need different sources), identity flexibility in programming (some need continuous warrior affirmation, others need reconstruction support), recognition that low-use does not equal non-value, and patience with temporal trajectories (first weeks are hardest; persistence enables integration). For theory, the findings confirm collective resilience frameworks, suggest identity multiplicity rather than single transition, reveal institutional support as safety net (potential as much as actual function), and demonstrate struggle as meaning-making vehicle prepared by military experience.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented findings from interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) of seven SSM/Vs' experiences developing resilience through engagement with institutional support structures during their first semester of higher education. Analysis revealed six recurrent

superordinate themes present across four or more participants: resilience as collective rather than individual, identity navigation through multiple modes, institutional support as necessary but complex, meaning-making through struggle, age and generational position as factor, and self-reliance as both strength and barrier. Additional common and idiographic themes illuminated both shared patterns and unique contributions.

The findings demonstrate that SSM/V resilience development is fundamentally collective, intertwined with identity navigation, supported by institutional structures in varied ways, and understood through meaning-making frameworks shaped by military experience. Universal patterns manifested through idiographic pathways, with the particular illuminating the general without reduction. Chapter 5 will discuss these findings in relation to existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and implications for practice and future research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter presents an interpretive discussion of the findings reported in Chapter 4, situating the lived experiences of seven Student Service Members and Veterans (SSM/Vs) within the theoretical frameworks and empirical literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The discussion addresses the central research question guiding this inquiry:

How do SSM/Vs perceive and describe their development of resilience through engagement with institutional support structures in higher education?

The interpretive analysis weaves together the phenomenological findings with Richardson's (2002) Resiliency Model and Vacchi's (2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support, demonstrating both alignment with and extension of existing theoretical frameworks. This chapter is organized into four primary sections: Implications for Theory, Implications for Research, Implications for Practice, and Theoretical Contribution. Each section connects specific findings from the interpretive phenomenological analysis to relevant literature, explains why these connections matter for the field, and articulates implications for scholarly and institutional advancement.

Throughout this discussion, the commitment to participant voice that characterized Chapter 4 is maintained while moving toward the more abstract theoretical engagement appropriate to a discussion chapter. The interpretive claims advanced herein are anchored in both specific participant data and specific theoretical or empirical sources; this approach is consistent with qualitative research standards for warranted assertions (Tracy, 2010; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Implications for Theory

The findings of this study carry significant implications for theoretical frameworks addressing resilience, transition, and identity among military-connected populations. Four interconnected theoretical contributions emerge from the data. These are 1) the reconceptualization of resilience as fundamentally collective rather than individual, 2) the identification of multiple identity navigation modes that challenge linear transition frameworks, 3) the articulation of institutional support value through perceived availability rather than utilization alone and 4) the specification of meaning-making processes through which SSM/Vs interpret adversity as growth opportunity.

Collective Resilience: Challenging Individualistic Frameworks

The most robust finding across all seven participants was the unanimous rejection of individualistic conceptions of resilience. This finding directly addressed the research problem articulated in Chapter 1, which identified a critical gap between psychological resilience models (Richardson, 2002) and institutional support frameworks (Vacchi, 2013). This gap is partly attributed to an undertheorized assumption embedded within resilience scholarship: the positioning of the individual as the primary unit of analysis for resilience development. P4 articulated this collective principle most directly: “No one can be resilient on their own.”

P1 grounded this understanding in military experience, where collective achievement was definitional: “The team wins, not individuals. So going through something hard, going through a hard deployment, you don’t do it as an individual, you do it as a group.” These statements, representative of perspectives voiced across all seven participants, demonstrate that resilience as experienced by SSM/Vs is fundamentally relational.

This finding aligned with Richardson's (2002) emphasis on protective factors, which include social support networks among the key resources that buffer individuals against adversity. The finding also extends Richardson's model in a significant way. Richardson's visual representation of the resiliency process depicts an individual progressing through disruption toward various reintegration outcomes, with protective factors serving as external resources that the individual draws upon. The participants in this study described something qualitatively different: not individuals drawing upon social support, but individuals embedded within collective systems where resilience itself is a group phenomenon.

Dialogue with Community Resilience Literature

While the military resilience literature has extensively documented the protective function of unit cohesion (Bartone, 2006; McAndrew et al., 2017), this research has conceptualized cohesion as a resource that supports individual resilience, not as a framework within which resilience itself is collectively constituted. Similarly, Military Transition Theory (Castro & Kintzle, 2018) has acknowledged veterans' collectivist socialization but frames the transition challenge as one of shifting "from collective to individualist thinking" (Falkey, 2016, p. 127). The current findings challenge this framing. Participants did not describe collective orientation as a barrier to navigate but as the fundamental architecture within which resilience operates.

Norris et al. (2008) defined community resilience as "a process linking a network of adaptive capacities to adaptation after a disturbance" (p. 130), identifying four networked capacities: Economic Development, Social Capital, Information and Communication, and Community Competence. While Norris and colleagues developed this framework for geographic communities responding to disasters, the current findings suggest these capacities translate meaningfully to military-socialized populations navigating transition. Participants described

Educational Capital (GI Bill benefits, prior learning credit), Military Social Capital (unit bonds, VSC networks, chosen family), Veteran Knowledge Networks (“smoke pit intel,” navigation support), and Collective Efficacy (“embrace the suck,” mission orientation) as interconnected resources enabling collective resilience.

Ungar (2018) advanced a multisystemic resilience framework emphasizing that resilience operates across multiple interacting systems—biological, psychological, social, and ecological. His seven principles governing systemic resilience include contextual and cultural specificity, the importance of atypical resources, and interactions across system scales. The current findings situate SSM/V collective resilience within this multisystemic ecology: participants described resilience as emerging from the interaction of individual capacities, relational networks, institutional structures, and cultural meaning-making frameworks derived from military socialization.

Smith-Osborne (2012) identified peer support as a critical protective mechanism in her design of resilience-based interventions for student veterans. Kirchner (2015) similarly emphasized “envirosocial protective processes” including peer networks as instrumental in fostering veteran academic resilience. The current findings corroborate these prior studies while suggesting that the theoretical framing understates the centrality of collective processes. Peer support is not merely one protective factor among many; for the participants in this study, collective resilience was the fundamental framework within which all other protective factors operated.

Multiple Identity Navigation Modes: Beyond Linear Transition

Chapter 4 documented six distinct modes of identity navigation among the seven participants: continuous (P1), reconstructed (P2, P3), oscillating (P4), transformed (P5), inverted (P7), and damaged (P6). These modes represent qualitatively different pathways through the

common challenge of reconstructing self after military service. This finding directly addresses Sub-Question 1, which asked how SSM/Vs experience and interpret the transition from military to academic environments. The existence of six distinct modes challenges theoretical frameworks that assume singular transition trajectories.

Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Model, while influential in early student veteran research (Anderson & Goodman, 2014), has been critiqued for its civilian-centered assumptions (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vacchi et al., 2017). The current findings provide phenomenological grounding for these critiques; veterans do not move through uniform phases toward a singular endpoint. They navigate identity through multiple, qualitatively distinct pathways that resist sequential stage models.

P1's continuous identity mode exemplifies one pathway: the maintenance of an unbroken warrior identity that requires no reconstruction. "I still identify more as a warrior than somebody who used to be in the military," P1 stated; "I don't think that warrior spirit, or that identity, goes away." For P1, transition to higher education did not involve identity reconstruction but identity application—being the same person on new terrain. This mode contrasts sharply with P2's reconstructed mode, characterized by active rebuilding: "I'm still trying to figure out who I am... I'm in a phase of reconstruction."

P4's oscillating mode represents a particularly significant finding because it describes a condition not fully captured in prior literature: the experience of never completing transition because transition is ongoing. P4's continued National Guard service requires monthly shifts between student and airman identities. "It's kind of hard to kind of form who you think you are, because you're always changing," P4 explained. His packing ritual—pulling out uniforms, checking their readiness—marks the threshold between worlds. This oscillation will continue for

four years of college and beyond; it represents a categorically different developmental challenge than veterans who made single transitions from military to civilian life.

P7's inverted mode offers another distinctive configuration. Unlike participants who carried forward positive identity elements from military service, P7 used his service as a negative template: "I did not enjoy my service at all... it mostly showed me who I don't want to be." This inversion creates unique challenges; P7 could not share stories authentically even among veterans because his relationship with service was opposite from theirs. His identity reconstruction proceeded through negation.

Diamond's (2012) Adaptive Military Transition Theory (AMTT) challenged linear transition models by identifying variable, stasis, and symmetrical transition subtypes. The current findings extend AMTT by providing phenomenological specificity to its theoretical claims. Hammond's (2016) Combat Veteran Conceptual Identity Model (CVCIM) emphasized fluid, contextual identity negotiation. The findings of this study seem to have corroborated Hammond's core insight while extending it through identification of specific modes. The CVCIM reveals that identity continuously shifts across gradients of situational salience and social belonging; the six modes identified in this study specify the qualitatively distinct configurations that such shifting produces (Hammond, 2016).

The Safety Net Function: Institutional Support Beyond Usage Metrics

A counterintuitive finding emerged from the analysis of institutional supported engagement: participants who used veteran support services minimally nevertheless described them as valuable. P1 stated, "It's there if I need it." P4 similarly noted, "The important thing is I know that they're there." These statements demonstrated that institutional support value cannot be measured solely through usage metrics. The psychological security of knowing support is available represents a protective factor distinct from support receipt.

This finding addressed Sub-Question 3, which asked which institutional support structures SSM/Vs identify as most beneficial and how they articulate the impact of these supports. The data revealed that “most beneficial” is not synonymous with “most used.” Light users identified institutional supports as valuable through their safety net function—the confidence that comes from knowing support exists even if one does not activate it.

Vacchi’s (2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support positions institutional structures as essential for veteran success. The model maps vital institutional dimensions—veteran services, transitional programming, disability accommodations, financial aid—against impactful areas including common obstacles and diverse sources of support. The model does not fully theorize how support value operates independent of utilization (Vacchi, 2013). The study findings demonstrated an important extension: institutional support structures function as protective factors through their perceived availability, not only through their actual delivery.

Richardson’s (2002) Resiliency Model emphasized protective factors that buffer individuals against adversity; these included both internal factors (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy) and external factors (e.g., social support networks). The safety net function identified in this study may be understood as a category of protective factor that is neither fully internal nor traditionally external: the internal knowledge of external support availability. This interpretation extends resilience scholarship that emphasizes protective resources and access to support across contexts (Masten & Garmezy, 1985; Richardson, 2002; Ungar, 2018). This knowledge operates as an internal cognitive-emotional resource even when the external support is never activated.

Meaning Through Struggle: Extending Resilient Reintegration

Six of seven participants described struggle as meaningful. This finding addressed the meaning-making dimensions of Sub-Question 2, which asked how SSM/Vs make meaning of

their interactions with institutional support in their ongoing resilience-building processes. The data revealed that meaning-making extends beyond support interactions to encompass the challenges themselves; participants interpreted difficulty as growth opportunity.

P1 articulated the military concept of “embrace the suck” as fundamentally collective: “Embrace the suck together... knowing that we’re all kind of embracing the suck together, I think that’s huge.” This phrase, common in military discourse, reframes adversity from something to be endured individually to something to be engaged collectively. The linguistic shift from “getting through” to “embracing” represents a significant meaning-making transformation: struggle becomes not merely tolerable but valuable.

Richardson’s (2002) Resiliency Model described resilient reintegration as the pathway through which individuals emerge from adversity with enhanced coping mechanisms and greater functional capacity. The model presented disruption as something to recover from, with resilient reintegration representing successful recovery. Study findings demonstrated a different framing: disruption as something to engage, with meaning-making transformation as the goal. The “embrace the suck” framework represented a military-derived meaning-making strategy more consonant with SSM/V experience than clinical resilience models.

Implications for Research

The findings of this study carry methodological and conceptual implications for future research on SSM/V populations. Four primary research contributions emerged; 1) the establishment of identity navigation modes as a typological framework for future investigation, 2) the reconceptualization of collective resilience as a unit of analysis, 3) the identification of measurement approaches that capture institutional support value beyond utilization metrics and

4) the articulation of action research as a methodological bridge for testing practitioner-derived andragogical frameworks.

Identity Navigation Modes as Research Typology

The six identity navigation modes identified in this study—continuous, reconstructed, oscillating, transformed, inverted, and damaged—provided a typological framework for future research. These modes are not exhaustive; additional modes likely exist among populations not represented in this sample. Future research might examine whether these modes replicate across diverse SSM/V populations, including women veterans, veterans of color, and veterans with varied service characteristics.

The oscillating mode identified through P4's experience merits particular research attention. National Guard and Reserve members constitute a distinct subgroup within the military-connected student population, and their continuing military obligations may create developmental and transitional challenges that differ from those experienced by veterans who have fully separated from service (Livingston et al., 2013; Molina & Morse, 2017b; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Research specifically examining oscillating identity navigation among National Guard and Reserve students would illuminate support needs unique to this population.

The damaged mode identified through P6's experience indicated directions for research on training trauma. P6's disclosure of daily verbal abuse during training, witnessed by colleagues who never intervened, suggests forms of institutional betrayal within military contexts that may shape subsequent trust in academic institutions. Training trauma—wounds emerging from military experience itself rather than combat exposure—represents an underexamined phenomenon in student veteran literature and may influence identity development, trust, and help-seeking during the transition to higher education (Lancaster, 2019; Norman et al., 2015a;

Smith & True, 2014). Future research could examine how training-specific trauma affects veteran help-seeking, classroom participation, and institutional trust.

Collective Resilience as Unit of Analysis

The unanimous articulation of collective resilience among participants challenged research designs that position the individual as the primary unit of analysis for resilience measurement. Much of the resilience literature has historically emphasized individual traits or coping capacities, even while acknowledging the importance of social and contextual resources (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2018). Future research could make a significant contribution by developing collective resilience measures that assess group-level properties rather than aggregating individual scores. Such measures might examine cohort cohesion, peer network density, collective efficacy beliefs, and shared meaning-making frameworks.

Future research designs should consider dyadic and network methodologies that capture relational resilience processes. Rather than surveying individual veterans about their personal resilience, researchers might examine veteran cohorts, peer mentoring pairs, or Veteran Services Center (VSC) communities as units of analysis (Norris et al., 2008; Ungar, 2018). Social network analysis offers particular promise for mapping the relational architectures within which collective resilience operates.

Measuring the Safety Net Function

The safety net function identified in this study indicates that current research methodologies may underestimate the value of institutional support by focusing primarily on utilization metrics. Much of the student veteran success literature has examined engagement with institutional services through measures of service use, retention, and academic outcomes rather than perceptions of support availability (Cole & Kim, 2013; Southwell et al., 2018; Wilson et al.,

2020). Future research should therefore develop measures of perceived support availability alongside actual utilization. Survey instruments should include items assessing whether veterans know what supports exist; whether they feel confident accessing support if needed; and whether the availability of support affects their willingness to take academic risks.

Cole and Kim (2013) correlated veteran center engagement with academic outcomes, while Southwell et al. (2018) found that use of university services was associated with student retention among veterans. Similar studies have demonstrated that institutional support programs contribute to academic persistence and engagement among student veterans (Evans et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2020). However, these studies primarily measured actual service use; the current findings suggest that such measurement captures only part of institutional support's protective function. Methodological development should therefore create instruments capable of capturing the full range of institutional support value, including availability effects that usage metrics may overlook. Such work would align with resilience scholarship emphasizing access to resources and supportive systems as critical protective factors (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2018).

Action Research as Methodological Bridge

The andragogical framework proposed in the Implications for Practice section invites methodological approaches capable of examining practitioner-designed interventions within naturalistic educational settings. Action research methodologies (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Stringer, 2014) offer particular promise for this purpose, positioning the practitioner-scholar as both researcher and participant in iterative cycles of design, implementation, observation, and reflection. Such methodologies align with the theory-to-practice orientation that undergirds both the Collective Resiliency Model and adult learning traditions emphasizing experiential and reflective practice (Knowles, 1984; Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

Future research might employ action research designs to examine whether curriculum grounded in collective resilience principles produces observable differences in SSM/V persistence, belonging, identity navigation, and resilience development. Research on student veterans consistently identifies belonging, institutional support, and identity integration as key predictors of successful transition and persistence in higher education (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vacchi, 2012). The iterative nature of action research—its capacity to refine interventions across successive cycles based on participant feedback and observed outcomes—is particularly well suited to testing pedagogical frameworks derived from phenomenological findings, where the richness of lived experience demands responsive rather than predetermined intervention designs (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Stringer, 2014). Such research would extend the current study’s contributions from theoretical framework and practice recommendation to empirical evaluation of andragogical application.

Methodological Boundaries and Future Directions

This study’s interpretative phenomenological analysis captured the *lived experiences* of seven SSM/Vs during their first semester at a single land-grant institution in the Mountain West. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is designed to produce rich, idiographic insight into participant experience rather than broad statistical generalization (Smith et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2022). Several methodological boundaries therefore constrain the transferability of findings. First, the single-institution design limits generalizability to other institutional contexts. The University of Wyoming’s comprehensive veteran support services represent a best-case scenario for institutional support engagement. Future research should examine SSM/V resilience development across varied institutional types, including community colleges, private

universities, and online learning environments (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Second, the first-semester timing captured initial transition but not longer-term trajectories. Prior research suggests that student veteran adjustment unfolds over extended periods as identity renegotiation, academic integration, and social belonging develop across the college experience (Livingston et al., 2011; Jones, 2017). Longitudinal research following SSM/Vs across multiple semesters would illuminate how support engagement, identity navigation, and resilience development unfold beyond initial transition. Third, the sample composition—seven male participants with varied but not comprehensive demographic characteristics—limits understanding of how gender, race, ethnicity, and other identity factors intersect with veteran status in shaping transition experience. Research on veteran identity has emphasized the complexity of multiple and intersecting identities within veteran populations (Iverson & Anderson, 2013; Jones & McEwen, 2000). Future research should intentionally recruit diverse samples to examine intersectional dimensions of SSM/V resilience.

The VSC as “smoke pit” function—an authentic expression space distinct from a service delivery site—suggests value dimensions that current research frameworks do not fully capture. P5’s description of the VSC as “the smoke hole of the campus,” where veterans can express themselves without navigating civilian sensitivities, points toward social-spatial dynamics that merit further investigation. Prior research has documented the importance of veteran-specific spaces for fostering belonging, peer connection, and identity continuity during the transition to higher education (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Future research should examine how veteran spaces function as sites for authentic community distinct from their formal

service delivery roles. The questions this work surfaces reach well beyond any single discipline. See Appendix E for an extended exploration of those cross-field research possibilities.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study carry significant implications for how institutions conceptualize, design, deliver, and evaluate veteran support services. Five primary practice implications emerge: 1) the redesign of service delivery around collective models; the implementation of differentiated support for varied identity navigation modes, 2) the reconceptualization of veteran services as steppingstones toward discipline communities, 3) the accommodation of military-derived barriers including self-reliance and hypervigilance, 4) the development of age-differentiated support approaches and 5) the articulation of a veteran andragogy that operationalizes collective resilience principles into curriculum design.

Designing for Collective Resilience

Current best practices in higher education emphasize connecting individual veterans with individual resources: an academic advisor; a mental health counselor; or a career services appointment. Much of the student veteran support literature focuses on institutional services designed to address individual academic, psychological, and career needs (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vacchi, 2012). The current findings suggest that such individual-focused service delivery may be structurally misaligned with how SSM/Vs naturally develop resilience through shared experience and peer connection. Institutions should therefore prioritize group-based interventions such as cohort advising sessions, peer mentoring circles, group counseling options, and collective career exploration activities. Research on resilience increasingly emphasizes the importance of relational and systemic resources in supporting adaptive development in contexts of adversity (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2018).

Wurster et al. (2013) examine how first-generation status compounds transition risks for student veterans and recommend reinforcing institutional supports such as tutoring, mentoring, and financial aid guidance. The current findings suggest that such supports are most effective when designed around collective engagement models rather than individual service encounters. Group-based tutoring, cohort mentoring structures, and peer financial aid advising align more closely with how SSM/Vs describe developing resilience through shared experience and mutual accountability. Prior research has similarly documented the importance of peer connection and community-building in supporting veteran transition and persistence in higher education (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

This suggests that institutional support structures aligned with collective engagement models—cohort advising, peer mentoring circles, and group-based programming—may more effectively support SSM/V resilience development than individually focused service delivery models. The collective dimension of resilience expressed by participants—summarized in the phrase “embrace the suck together”—reflects the shared adversity orientation characteristic of military culture and peer bonding (Lancaster, 2019). Designing institutional programming that leverages this collective orientation may therefore strengthen belonging, peer cohesion, and resilience development during the transition to higher education.

The VSC as Steppingstone: Trajectories Through Veteran Spaces

P7 articulates a vision of veteran support services that reframes traditional success metrics: “The VSC has been a benefit in finding an initial place to find community on campus, but... it’s meant to be a steppingstone.” This statement suggests that healthy veteran transition involves moving beyond veteran-specific spaces toward discipline-based communities. Research consistently identifies belonging and peer connection as critical elements of student veteran

transition and persistence in higher education (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vacchi, 2012). For P7, the Veteran Services Center provides an initial landing zone before migration to his primary academic community: the Society of Physics Students, where identity develops around shared intellectual interests and disciplinary affiliation.

The steppingstone model contrasts with Tinto's (1975, 1993) integration model, which has been critiqued for assimilationist assumptions that place responsibility on nontraditional or marginalized students to adapt to existing campus culture (DiRamio et al., 2008; Vacchi et al., 2017). Rather than assimilating into a generalized campus culture, P7 describes a trajectory toward a specific disciplinary community aligned with his intellectual identity. Research on identity development among student veterans similarly emphasizes the importance of reconstructing post-military identity through academic and professional pathways (Hammond, 2016; Lancaster, 2019). In this sense, the destination is not "the campus" in general but a particular intellectual community in this case, physics students.

Veteran services therefore play an important transitional role in facilitating connections between veteran identity and broader academic engagement. Programming should intentionally facilitate connections to academic departments and discipline-based organizations. Such programming might include introductions to departmental clubs, faculty mentorship within academic majors, and explicit encouragement to cultivate non-veteran campus communities. Prior research similarly suggests that successful veteran transition often involves movement from veteran-specific support spaces into broader academic and institutional communities (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Institutional success metrics should therefore include "successful launches" into broader campus community rather than relying solely on veteran center engagement or retention indicators.

Navigating Self-Reliance and Help-Seeking Barriers

Four participants describe military-trained self-reliance as both an asset and an obstacle during their academic transition. Prior research notes that military culture often emphasizes independence, personal responsibility, and mission-oriented problem solving, values that can complicate help-seeking behaviors in civilian contexts (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Lancaster, 2019). P1 and P4 explicitly invoke the “John Wayne mindset”—independence, self-sufficiency, and reluctance to seek help. For P5 and P6, self-reliance becomes a systematic barrier. P6 discloses, “As soon as I’m shown that I’m a burden on anybody, I shut down.” This “burden shutdown” represents withdrawal from potential support whenever problems appear to impose on others. Prior studies of student veterans similarly identify reluctance to seek assistance and concerns about burdening others as barriers to engagement with institutional support services (Kirchner, 2015; Norman et al., 2015b).

Support services should therefore design delivery mechanisms that minimize perceived burden. This includes drop-in formats that do not require scheduled appointments; group formats that distribute support-seeking across multiple participants; peer formats that frame help-seeking as reciprocal exchange; and proactive outreach that positions services as offered rather than requested. Research on veteran transition suggests that peer-based environments and community-oriented engagement strategies are particularly effective in supporting veteran help-seeking and academic adjustment (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Outreach messaging should also normalize help-seeking within military values frameworks, positioning help-seeking as strategic resource acquisition rather than personal deficiency.

Accommodating Hypervigilance in Academic Spaces

Three participants describe persistent threat awareness that transfers from military to civilian environments. Research on post-deployment adjustment notes that heightened environmental awareness and vigilance often persist following military service, particularly among individuals exposed to high-stress operational environments (Norman et al., 2015a; Smith & True, 2014). P5 provides the most detailed description: “It’s like you have three bars open. You have the bar of the conversation going on. You have the visual of wherever the entrance and where your exits are, and you have a good view of the area around you.” This cognitive division—attention split between course content and environmental monitoring—reduces available learning capacity.

Classroom design should therefore consider sight lines, exits, and seating preferences for hypervigilant students. Allowing veterans to select seats near exits and walls, reducing environmental unpredictability, and providing clear classroom routines may support veteran engagement. Research on student veteran transition similarly suggests that classroom environments can either mitigate or intensify stress responses during academic reintegration (Ellison et al., 2012; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Faculty should recognize that some veterans remain cognitively divided between course content and environmental monitoring; this is not disengagement but a different form of engagement shaped by military conditioning. For veterans whose hypervigilance remains persistent, environmental accommodation may be more immediately achievable than attempts at symptom reduction within classroom settings.

Addressing Age-Based Visibility and Invisibility

Five participants discuss how age or generational position affects their transition experience. Research on student veterans consistently notes that veterans enter higher education across a broad range of ages and life stages, which differentiates their transition experience from that of traditional-aged undergraduates (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Older veterans—P1, P3, and P6—navigate heightened visibility and the assumptions that accompany it. P6 captures this challenge: “I’m the oldest person in the class, and it’s like the oldest person is always raising his hand. This guy doesn’t know anything, like, what’s his deal?” Such experiences reflect the tension many veterans experience when shifting from positions of expertise and leadership in military settings to novice roles within academic environments (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Lancaster, 2019).

By contrast, P4’s position at age 19 reflects the opposite dynamic. Looking indistinguishable from traditional first-year students, P4 navigates invisibility: “Nobody really thinks that I have a story, but I do.” Research on veteran identity similarly emphasizes that student veterans do not represent a homogeneous group and may vary widely in age, life experience, and identity presentation (Iverson & Anderson, 2013; Jones & McEwen, 2000). These variations shape how veterans are perceived by peers and faculty and influence how easily they access veteran-specific support networks.

Support services should therefore address age-based challenges in differentiated ways. Older veterans benefit from strategies for navigating assumptions and managing the role reversal from military expert (e.g., NCO or officer) to academic novice. Younger veterans benefit from identity disclosure support and connection pathways that do not rely on visible veteran status. Faculty development initiatives should also address the diversity of veteran age presentations and

experiences. Training programs should explicitly counter assumptions that all veterans share similar visible characteristics, recognizing the wide variation in age, identity, and life stage among military-connected students (Vacchi, 2012; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Toward a Veteran Andragogy: Operationalizing Collective Resilience in Curriculum Design

The five practice implications articulated above identify what institutions should do differently in serving SSM/V populations. This section extends those recommendations by proposing a conceptual framework for how such changes might be systematically integrated into curriculum design: a veteran andragogy grounded in the phenomenological findings of this study and situated within established traditions of adult learning theory.

Knowles (1980, 1984) established andragogy as the foundational framework for adult education, articulating six principles that distinguish adult from pedagogical learning: adults are self-directed learners who bring accumulated experience as a resource, demonstrate readiness to learn tied to developmental tasks and social roles, prefer problem-centered rather than subject-centered learning, are motivated primarily by internal factors, and need to understand the reasons for learning. These principles have been widely applied across adult learning contexts, including higher education, professional development, and military training environments (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The current findings confirm the relevance of Knowles' framework for SSM/V populations: participants demonstrated self-direction (P7's spreadsheet-based university comparison), experience as resource (P1's leadership transfer from military to academic contexts), and problem-centered orientation (P2's pivot toward psychology as purposeful response to lived experience).

However, the findings also expose a significant limitation within andragogical theory as currently constituted. Knowles' framework positions the individual adult learner as the primary unit of analysis—the self-directed individual who draws upon personal experience and pursues individual learning goals. The participants in this study described learning and resilience development as fundamentally collective processes. P1's assertion that “the team wins, not individuals” and P4's conviction that “no one can be resilient on their own” describe an orientation toward learning that is not merely self-directed but collectively constituted. This collective orientation is not a cultural artifact to be accommodated within existing andragogical frameworks; it is a foundational learning disposition that requires theoretical extension.

Mezirow's (1991, 2000) transformative learning theory provides a complementary theoretical lens that illuminates additional dimensions of the current findings. Transformative learning occurs when adults encounter disorienting dilemmas that challenge existing meaning perspectives, prompting critical reflection and ultimately perspective transformation. For readers less familiar with this tradition, Mezirow's framework has been particularly influential in adult and continuing education, where it provides a theoretical account of how adults revise fundamental assumptions about themselves and their worlds through reflective engagement with challenging experiences. The current findings document multiple instances of transformative learning among participants: P2's mid-semester pivot from computer science to psychology represented a fundamental perspective transformation triggered by the disorienting dilemma of confronting unprocessed grief; P7's math placement trajectory (scores of 20, 46, 90) reflected a transformed meaning scheme regarding his own intellectual capacity; and P3's post-crisis decision to pursue education following a psychotic break and suicidal ideation represented transformation catalyzed by existential disruption.

Yet Mezirow's framework, like Knowles', locates the transformative process primarily within the individual learner. Critical reflection—the mechanism through which transformation occurs—is conceptualized as an internal cognitive process, even when facilitated by dialogue with others (Mezirow, 2000). The current findings suggest that for military-socialized learners, transformation occurs not merely through individual critical reflection but through collective meaning-making. P1's "embrace the suck together" describes a group-level interpretive process through which adversity is reframed as meaningful—a collective perspective transformation that operates between individuals, not only within them. This finding extends Mezirow's framework by identifying collective critical reflection as a mechanism of transformative learning among populations socialized in group-achievement contexts.

Brookfield's (1995, 2005) critical reflection theory foregrounds the power dynamics inherent in adult learning environments—interrogating whose knowledge is validated, whose experience counts as legitimate, and how institutional structures reproduce or challenge existing hierarchies. This critical lens illuminates dimensions of SSM/V learning that purely facilitative frameworks miss. P6's training trauma—daily verbal abuse witnessed by colleagues who never intervened—represents an experience of institutional power that profoundly shaped his subsequent relationship to learning environments. His classroom silence following a single incorrect answer was not mere shyness but a conditioned response to institutional betrayal: learning environments experienced as sites of potential humiliation rather than growth. P5's burden shutdown—"as soon as I'm shown that I'm a burden on anybody, I shut down"—similarly reflects internalized power dynamics from military hierarchies where appearing weak carried real consequences. A veteran andragogy informed by Brookfield's critical tradition must

account for how prior institutional power experiences shape veterans' willingness to engage as learners and help-seekers in academic contexts.

The emerging literature on veteran-specific pedagogy provides additional grounding for this framework. Heineman (2017) argued that effective teaching of student veterans requires understanding military culture as a pedagogical variable—not merely a demographic characteristic but an active shaper of how veterans engage with content, peers, and instructors. Cate (2014) identified specific pedagogical strategies aligned with military learning cultures, including structured environments, clear expectations, mission-oriented framing, and peer-based learning models. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has advanced frameworks for recognizing and integrating prior experiential learning into academic pathways, a principle directly relevant to SSM/V populations whose military training represents substantial but often unrecognized learning (CAEL, 2010). The current findings extend this emerging conversation by grounding veteran pedagogical recommendations in phenomenological evidence of how SSM/Vs actually experience learning and resilience development, rather than in institutional best-practice assumptions alone.

Synthesizing across these theoretical traditions and the phenomenological findings of this study, a veteran andragogy operationalizing collective resilience rests on five interrelated design principles, each traceable to specific findings from Chapter 4.

First, collective learning architecture. Curriculum designed for SSM/V populations should position the group—not the individual—as the primary unit of learning. This principle derives from the unanimous finding that resilience is collectively constituted (Superordinate Theme 1) and aligns with Knowles' (1980) recognition that adults learn from shared experience while extending that recognition to position shared experience as the structural foundation of

curriculum rather than a supplementary resource. Cohort-based models, team-structured activities, and peer-facilitated learning communities operationalize this principle.

Second, identity-responsive differentiation. The six identity navigation modes identified in Chapter 4 demonstrate that SSM/Vs navigate transition through qualitatively distinct pathways. Curriculum should accommodate this multiplicity rather than assuming uniform veteran experience. A student navigating continuous identity (P1) requires different pedagogical engagement than one navigating damaged identity (P6) or oscillating identity (P4). This principle extends Mezirow's (2000) attention to individual meaning perspectives by recognizing that military-socialized learners bring not merely different perspectives but fundamentally different identity configurations to the learning environment.

Third, adversity as pedagogy. Six of seven participants described struggle as meaningful—a finding consistent with military socialization that frames difficulty as growth opportunity. Curriculum should intentionally incorporate structured challenge and guided reflection on adversity engagement, positioning difficulty not as an obstacle to learning but as a pedagogical tool. This principle transforms P1's "embrace the suck together" from military idiom to andragogical strategy: collective adversity engagement as a deliberate learning modality.

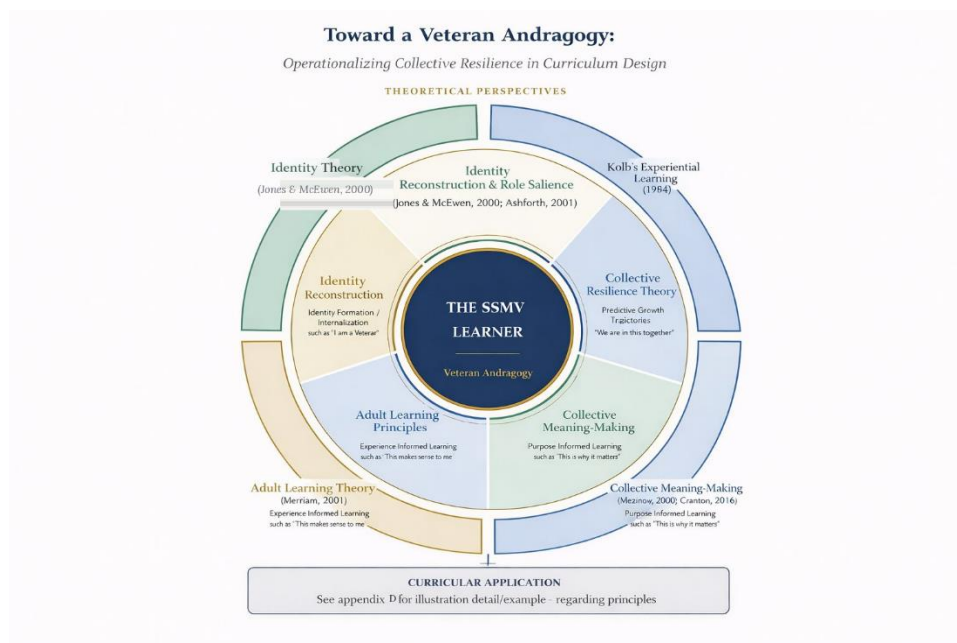
Fourth, safety net design. The finding that institutional support operates as a protective factor through perceived availability—not solely through utilization—has direct curricular implications. Learning environments should be designed so that support structures are visible, accessible, and normalized, reducing the help-seeking barriers identified among participants. This principle extends Vacchi's (2013) institutional support framework into classroom-level

design, ensuring that the safety net function operates within courses and not only across institutional services.

Fifth, steppingstone trajectory. P7's articulation of the VSC as a launching point toward discipline-based community suggests that veteran-focused curriculum should intentionally facilitate movement beyond veteran-specific spaces. Effective veteran andragogy does not create permanent enclaves; it builds bridges to broader academic and professional communities. This principle challenges deficit models that position veteran support as remediation and instead frames it as launchpad—consistent with Brookfield's (2005) emphasis on education as emancipatory practice rather than compensatory intervention. See figure 11, below.

Figure 11

Toward Veteran Andragogy



These five principles constitute a preliminary framework for veteran andragogy that operationalizes the Collective Resiliency Model proposed in this chapter. Appendix D presents an illustrative curricular design demonstrating how these principles might be implemented in a semester-long course format; such application represents one possible operationalization among many. The framework itself—rooted in phenomenological evidence and situated within established adult learning traditions (Knowles, 1984; Merriam & Bierema, 2014)—invites adaptation across institutional contexts, program types, and student populations beyond the SSM/V focus of this study. This adaptability aligns with resilience scholarship emphasizing that protective systems operate across multiple ecological and institutional contexts rather than within a single fixed environment (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2018).

Theoretical Contribution

The overarching theoretical contribution of this study lies in the extension of resilience theory from individual to collective frameworks for military-socialized populations in transition contexts. This contribution integrates and extends four theoretical traditions: Richardson's (2002) Resiliency Model, Norris et al.'s (2008) community resilience framework, Ungar's (2018) multisystemic resilience theory, and Vacchi's (2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support.

Positioning Within Resilience Scholarship

While Norris et al. (2008) and Ungar (2018) have established that resilience operates at collective and systemic levels, this literature has primarily examined community resilience in disaster contexts. Norris and colleagues studied geographic communities recovering from hurricanes, terrorism, and earthquakes; Ungar's multisystemic framework addresses social-ecological interactions across diverse contexts but has not been applied to military-socialized populations. The current findings extend collective resilience theory to transition contexts,

demonstrating that military-socialized populations carry collective resilience frameworks as internalized meaning-making structures—not merely as responses to acute disruption, but as foundational orientations toward challenge.

The military resilience literature offers a related but distinct lineage. Bartone (2006) established the hardiness-cohesion-resilience nexus, demonstrating that unit cohesion buffers stress and enhances resilience. McAndrew et al. (2017) found that higher unit cohesion was associated with better mental health outcomes among National Guard and Reserve members post-deployment. Lancaster’s (2019) Warrior Identity Scale measures “interdependence with other veterans” and “military-as-family” orientations, finding these attachments associated with both protective outcomes (lower suicidal ideation) and risk factors (depression, PTSD when over-attached).

Yet much of the military resilience literature frames cohesion as a resource that supports individual resilience rather than as a framework within which resilience itself is collectively constituted. Research on military resilience frequently examines individual psychological hardiness, coping capacity, and adjustment outcomes while treating cohesion and social support as contextual resources that facilitate those individual outcomes (Bartone, 2006; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). In these models, the unit of analysis remains the individual soldier or veteran; cohesion is operationalized as an environmental resource that individual service members access. The current findings suggest a reframing: resilience as a property of collectives that individuals participate in, not merely a property of individuals that collectives support.

The Collective Resiliency Model

Building on these theoretical foundations and grounded in the phenomenological findings of this study, I propose a Collective Resiliency Model that extends Richardson’s (2002)

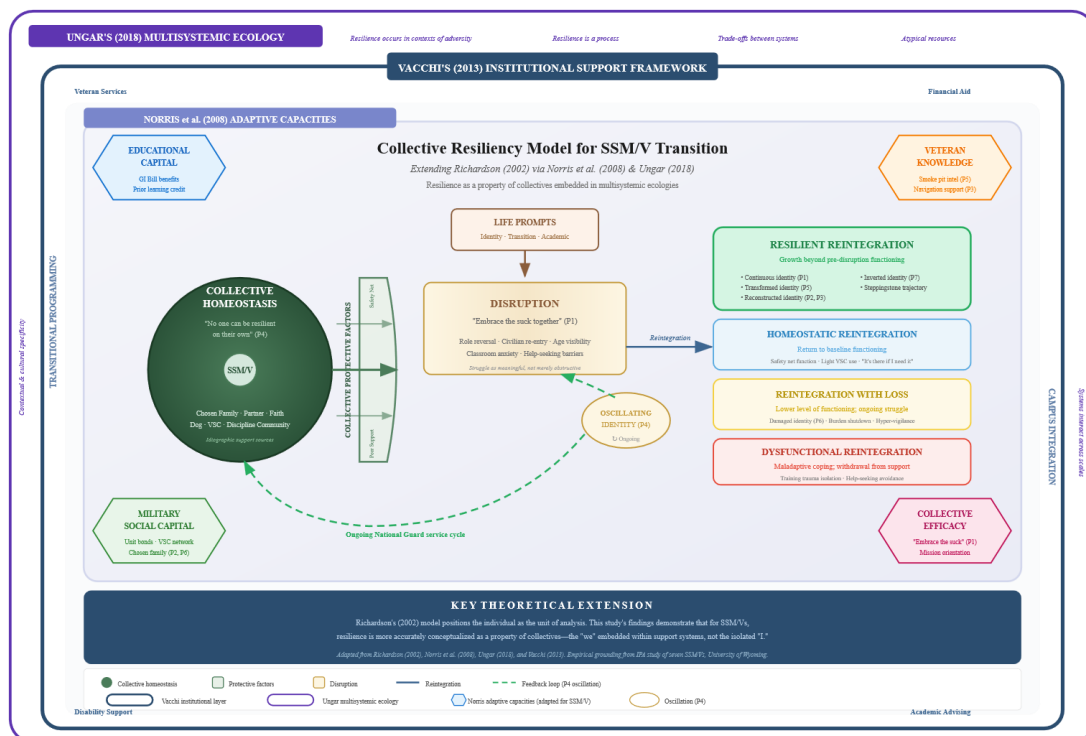
individual framework to honor the collective resilience processes described by participants.

Figure 12 presents this model visually.

Figure 12

Collective Resiliency Model for SSM/V Transition

The model integrates three nested theoretical layers that border our eclectic model. The outermost layer represents Ungar's (2018) multisystemic ecology, framing the entire model within the principle that resilience operates across multiple interacting systems—biological,



psychological, social, institutional, and ecological. This positioning situates SSM/V transition within broader social-ecological dynamics rather than treating it as an isolated individual process.

The middle layer of our bordered theoretical framework represents Vacchi's (2013) institutional support infrastructure—the higher education context within which SSM/V transition

occurs. This layer encompasses veteran services, financial aid, disability support, academic advising, transitional programming, and campus integration initiatives. Critically, this institutional layer is positioned as one system within the larger multisystemic ecology, not as the primary context for resilience development.

The inner layer adapts Norris et al.'s (2008) four networked adaptive capacities for military-socialized populations: Economic Development becomes Educational Capital (GI Bill benefits, prior learning credit); Social Capital becomes Military Social Capital (unit bonds, VSC networks, chosen family); Information and Communication becomes Veteran Knowledge Networks ("smoke pit intel," navigation support); and Community Competence becomes Collective Efficacy ("embrace the suck," mission orientation). These four capacities function as networked resources that feed collective homeostasis.

At the core, Richardson's (2002) disruption-reintegration process is preserved but repositioned with the collective—not the individual—as the unit of analysis. Collective Homeostasis replaces individual homeostasis, representing SSM/Vs embedded in concentric support systems. Collective Protective Factors buffer disruption. Life Prompts (identity challenges, transition stressors, academic demands) create disruption that the collective navigates together—P1's "embrace the suck together."

A note on the structural logic of this model warrants attention. It may appear intuitive to position disruption as the starting point—after all, disruption is the phenomenological entry point, the catalyst that Chermack (personal communication, 2026) aptly describes as the moment one encounters "something you cannot make sense of." In the lived experience of the participants in this study, disruption was indeed the narrative beginning: the moment military identity met academic terrain and found the footing unfamiliar. Yet a theoretical model must operate at a

structural level distinct from the experiential level. Collective Homeostasis is positioned first not because veterans are consciously aware of their baseline functioning, but because disruption is only intelligible in relation to a prior state. Without an established baseline—a reference point of functioning, identity coherence, and relational embeddedness—there is no disruption, only chaos.

Meaning-making, which Mezirow (2000) positions as the central work of adult learning and which six of seven participants demonstrated through their framing of struggle as growth, is inherently comparative: it requires a *before* against which the *after* can be measured, interpreted, and integrated. Collective Homeostasis provides that anchor. Disruption is where the story is experienced; homeostasis is the condition that makes the story possible.

The four reintegration outcomes identified by Richardson are populated with findings from this study. Resilient Reintegration encompasses the continuous, transformed, reconstructed, and inverted identity modes that participants describe as growth trajectories; Homeostatic Reintegration reflects the safety net function and light VSC engagement; Reintegration with Loss captures P6's damaged identity and the burden shutdown phenomenon; and Dysfunctional Reintegration addresses training trauma isolation and help-seeking avoidance. These mappings extend Richardson's resiliency framework by situating the reintegration outcomes within the lived transition experiences of student service members and veterans in higher education (Richardson, 2002).

P4's oscillating identity is represented as a distinctive pathway—a feedback loop connecting homeostasis and disruption that reflects the ongoing identity shifts required by continued National Guard service. This oscillation pattern, not captured in Richardson's original model, represents a contribution of the current study to resilience theory. Identity scholarship similarly suggests that individuals navigate multiple and evolving identity configurations across

changing social contexts, particularly during periods of transition (Iverson & Anderson, 2013; Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Challenging Deficit Framings

The military transition literature has recognized that military socialization emphasizes “obedience, regimentation, collectivism” (Smith & True, 2014, p. 157). The transition challenge has been framed as a shift “from collective to individualist thinking” (Falkey, 2016; Ryan et al., 2011). Veterans are described as carrying “group-learned values of group belonging and collectivism” (Mahoney et al., 2023) into civilian contexts. This framing positions collective orientation as cultural baggage to manage—an artifact of military socialization that impedes civilian adjustment.

The current findings challenge this deficit framing. Much of the higher education literature on student veterans implicitly frames military cultural orientations—including collectivism, strong group identity, and mission-focused norms—as adjustment barriers that veterans must navigate in order to integrate into civilian academic environments (DiRamio et al., 2008; Vacchi, 2013). Participants in the present study did not describe collective orientation as a barrier to overcome but as the fundamental architecture within which resilience operates. P4’s assertion that “no one can be resilient on their own” was not a statement of limitation but of ontological reality—a description of how resilience functions for military-socialized individuals. Contemporary resilience scholarship similarly emphasizes that resilience emerges through relational and ecological systems rather than solely through individual traits (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2018). This reframing has significant implications: rather than helping veterans overcome their collective orientation, institutions should design supports that leverage it.

Collective Resilience to Transition Contexts

Norris et al. (2008) developed their community resilience framework to explain how geographic communities respond to acute disasters such as hurricanes, terrorist attacks, and earthquakes. In that framework, resilience emerges through networked adaptive capacities, economic resources, social capital, information and communication systems, and community competence that allow communities to respond to and recover from collective disruption. The timeframe in Norris and colleagues' work is crisis response and recovery; the context is geographically bounded communities facing shared external threats. The current findings suggest that collective resilience frameworks may also apply beyond disaster contexts, particularly within developmental transitions experienced by specific populations.

SSM/Vs in higher education are not responding to acute disaster but navigating an ongoing developmental transition from military to civilian life. Yet the collective resilience processes participants describe—networked adaptive capacities, shared meaning-making, mutual support, and collective efficacy—parallel those identified in disaster resilience research (Norris et al., 2008). These patterns also align with scholarship on resilience as an emergent property of social systems rather than solely an individual psychological trait (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2018). This parallel suggests that collective resilience operates as a general framework for understanding how groups navigate challenge, not merely as a specialized model for disaster response.

Furthermore, the current findings suggest that military-socialized populations may carry collective resilience frameworks as internalized structures rather than activating them only in response to shared external threat. Military organizations intentionally cultivate cohesion, mutual reliance, and collective problem-solving capacities as foundational elements of operational

effectiveness (Bartone, 2006; Siebold, 2007). Participants in this study described collective resilience not as something activated by crisis but as the default mode through which they approach difficulty. This internalization distinguishes military-socialized collective resilience from the geographically bounded community resilience described by Norris and colleagues (2008), suggesting that collective resilience may function both as a situational community response and as a culturally embedded orientation toward challenge.

Implications for Resilience Theory

The theoretical contribution of this study extends beyond SSM/V populations to resilience theory broadly. Contemporary resilience scholarship increasingly recognizes that resilience emerges through relational and ecological systems rather than solely through individual psychological traits (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2018). The findings of this study further demonstrate that resilience frameworks benefit from greater attention to collective processes, particularly among populations socialized in collective-achievement contexts. Military veterans represent one such population; others might include team athletes, performing artists, first responders, and members of collectivist cultural traditions in which group cohesion and shared efficacy structure responses to adversity.

The reconceptualization of resilience as a property of collectives rather than individuals carries methodological implications for resilience research. Measures that assess individual resilience capture only part of the phenomenon; collective resilience measures—assessing cohort cohesion, network density, collective efficacy, and shared meaning-making—would capture dimensions that individual measures miss. Much existing resilience measurement focuses on individual traits such as coping capacity, psychological hardiness, or adaptive functioning (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Windle, 2011). Research designs that position individuals as the

primary unit of analysis should therefore be complemented by designs that examine dyads, networks, and communities as sites where resilience processes unfold.

Finally, the integration of Richardson's (2002) process model with Norris et al.'s (2008) capacity framework and Ungar's (2018) multisystemic ecology provides a template for theoretical synthesis in resilience studies. These three traditions have developed largely in parallel: Richardson's model emphasizes the dynamic reintegration processes individuals experience following disruption; Norris and colleagues (2008) foreground the adaptive capacities that enable communities to respond to collective threat; and Ungar highlights the multisystemic ecological resources that shape resilience across social environments. The Collective Resiliency Model proposed in this study demonstrates how these traditions can be integrated to provide a more comprehensive understanding of resilience as a multilevel phenomenon operating across individual, relational, institutional, and ecological systems.

Conclusion

This discussion chapter has interpreted the phenomenological findings presented in Chapter 4 within the theoretical frameworks and empirical literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The four primary sections—Implications for Theory, Implications for Research, Implications for Practice, and Theoretical Contribution—have connected specific findings to existing scholarship, clarified their significance for resilience studies and student veteran research, and articulated implications for both scholarly inquiry and institutional practice.

The overarching contribution of this study lies in its phenomenological specification of how student service members and veterans (SSM/Vs) experience resilience development within institutional support contexts. While prior scholarship has established that resilience is associated with successful student veteran transition and that institutional support structures play an

important role in that process (DiRamio et al., 2008; Vacchi, 2013), this study illuminates how these dynamics are lived in everyday academic experience. Participants described resilience not as an individual psychological trait but as a fundamentally collective process embedded within peer relationships, shared meaning-making, and institutional environments. Identity navigation emerged as multiple and non-linear; institutional support was valued through its availability as much as its utilization; struggle was interpreted as meaningful; and military conditioning functioned simultaneously as asset and barrier in academic transition.

The Collective Resiliency Model proposed in this chapter integrates Richardson's (2002) reintegration process framework with Norris et al.'s (2008) community resilience capacities, Ungar's (2018) multisystemic ecological perspective, and Vacchi's (2013) conceptualization of institutional support structures for student veterans. Through this synthesis, resilience among military-socialized populations is conceptualized not solely as an individual adaptation process but as a phenomenon operating across collective and institutional contexts. This reconceptualization positions the collective—not the individual—as the primary unit of analysis for understanding resilience among SSM/Vs. In doing so, the model challenges deficit-oriented interpretations that frame military collectivism as a barrier to civilian adjustment and instead recognizes collective orientation as the foundational architecture through which resilience is enacted.

Beyond theoretical contribution, this study also advances a veteran andragogy grounded in phenomenological evidence and situated within established traditions of adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980, 1984; Mezirow, 2000; Brookfield, 2005; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The five design principles articulated in this chapter—collective learning architecture, identity-responsive differentiation, adversity as pedagogy, safety net design, and steppingstone trajectory—translate

the Collective Resiliency Model into curricular and institutional practice. These principles illustrate how resilience-informed environments might be intentionally designed to support SSM/V learning and transition. This theory-to-practice extension reflects both the applied orientation of the Organizational Learning, Performance, and Change doctoral program and the broader tradition of engaged scholarship in adult education, where research serves not only to explain phenomena but also to inform the design of learning environments that foster growth and development.

The implications of this study extend beyond student veteran populations. The findings suggest that resilience frameworks benefit from greater attention to collective processes, particularly among populations socialized in collective-achievement contexts such as military organizations, emergency services, athletics, and performing arts communities. By foregrounding the relational and ecological dimensions of resilience, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that conceptualizes resilience as a dynamic, multisystemic process operating across individual, relational, institutional, and cultural systems (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2018).

Ultimately, this study contributes to the expanding literature that positions student veterans not as deficient or troubled populations but as capable individuals navigating complex transitions with distinctive strengths and specific support needs (DiRamio et al., 2008; Heineman, 2017; Vacchi, 2013). The participants in this study demonstrated resilience through collective engagement, shared meaning-making, and adaptive navigation of institutional barriers. Institutions that recognize these dynamics—and design support structures that leverage collective processes, normalize struggle, and accommodate military-derived conditioning—may more effectively serve the growing population of SSM/Vs pursuing higher education.

The warrior spirit that P1 described as continuous; the reconstruction that P2 undertook; the oscillation that P4 navigates; the transformation that P5 achieved; the inversion that P7 maintains; and the damage that P6 carries represent not deficits to be remediated but identities to be understood and supported. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, this study has sought to illuminate those lived experiences and situate them within broader theoretical and institutional contexts. The resulting contribution is both theoretical and practical: seven voices carefully interpreted, connected to the evolving scholarship on resilience and veteran transition, and translated into guiding principles for designing learning environments in which student veterans can continue to grow, adapt, and thrive.

The experiences shared by the participants in this study demonstrate that resilience among student service members and veterans is not merely an individual capacity but a relational process constructed through collective engagement, shared meaning-making, and institutional context. Understanding resilience in this way shifts attention from strengthening individuals alone to designing environments that support collective resilience. Institutions that recognize and build upon these processes may more effectively support the growing population of veterans pursuing higher education.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

Consent to Participate in Research Colorado State University

I am Thomas K. Stoudt, a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Education at Colorado State University. You are invited to participate in this research study. The following information is provided to ensure you thoroughly understand the purpose and nature of your participation. Please contact me at 307-703-1213 or tstoudt@uwyo.edu with any questions.

Title of the Study:

Student Veteran Resiliency in Higher Education: A Model for Comprehensive Support

Procedures:

If you agree to participate, you will engage in three semi-structured interviews throughout an academic semester, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. Additionally, you may participate in three focus group sessions, each approximately 60-90 minutes, with other student veterans. You will also maintain a reflective journal with weekly entries documenting your experiences related to resilience, transition, and institutional support.

The interviews and focus groups will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. If at any point you feel uncomfortable or wish to discontinue participation, you may request to stop recording or withdraw entirely from the study without penalty.

Benefits:

While there are no direct benefits to you, your participation will contribute valuable insights into improving support systems and academic environments for student veterans in higher education.

Risks/Discomforts:

You will be asked to reflect upon your personal experiences and challenges associated with transitioning from military service to university life, which may evoke emotional discomfort. You may decline to answer any question or pause or end your participation at any time.

Confidentiality:

To minimize confidentiality risks, all personal identifiers will be replaced with pseudonyms in transcripts, data analyses, and published materials. All electronic data will be stored securely on password-protected, encrypted devices. Only the researcher and authorized personnel from the CSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) will access identifiable information.

After de-identification, data may be used for future research without additional consent. Data records will be retained securely for up to five years following study completion.

Compensation:

Participants will receive a \$50 gift card upon completing all study components.

Rights:

Participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Questions:

For any questions regarding this research, contact:

- **Principal Investigator:** Dr. Thomas J. Chermack, School of Education, Colorado State University, Thomas.chermack@colostate.edu
- **Co-Principal Investigator:** Thomas K. Stoudt, Ph.D. candidate, School of Education, Colorado State University, 307-703-1213, tstoudt@uwyo.edu.

For questions regarding participant rights, contact: Colorado State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 970-491-1553 or via email at RICRO_IRB@colostate.edu.

Consent

By signing below, you confirm that you have read and understood this informed consent document and voluntarily agree to participate. Your digital signature acknowledges receipt of a copy of this consent form on the date signed.

Do you consent to your interviews and focus groups being audio-recorded?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Do you consent to your journal entries transcribed?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Do you consent to being contacted for follow-up questions or future studies?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Signature of Study Participant Date

Printed Name of Study Participant: _____

Name of Person providing information: Thomas K. Stoudt

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Introduction:

- Thank the participant for agreeing to the interview.
- Remind participant of confidentiality and their right to pause or end the interview at any time.
- Briefly explain the purpose of the study: to explore how Student Service Members and Veterans (SSM/Vs) develop resilience through institutional support structures in higher education.

Interview Questions:

Transition into Higher Education:

1. Can you describe your initial experience transitioning from military service to university life?
2. What specific challenges did you encounter during your transition?

Engagement with Institutional Support:

3. How did you first become aware of the support services available to student veterans at this university?
4. Which institutional support structures have you engaged with (e.g., peer mentoring, academic advising, transition programs)?
5. Can you describe your experiences interacting with these support structures?

Effectiveness of Institutional Support:

6. Which institutional support services have you found most helpful or valuable? Why?
7. Are there aspects of institutional support that have positively influenced your academic performance or personal adjustment to college?

Barriers and Challenges:

8. Have you faced any barriers when trying to access support services provided by the institution?
9. How did you navigate or overcome these barriers?

Evolution Over Time:

10. Reflecting over your time at the university so far, how has your use or perception of institutional support services changed?

11. Can you share a specific instance or experience where institutional support notably influenced your ability to manage academic or personal challenges?

Resilience Development:

12. How would you describe your own resilience or ability to cope with challenges during your transition and adjustment to university life? 13. What role do you believe institutional support structures have played in your resilience development?

Conclusion:

- Is there anything about your experience with institutional support or resilience development that we haven't discussed but you think is important for me to know?
- Thank you again for your participation and valuable insights.

Appendix C

Reflective Journal Entry Guidelines

Purpose: The reflective journal is designed to capture your ongoing experiences and insights related to your transition from military service to university life, resilience development, and interaction with institutional support structures.

Journal Entry Procedures:

- Please complete one journal entry per week throughout the duration of the study.
- Submit your entries electronically via the secure submission portal (Canvas) provided.
- There is no minimum or maximum length; entries should thoroughly reflect your experiences and thoughts.

Journal Entry Content: Please address the following prompts to guide your reflective entries:

1. Weekly Experiences:

- Describe any significant experiences or events you encountered this week related to your academic, social, or personal transition to university life.

2. Challenges and Responses:

- Reflect on any specific challenges you faced this week. How did you respond to these challenges?
- What resources, people, or institutional supports, if any, did you utilize to manage these challenges?

3. Resilience Development:

- Reflecting on your experiences this week, how would you describe your personal resilience? Has your ability to cope or adapt changed? If so, how?
- What factors (personal or institutional) have most influenced your resilience this week?

4. Interaction with Institutional Support:

- Describe any institutional support services you engaged with this week. How helpful or effective were these services?
- Did you encounter any barriers or difficulties in accessing or using these supports? If so, describe them.

5. Insights and Reflections:

- Share any additional insights, reflections, or thoughts you have about your overall experiences this week, particularly those related to your transition, resilience, or institutional support.

Confidentiality: Your journal entries will be kept confidential and stored securely. Personal identifiers will be removed, and entries will be coded to ensure privacy and anonymity in research publications and presentations.

Appendix D

Resiliency Lab: Proposed Applied Course Design

RESILIENCY LAB

THE SCIENCE AND PRACTICE OF
COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE

UWYO 4600 / Special Topics in Resilience Studies
Fall 2026

Professor TK
University of Wyoming
College of Education

"No one can be resilient on their own."
— Participant, Collective Resiliency Study

Course Description and Philosophy

Resiliency Lab is a transformative, research-grounded course built on a simple but powerful premise: **resilience is not something you build alone—it is something you build together**. Inspired by Angela Duckworth’s Grit Lab at the University of Pennsylvania, this course translates cutting-edge resilience science into lived practice.

The aims of Resiliency Lab are three-fold:

1. To equip you with generalizable knowledge about the science of resilience—individual, collective, and systemic.
2. To help you apply these insights to your own life through experiential challenges, team-based adversity engagement, and reflective practice.
3. To inspire you to become a resilience catalyst—someone who builds resilient systems for others.

Founding Philosophy — EQ Before IQ: This course is grounded in the belief that emotional intelligence precedes academic performance. Before you can conquer a challenging class, a career pivot, or a life transition, you must understand how you process adversity, how you draw strength from others, and how struggle itself becomes meaningful. We develop the whole person first. The grades follow.

This course is designed for **all students** navigating difficult transitions: first-generation students, student veterans, career changers, returning adults, athletes, anyone facing a chapter where the old playbook no longer works. Yes, this class aims to change you. If you don’t like that idea, keep in mind that this is an elective.

Theoretical Foundation

Resiliency Lab is anchored in original research—the Collective Resiliency Model—which integrates four major theoretical traditions:

Theoretical Layer	What It Teaches Us
Richardson’s Resiliency Model (2002)	Resilience is a process: disruption → reintegration. We can emerge from adversity stronger, unchanged, diminished, or dysfunctional.

Norris et al.'s Community Resilience (2008)	Groups develop networked adaptive capacities: social capital, knowledge networks, collective efficacy, and economic/educational resources.
Ungar's Multisystemic Resilience (2018)	Resilience operates across multiple interacting systems—biological, psychological, social, institutional, and ecological.
Vacchi's Student Veteran Support Model (2013)	Institutional support infrastructure matters—not just for those who use it, but for those who know it exists (the Safety Net Function).

The key insight: Resilience is not a personality trait you either have or lack. It is a collective process you participate in. Military veterans, athletes, first responders, performing artists, and members of collectivist cultural traditions all demonstrate this: the group navigates adversity together, and individuals become resilient through that collective engagement.

Course Structure

Format: In-person, interactive sessions. Tuesdays 3:30 PM – 6:30 PM.

Team Structure: You will be assigned to a Fire Team of four students. You will stay with your Fire Team throughout the semester. Like a military unit, your team succeeds or fails together. Each week, one member rotates as Team Leader—responsible for facilitating discussion and ensuring every voice is heard.

Cohort Structure: Three Fire Teams form a Squad (12 students). Each Squad has a Graduate TA who serves as Squad Mentor. Squads present together, debrief together, and compete in the Resilience Challenge.

Weekly Rhythm

When	What You Do
Sunday by 11:59 PM	Complete pre-class experiential activity and submit written reflection
Tuesday before class	Complete assigned readings (journal articles, book chapters, multimedia)
Tuesday 3:30 PM	Graded quiz on readings (15 min)
Tuesday 3:45 PM	Fire Team debrief: discuss pre-class experience (30 min)
Tuesday 4:15 PM	Lecture and interactive demonstration (60 min)
Tuesday 5:15 PM	Break (10 min)

Tuesday 5:25 PM	Squad Activity or Resilience Challenge session (55 min)
Tuesday 6:20 PM	After Action Review (AAR): What worked? What didn't? What's next? (10 min)

Grading

Component	Weight	Format
Weekly Reading Quizzes (lowest 2 dropped)	10%	In-class
Weekly Written Reflections	15%	Canvas
Pre-Class Experiential Activities	10%	Canvas
Fire Team Participation & After Action Reviews	10%	In-class
Resilience Challenge (ongoing team project)	15%	Mixed
Adversity Navigation Journal (4-week experiential)	10%	Canvas
Midterm Reflection Essay (750–1000 words)	10%	Canvas
Final Resilience Portfolio & Squad Presentation	15%	In-person
Resilience Catalyst Project (pay-it-forward capstone)	5%	Presentation

Grading Scale: A = 93–100 | A- = 90–92 | B+ = 87–89 | B = 83–86 | B- = 80–82 | C+ = 77–79 | C = 73–76 | C- = 70–72 | D = 60–69 | F = below 60

Signature Assignments

The Resilience Challenge (Ongoing — Weeks 1–14)

Benchmarked from Duckworth's Discovery Project, the Resilience Challenge is your semester-long experiential laboratory.

Throughout the semester, your Fire Team will complete a minimum of six challenges from the Resilience Challenge Checklist. These challenges are designed to push you outside comfort zones—individually and collectively. Unlike Duckworth's interest-discovery focus, the Resilience Challenge focuses on adversity engagement: deliberately pursuing difficult experiences and reflecting on how you navigated them together.

Example challenges include: learning a new physical skill as a team (all start as beginners); conducting a “curiosity conversation” with someone whose life path was radically disrupted;

volunteering as a team in an unfamiliar environment; completing a group endurance challenge (ruck march, charity run, community build); teaching a concept from this course to an outside audience; interviewing a community resilience leader.

Key distinction: At least three challenges must be completed as a full Fire Team. The collective engagement is the point.

The Adversity Navigation Journal (Weeks 6–9)

Benchmarked from Duckworth’s Build-A-Habit Guide, the Adversity Navigation Journal is a structured 4-week experiential program.

Rather than building a single habit, you will identify a current adversity, stressor, or challenging transition in your life and systematically apply course concepts to navigate it. Each week you will: log daily observations about how you encounter, interpret, and respond to the challenge; apply a specific resilience strategy from that week’s lecture; document how your Fire Team supported your process; and complete a weekly synthesis reflecting on what shifted.

The journal tracks your real-time resilience process—not your successes, but your navigation. Grading rewards honesty, depth of reflection, and integration of course concepts, not whether your adversity was “solved.”

Resilience Portfolio & Squad Presentation (Week 14)

Your final deliverable is a Resilience Portfolio that weaves together your Resilience Challenge experiences, Adversity Navigation Journal insights, and course concepts into a cohesive narrative about your resilience development. You will present a 5-minute synthesis to your Squad, followed by team Q&A. Portfolios may be written (1500–2000 words), visual (poster, video, creative artifact), or multimedia.

Resilience Catalyst Project (Week 13)

Benchmarked from Duckworth’s “Pay It Forward” arc.

As a Fire Team, design and execute a project that builds resilience capacity for others. This could be a workshop for incoming students, a peer support resource, a community event, or a creative intervention. The goal is to move from resilience consumer to resilience architect—from benefiting from collective resilience to intentionally building it for others.

Required Texts & Materials

Primary Texts (Mandatory):

1. Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (Scribner, 2016).
2. Ann S. Masten, *Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development* (Guilford Press, 2014).
3. Bryan & Lamar, *Foundations of Engaged Scholarship* (Custom/University Press).

You will have access of each text via “StartRight+, My Textbooks in Canvas.

Supplementary Text: Sheryl Sandberg & Adam Grant, Option B: *Facing Adversity, Building Resilience*, and *Finding Joy* (Knopf, 2017). Recommended, not required.

Course Reader: A curated collection of journal articles and book chapters available on Canvas, organized by weekly topic.

Adversity Navigation Journal: A custom workbook designed for this course (provided in class, Week 6).

Course Policies

Attendance

Attendance is essential and mandatory. Because so much of Resiliency Lab happens in a Fire Team structure, your absence affects your teammates—not just you. We take attendance every session via seating chart, quiz completion, and team check-in. In the event of an unavoidable absence, email the instructor and your Squad Mentor within 24 hours. Approved absences require a written reflection on the recorded lecture (200–500 words) submitted before the next class.

Technology Policy

Phones silent and out of sight except during polling activities. Laptops and tablets are not permitted—take handwritten notes. Research consistently shows that handwriting enhances retention and comprehension. Accessibility accommodations are available by contacting the instructor within the first two weeks.

AI Policy

You are not permitted to use AI platforms (ChatGPT, Claude, etc.) to generate your weekly written reflections. These reflections are themselves a psychological intervention—expressive writing in your own voice about your own experience. Using AI to write a personal reflection is like having someone else do your push-ups: the output looks the same, but you don’t get

stronger. Your reflections are not graded on writing style; they are graded on authenticity, depth, and integration of course concepts.

Academic Integrity

The University of Wyoming's academic integrity policies apply fully to this course. Using generative AI for personal reflections constitutes a violation and will be reported through university channels.

Accommodations

Students requiring accommodations should contact University Disability Support Services and notify the instructor within the first two weeks of class. We are committed to creating an accessible, inclusive learning environment.

Schedule of Topics

ARC I: KNOW YOURSELF — Foundations of Resilience

Who are you when things get hard? What is resilience, really? And why does it start with the collective?

Week 1: Welcome to Resiliency Lab

What Is Resilience? (And What It Isn't)

Pre-Class Activity: Before our first meeting, do something hard on purpose—alone. Run farther than you think you can. Start a conversation you've been avoiding. Attempt a recipe way above your skill level. Lean into discomfort deliberately.

Written Reflection: What hard thing did you do? What happened in your mind and body during the hard part? How did you feel afterward?

Readings:

- Richardson, G. E. (2002). The metatheory of resilience and resiliency. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 58(3), 307–321.
- Duckworth, A. L., *Grit: Preface and Chapter 1 (Showing Up)*.
- Masten, A. S., *Ordinary Magic: Chapter 1 (Resilience in Human Development)*.
- Duckworth, A. L., & Gross, J. J. (2014). Self-control and grit: Related but separable determinants of success. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 23(5), 319–325.

In-Class Session:

- Graded quiz on readings
- Fire Team formation and “Can I Ask You a Question?” icebreaker
- Lecture: Richardson’s Resiliency Model—disruption, reintegration, and why “bouncing back” is the wrong metaphor
- Squad Activity: Map your personal disruption timeline (life events that required resilience)
- Introduction to the Resilience Challenge Checklist

Week 2: Your Resilience Identity

How Do You Navigate Adversity?

Pre-Class Activity: Complete the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) and the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) linked on Canvas. Share your results with someone who knows you well and ask: “Does this match who you think I am?”

Written Reflection: Tell a story about a time you navigated something genuinely difficult. Looking back, which identity navigation mode (continuous, reconstructed, oscillating, transformed, inverted) best describes how you moved through it?

Readings:

- Duckworth, A. L., *Grit*: Chapter 2 (Distracted by Talent) and Chapter 4 (How Gritty Are You?).
- Masten, A. S., *Ordinary Magic*: Chapter 2 (Models of Resilience).
- Ungar, M. (2018). Systemic resilience: Principles and processes for a science of change in contexts of adversity. *Ecology and Society*, 23(4), Article 34.
- Video: Angela Duckworth TED Talk, “Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance”

In-Class Session:

- Graded quiz on readings
- Fire Team discussion: Share your resilience stories (guided protocol)
- Lecture: Six Identity Navigation Modes—continuous, reconstructed, oscillating, transformed, inverted, and damaged. How people move through disruption differently.
- Squad Activity: Identity Navigation Gallery Walk—anonously post your mode and story; teams identify patterns

Week 3: Values Under Pressure

What Do You Stand For When It Costs Something?

Pre-Class Activity: Write a “This I Believe Under Fire” essay (500 words or fewer). Not just what you believe—but what you believe when believing it is expensive. Read it aloud to someone you trust.

Written Reflection: When has a value you hold been tested by adversity? What happened? How does this connect to your understanding of resilience?

Readings:

- Schwartz, S. H. (2012). An overview of the Schwartz theory of basic values. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2(1).
- Crum, A. J., Salovey, P., & Achor, S. (2013). Rethinking stress: The role of mindsets in determining the stress response. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 104(4), 716–733.
- Frankl, V. E. (1966). Self-transcendence as a human phenomenon. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 6(2), 97–106.

In-Class Session:

- Graded quiz on readings
- Fire Team discussion: Values under pressure
- Lecture: Stress mindsets, values affirmation, and Frankl’s meaning-making—why purpose is the engine of resilience
- Squad Activity: Team Values Charter—as a Fire Team, articulate 3 shared values that will govern how you operate this semester

Week 4: The Collective Turn

Why No One Is Resilient Alone

By this point, most Fire Teams should have completed at least one Resilience Challenge.

Pre-Class Activity: Interview someone who has navigated a major life transition (career change, immigration, health crisis, military service, divorce, addiction recovery). Ask them: “Who helped you get through it? Could you have done it alone?”

Written Reflection: What did your interview reveal about the role of other people in resilience? How does this compare to your own experience?

Readings:

- Norris, F. H., et al. (2008). Community resilience as a metaphor, theory, set of capacities, and strategy for disaster readiness. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 41, 127–150.
- Masten, A. S., *Ordinary Magic: Chapter 4 (Resilience in Families and Close Relationships)*.
- Bryan & Lamar, *Foundations of Engaged Scholarship: Chapters 1–2*.
- Bartone, P. T. (2006). Resilience under military operational stress: Can leaders influence hardiness? *Military Psychology*, 18(S1), S131–S148.

In-Class Session:

- Graded quiz on readings
- Fire Team discussion: Interview debrief—what patterns emerged?
- Lecture: The Collective Resiliency Model—from individual resilience to networked adaptive capacities. Introduction to Norris et al.’s four community capacities adapted for transition contexts.
- Squad Activity: Map your collective resilience network—who are the people, institutions, and communities that constitute your resilience architecture?

ARC II: BUILD TOGETHER — The Practice of Collective Resilience

How do groups navigate adversity? What does “embrace the suck together” look like in practice? And how do you build systems that make resilience possible?

Week 5: Embrace the Suck Together

Collective Adversity Engagement

Pre-Class Activity: As a Fire Team, do something physically or psychologically challenging together. Examples: a team fitness challenge, a public speaking exercise, volunteering for an unfamiliar task, cooking a complex meal together with a tight deadline. The activity must involve real discomfort and require mutual support.

Written Reflection: What happened when it got hard? How did your team respond? What role did you play? What would have been different alone?

Readings:

- Duckworth, A. L., *Grit*: Chapter 3 (Effort Counts Twice) and Chapter 7 (Practice).
- Masten, A. S., *Ordinary Magic*: Chapter 5 (Resilience in the Community).
- Eskreis-Winkler, L., & Fishbach, A. (2019). Not learning from failure—the greatest failure of all. *Psychological Science*, 30(12), 1733–1744.
- Ericsson, K. A., Prietula, M. J., & Cokely, E. T. (2007). The making of an expert. *Harvard Business Review*.

In-Class Session:

- Graded quiz on readings
- Fire Team debrief: The team challenge—After Action Review format
- Lecture: Deliberate practice meets collective effort. How expert performance and team resilience share a common architecture of purposeful struggle.
- Squad Activity: Design a “deliberate difficulty” protocol for your Fire Team—a structured way to practice engaging adversity together over the coming weeks

Week 6: The Safety Net

Why Knowing Help Exists Changes Everything

Adversity Navigation Journal begins this week. Complete daily entries through Week 9.

Pre-Class Activity: Audit your personal safety net. Map every resource available to you (institutional, relational, financial, spiritual, digital)—whether or not you’ve ever used it. Then identify three resources you didn’t know existed until you looked.

Written Reflection: What did the audit reveal? How does knowing these resources exist—even if you never use them—change how you approach risk and difficulty?

Readings:

- Vacchi, D. T. (2013). Considering student veterans on the twenty-first-century college campus. *About Campus*, 17(2), 15–21.
- Oettingen, G. (2014). Stop being so positive. *Harvard Business Review*, 92(10), 92–99.
- Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (2002). Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation. *American Psychologist*, 57(9), 705–717.

In-Class Session:

- Graded quiz on readings
- Fire Team discussion: Safety net audits—compare networks and identify gaps
- Lecture: The Safety Net Function—how perceived support availability operates as a protective factor independent of actual use. WOOP goal-setting (Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan) as a resilience planning tool.
- Squad Activity: Complete a WOOP for an upcoming academic challenge. Distribute Adversity Navigation Journals.

Week 7: Rethinking Failure

From Threat to Growth Signal

Pre-Class Activity: Create a “Failure Resume”: a document listing your most significant failures, what each cost you, and what each taught you. Then share at least one entry with your Fire Team before class.

Written Reflection: How did it feel to document your failures? How did sharing them change the experience? What is the relationship between failure and resilience?

Readings:

- Duckworth, A. L., *Grit*: Chapter 9 (Hope).
- Bryan & Lamar, *Foundations of Engaged Scholarship*: Chapters 3–4.
- Crum, A. J., Handley-Miner, I. J., & Smith, E. N. (2020). The Stress Mindset intervention. In *Handbook of Wise Interventions*.
- Wiggins, G. (2012). Seven keys to effective feedback. *Educational Leadership*, 70(1), 10–16.

In-Class Session:

- Graded quiz on readings
- Fire Team discussion: Failure resume sharing and feedback practice
- Lecture: Stress mindsets, growth mindset, and the neuroscience of failure—why your brain learns more from mistakes than successes (and why we avoid them anyway). Giving and receiving feedback as resilience practice.
- Squad Activity: Structured feedback rounds—practice giving honest, growth-oriented feedback to teammates

Week 8: Navigating Barriers

Self-Reliance, Hypervigilance, and the Help-Seeking Paradox

By this point, most Fire Teams should have completed at least three Resilience Challenges.

Pre-Class Activity: MIDTERM ESSAY DUE (750–1000 words): What have you learned so far in Resiliency Lab? Which experience was most meaningful and why? How have course concepts changed how you navigate difficulty? Submit Resilience Challenge checklist progress.

Written Reflection: Integrated into midterm essay.

Readings:

- Smith, R. T., & True, G. (2014). Warring identities: Identity conflict and mental distress of American veterans. *Society and Mental Health*, 4(2), 147–161.
- Lancaster, S. L. (2019). Warrior identity and the impact of military culture on veteran transition. *Military Behavioral Health*, 7(3), 343–352.
- Eden, D., & Shani, A. B. (1982). Pygmalion goes to boot camp: Expectancy, leadership, and trainee performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 67(2), 194–199.

In-Class Session:

- Graded quiz on readings
- Fire Team discussion: What barriers to help-seeking do you personally experience? Where does “I should handle this myself” come from?
- Lecture: The John Wayne Mindset—how self-reliance becomes a barrier. Hypervigilance in academic spaces. The burden shutdown phenomenon. Designing environments that make help-seeking feel like strategy, not weakness.
- Squad Activity: Redesign a campus resource—how would you make it easier for someone like you to actually use it?

Week 9: Habits of Resilience

Scaffolding Sustainable Strength

Pre-Class Activity: Complete your final Adversity Navigation Journal entries and synthesis pages. Submit the full journal to Canvas.

Written Reflection: Address the journal’s five synthesis prompts: What helped most? What did you learn about navigating adversity? What surprised you? What was hardest? What insight do you want to keep, and what misconception do you want to leave behind?

Readings:

- Wood, W., & Neal, D. T. (2016). Healthy through habit: Interventions for initiating and maintaining health behavior change. *Behavioral Science & Policy*, 2(1), 71–83.
- Neal, D. T., Wood, W., & Quinn, J. M. (2006). Habits—A repeat performance. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 15(4), 198–202.

In-Class Session:

- Graded quiz on readings

- Fire Team discussion: Adversity Navigation Journal debrief—what patterns did you discover in how you respond to difficulty?
- Lecture: The process model of behavior change. How to scaffold resilience into daily routines. Why immediate comfort beats long-term growth—and what to do about it.
- Squad Activity: Design a “resilience routine”—a daily or weekly practice your team commits to for the remaining weeks

ARC III: LAUNCH FORWARD — From Resilience Consumer to Resilience Architect

How do you take what you've learned and build resilience for others? The steppingstone model: you don't stay in the support structure—you launch from it.

Week 10: Learning From and Leaning On

Mentoring, Role Models, and Cultures of Resilience

Pre-Class Activity: Write a Gratitude Letter (300–500 words) to someone who helped you through a difficult time and whom you've never properly thanked. Record yourself reading it aloud and send it to them—or read it to them in person.

Written Reflection: How did it land? How did this experience make you feel? What does gratitude have to do with resilience?

Readings:

- Masten, A. S., Ordinary Magic: Chapter 8 (Promoting Resilience).
- Duckworth, A. L., Grit: Chapter 10 (Parenting for Grit) and Chapter 12 (A Culture of Grit).
- Cho, C. S., Ramanan, R. A., & Feldman, M. D. (2011). Defining the ideal qualities of mentorship. *The American Journal of Medicine*, 124(5), 453–458.
- Lee, T. H., & Duckworth, A. L. (2018). Organizational grit. *Harvard Business Review*, 96(5), 98–105.

In-Class Session:

- Graded quiz on readings
- Fire Team discussion: Gratitude letter debrief
- Lecture: How do you grow resilience with and for other people? Pygmalion effects, mentoring styles, and cultures of resilience. The VSC as steppingstone—why the goal isn't to stay in the support structure but to launch from it.
- Squad Activity: Design your “Resilience Catalyst Project” concept (see Week 13)

Week 11: The Steppingstone

From Support Consumer to Community Builder

By this point, Fire Teams should have completed at least five Resilience Challenges. Submit Resilience Challenge Checklist to Canvas by Monday.

Pre-Class Activity: YOUR CHOICE as a Fire Team: (1) Complete the Good Deed Scavenger Hunt—how many acts of resilience-building can your team do in one week? OR (2) Collectively plan and execute an ambitious act of service that builds resilience capacity for someone else.

Written Reflection: What did your team do? How did it go? What did you learn about the relationship between serving others and your own resilience?

Readings:

- Koltko-Rivera, M. E. (2006). Rediscovering the later version of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: Self-transcendence. *Review of General Psychology*, 10(4), 302–317.
- Frankl, V. E. (1966). Self-transcendence as a human phenomenon. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 6(2), 97–106.
- Watch: Adam Grant TED Talk, “Are You a Giver or a Taker?”

In-Class Session:

- Graded quiz on readings
- Fire Team discussion: Service debrief
- Lecture: Self-actualization, self-transcendence, and the paradox of resilience—you become most resilient when you stop focusing on your own resilience and start building it for others.
- Squad Activity: Finalize Resilience Catalyst Project plan with timeline and deliverables

Week 12: Resilience Across Contexts

Athletes, Veterans, First Responders, and Collectivist Traditions

Pre-Class Activity: Research a community that demonstrates collective resilience (examples: a sports dynasty, a military unit, a disaster-recovery community, an immigrant community, a performing arts ensemble, an Indigenous tradition). Prepare a 2-minute briefing for your Fire Team.

Written Reflection: What made this community collectively resilient? How do the Collective Resiliency Model's four capacities (Educational Capital, Social Capital, Knowledge Networks, Collective Efficacy) show up in their story?

Readings:

- Phillips, G. A., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2017). Introducing veteran critical theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 30(7), 656–668.
- Reyes, A. T., et al. (2018). Student veterans' construction and enactment of resilience. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 25(1), 37–48.

In-Class Session:

- Graded quiz on readings
- Fire Team discussion: Community resilience briefings
- Lecture: How collective resilience operates across diverse populations. Challenging deficit framings—collective orientation is not cultural baggage, it is resilience architecture. Guest panel: community leaders who embody collective resilience.
- Squad Activity: Work session for Resilience Catalyst Project

Week 13: Resilience Catalyst Presentations

Pay It Forward

Pre-Class Activity: Complete and submit your Resilience Catalyst Project documentation to Canvas by Monday. Prepare your team presentation.

Written Reflection: Written reflection: What did your team create? What impact did it have (or do you hope it will have)? What did you learn about building resilience for others?

Readings:

- No new readings this week—focus on project completion and portfolio preparation.

In-Class Session:

- No quiz this week
- Fire Team Resilience Catalyst Project presentations to Squads (5 minutes per team + Q&A)
- Peer feedback rounds
- Brief lecture: The resilience ripple effect—how one person’s resilience architecture extends outward

Week 14: Resilience Portfolio Presentations

The After Action Review

Pre-Class Activity: Write at least two paragraphs for each of your Fire Team teammates: what you most appreciate about them, and what you learned from their resilience journey this semester. Submit via Canvas form.

Written Reflection: Submit your Resilience Portfolio and Discovery Project Essay (1500–2000 words): How has your understanding of resilience changed? What did you learn about yourself, your team, and the collective nature of resilience? How will you carry this forward?

Readings:

- Review: Richardson (2002), Norris et al. (2008), and the Collective Resiliency Model.

In-Class Session:

- 3:30 PM: Portfolio Presentations in Squad breakout rooms (5 min each + Q&A)
- 5:00 PM: Break and reconvene in main classroom
- 5:15 PM: Whole-class After Action Review and celebration
- 6:00 PM: Closing lecture: The warrior spirit—continuous, reconstructed, oscillating, transformed, inverted—every mode is valid. Every journey is honored.

How Resiliency Lab Differs from Grit Lab

This course was directly inspired by and benchmarked against Dr. Angela Duckworth's Grit Lab 5.0 at the University of Pennsylvania. The following table highlights key structural parallels and departures:

Dimension	Grit Lab 5.0 (Duckworth)	Resiliency Lab (This Course)
Core Construct	Grit (passion + perseverance)	Collective Resilience (navigating adversity together)
Unit of Analysis	Individual	Collective (Fire Team / Squad)
Theoretical Base	Duckworth's grit research	Collective Resiliency Model (Richardson + Norris + Ungar + Vacchi)
Team Structure	Teams of 4	Fire Teams of 4, nested in Squads of 12
Semester Project	Discovery Project (interest exploration)	Resilience Challenge (adversity engagement)
Experiential Tool	Build-A-Habit Guide (4 weeks)	Adversity Navigation Journal (4 weeks)
Primary Book	Grit (Duckworth)	Grit (Duckworth), Ordinary Magic (Masten), Foundations of Engaged Scholarship (Bryan & Lamar)
Capstone	Discovery Project Presentation	Resilience Portfolio + Catalyst Project
Target Population	All Penn undergraduates	Students navigating transitions (veterans, first-gen, adult learners, all welcome)
Philosophy	Passion drives perseverance	EQ before IQ; emotional intelligence precedes academic performance
Signature Phrase	Effort counts twice	Embrace the suck together

"The team wins, not individuals. So going through something hard, you don't do it as an individual, you do it as a group."

— Participant, Collective Resiliency Study

Resiliency Lab — University of Wyoming — College of Education
Developed by Professor TK — Informed by Original Doctoral Research on SSM/V Collective Resilience

Appendix E

CSU IRB Approval Letter



COLORADO STATE
UNIVERSITY

The protocol listed below has been approved by the CSU IRB Determinations Fort Collins on Thursday, June 5th 2025.

PI: Chermack, Thomas James
Submission Type and ID: Initial 6855
Title: Student Veteran Resilience in Higher Education
Approval Date: Thursday, June 5th 2025
Expiration Date: no date provided

The IRB has completed its review of protocol 6855 Student Veteran Resilience in Higher Education. In accordance with federal and state requirements, and policies established by the IRB, the committee has approved this protocol under Exempt review.

The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption under category 2(iii).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination. If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at CSU_IRB@colostate.edu

If no expiration date is listed above, continuing review is not required for this study.

What are your responsibilities now, as you move forward with your research?

Document Retention: The PI is responsible for keeping all regulated documents, including IRB correspondence such as this letter, approved study documents, and signed consent forms for at least three (3) years following protocol closure for audit purposes. Documents regulated by HIPAA, such as Release Authorizations, must be maintained for six (6) years.

Site Permission: If your research is conducted at locations outside of Colorado State University (such as schools, hospitals, or businesses), you must obtain written permission from all sites to recruit, consent, study, or observe participants. Generally, such permission comes in the form of a letter from the school superintendent, director, or manager. You must maintain a copy of this permission with study records.

Training: All researchers collecting or analyzing data from this study must renew training in human subjects research via the CITI Program (www.citiprogram.org) every 3 years. New personnel must

complete training and be added to the protocol before beginning research with human participants or their data.

Modifications: Change to any aspect of this protocol or research personnel must be approved by the IRB before implementation, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects or others. In such situations, the IRB should still be notified immediately.

Unanticipated Problems/Adverse Events: Unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others, serious adverse events, and noncompliance with the approved protocol must be reported to the IRB immediately through a reportable event in the IRB Protocols in accordance with the Reportable New Information CSU IRB procedures. When in doubt, consult with the HRPP/IRB.

Monitoring: The HRPP reminds researchers that this study is subject to monitoring at any time by Colorado State University's HRPP staff, Institutional Review Board, Post Approval Monitoring team, or authorized external entities. Timely cooperation with monitoring procedures is an expectation of IRB approval.

Change of Institutions: If the PI leaves Colorado State, the study must be closed or the PI must be replaced on the study or transferred to a new IRB. Studies without a Colorado State University PI will be closed.

Other Approvals: This Colorado State IRB approval covers only regulations related to human subjects research protections (e.g. 45 CFR 46). This determination does not constitute approval from any other Colorado State campus departments, research sites, or outside agencies. The Principal Investigator and all researchers are required to affirm that the research meets all applicable local/state/federal laws and university policies that may apply.

If you have questions about this determination or your responsibilities when conducting human subjects research on this project or any other, please do not hesitate to contact the IRB office at your respective campus:

CSU Fort Collins - CSU_IRB@colostate.edu
CSU Pueblo - CSUP_IRB@csupueblo.edu

Attachments

Letter of Cooperation Research_Letter of Support_STOUDT copy.pdf

MethodologySTOUDT_Chapter 3_IRB_04-30_2025.pdf

RecruitmentMaterialsEligibility_Screening_Questionnaire.pdfEligibility screening questionnaire

RecruitmentMaterialsCanvas_Announcement_Research_Invite_V2.docxLMS_CanvasAnnouncement

Interview/FocusGroup QuestionsSemi_Structured_Interview_Guide.pdfInterview Questions -Semi Structured

Data ManagementPlanMember_Checking_Email_Template.pdfMember CheckingEmail

RecruitmentMaterialsCSU_Veteran_Study_Recruitment_Slide.pptxRecruitment
PPTRecruitmentMaterialsFace_to_Face_Recruitment_Script_V2.docxRecruitment - Face-to-Face
Script

ConsentCSU_Exempt Consent_Identifiable Data_V3.docxRevised, CSU, Consentform

Appendix F

Future Research Thoughts

Grit, Veteran Identity, and Collective Resilience

A Conceptual Bridge for Future Research

Research on perseverance and persistence in education has been significantly shaped by the work of Angela Duckworth, whose construct of Grit emphasizes sustained passion and perseverance toward longterm goals. Grit research suggests that individuals who maintain effort and interest over time are more likely to achieve success in demanding environments. While this work has contributed valuable insight into individual persistence, grit is primarily conceptualized as a trait-level characteristic located within the individual.

Findings from the present study of Student Service Members and Veterans (SSM/Vs) suggest a complementary perspective. Participants frequently described perseverance not solely as an individual attribute, but as something activated, reinforced, and sustained through community and institutional relationships. Veterans in this study often referred to a cultural ethos learned during military service—captured in the phrase “*embracing the suck*”—which reflects a shared expectation that hardship is inevitable and must be endured. Importantly, participants emphasized that this endurance is rarely experienced in isolation; rather, it is most meaningful when undertaken collectively.

This orientation toward hardship aligns with resilience theory as articulated by Richardson, who describes resilience as a dynamic reintegration process that occurs as individuals adapt to disruption and adversity. In the context of higher education, resilience among student veterans also appears to be shaped by institutional environments that recognize and support their unique experiences. Robert Vacchi’s conceptual model of student veteran support similarly highlights the role of institutional structures—such as veteran services centers, peer communities, and culturally responsive faculty—in facilitating successful transitions to college.

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that perseverance among student veterans may be better understood not simply as individual grit, but as a form of collective resilience emerging from the interaction between individual dispositions, shared veteran identity, and supportive institutional environments. In this sense, behaviors commonly associated with grit—such as persistence, determination, and long-term goal pursuit—may be activated and sustained through social and relational contexts rather than originating solely within the individual.

This perspective invites further exploration of the intersection between grit and resilience in veteran student populations. Future research may examine whether institutional veteran support structures function as scaffolding mechanisms that cultivate and sustain perseverance, transforming individual grit into a shared and socially reinforced process of persistence. Such inquiry may also illuminate how collective identity and community belonging contribute to long-term academic success among veterans transitioning to higher education.

The phrase frequently invoked by participants “*embracing the suck together*” may offer a concise conceptual lens for understanding this phenomenon. Rather than framing perseverance as an individual trait alone, this orientation reflects a culturally embedded form of endurance rooted in shared identity, mutual support, and collective meaning-making. Understanding how this ethos operates within higher education contexts may provide new insight into how resilience develops and is sustained among student veterans.