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# Campus Climates Experienced by United States Military Veterans

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CAMPUS CLIMATES EXPERIENCED BY  
UNITED STATES MILITARY VETERANS

A dissertation submitted to  
the Graduate College of  
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In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
in  
Educational Leadership  
by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to learn how military veterans experienced higher education campus climates. A recent West Virginia law requires state-operated colleges to become veteran-friendly and this study examined the perceptions of veterans who attended college before and after the passage of the law. Six veterans participated in a series of in-depth interviews regarding their personal experiences with attention given to factors that enabled and/or constrained their academic progress. The interviews were electronically recorded using audio media and standard conventions of informed consent were followed. Interview transcripts were produced, coded, analyzed to identify common themes, and interpreted theoretically. All of the participants identified asymmetrical maturity, intervening priorities, and economic hardships as key constraining factors. Every participant identified military oriented financial resources as the key factor that enabled them to attend college. A comparison of experiences revealed that participants who attended college before the state law was passed experienced predominantly negative interactions with campus representatives and the participants who attended college after the legislation overwhelmingly reported positive interaction with campus representatives. The biographical narratives contained within the study allow the reader to understand what it was like to be a student veteran in these two contexts. The study suggests that recent legislation may be having a positive effect on the student-veteran population within one West Virginia county. Researchers, policy makers, and practitioners of higher education can benefit from the study because it contributes to knowledge about the experiences of veterans in higher education.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The U.S. military offers an array of financial benefits for higher education in an effort to recruit personnel. Most service members have difficulty using their benefits while they are in the service due to their mission requirements and many veterans experience unique challenges when pursuing college degrees after they have completed their service. The student-veteran population also has a significantly lower graduation rate when compared to traditional students who are not veterans (Herrmann, Hopkins, Wilson, & Allen, 2009; Toppo & DeBarros, 2005; Yamamoto, 2007). Military veterans constitute a unique subgroup within higher education and their challenges warrant examination. The U.S. has spent billions of dollars to support various educational benefit programs since WWII and modern era veterans are receiving more monetary assistance than ever before (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009). Efforts to provide assistance to veterans are gaining momentum and lawmakers within the state of West Virginia have passed legislation tailored to enhance college attendance and degree attainment for veterans. The state law requires state-operated higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly by implementing a series of mandates designed to help student veterans (West Virginia House Bill 4145, 2010). The legislative mandates seek to maximize factors that enable student veterans to become successful in their academic pursuits largely by establishing veteran-friendly campus climates. However, little is known about how veterans experienced their campuses before and after the passage of the new law. Given the scope of the national investments and state initiatives, efforts have been made and should continue to be made to determine what is working and what can be improved.

This study used qualitative methods to examine how veterans experienced campus climates within one West Virginia County. Purposeful selection was used to select six participants who were student-veterans and they were divided into two main groups. Half of the participants were selected on the basis of having attended a state-operated college before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 and the other half of the participants were selected on the basis of having attended a state-operated college after the passage of the bill. All of the participants attended live courses on a campus while using financial benefits distributed through the Veterans Administration. Other sampling criteria included selecting an equal number of males and females and selecting an equal number of participants who attended two-year and four-year institutions. This study focused exclusively on first generation college students. The selection criteria was designed to facilitate maximum variation sampling in an effort to capture and describe the "central themes that cut across a great deal of variation" (Patton, 2002, p. 235).

The respondents participated in a series of recorded interviews that was transcribed and analyzed to identify emergent themes. Data from the two main groups were compared to determine if there were any differences. Special attention was given to their perceptions of campus climates and recommendations for future action are discussed.

### **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework can be understood as the "concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs" a study (Maxwell, 2005, p. 33). The concept of a military veteran and how they experience campus climates through enabling and/or constraining factors were key elements of this study. The main assumption was that lived experiences of veterans can be understood and analyzed in a manner that will be of value to the higher

education community and lawmakers. I reasonably expected to locate participants and explore their experiences through a series of interviews that was expected to be time-consuming. I also expected for this process to require financial resources. My personal beliefs provided a background for understanding and identifying with the participants. Their experiences were explored within a theoretical orientation based on structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), and critical theory. The components of this framework supported and informed this study.

The central concepts for this study included notions of what it means to be a veteran who pursued higher education, the factors that enable and/or constrained that pursuit, and how campus climates were perceived within a single West Virginia County. Government assistance, in the form of the GI Bill and other initiatives, has historically provided veterans with the financial means to attend college and these types of programs can be described as enabling. Indeed, the State of West Virginia has passed legislation to enable veterans to attend college and obtain a degree. The idea of enabling veterans to go to college stems from the concept of a social reward system. American society places veterans in harm's way to wage wars, engage in armed conflicts, and defend the homeland. However, the individuals within the military only constitute a small minority within the greater society. Given the inherent risk associated with military service, our society has offered a reward for serving in the military (i.e. the GI Bill, pro-veteran legislation, and other educational incentives). However, the education that can stem from this reward is not always realized. Factors can constrain academic progress for veterans and this population has a disproportionately lower college graduation rate compared to the non-veteran population. Narrative data that explored the lived experiences of student-veterans were obtained through a series of in-depth interviews aimed at determining if there is a difference in how

veterans experienced campus climates before and after the passage of legislation that sought to maximize enabling factors for academic progress.

This study operated from the assumption that an exploration of the lived experiences of student-veterans could provide meaningful insight into their perceptions of campus climates. Patton (2002) describes it best by noting that “qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit” (p. 341). This study also assumed that the participants will have lived experiences that enabled and/or constrained their academic trajectory and a deep exploration of those lived experiences could facilitate an understanding of campus climates. I assumed that state legislators seek to maximize enabling factors for student veterans because West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) sets a series of mandates that comport with the enabling factors noted within the relevant literature. These enabling factors, required by law, have been mandated in an effort to make campuses veteran-friendly. An understanding of how student veterans experienced these efforts can help practitioners of higher education and lawmakers to make informed decisions about how to promote college attendance and degree attainment among veterans.

I had some general expectations for this qualitative study. First, I did not expect to have difficulties locating student-veterans for participation in this research project. The geographic area where the study was conducted was home to several higher education institutions, multiple government operated institutions for veterans, and a number of active duty and reserve forces duty stations. Moreover, the state of West Virginia was home to approximately 170,000 veterans (Messina, 2012). Given these factors, it was reasonable to expect to locate participants for the study. Second, the research process was expected to be extremely time-consuming. Field notes

were written, multiple interviews were conducted, recordings were transcribed, the data were analyzed, and the results are conveyed in writing. Therefore, it was reasonable to expect the combination of the noted tasks to take a considerable amount of time. Third, the study was expected to create a number of monetary costs. Participants were paid for their interviews; the researcher was required to travel to interview locations; recording materials were procured, recording software was purchased, and several individuals were employed to transcribe interviews.

Several of my beliefs provided a context for this study. I was a combat veteran with extensive personal experience with balancing military duties with academic goals. My experiences have shaped the way I made sense of the phenomena I studied. For example, I believe higher education is an inherently good thing for individuals and society. I also believe veterans deserve educational benefits such as the GI Bill. However, I have also experienced incredible barriers to completing my educational objectives and many of those barriers were a direct result of my military service. I have come to believe that the structures of educational benefits for student-veterans can be paradoxically enabling and constraining within the same point in time. For example, I joined the Army National Guard, in part, because the National Guard offered 100% paid tuition for college. This was a significant factor that enabled me to pursue my educational aspirations. However, my military service also constrained my academic progress because I was frequently called to duty within the U.S. and I was also deployed to Iraq. My case was not unlike other cases noted within the relevant literature (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; O'Herrin, 2011) and within the state of West Virginia (West Virginia House Bill 4145, 2010). Veterans are often required to operate in dynamic situations that can both enable and constrain their academic progress. My experiences and beliefs provided a foundation for



understanding the beliefs of other student-veterans. Their stories, experiences, and beliefs were used to inform this study.

Structuration theory and critical theory provided an orientation for this study. I looked at macro-level and micro-level phenomena to understand how the relationships between phenomena are intertwined. For example, I will look at macro-level factors such as government policy for implementing West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) and I also looked at micro-level factors such as individual socioeconomic status and the family life of the participants. It was important to consider macro-level and micro-level social phenomena because such consideration provided a holistic approach to answering the research questions. Giddens' (1984) structuration theory was used to specifically address notions of social agency and structure within the lived experience of the participants. The identification of instances of agency and structure lead to an understanding of enabling and constraining factors for veterans as they make choices in their pursuit of higher education. A discussion of these factors served as a platform for studying their perceptions of campus climates. Critical theory was used to critique the circumstances uncovered during the research process by identifying who benefited and who was marginalized by various social phenomena. The combination of the two noted theories provided an orientation for the research project.

The combination of “concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories” constituted the conceptual framework (Maxwell, 2005, p. 33). Each component had an important role in supporting and informing this study. Veterans' perceptions of campus climate factors, both structural and personal, that enable or constrain veterans in their pursuit of higher education were key concepts for this study. I assumed the experiences of veterans had meaning and that

understanding those experiences could benefit the field of higher education administration. I expected to be able to locate participants, spend time interviewing them, and expend financial resources during the process. My prior experiences and beliefs aided my attempt to understand and identify with other student-veterans. Their lived experiences were explored through the lenses of Giddens' (1984) structuration theory and critical theory.

## **Relevant Literature**

A number of publications describe key issues related to the student-veteran population. I extrapolated information from the literature to create a list of factors that enabled or constrained veterans as they pursued higher education. These factors provided a foundation for understanding campus climates by serving as talking points during the interviews. The key issues addressed within the veteran-focused literature include the GI Bill, recruitment of veterans, mental health trends, the recognition of women veterans, campus services for student veterans, student organizations for veterans, and campus climates. The literature relevant to these issues provided an overview of the factors that are most relevant to this study.

The history and challenges associated with the GI Bill are described in a number of publications (Mettler, 2005; Humes, 2006; Jasper, 2009; Kleykamp, 2006; Sander, 2012a; O'Herrin, 2011; Smith-Osborne, 2009; Simon, Negrusa, & Warner, 2010). The literature frequently and consistently cites the GI Bill as a benefit that provides an opportunity for millions of veterans to attend college. Indeed, the amount of financial aid associated with modern versions of the GI Bill has reached a historic high. The GI Bill was developed, in part, to recruit personnel into military service. However, given the unprecedented amount of financial aid distributed through modern versions of the GI Bill, the military has difficulty retaining personnel

because service members want to leave the military so they can use their educational benefits (Simon, Negrusa, & Warner, 2010).

Higher education institutions stand to benefit from the large amount of financial aid associated with the GI Bill and many institutions participate in aggressive and controversial recruiting campaigns (Gayheart, 2009; Weinstein, 2011; Nelson, 2012). For example, some proprietary institutions target veterans by creating web-pages that come up during an internet search for the GI Bill. Many of these types of institutions lack the accreditation required for the students to secure employment with the degrees offered. There are generally two types of institutions recruiting veterans: degree mills and legitimately accredited institutions. The key finding for these studies is many veterans don't understand how accreditation standards can affect their future employment prospects. For example, a veteran can obtain a degree that is not accredited and many employers will not honor such a degree for employment qualification. The lack of awareness of this issue contributes to poor decisions regarding college enrollment.

The psychological stresses of the armed conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are taking a noticeable toll on the modern student-veteran population. A number of studies have addressed mental health trends as they relate to student-veterans (Smith-Osborne, 2012; Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones, and Sulak, 2011; Grasgreen, 2011; Rudd, Goulding, and Bryan, 2011; French and Parkinson, 2008; Hamilton, 2011). The existing literature focuses on three primary areas of concern; post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicide, and brain injuries. Some higher education institutions are addressing PTSD by offering advocacy and referral services for student-veterans (Smith-Osborne, 2012). A study by Bagby, Jones, and Sulak (2011) found there is a need to train faculty members on how to respond to veterans who display symptoms

consistent with PTSD. Rudd, Goulding, and Bryan (2011) found that almost half of the student-veteran population has contemplated suicide and these students may seek help through student services that may not be equipped to handle this type of situation. Another trend, described by French and Parkinson (2008), is that traumatic brain injuries are becoming a serious problem for veterans and these types of injuries are especially difficult to diagnose because they may be caused by the shock waves from explosions as opposed to direct contact with the shrapnel created by explosions. Little is known about how students suffering from traumatic brain injuries function within an academic environment.

Several publications have recognized the specific needs of women veterans within the context of higher education (Toure, 2012; Business and Professional Women's Foundation, 2008; Baechtold & Sawal, 2009; Hamrick & Rumann, 2011). A number of female student-veterans have worked together to create veterans support activities designated for women only (Toure, 2012). These activities allow women to express themselves in an environment free of scrutiny from their male counterparts. The intentional gender segregation is largely geared toward providing a space where women can feel free to discuss topics such as sexual assault, reintegration into civilian life, gender roles, combat experiences, and PTSD without fear of a gender-biased judgment from male student-veterans.

Given the large number of student-veterans within our nation's higher education system, some student services have been tailored to meet the needs of veterans (Cate, 2011; Hall, 2009; Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Altschuler & Blumin, 2009; McGrevey & Kehrer, 2009; Persky & Oliver, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Livingston, 2009; Cook & Kim, 2009). Several researchers found that veterans can become

aggravated by the immaturity of their classroom peers and some institutions have responded to this problem by offering veteran-only courses. Many institutions are forming veteran support groups and efforts are also underway to streamline programs specifically for veterans and create veteran-friendly campuses. Clearly, veterans are a growing constituency of the higher education community and we can expect the number and types of student services for veterans to increase in the years to come.

Many student-veterans are creating their own campus organizations in an effort to regain a sense of camaraderie commensurate with their military service (Whikehart, 2010; Lokken, et. al. 2009; Toure, 2012). Members of the military often develop close-knit relationships during their service. These types of relationships often deteriorate once someone leaves the military because that person is no longer in regular contact with his or her peers. Consequently, this can have a negative effect on how a person reintegrates into civilian life. A common solution to this problem, within the context of higher education, is for student-veterans to form their own support groups and clubs. This can provide student-veterans with opportunities to interact with and find comfort with students who have shared the same types of experiences and students who exhibit similar levels of maturity.

Every college campus provides a unique environment for students and it can range from a veteran-friendly climate to an outright hostile place for veterans. Summerlot, Green, and Parker (2009) described the spectrum of campus climates as ranging from supportive, ambivalent, and challenging. Stever (1996) found that the effects of hostile campuses can be mitigated through peer-support initiatives. These types of initiatives are encouraged in recent state legislation. West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) requires state institutions of higher education to become

veteran-friendly by providing appropriate services, facilities, and support to assist veterans. The specific requirements outlined within this legislation closely match the enabling factors that are commonly discussed within the literature.

An examination of the veteran-focused literature has allowed me to gain an understanding of the prevalent issues concerning veterans who pursue higher education. A number of factors can be extrapolated from the literature and they generally fall within the categories of either enabling or constraining college attendance and degree completion. For example, the GI Bill has clearly enabled student-veterans to attend college by providing financial resources. Conversely, mental health challenges can constrain veterans from achieving their academic goals. Many of the enabling and constraining factors are widely known to researchers who study the student-veteran population and these factors are discussed in Chapter Two.

There is a noticeable absence of consideration given to socioeconomic status and family life within the existing veteran-focused literature pertaining to higher education. A pilot study by Lang and Powers (2011) found that student-veterans are more likely to be married and have a dependent when compared to their non-veteran peers. Although these factors are not the focus of this study, an ancillary exploration of these areas may yield additional information concerning enabling and constraining factors that can contribute to a holistic analysis of the phenomena studied. The college attendance and degree completion for this population is a concern for lawmakers within the state of West Virginia as evidenced by their passage of legislation requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly by implementing a series of requirements designed to help veterans (West Virginia House Bill 4145, 2010). Little is known about the perceptions of veterans themselves as they relate to the extent to which a campus is or

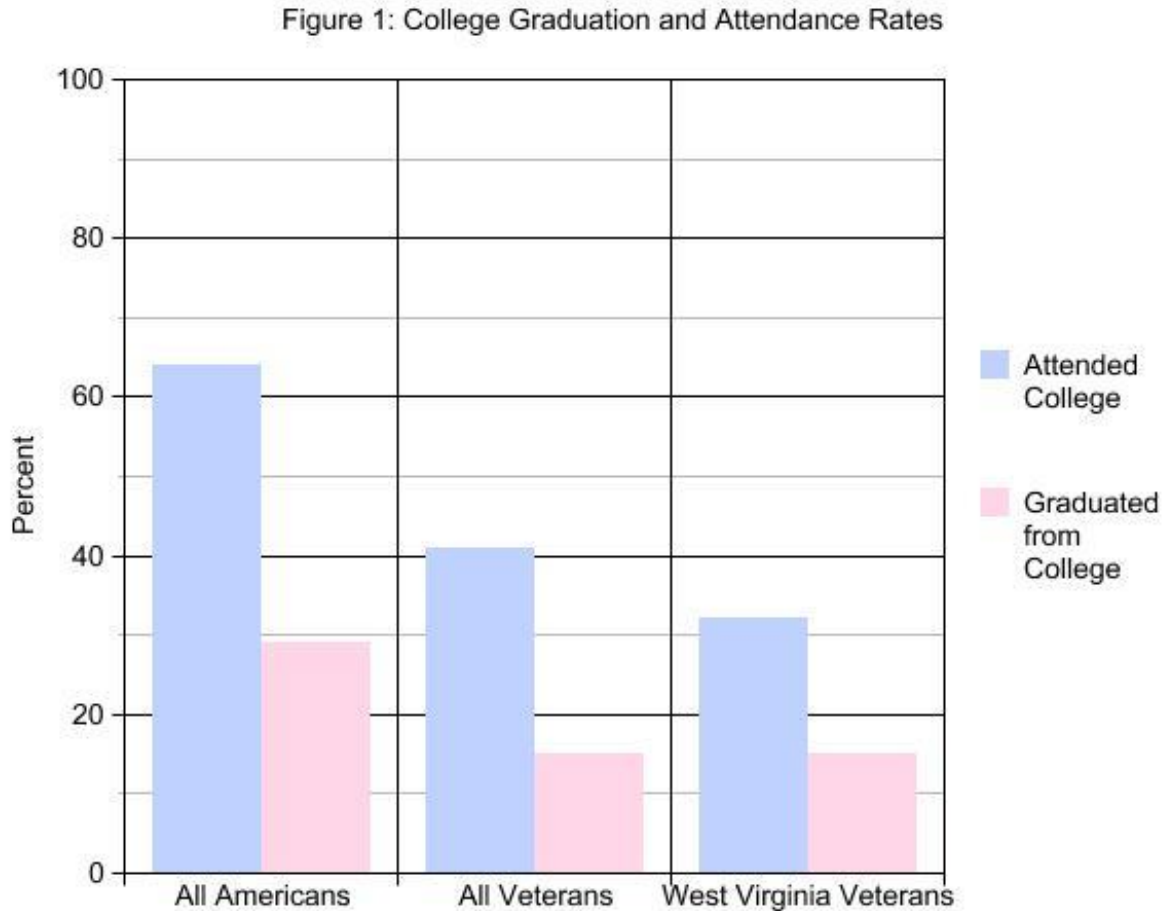
is not veteran-friendly since the passage of this new state law. Given all of the financial support offered through the GI Bill, all of the support programs available to student-veterans, and the state law requiring campuses to become veteran-friendly, one could assume student-veterans would have rates of college attendance and degree attainment comparable to or higher than the general population. However, this assumption does not comport with reality.

### **Problem Statement**

Student-veterans had lower rates of college attendance and degree attainment when compared to the general population (Herrmann, Hopkins, Wilson, & Allen, 2009; Toppo & DeBarros, 2005; Yamamoto, 2007). However, student-veterans had access to a plethora of financial resources distributed by the Veterans Administration and the number of students using these resources has steadily increased for more than a decade. Given this context, state legislators have made an effort to provide additional assistance to student-veterans by establishing a series of mandates designed to make campuses veteran-friendly (West Virginia House Bill 4145, 2010). However, little was known about the effects of this legislation and the extent to which veterans perceive their campuses as veteran-friendly.

Sixty-four percent of American high school graduates go on to attend college (Toppo & DeBarros, 2005) and 29% obtain a bachelor's degree (Yamamoto, 2007). Approximately 41% of veterans attend college while only 15% graduate with a degree (Herrmann, Hopkins, Wilson, & Allen, 2009). Similar statistics have been reported within the state of West Virginia. Atlas Research LLC (2013) conducted a study of veterans within West Virginia and found that 32% of veterans have attended an institution of higher education, but only 15% have obtained a

bachelor's degree, and 16% have obtained a graduate degree. The statistics are summarized in Figure 1.

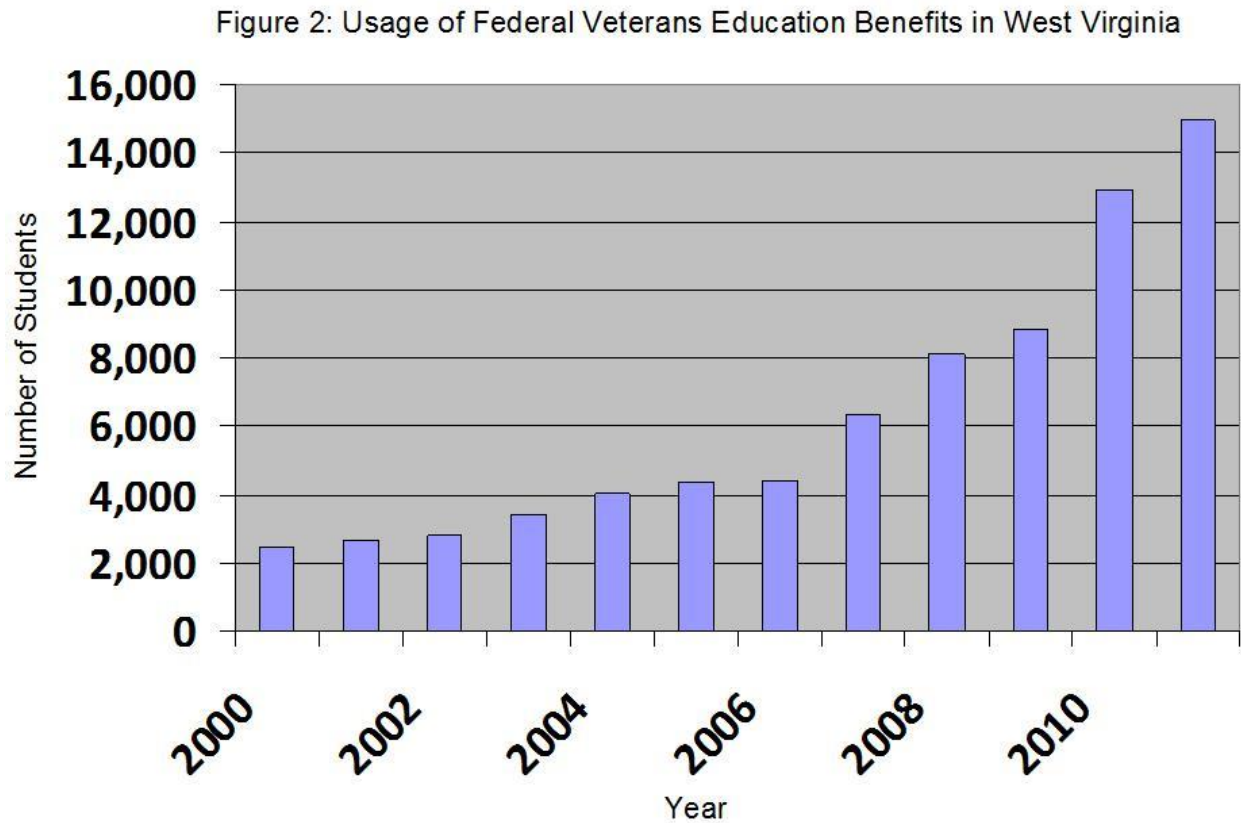


The statistics suggest that veterans have fallen far behind the general population in terms of college attendance and degree attainment. This trend is surprising considering the billions of dollars that have been spent to grant financial aid to veterans (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009).

The funding for financial aid programs like the GI Bill originates from taxation and Americans have a vested interest in ensuring that their tax dollars are spent effectively. The fact that veterans are afforded sizeable financial incentives to attend college and significantly fewer veterans graduate when compared to the general population suggests there is a big problem. The



number of student-veterans using federal education benefits within the state of West Virginia has steadily increased. Data from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (2013) was used to create Figure 2 which shows the extent of this increase.



Given the steep increase in the number of veterans using federal education benefits within West Virginia, the higher education community and state legislators should become prepared to deal with the unique challenges associated with student-veterans.

The West Virginia Legislature is concerned about veterans' academic progress to the extent that legislation was passed which requires campuses to become veteran-friendly (West Virginia House Bill 4145, 2010). However, little was known about how veterans perceived the extent to which campuses were veteran-friendly or not within the state. This is an issue that was

illuminated by examining the lived experiences of student veterans. Their perceptions, ideas, and experiences concerning the extent to which a campus was or was not veteran-friendly (i.e. the campus climate) provided data that will be useful for legislators, policy makers, and practitioners of higher education. The study by Atlas Research LLC (2013) called for additional research regarding the effects of this legislation within the state. This study sought to fill the gap in knowledge regarding how veterans experience campus climates within a portion of West Virginia before and after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). This type of understanding was especially important given the lower graduation rates among student-veterans, increased number of veterans using federal financial benefits within the state, and the state legislative initiative aimed at establishing veteran-friendly campuses. The findings explored enabling and constraining factors related to campus experiences and yielded information that established a basis for making recommendations for actions that can be taken to increase college attendance and degree attainment for veterans.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of knowledge concerning how military veterans experience higher education. This study answered the general calls by Cate (2011), Rumann and Hamrick (2010), and Livingston (2009) for additional research concerning veterans within academic settings. However, this research also filled a gap in knowledge about veterans in the state of West Virginia and answer a specific call for additional research concerning the status of “military-friendly colleges and universities in the state” (Atlas Research LLC, 2013, p. 22). The research explored how student-veterans experienced higher education

settings (i.e. campus climates) in an effort to determine the extent to which campuses were perceived as veteran-friendly or not veteran-friendly.

### **Significance of the Study**

Most institutions do not track the academic progress, retention, and graduation rates of the veterans on their campuses and this lack of tracking has resulted in a number of universities remaining unaware of the types of situations that prevent veterans from succeeding within academia (Fain, 2012). This study represents a significant scholarly contribution because it addressed what Cate (2011) identified as “a need for empirical research about student veterans so that colleges, universities, and policy makers make more informed decisions about their possible needs” (p. 137). This study also answered the call by Rumann and Hamrick (2010) for additional research on the perceptions of veterans concerning their college experience and this study will specifically fulfill the call by Livingston (2009) for additional qualitative research addressing veterans in higher education settings. This study was also significant in that it made a contribution to the effort to determine if tax funding is being spent effectively; especially by identifying factors that support or thwart GI Bill usage and degree attainment. The numbers of veterans using federally brokered financial benefits has been steadily rising for more than a decade and researchers believe this rise will have a substantial effect on higher education (Radsford, 2009).

This study also made a contribution to broadening the geographical distribution of dissertation studies that examine veterans within the United States. The dissertation by Cate (2011) focused on student-veteran populations primarily on the west coast; the dissertation by Persky (2010) focused on student-veterans in the Midwest; and the dissertation by Livingston

(2009) focused on student-veteran populations primarily within the Southeastern United States. This study widened the geographical field of data by conducting research within the Appalachian region. This region was especially significant because rural areas have higher numbers of socio-economically disadvantaged residents and higher rates of individuals who serve in the military when compared to their urban counterparts (Heady, 2011).

This study informs higher education administrators of the challenges veterans face during their college experience and the results of this study can inform future policy decisions. The identification of how enabling and constraining factors are experienced can also give counselors valuable information that can inform decisions necessary to enhancing the retention and graduation rates of student-veterans. The results of this research should be of interest to policy makers concerned with establishing veteran-friendly campuses. The state of West Virginia has passed legislation aimed at establishing veteran-friendly campuses (West Virginia House Bill 4145, 2010) and the State Legislature recently commissioned a study of veterans to, in part, assess the effects of the legislation. However, the study by Atlas Research, LLC (2013) was not able to draw any conclusions regarding the state mandate for higher education institutions to become “veteran-friendly.” Ideally, the effect of the legislation should have been measured via a well-constructed survey instrument that would have been implemented for several years prior to and several years after the implementation of the legislation. However, those types of data were not collected prior to the legislative initiative. Accordingly, this study employed a qualitative approach to begin understanding how veterans in West Virginia experienced campus climates (i.e. the extent to which they believe campuses were or were not veteran-friendly) and how they deal with enabling and/or constraining factors. The qualitative approach was successful in yielding in-depth and detailed information of interest to state legislators and this study can make

substantive recommendations aimed at increasing college attendance and degree completion rates for veterans within West Virginia.

## **Research Questions**

The research within this field has established that there are several key factors that were known to enable or constrain academic progress for veterans. Lawmakers within West Virginia were aware of these factors and legislators passed a law in an effort to ensure that state-operated higher education institutions maximized enabling factors by establishing veteran-friendly campus climates (West Virginia House Bill 4145, 2010). However, little was known about how veterans experienced campus climates before and after the passage of this legislation. The following three research questions will be explored:

- How do a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate before the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly?
- How do a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate after the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly?
- How can a qualitative exploration of the direct experience and perceptions of a small group of West Virginia veterans inform our understandings of how the passage of a state law may or may not have affected campus climates for veterans?

## **Methods**

Because my research questions have a phenomenological orientation in so far as they seek to understand how veterans experience campus climates within West Virginia, qualitative research methods were used to gather and analyze data. Six participants were selected via purposeful sampling. They consisted of three student-veterans currently enrolled in an undergraduate institution and three former student-veterans who attended college before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). Each participant was interviewed three times. The interview strategy articulated by Seidman (1991) was followed. The first interview focused on biographical information, the second interview was devoted to examining the respondent's recent higher education experiences, and the third interview served as a reflective exercise (Seidman, 1991). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically. This study employed the inductive techniques developed by Strauss (1987) by identifying excerpts from the data, organizing the excerpts into categories, and developing a common set of themes within each category. An exploration of the themes provided answers to the research questions through a comparison of data gathered from each group of participants.

## **Strengths and Limitations**

The strength of the study was that it provided a deep, holistic understanding of the lived experiences of student-veterans. The methods allowed for an in-depth examination of the participants, individually and collectively. Participant biographies are presented in a way that allows readers to gain personal and complex understandings of what it is like to be a student veteran. This information can inform state legislators of how veterans experienced campus climates and the study addressed broader issues concerning the reintegration and readjustment of

veterans during a time when large-scale land warfare operations were winding down in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The key limitation of this study was the findings cannot be statistically generalized beyond the actual participants. Maxwell (2005) noted that "qualitative researchers usually study a single setting or a small number of individuals or sites, using theoretical or purposeful rather than probability sampling, and they rarely make explicit claims about the generalizability of their accounts" (p. 115). However, the identification of enabling and constraining factors and other key aspects of lived experience can inform researchers of potential variables for future quantitative research projects.

## **Definitions**

Campus Climate- Perceptions of a campus environment that fall within a spectrum ranging from veteran-friendly to veteran-hostile.

Constraining Factor- Any action, element, or event that hinders a student's academic progress.

Cultural Informants- People who, by nature of their civilian employment and/or military service, are uniquely qualified to provide guidance for this research project by providing information about veterans' culture. An example of a cultural informant would be a Veterans Affairs Representative for a higher education institution who provides information about the culture of veterans within their campus.

Enabling Factor- Any action, element, or event that contributes to a student's academic progress.

GI Bill- Any version of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, as amended, in which veterans are given financial support to attend college.

Veteran- Any person who has served in the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, or Coast Guard of the United States of America and received pay for such service.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter One is an introduction to the study. It provides a general overview by describing the conceptual framework, relevant literature, research problem, purpose, significance, research questions, methods, strengths, limitations, operational definitions, and organization of the study. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature related to this study. It begins by describing the broad historical context and it narrows to describe research related to campus climates within higher education. Chapter Two also provides a literature synthesis that explains what is known and unknown about the student-veteran population and the chapter ends by proposing research questions that stem from the literature. Chapter Three articulates the qualitative research methods selected for the study and provides a rationale for selection and omission of certain methods. Chapters Four through Nine provides a detailed biographical description of the veterans who were interviewed for this project, a thematic analysis of the interviews, and a brief discussion. Chapter 10 provides an analysis to include a summary of the individual analyses, an analysis of common themes, a comparative analysis of the differences between the two main groups, and a comparative analysis of males and females. Chapter 11 presents an interpretation of the analysis. Appendix A contains an Institutional Review Board letter. Appendix B contains the informed consent form used for this study. Appendix C contains basic interview questions for the participants.



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The key issues articulated within the veteran-focused literature include the GI Bill, recruitment of veterans, mental health trends, the recognition of women veterans, the role of campus services, student organizations for veterans, and campus climates. The historical underpinnings of the GI Bill are described and modern challenges are examined through key publications (Mettler, 2005; Humes, 2006; Jasper, 2009; Kleykamp, 2006; Sander, 2012a; O'Herrin, 2011; Smith-Osborne, 2009; Simon, Negrusa, & Warner, 2010). Recent increases in federal funding for the GI Bill have made college a financially attractive prospect for students and colleges alike. Given this economic boom, many higher education institutions are engaged in aggressive and often controversial recruiting campaigns (Gayheart, 2009; Weinstein, 2011; Nelson, 2012). However, mental health trends represent a formidable challenge for student-veterans and the higher education community and these implications are discussed (Smith-Osborne, 2012; Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones, & Sulak, 2011; Grasgreen, 2011; Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011; French & Parkinson, 2008; Hamilton, 2011). Many women veterans also have their own organizations and gender-specific needs that warrant examination (Toure, 2012; Business and Professional Women's Foundation, 2008; Baechtold & Sawal, 2009; Hamrick & Rumann, 2011). The large number of veterans using their educational benefits has resulted in a surge of veteran enrollments on college campuses and this population of students has a unique set of needs that can be met through student services (Cate, 2011; Hall, 2009; Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Altschuler & Blumin, 2009; McGrevey & Kehrer, 2009; Persky & Oliver, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Livingston, 2009; Cook & Kim, 2009). Many veterans are looking beyond student services in an effort to

reestablish the sense of camaraderie they felt during their military careers and this has been accomplished through the establishment of student organizations for veterans (Whikehart, 2010; Lokken, et. al. 2009; Toure, 2012). Finally a number of publications discuss the campus climates as they are experienced by student veterans (Stever, 1996; Summerlot, Green, and Parker, 2009; Atlas Research LLC, 2013).

## **The GI Bill**

An understanding of the key issues affecting veterans in higher education requires an examination of the historical underpinnings of congressionally brokered financial aid benefits for veterans. The GI Bill is the largest and most frequently used educational benefit for veterans. It has assisted millions of veterans with their educational goals and it remains especially relevant within the modern academic world. This benefit is almost always discussed within publications that focus on veterans within academic settings. Therefore, a description of the GI Bill can provide a historical context for this study.

Mettler (2005) describes the historical origins of the GI Bill, a financial aid package created in the wake of WWII. The GI Bill originated as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. Congress passed the law in an age of patriotism to reward veterans for their wartime service and allow wounded veterans the opportunity for learning employment skills. It was also an attempt to allow veterans to reintegrate into civilian life through the pursuit of educational opportunities. The GI Bill was, at its core, a substantial form of financial aid that provided funding for veterans to attend college or obtain post-secondary vocational training. Other provisions of the bill allowed veterans to secure loans to start businesses and obtain financial

backing for low-rate mortgages. Millions of veterans benefited from this seminal piece of legislation and updated versions of the GI Bill remain in effect today.

Humes (2006) addressed how the GI Bill fundamentally transformed the nation. The legislation marking the passage of the GI Bill was followed by the Cold War and veterans responded to the struggle for technological dominance by pursuing degrees in science. The combination of GI Bill funding and government grants for scientific inquiry set the stage for a generation of veterans to contribute to national security through scientific achievements that ultimately landed humans on the moon. The effect of millions of veterans using the GI Bill also resulted in an expansion of the middle class. The increased number of college graduates had the domino effect of those graduates securing higher paying jobs and subsequently contributing to a golden age of economic prosperity in the United States.

Jasper (2009) notes that "since 1944, when the GI Bill began, more than 2.8 million veterans, service members and family members have received \$75.6 billion in GI Bill benefits for education" (p. 53). However, the GI Bill has changed over time and several versions have been approved through the United States Congress. For example, the Montgomery GI Bill was established in 1985 to provide a monthly stipend to student-veterans who had served as full-time members of the armed forces. Similarly, the Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve was created to provide stipends to reservists who did not serve a full-time role in the military. Each version of the Montgomery GI Bill provided approximately 36 months of benefits to the recipients and the amount of the monthly stipend varied based on a number of factors. Each version also provided financial aid for tuition that was paid directly to the academic institutions.

A study by Kleykamp (2006) sought to understand the factors responsible for high school graduates' decisions to join the military instead of attend college or join the civilian workforce. This study analyzed statistical data collected from a cohort of students within the state of Texas. Kleykamp (2006) found that the financial incentives, such as the GI Bill, were significant factors that contributed to the decision to join the military. Many high school graduates enlist with the goal of eventually attending college. The study also determined that a military presence within a community is a factor that significantly increases enlistment rates from that community. For example, enlistment rates tend to be higher in areas where military bases are located.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 ushered in a new era of military service and this subsequently led to the creation of the latest form of the GI Bill, called the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which became effective in 2009. Radford (2009) predicted the new Post-9/11 GI Bill would result in a significant increase in college attendance among veterans because the new version offered an array of lucrative financial benefits. This prediction was well-founded because Sander (2012a) notes that more than 550,000 veterans have already received benefits under this new program. The benefits are unprecedented in terms of financial assistance. For example, a veteran can receive 100% paid tuition at public institutions, a monthly housing allowance, a monthly stipend, and additional funding for books. The housing allowance alone can range from several hundred to several thousand dollars depending on the zip code. The monthly stipend is typically proportional to the amount of time spent in the service with higher amounts being paid to veterans who served on active duty. Most stipends range in the hundreds of dollars. Sander (2012a) describes the Post-9/11 GI Bill as creating the "most-comprehensive education benefits since the original 1944 GI Bill" (p. 1). The effects of this new Post-9/11 GI Bill have become

prevalent in the literature to the extent that after 2009, in virtually all publications that focus on veterans in higher education, there is a reference to the bill.

O'Herrin (2011) discusses the post-9/11 GI Bill, veteran characteristics, and the specific needs of this population. Her article is informed by her professional experience as the Associate Director of the American Council on Education and a review of relevant literature. O'Herrin (2011) notes that "veterans are, by definition, nontraditional students. They are typically older and many are technically considered transfer students because they often bring with them credit earned through college courses they completed while in the military" (p. 15). O'Herrin documents the influx of large numbers of veterans into academia, especially as a result of the latest version of the GI Bill. She notes that given the diversity of veterans, a one-size-fits-all approach to serving veterans is not the best way forward. She concludes with a call for enhanced student services for veterans, especially multiple initiatives on any given campus.

Smith-Osborne (2009) use extant survey data to determine if the GI Bill induced protective effects for disabled veterans who pursued higher education opportunities. Protective effects were understood as establishing conditions where veterans could pursue higher education opportunities without fear of financial disarray. The study addresses the general idea that the GI Bill funding makes students more likely to succeed because they don't have to worry about paying for tuition when compared to their non-veteran peers. The analysis did not find a statistically significant relationship between the GI Bill and the protective effects. However, the analysis indicated that medical disability income and social support systems did have a significant relationship with educational success among disabled veterans. The findings of this study suggest that the GI Bill may not be achieving its goal.

Simon, Negrusa, and Warner (2010) use extant data and quantitative methods to statistically examine the effects of educational benefits on military retention rates. The researchers found that an increase in educational benefits leads to an increased likelihood for soldiers and airmen to separate from the service to use the benefits. Stated differently, military service members are less likely to remain in the service beyond their initial contract because educational benefits represent an attractive alternative to military service. The study warns of the potential for negative consequences associated with increasing the amount of benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Educational benefits have traditionally served as a military recruiting tool but the increased value of such benefits is making it difficult to retain military personnel.

The historical context of the GI Bill serves as a foundation for understanding important issues for veterans within academia. Since its inception, the GI Bill has continued to grow and offer larger amounts of financial aid to veterans in an effort to promote higher education. Almost all veterans who attend college use this benefit and it has become an especially important tool for the Post 9/11 era veterans. The GI Bill will remain relevant for many decades to come given the billions of dollars spent on this program, the widespread use of the financial benefits, and the frequency with which it is discussed in publications.

### **Recruiting Veterans for College**

Given the prevalence of GI Bill funding and other financial aid sources for veterans, many universities have launched recruiting initiatives specifically directed toward veterans. Millions of dollars are available to cover tuition and other costs. Thus, it is not surprising that many universities are trying to benefit from such funding. However, some institutions are using

aggressive marketing strategies to solicit veterans, secure their funding, and grant worthless degrees. This trend is especially problematic within the for-profit higher education sector.

Higher education recruitment strategies for veterans are in demand because institutions can benefit from the government-brokered funding that comes with each veteran. Gayheart (2009) addresses the consumer nature of veterans in higher education by conducting a case study of several veterans groups within the state of Kentucky and by collecting survey data from a number of universities throughout the United States. The findings of the research form the basis of higher education recruiting strategies that target veterans. Gayheart identified a strategy for fulfilling veterans' emotional needs for safety and security. Colleges and universities can establish advocacy groups and transition programs in an effort to make veterans feel more socially secure on campus. Another strategy is to market degree programs through media sources that veterans are familiar with and media sources that are specifically targeted toward veterans. Gayheart also recommended that recruiters use more one-on-one recruiting when targeting veterans because the study found that many combat veterans are hesitant to be a part of large crowds or assemblies. The author emphasized that veteran recruitment will be financially beneficial for institutions especially given the additional funding granted through the GI Bill. Universities have a financial incentive to recruit veterans because the institutions can receive tuition payments directly through the Veterans Administration.

A popular media article by Weinstein (2011) reports, based on journalistic research, that many for-profit institutions target veterans because of the GI Bill and other financial aid benefits. Most for-profit institutions offer online and evening courses in an effort to cater to the veteran demographic. However, many of the programs lack the accreditation needed for graduates to

secure an actual job with the degree earned. Many institutions have hired marketing firms to create deceptive web pages that look as if they have some official connection to the military or to the GI Bill when no such connection exists. The author encourages veterans to spend more time investigating the credibility and accreditation of institutions they consider attending.

Nelson (2012) notes that legislation is currently being developed to crack down on the efforts of for-profit institutions to recruit veterans. The Obama administration is also prepared to sign an executive order limiting the use of the term GI Bill for marketing purposes. The legislative and executive efforts are in response to what many government officials see as deceptive recruitment tactics. The for-profit higher education sector is accused of offering low-quality unaccredited programs to veterans at inflated tuition prices in an effort to profit from GI Bill benefits. Many veterans are unaware of accreditation standards and post-graduation employment prospects associated with degrees from such institutions.

Veterans have a considerable amount of financial resources at their disposal and institutions have begun to compete for those resources. Literature has been published to enhance recruitment strategies for veterans (Gayheart, 2009) and some institutions are using those strategies to take advantage of unwitting students by charging exuberant tuition for junk degrees (Weinstein, 2011). Researchers who study these phenomena can use a critical theory approach by asking key questions: who benefits and who is disadvantaged from this process? The stance of the Obama administration is clear: proprietary institutions should not engage in unethical recruiting methods that target veterans.



## **Mental Health Trends**

Large numbers of veterans are returning home from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan with unseen wounds. Psychological trauma is a substantial challenge for veterans, mental health practitioners, and higher education institutions. The three main areas of concern are post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidal tendencies, and traumatic brain injuries. Given the large number of veterans currently enrolled in higher education, and those who will enroll in the future, many will likely suffer from some or all of the three main concerns.

A literature-based study by Smith-Osborne (2012) found that higher education programs and behavioral health programs for veterans are becoming more common due to the widespread prevalence of PTSD. These programs are rooted in the psychiatric deinstitutionalization movement that encourages patients to live in community settings as opposed to remaining confined to institutional environments like sanitariums. The intent of this movement was to afford patients an opportunity to live as normal a life as possible. Higher education institutions have begun to offer case management, advocacy, and referral services to veterans who are diagnosed with PTSD. The author recommends taking steps to enhance the coordination between existing student support services and new programs tailored to meet the needs of the veteran population. For example, veteran status could be added to intake forms in an effort to identify this population and space could be allocated to establish a lounge for veterans. Ultimately, Smith-Osborne argues that higher education institutions should assist veterans with their struggle to reintegrate into civilian life.

Student-veterans have experienced difficulty interacting with faculty members who express a personal bias against the military or against modern armed conflicts. This can cause a

strained relationship between the student-veterans and faculty. Students with PTSD can be especially disadvantaged when encountering these faculty members because this student population is less likely to garner the extra support needed to accommodate their illness. The study by Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones, and Sulak (2011) examined faculty perceptions of student-veterans. A survey instrument was used to gather data that subsequently underwent a statistical analysis. The researchers found that faculty members who had negative perceptions of modern military conflicts were likely to express disrespect for veterans. However, a number of faculty members reported they could put aside their negative feelings and work with students who suffered from PTSD. The authors recommend that higher education institutions offer self-efficacy training and teach debiasing techniques to faculty members who may encounter student veterans with PTSD.

The prevalence of the mental health challenges associated with student-veterans was noted in a recent Podcast through National Public Radio (Hodson, 2013). Tom Walker interviewed Eric Burke, a student-veteran attending college within the Appalachian region. The interview occurred in partnership between the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Ohio University, and the Conversations with Studio B podcast series. Burke described becoming a college student immediately after completing his term of military service where he served in combat. He described frustration with students who were playing with toy guns on campus. One student was essentially playing with a Nerf gun that shot a rubber projectile and this activity served as a trigger for a response consistent with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Burke felt as if he experienced the world in a different way than most of his college peers and his interview indicated he was frustrated by the immaturity of students on his campus (Hodson, 2013).

Grasgreen (2011) reported the number of student-veterans who have considered suicide is substantially higher when compared to the traditional student population. Almost half of all student-veterans have experienced suicidal thoughts and many have actually planned a suicide. Much of the driving force behind the suicidal tendencies stems from difficulty with transitioning from military to civilian life. This represents a unique challenge for higher education because many veterans pursue college degrees as part of their reintegration and vocational rehabilitation processes. However, the author warns against stereotyping student veterans because not all veterans will have suicidal tendencies or experience other mental health problems. Given this situation, the author suggests that universities establish partnerships with the Department of Veterans Affairs to help address the needs of the student-veteran population. One of the author's respondents suggested that outreach programs, staff training, supportive faculty, and a positive environment are key elements for academic success for veterans.

A study by Rudd, Goulding, and Bryan, (2011) noted that student-veterans frequently experience severe psychological problems that lead to suicide. The researchers found that depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms are prevalent among the student-veteran population. Almost half of the participants for this study reported experiencing suicidal thoughts, 10% reported frequent suicidal thoughts, and 7% had attempted a suicide. The authors speculate that many troubled veterans will attempt to seek services through student services at their institutions. However, higher education staff may not have the training or expertise to adequately address this problem. Accordingly, the study concluded with a recommendation for university clinicians to be trained to treat PTSD and assess suicide risks.

French and Parkinson's (2008) study found that traumatic brain injuries are becoming a serious problem for combat veterans. This type of injury can result from shrapnel wounds or from violent head jolts without penetrating wounds. The latter type is especially hard to diagnose and large numbers of veterans could suffer from such an injury and not realize it. Symptoms can include loss of consciousness, loss of memory, balance disturbances, changes in vision, neurological deficits, headaches, and difficulty sleeping. Although the authors did not address implications for higher education, the prevalence of traumatic brain injuries and the symptoms associated with such injuries can clearly pose challenges for student-veterans who experience such injuries.

A media report by Hamilton (2011) reported that veterans who experience traumatic brain injuries often have difficulty with their short and long term memory. Patients can drift away during conversations or have difficulty remembering where they are going. Military treatment facilities are developing new programs to facilitate treatment for these types of injuries. A new approach is to treat a patient's brain like the rest of his or her body by exercising it in an effort to improve it. Psychologists are using computer programs to quiz participants on their memory and many soldiers have reported improvements in memory after undergoing this type of treatment. One of Hamilton's respondents reported that he hopes to attend a nursing school after his treatment.

Scores of veterans are returning home from combat deployments and they often suffer from psychological trauma. PTSD, suicidal tendencies, and traumatic brain injuries are the primary mental health threats to the student-veteran population. Mental health specialists and higher education practitioners are starting to become aware of PTSD and they are beginning to

identify suicidal tendencies for this population. However, little is known about how student-veterans with traumatic brain injuries are experiencing their educational pursuits. Indeed, there is a notable gap in the literature about the relationship between traumatic brain injuries and education. This may be attributed to the fact that these types of injuries are difficult to diagnose. Accordingly, this is an area that needs additional research.

### **Recognizing Women Veterans**

Female veterans experience their own unique challenges and solutions for navigating through higher education. Some of the most notable issues include creating women-only social outlets, participating in transition programs, construction of personal identity, and gender stereotypes. The literature by Sander (2012b), Toure (2012), the Business and Professional Women's Foundation (2008), Baechtold and Sawal (2009), and Hamrick and Rumann (2011) provide an overview of the noted issues.

Sander (2012b) reported that many female veterans do not seek campus services or participate in campus organizations for veterans. Sander (2012b) noted that some women hide their status as a veteran in an effort to avoid being stereotyped and compared to their male veteran counterparts. This makes it especially difficult for colleges and universities to locate the women who are veterans and provide them with services tailored for their needs. Sander (2012b) found that some women who joined campus veterans' organizations note that the organizations are mostly comprised of males and this leaves many females fearing the types of gender based discrimination they experienced during their military service. Some institutions have responded by creating support groups for women only and the University of Denver formed a women's college. The segregation of women veterans from men is an effort to promote academic success

by fostering an environment where women feel safe to pursue their academic goals (Sander, 2012b).

Madina Toure (2012) authored a news article that describes a cohort of women veterans at Columbia University that met monthly. The cohort was a subset of a larger veteran's organization on that campus. However, the female veterans decided to hold some activities that were designated for women only. "The group provides space for female veterans to reflect on gender and deployment while bonding with other women" (Toure, 2008, p. 1). The group has been successful at maintaining close-knit relationships between members and recruiting new members. Students from other schools have also joined this group. Meetings are typically held in a happy-hour bar environment where the women can interact with each other in a casual manner with the understanding that it is a safe environment to discuss issues of importance to them. One of the respondents "likened the happy hours to 'bathroom talk'—a place where women can discuss issues frankly with one another" (Toure, 2008, p. 1).

The Business and Professional Women's Foundation (2008) explores how women veterans pursued employment opportunities and describes some of the resources available to them. This report describes successful transition programs that included referral services, transition assistance programs, and collaborative pursuits among women's groups. A statistical analysis of survey data found that women who left the service with a college degree were able to transition into civilian life more quickly when compared to their non-degree holding counterparts. The study concluded that resources should be directed toward identifying women who serve short enlistments and who do not have college degrees. Once the individuals are

identified, transition services should be offered to them (e.g. job placement services and monetary educational assistance).

A book chapter based on a review of literature warns higher education administrators that female veterans often return home having experienced combat, developed post traumatic stress disorder, and/or having been sexually assaulted (Baechtold & Sawal, 2009). Although attending college is often seen as a step forward for reintegration into civilian life, many women will require mental health services while attending college. The authors also explored identity construction and noted that women are assigned an identity and to a particular social group during military training. The military's highly structured approach to developing personnel is usually far removed from free-spirit traditional campus life. Moreover, the military rewards females who demonstrate traditionally masculine traits whereas civilian life often stigmatizes masculinity among women. Consequently, "when women veterans re-enter civilian life, they are often unsure of how to fulfill not only their specific role as a student but also their role as a woman" (Baechtold & Sawal, 2009, p. 40). The authors recommended that higher education administrators become aware of the challenges facing women veterans and the authors advocated for enhanced student services and the establishment of veteran organizations on campuses. The authors noted that most of the literature on this topic comes from popular media outlets and military reports. Accordingly, a call for additional research studies on the needs of women veterans on college campuses was made.

Hamrick and Rumann (2011) conducted a pilot study to examine the perceptions of women veterans who pursue college degrees. The subjects participated in a series of interviews that were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The researchers used a phenomenological

approach to identify how women perceived their transition from service members to college students. This study found that the women identified their combat experiences as positive contributions to their academic success. However, the close-knit, supportive relationships the women developed with their peers during their combat deployments were not in place within the context of civilian educational pursuits. That type of support mechanism, if developed in a civilian setting, could arguably enhance the prospects for academic success. The women described difficulty transitioning between military and civilian mindsets. One of the respondents made a conscious effort to construct a new identity by pursuing a ROTC program. The study noted that the hypervigilance associated with combat deployments manifested in the women's meticulous efforts to seek educational benefits and navigate through the complex bureaucracy associated with the Veterans Administration. The study also found that some women dislike being labeled as masculine within the context of serving in the military. They self identified as feminine and that stood in contrast to how they assumed others perceived them.

Women experience a variety of challenges as they pursue higher education and they develop a number of innovative solutions. The articles by Toure (2012), the Business and Professional Women's Foundation (2008), Baechtold and Sawal (2009), and Hamrick and Rumann (2011) enhance the understanding of how female veterans experience academic settings. The key findings for literature focused on the female student-veterans population are that many women benefit from a social support mechanism, professional transition services, and help with reintegrating into civilian life. Given the increasingly important role of women in the military and the rising numbers of women in the service, higher education institutions can expect a comparable rise in the number of women veterans on college campuses.



## **The Role of Campus Services for Student Veterans**

Higher education institutions have begun to offer an array of student services specifically tailored for veterans. These services can include streamlined programs, special transfer credit programs, veteran-only courses, and veteran support services. These types of services are typically initiated and operated by individual institutions in an effort to promote academic success for the veteran population. The creation of such services can be understood as a reaction to the growing number of veterans on college campuses.

Cate (2011) conducted a study in which survey data were examined using descriptive and inferential analysis techniques. Comparisons were made between traditional college students and student-veterans. The study found that student-veterans tend to have a higher grade point average when compared to traditional college students. This study also made comparisons among the veterans and found that factors such as rank, combat experience, or branch of military did not have a significant correlation with the participant's grade point average. The overwhelming majority of veterans in this study reported not participating in clubs and they felt they had little in common with their traditional student counterparts. The study concluded that campus services for veterans should be expanded in an effort to integrate the veterans into the academic environment and address their needs.

A news article, based on journalistic research, reports a steep increase in enrollment for military veterans (Hall, 2009). This increase was attributed to the enhanced financial aid benefits associated with the latest version of the GI Bill. Hall notes that veterans frequently experience problems with campus bureaucracies, crowds triggering alarm instincts, and fellow students who cannot relate to their battlefield experiences. Indeed, one of the most offensive frequently asked

questions for veterans is: "Did you ever kill anybody?" (Hall, 2009, p. 8). Given these challenges and the nuances associated with veterans on campuses, many colleges are offering veteran-only courses, providing counseling, and establishing peer groups.

DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell, (2008) and Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell (2009) conducted a qualitative study in which they gathered and analyzed interview data from 25 military service veterans. A thematic analysis was conducted and revealed patterns among the responses. A significant pattern was that educational benefits served as a motivation for pursuing military service. Another pattern was that veterans who navigate through bureaucratic higher education structures experience difficulties with those processes. For example, many veterans found the process of actually receiving GI Bill benefits difficult because the Veteran's Administration was slow to process their paperwork. A delay in this kind of payment can cause students to be administratively dropped from courses due to non-payment. Other bureaucratic challenges included difficulties with receiving the appropriate amount of transfer credits for military education and difficulty receiving financial aid after withdrawing from courses to deploy into combat. The researchers proposed that veterans should be afforded the same services that other special-needs populations receive on campuses. They concluded with a call for practitioners to share best practices associated with serving the veteran population.

Altschuler and Blumin (2009) provide an in-depth description of the history of the GI Bill and other veteran programs. Their book is written for a broad audience including veterans, policymakers, and university administrators. The GI Bill is discussed as an example of one of the most successful pieces of legislation in U.S. history because it allowed large numbers of veterans to secure degrees after WWII and this helped to expand the middle class while ensuring the

United States is competitive with the Soviet Union in terms of research capability. The latest version of the GI Bill is discussed in detail because it represents an unprecedented leap forward in terms of enhancing government brokered funding for veterans. Among many other things, the book warns of the danger of lowering academic standards to streamline programs for veterans because this could shortchange their education. The warning was rooted in the idea that veterans should be held to the same academic standards as their non-veteran peers and attempts to streamline degrees for veterans could result in a lowering of standards for such degrees. This notion stands in contrast to Persky and Oliver's (2011) argument for streamlined programs and services.

McGrevey and Kehrer (2009) discuss the history of assisting veterans, describe popular benefit programs, and conclude by describing how campuses benefit from the knowledge and character of students who served in the military. The authors noted that more than 500,000 veterans receive benefits under the GI Bill program and they represent a growing trend of service members pursuing higher education. Accordingly, universities should become aware of the financial aid programs for veterans and offer services that cater to this population.

Persky and Oliver (2011) explore how veterans perceive their needs within the context of a community college environment. Interviews were conducted in concert with other data gathering methods and the data were analyzed to reveal five themes: difficulties experienced by veterans, training of university personnel, credit streamlining, program streamlining, and factors constituting a veteran friendly campus. Some of the difficulties include dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder and dealing with the immaturity of younger college students. The authors recommend that advisors, faculty, and staff members be specifically trained to deal with

veterans in an effort to enhance services and encourage retention. Moreover, credit streamlining should be directed to identify military training that can constitute college credit. National level accreditation standards are already in place for credit streamlining but some institutions are unaware of the processes or granting such credit. The idea of program streamlining refers to developing a cohort approach and engineering programs specifically for veterans. Additionally, they advocated for making campuses veteran friendly by creating a space in which veterans could be heard and their concerns could be addressed. The authors concluded with a call for community colleges to identify the unique needs of veterans and make an effort to meet those needs. The work is an especially important contribution to the body of knowledge about veterans in community college settings because of the growing number of veteran students and the increase in community college programs nationwide.

Rumann and Hamrick (2010) conducted a qualitative study that examined the perceptions of six student-veterans through multiple interviews. The respondents revealed strategies for making the transition back into student life. The strategies include forming student groups, seeking friendships with other veterans, discussing experiences in safe (nonjudgmental) environments, and engaging in self-discipline. The noted strategies can be employed on college campuses in an effort to enhance student services for veterans. Moreover, the authors also examined how the respondent's self-identity was constructed and evolving. The approach of this study paralleled Luttrell (2003) because identity construction within the context of periods of life transition was explored to gain a rich understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. The article ended with a call for additional research in this area. This study can serve as an example of how to model a qualitative research project involving veterans.

Livingston (2009) used qualitative research methods to examine how veterans transitioned into their roles as students. The study focused on a single university where veterans were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The study found that the veteran population was more mature than their non-veteran peers and the veterans needed less academic support but more social support. Specifically, veteran-oriented peer groups were seen as a mechanism that made veterans feel more comfortable on campus.

Cook and Kim (2009) used a survey to gather data from staff members who worked in the field of higher education. The goal of the study was to assess the availability of services provided to veterans by universities throughout the United States. The researchers anticipated an increase in the numbers of veterans enrolling in degree programs and the anticipated increase was attributed to enhanced funding through modern versions of the GI Bill and concern was expressed regarding the higher education community's ability to respond to this influx of veterans. Cook and Kim (2009) found that a majority of the represented universities were reasonably prepared to meet the needs of veterans by addressing the veteran demographic within institutional strategic plans, offering services to veterans, granting academic credit for military training, providing referrals for counseling, and addressing financial concerns. However, the study also found several areas in need of improvement such as providing transition services to veterans and training practitioners of higher education in ways to specifically work with veterans on campuses. This study ultimately called for an enhancement of the existing student services for veterans and the creation of new services where none are present.

Institutions of higher education are offering a variety of student services specifically for veterans. Some examples include streamlined programs, special transfer credit programs, veteran-only courses, and veteran support services. The services for veterans are usually driven by the institutions in an effort to help veterans with their college experience. However, not all campus service programs are deemed valuable. For example, a veterans representative in Cabell County was quoted in the Herald-Dispatch newspaper as saying, “Don’t throw your veterans a barbecue and call yourselves military-friendly” because programs need to have a purpose to avoid becoming a “dog-and-pony show” (Herald-Dispatch, 2012, p. 1C). His comments are indicative of the wide variety and sometimes contradictory views expressed within the literature.

### **Student Organizations for Veterans**

The student services offered to veterans can become intertwined with other campus organizations that also have the goal of assisting veterans. Campus organizations can be university driven or student driven. They vary widely in terms of their scope but they each share the common element of providing an outlet for veterans. Articles by Whikehart (2010) and Lokken, et. al. (2009) provide a general framework for understanding campus organizations for veterans.

Whikehart's (2010) article, based on his professional experience as a Chancellor of a community college, gives a first-hand account of the development of a veterans' organization on the campus of Ivy Tech Community College in Bloomington, Indiana. The institution's recognition of the need to serve the veteran population paid off because enrollment of veterans increased by 130% within a two-year period. The college secured a grant for \$15,000 to facilitate an organization named Mission Graduation. The goals of the organization were to increase

retention, decrease withdrawals from courses, enhance grades, and provide a supportive environment for veterans. The author reported several key findings based on his experiences with this program. Support of the college's senior management was found to be vital to the success of the program. Whikehart (2010) suggested that other programs can follow the example set by Mission Graduation by encouraging program advisors to function as a cohesive team and include individuals with personal military experience or ties to the military. Whikehart (2010) also recommended that the infrastructure of this type of organization be sustainable. For example, a permanent source of funding was seen as vital to the survival of the Mission Graduation program.

Lokken, et. al. (2009) discusses the successful collaboration among three veteran organizations within the state of Minnesota. The authors write about this subject on the basis of their personal experiences with collaboration among veterans' organizations. Some of the elements of their work can serve as a model for other states and organizations to emulate. The authors recommend that higher education institutions seek partnerships among local, state, and federal organizations in an effort to facilitate the sharing of resources to better serve the population of veterans within academia. The best practices associated with such integration include the sharing of resources such as meeting space, financial support, and specific administrative support for veterans. Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell (2009) had made a previous call to share best practices and Lokken, et. al. (2009) successfully answered the call. The key elements, best practices, and collaboration represent efforts to enhance student services for veterans.

Student organizations for student-veterans have developed with the same goals as traditional student services. They are each unique to the institution with which they are affiliated but they all aim to help veterans and provide an organized platform for social interaction. Whikehart (2010) and Lokken, et. al. (2009) offer a glimpse into how such organizations can be effective.

### **Campus Climates**

Institutions of higher education may provide challenging environments for veterans. Generally speaking, a campus can be understood as socially challenging if the campus is perceived as being hostile toward veterans. The degree to which any institution is perceived as being veteran-friendly or veteran-hostile can be understood in relation to a campus climate. An institution that hosts a Reserve Officer Training Corps program, offers student services tailored to the needs of veterans, and provides student support groups for veterans can be perceived as having a veteran-friendly campus climate. Conversely, an institution that hosts protest events against the armed services, refuses to allow military recruiters on campus, and does not encourage military peer-support activities may be perceived as having a veteran-hostile campus environment. Stever (1996) found that hostile campus climates were common during the mid-1990's but the effects of the hostilities could be offset by establishing peer-support initiatives. Indeed, the type and numbers of peer-support initiatives have increased sharply since September 11, 2001. However, challenges do exist in modern times. Summerlot, Green, and Parker (2009) identified a spectrum of campus climates described as supportive, ambivalent, or challenging. The state of West Virginia is making an effort to create supportive campus climates for veterans



through the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 which mandates for institutions of higher education to become veteran-friendly.

A study by Stever (1996) examined the political climate for veterans on college campuses. The study included stories about the individual experiences of students and faculty members. A number of campuses were found to be hostile environments for veterans. Examples of hostilities included a pro-military poster being defaced on campus, a Reserve Officer Training Corps student's professor asking why the student wanted to be a murderer, and a professor who was denied tenure because of his status as a Vietnam veteran. College campuses are traditionally fertile grounds for free speech and political strife but instances of hostility as described above can alienate veterans from their institutions of higher education. Stever (1996) found that hostility toward veterans was endemic throughout the United States higher education system but the establishment of veterans support groups on campuses helped to mitigate against the negative effects of hostility and discrimination.

An article by Summerlot, Green, and Parker (2009) is directed toward academic administrators, support service providers, and veterans who are interested in creating a veteran's organization on their campus. The authors based their article on their personal experiences and conversations they had with other knowledgeable sources. Three types of campus climates were identified in terms of their suitability for veterans and they were characterized as supportive, ambivalent, and challenging. Supportive climates were described as campuses with veterans services and/or Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs. Ambivalent climates refer to campuses that do not have the noted services and programs but they also do not have any perceived hostility toward veterans. Challenging climates refer to campuses that make an

intentional effort to not offer veterans' programs and ROTC programs. Challenging campus environments are perceived as hostile toward veterans when large numbers of students, faculty, and staff openly oppose the military in general. The authors suggested that additional student services be directed toward veterans in an effort to create veteran-friendly environments. Organizations can be founded by veterans and/or campus representatives in an effort to provide networking opportunities, develop a space free of criticism and discrimination, and share strategies for dealing with campus life.

Elected representatives in West Virginia have made an effort to ensure the needs of veterans are being met within the context of higher education. West Virginia House Bill 4145 was passed in 2010 and it mandates that state institutions provide appropriate services, facilities, and support to assist veterans in their pursuit of higher education. This legislation specifically requires state-operated higher education institutions to become "veteran-friendly" (West Virginia House Bill 4145, 2010, p.1).

The West Virginia Legislature commissioned a broad study of veterans within the state. This study was conducted by Atlas Research LLC (2013) and data were gathered via a survey instrument with approximately 1,000 respondents. The survey found that less than 1% of the respondents did not have a high school diploma, 10% of the respondents had not pursued higher education, "32% had some college or technical school, 15% had a bachelor's degree, and 16% had completed a master's or doctoral degree" (Atlas Research LLC, 2013, p. 8). A part of the study sought to assess the effect of the new legislative requirements for state higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly. However, the responses tended to be neutral and the study concluded that it was too soon to assess these effects because the legislation had only

recently been passed. Therefore, Atlas Research LLC (2013) recommended that future research be conducted to "study the impact of legislation to encourage the growth of military-friendly colleges and universities in the state" (p. 22).

The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (2010; 2011; 2012; 2013) published a series of annual reports detailing the implementation of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). These reports are mandated by the bill and publically available on a website operated by the state government. The latest publication (West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, 2013) reported that more than half of the state operated institutions of higher education have developed a club for veterans and approximately 75% of the institutions have trained advisors to specifically work with veterans. Moreover, a number of community colleges have developed veteran friendly programs and policies to grant academic credit for military training exist at every institution. However, the policies are not uniform and an effort to develop state wide recommendations is underway.

## **Literature Synthesis**

The prevalent issues concerning veterans in higher education are apparent within the cited literature. Several factors known to enable or constrain academic progress have been articulated. Legislators have addressed such factors by requiring state-operated colleges in West Virginia to become veteran-friendly by promoting many of the enabling factors. However, additional research is needed to address the effects of the recent legislation. Furthermore, factors such as socioeconomic status and family life warrant additional study. This literature synthesis will identify known enabling factors, known constraining factors, and areas not well-known

regarding the student veteran population. These considerations will reveal how my research questions stem from the literature.

It is clearly known that the GI Bill is helping veterans attend college (Mettler, 2005; Humes, 2006; Jasper, 2009; Sander, 2012; O'Herrin, 2011; Smith-Osborne, 2009; Simon, Negrusa, & Warner, 2010). Other enabling factors include targeted recruitment of veterans, providing campus services for this population, offering veteran-only courses, participation in veterans' support organizations, and professional transition services. It is clear that the state of West Virginia is responding to the issues that are prevalent in the veteran-focused literature because many of the requirements outlined by West Virginia House Bill 4145 match the enabling factors identified within the literature.

Factors known to constrain academic progress include mental health challenges, bureaucratic red tape, targeted recruitment of veterans, campus crowds of people, streamlining degree programs, lack of social support, and physical disability. These factors contribute to veterans having lower college attendance and degree attainment rates when compared to the general population. However, a few of the factors, such as streamlining degree programs and targeted recruitment of veterans, are cited as both enabling and constraining. This is consistent with McComas (2010) who found that some enabling and constraining factors are not mutually exclusive. A literature-based list of enabling and constraining factors is shown in Table 1.

A notable gap in the literature, which will be addressed by my study, is an absence of information about the extent to which veterans experience their campuses as veteran-friendly or veteran-hostile within the state of West Virginia (i.e. campus climate). For example, little is known about how West Virginia House Bill 4145 has been implemented, how the law has affected students, and how the student veterans perceive the extent to which their campuses are

or are not veteran-friendly. Furthermore, several ancillary considerations are notably absent within the literature (i.e., socioeconomic status and family life). A few studies have addressed the socioeconomic status of veterans, but they were not specific to the field of higher education. For example, Fredland and Little (1985) completed a study of the socioeconomic status of World War II veterans, Yu (1992) conducted a study of the socioeconomic status of Vietnam era male veterans, and Cooney, Segal, Segal, and Falk (2003) focused on racial considerations in their study of the socioeconomic status of women veterans. The existing studies are somewhat dated and they do not address the population of veterans who participated in the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, the familial considerations of veterans are rarely studied. Student-veterans are typically several years older than the general population when they enroll in college. Many veterans will have experienced four years of military service and started a family before they begin college whereas traditional students often begin college with little or no work experience and without starting a family (i.e., getting married and/or having a child). Thus, socioeconomic and familial factors may be a point of ancillary consideration for my study.

The degree to which a campus is perceived as friendly or hostile toward veterans (i.e. the campus climate) is an important factor for practitioners of higher education to consider (Stever, 1996; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). Little is known about how campus climates are experienced by veterans within the State of West Virginia before and after the passage of a state law requiring campuses to become veteran-friendly. The requirements set by this law are shown in Table 2 and it is clear that state legislators sought to maximize enabling factors for academic success among veterans because many of the law's requirements match the enabling factors described within the literature. Moreover, Atlas Research LLC (2013) made a recommendation for research be conducted to "study the impact of legislation to encourage the growth of military-

friendly colleges and universities in the state" (p. 22). My study seeks to fill the research void articulated by Atlas Research LLC (2013) by gathering and analyzing data about how student veterans experienced campus climates before and after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010).

**Table 1: Enabling and Constraining Factors for Educational Pursuits of Student-Veterans**

<b>Enabling Factors</b>	<b>Sources</b>
The G.I. Bill	Mettler, 2005; Humes, 2006; Jasper, 2009; Sander, 2012a; O’herrin, 2011; Simon, Negrusa, & Warner, 2010; Hall, 2009; Altschluer & Blumin, 2009; McGrevey & Kehrer, 2009; Smith-Osborne, 2009; Kleykamp, 2006; Radford, 2009
Recruiting Military Veterans for College	Gayheart, 2009
Campus Services for Veterans	Cate, 2011; Cook & Kim, 2009
Veteran-Only Courses	Hall, 2009
Streamlining Degree Programs for Veterans	Persky & Oliver, 2011; Cook & Kim, 2009
Participation in Veterans Support Organization	Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Livingston, 2009; Whitehart, 2010; Lokken, et. al., 2009; Toure, 2012
Transition Services (from military to civilian)	Business and Professional Women’s Foundation, 2008; Baechtold & Swal, 2009; DiRamio, Akerman, & Mitchell, 2008
Supportive Campus Climates	Stever, 1996; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009
<b>Constraining Factors</b>	
Recruiting Military Veterans for College	Weinstein, 2011; Nelson, 2012
Bureaucracies of Higher Education	Hall, 2009; Akerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Akerman, & Mitchell, 2008
Crowds of People	Hall, 2009
Streamlining Degree Programs for Veterans	Altschluer & Blumin, 2009
Mental Health Challenges (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Suicidal Thoughts, Brain Injuries, Prior Sexual Assault)	Persky & Oliver, 2011; Smith-Osborne, 2012; Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones, & Sulak, 2011; Grasgreen, 2011; Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011; French & Parkinson, 2008; Hamilton, 2011; Baechtold & Swal, 2009; Sander, 2012b; Hodson, 2013
Lack of Social Support from Peers	Hamrick & Rumann, 2011; DiRamio, Akerman, & Mitchell, 2008
Physical Disability	Smith-Osborne, 2009
Hostile Campus Climates	Stever, 1996; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009

<b>Table 2: Enabling Conditions Mandated by West Virginia State Law</b>
Community colleges must grant transfer credit for vocational training received at military schools.
Institutions must develop programs for veterans to share their knowledge and military experience.
Institutions must establish a student veteran organization.
Each degree program must appoint trained faculty members to serve as liaisons for student veterans.
The state must develop a blanket policy for granting credit for military experience.
Institutions must provide veterans with information about a Regents Bachelor of Arts degree.
Institutions must coordinate disability services with appropriate federal, state, and private organizations.
Each campus must provide counselors who are trained to deal with student veterans.
Institutions must establish meetings for employees who work with veterans to share best practices.
Institutions must periodically inform appropriate government agencies of the status of student veterans.
Institutions must create a program to promote post-graduation employment and other opportunities for student veterans.
Institutions must communicate with other veterans organizations within the state to promote the wellbeing of student veterans.

## **Research Questions**

My research questions stem from the literature through a consideration of what is known and unknown about student-veterans. The veteran-focused literature has addressed the GI Bill, recruitment of veterans, mental health trends, the recognition of women veterans, the role of campus services, student organizations for veterans, and campus climates. Two concepts that can overlap each of the themes are enabling and constraining factors. These two concepts, as noted by Olson (2011) and McComas (2010) can provide insight into how students experience their education while simultaneously providing an analytical framework for interpreting such experiences. Many of the enabling and constraining factors have already been explored but other



areas such as the effects of recent legislation, campus climates in West Virginia, socioeconomic status, and family life warranted additional study in an effort to gain a better understanding of the target population of veterans. These factors helped to establish an understanding of the extent to which and the ways in which campuses were or were not veteran-friendly. The known enabling factors were uniquely linked to legislative efforts within West Virginia because the requirements outlined in West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) closely match the list of known enabling factors shown in Table 1. A visual comparison of Table 1 and Table 2 makes it clear that state legislators are trying to promote enabling factors that are known to work by mandating them in an effort to establish veteran-friendly campuses. However, little was known about how this legislation has affected veterans or how perceptions of the campus climates have changed since the passage of this legislation. Accordingly, a qualitative study aimed at comparing how veterans experienced their campuses before and after the passage of the bill is useful to legislators and higher education practitioners. Livingston (2009) called for additional qualitative studies to explore how veterans experience higher education and Atlas Research LLC (2013) made a specific recommendation for future research concerning the effects of state legislation (West Virginia House Bill 4145, 2010) concerning veterans. Given the current state of research concerning student-veterans that has been articulated within the literature and in consideration of calls for additional studies, the following research questions were proposed:

- How do a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate before the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly?

- How do a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate after the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly?
- How can a qualitative exploration of the direct experience and perceptions of a small group of West Virginia veterans inform our understandings of how the passage of a state law may or may not have affected campus climates for veterans?

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODS

This study was conducted by using qualitative research methods and interviews served as the primary sources of data. The interviews followed the three-step interviewing technique described by Seidman (1991). Several different kinds of qualitative research methods were used in an effort to enhance the chances for triangulating findings among multiple sources and types of data (Patton, 2002). A field journal was maintained to document my interactions with cultural informants and participants and extant data documents were examined on an opportunistic basis. The research process followed standard conventions of emergent design as described by Patton (2002) by modifying strategies as needed as the study unfolded. Qualitative methods were appropriate for this study because they allowed for maximum flexibility and because the aim of the study was to explore how student-veterans experience higher education. The phenomenological nature of the research questions is not suited for a traditional quantitative approach.

#### **Sampling**

Several sampling techniques were employed in concert to facilitate this study. Snowball sampling was used to locate participants and maximum variation sampling was used to select participants. The sample of this study was composed of a total of six participants. Most of the studies that used the technique of interviewing respondents multiple times focused on a small number of participants. For example, McComas (2010) interviewed four respondents three times each and Rumann and Hamrick (2010) interviewed six respondents on multiple occasions. Patton (2002) best describes this strategy by noting that "qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples" (p. 230). The advantage of this approach is that "studying

information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations" (Patton, 2002, p. 230).

The identification of study participants began by following the recommendation of Bogdan and Biklen (2007) to consult with "someone who is familiar with what is being studied" (p. 84). This is a snowball sampling method for "locating information-rich key informants" (Patton, 2002, p. 237). I identified a few key professionals who specialized in veteran's affairs and a few student-veterans to serve as cultural informants. I used their expertise to locate the interview participants. I met with veterans affairs representatives who worked for colleges within the county in which this study took place. I discussed my proposed study and asked for assistance locating research subjects. Additionally, the initial participants of this study were able to refer me to other participants.

Maximum variation sampling, guided by factors identified within the relevant literature, was used to select participants with diverse characteristics. Maximum variation sampling is adept at "capturing and describing the central themes that cut across a great deal of variation" (Patton, 2002, p. 235). The central advantage of maximum variation sampling is that "common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon" (Patton, 2002, p. 235). Accordingly, I sought to maximize variation by recruiting research subjects with different experiences and demographic characteristics.

The central point of variation among the participants was the difference between students who attended a state college before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) and students who attended college after the passage of the bill. The differences in experience shed

light on how such legislation may or may not have affected students. This is of particular interest to state legislators because student-veterans constitute a growing demographic, legislation has been passed in an effort to make campuses veteran friendly, the state government commissioned a study of such phenomena, and the study concluded with a call for additional research in this area (Atlas Research LLC, 2013). An ancillary point of variation among the participants included selecting an equal number males and females. It was important to balance the sex of the participants because females have been historically marginalized within the veterans' community while simultaneously having a unique set of challenges (Toure, 2012; Business and Professional Women's Foundation, 2008; Baechtold & Sawal, 2009; Hamrick & Rumann, 2011). It was also important to include a number of participants who attended two-year and four-year institutions because West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) applies equally to each type of institution and exploring the lived experiences from both types of campuses will help maximize the variation of the sample.

Other criteria for selection remained constant. For example, all participants served in a branch of the United States military, used Veterans Administration educational benefits, attended courses in person, and they were all first generation college students. The decision to select veterans who used educational benefits was based on the literature that indicates this demographic is steadily growing and will remain a formidable concern for the field of higher education (Mettler, 2005; Humes, 2006; Jasper, 2009; Kleykamp, 2006; Sander, 2012a; O'Herrin, 2011; Smith-Osborne, 2009; Simon, Negrusa, & Warner, 2010). This was an especially important group to examine within the state of West Virginia because the number of veterans using educational benefits brokered by the Veterans Administration grew from 2,487 in the year 2000 to 14,941 in the year 2011 (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013).

This study focuses on students who attended traditional brick and mortar institutions. Students who took all of their classes online were not selected for participation because it would be difficult for online students to have experienced campus climates. Student-veterans who attended college during the ninety-day time period following the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) were either not selected for the study or not interviewed about their experiences during that time period because institutions may not have immediately implemented the law's mandates. Thus, a ninety-day buffer period was observed. The decision to include only first generation college students was based on the fact that "both first-generation college students and student veterans have received attention in the media in recent years" because first-generation college students pose retention challenges for universities and student veterans and the number of student veterans may increase "as much as a 20%" within the next several years (Wurster, Rinaldi, Woods, and Liu<sup>1</sup>, 2013, p. 127). Moreover, "student veterans are also more likely to be first-generation than their nonveteran peers" (National Survey of Student Engagement,2010).

The West Virginia State Legislature has taken an active interest in learning about the status of veterans within the state (Messina, 2012). Given the interest of the lawmakers and their desire to discover what veterans need, this study occurred exclusively within the state of West Virginia. The geographical setting included the metro area surrounding a single county. This area was selected because it was a hub for military activity, veteran activity, and higher education opportunities. The name of the county where this study occurred is intentionally omitted from this document in an effort to help protect the confidentiality of the participants.

## **Data Collection**

This study does not focus on any specific higher education institution. The aim of this research was to examine individual experiences. The interviews were conducted in a variety of locations including the home of one participant, a library, administrative offices, and other public spaces. All interviews were conducted in person (as opposed to using a telephone or internet connection).

I conducted one-on-one interviews with student-veterans (as opposed to group interviews or focus groups). This approach was consistent with Gayheart's (2009) recommendation to interact with veterans individually. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and I had a general list of questions prepared before each interview session. Additionally, the enabling and constraining factors shown in Table 1 served as discussion points. I avoided recorded conversations when establishing first contact with participants but the initial contact was documented as field notes or filed via email as appropriate. Once I established sufficient rapport and received informed consent, I initiated recorded interviews. It was critically important to establish a rapport before recording the conversation because participants may have felt less inclined to participate or they may have initially felt intimidated by the recording process.

The in-person recorded interviews used a double-recording process where two devices recorded the conversations. Initially, an RCA model No. RP3503-B standard cassette tape voice recorder was used as the primary recording instrument while an RCA model No. RP 511A digital voice recorder was used simultaneously as a back-up. The use of two different types of voice recorders at the same time safeguarded against a loss of data through accidental deletion, loss of power, or other unforeseen circumstances. This was a prudent decision because the RCA model No. RP3503-B standard cassette tape voice recorder frequently stopped working during the

initial interviews. Given the unreliable nature of the tape recorder, I stopped using it and replaced it with a Sony model number ICD-B300 digital recorder (serial number 1429153).

The recorded data were stored in a secure space at 2650 State Route 152 in Huntington, West Virginia 25701. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by Tara Allman, Justin Adkins, Diane Wellman, and me. The names of the respondents were omitted from the transcripts in an effort to safeguard the identity of the participants. The original recordings were destroyed once paper transcripts were produced.

The phenomenological nature of the research questions required an exploration of the experiences of veterans. This type of inquiry necessitates an understanding of the context in which veterans made sense of the world around them. Seidman (1991) articulated a three-step semi-structured interview process that has proven effective for exploring experiences and contexts for qualitative research projects. The first interview “establishes the context of participants’ experience” while the second interview “allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience” and the third interview serves as a reflective exercise (Seidman, 1991, p. 11). The use of multiple interviews throughout a period of time allows researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences studied.

The first interview focused on the biographical characteristics of the respondents. They were invited to talk about themselves, their past experiences, and the events that led to their decisions to serve in the military and attend college. The first interview explored how the participants became students and veterans. Special attention was given to their decision-making processes, transitions, motivations, and expectations. The first interview also served as an important rapport-building activity between the interviewer and respondents. Thus, the goal was to gather data while establishing conditions favorable for securing follow-up interviews.



The second interview focused on the details of the respondent's recent experiences as they related to higher education. I followed Seidman's (1991) recommendation to ask the participants to "reconstruct a day" in an effort to gain a better understanding of the participants' experiences (p. 12). For example, I asked each participant to walk me through an average day at college. The goal of the second interview was to gather data rich in specific details that were unique to each respondent's experience on the campus where he or she attended college. This method connected to my theoretical orientation because Giddens (1984) noted, "The study of day-to-day life is integral to the reproduction of institutionalized practices" (p. 282).

The third interview served as a reflective exercise and as a review of the topics discussed during the first two interviews. The respondents were asked to think about their past and present experiences and describe how such experiences were meaningful. This interview was geared toward understanding how meaning is constructed and how the participants have made sense of their experiences as veterans pursuing higher education. Seidman (1991) describes the process as requiring participants to "look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation" (p. 12).

The allotted timeframe for each interview was ninety minutes. Seidman (1991) believes this amount of time is suitable for exploring issues in depth and over time. The actual amount of time for each interview varied. The longest individual interview lasted 83 minutes and the shortest interview lasted 46 minutes. The total amount of recorded narrative data for this study was 18 hours and 36 minutes. All of the interview transcripts were merged into a single document to facilitate data analysis. The final transcript containing all interview data was composed of 162,032 words placed within 301 pages of single-spaced text.

The interviews were typically spread out across a time period of several weeks to allow for building relationships with the respondents. The first interview for this study was conducted on October 11, 2013 and the last interview was conducted on May 22, 2014. Seidman (1991) warned against attempting to gather all of the information in a single interview because respondents are more likely to talk more openly after a rapport has been established. Moreover, the multi-interview strategy mitigated the possibility of gathering information that could be skewed by a participant having a single nuanced response. Accordingly, a set of semi-structured interview questions was used to guide the interview while maintaining a conversational approach. Appendix C provides a basic list of questions for each interview. However, such questions were only a starting point because the respondents were free to discuss the areas studied through in-depth conversation.

### **Methodological Delimitations**

Two elements of qualitative research were not appropriate for this particular study. First, focus group interviews were not suitable forms of data collection for the target population. Gayheart (2009) and Hall (2009) found that veterans, especially those with combat experience, tend to do better with one-on-one interaction when compared to interacting in a group setting. Many veterans are uncomfortable with group settings and this type of discomfort could diminish the respondents' likelihood to fully and freely answer questions. Accordingly, a one-on-one interview approach was used and focus group interviews were not a part of this study. Second, Spradley (1979) recommended that researchers display ethnographic ignorance when participating in interviews and fieldwork. This involves researchers pretending to know almost nothing about the people they interview and the phenomena under study. Although this strategy is useful in other situations, it was not appropriate in this study because it could have undermined

my rapport with the respondents. For example, my credibility and rapport may have been severely undermined if I strategically played dumb, did not disclose my status as a veteran, and the respondents later discovered that I was a veteran. I wanted to avoid situations where the respondents would feel that I was not being completely honest with them. Thus, Spradley's (1979) strategy of displaying ethnographic ignorance was not adopted as a part of this study.

### **Compensation**

VanderWalde and Kurzban (2011) noted that research participants sacrifice their time and energy to provide data for any given study and it is a common practice to compensate research subjects for their participation. Accordingly, each participant was compensated for their participation in every recorded interview. A ninety-minute time period was allocated for each interview session and participants were given \$20.00 cash and a thank you card for their participation. The amount of \$20.00 was large enough to encourage participation in the study but small enough to avoid attracting people who would agree to be interviewed just to get the cash. This total cost for compensating the sample of 6 participants was \$360.00 because each participant was interviewed on three separate occasions (six participants x \$20.00 x three occasions = \$360.00).

Hennink and Weber (2013) noted that transcriptionists are routinely employed to produce transcripts to facilitate qualitative research projects. I followed this conventional approach and employed three individuals to transcribe interview conversations verbatim. A total of 18 hours and 36 minutes of audio data were collected for this study. I transcribed 63 minutes of audio data and I paid to have the remaining 17 hours and 33 minutes transcribed. Marshall University contributed \$491.50 toward transcription services and I paid \$1,400.00. The total amount paid for transcription services was \$1,891.50.

## **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

One of the hallmarks of qualitative research is its reliance on the minds of individual researchers as instruments of data analysis. Qualitative analysis is an inherently subjective process described by Patton (2002) as being akin to "medieval alchemy" (p. 432). Qualitative researchers, like skilled medieval artisans, can create products of value (Patton, 2002).

Qualitative analysis has secured a legitimate status within the social research community because it can yield valuable information. I intended to learn about the lived experiences of student-veterans and share those experiences in a manner that will be of value to veterans, educators, legislators, and the field of higher education. This study used analytical techniques pioneered by Strauss (1987) to code, analyze, and interpret the data.

The interview transcripts from this study were analyzed through deductive and inductive processes. The deductive component stems from the assumption that student-veterans will have experienced enabling and constraining factors during their pursuit of higher education. Many of those factors are discussed in the existing literature and outlined within Table 1. Working from that assumption, I sought to identify inductively the specific factors that have enabled and/or constrained each participant and to understand how those factors were experienced. Special attention was given to the central point of variation among the participants (i.e. lived experiences of campus climates before and after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145). Other factors, such as socioeconomic status and family life, were articulated within the biography for each participant because these factors are not sufficiently addressed within the existing literature. A starting point for identifying such factors was to look at the data through the lens of Giddens' (1984) structuration theory in which the reciprocal relationship between agency and structure can

be used to explain social phenomena. Accordingly, I looked for instances of agency and structure within the context of the lived experiences of the participants. An inductive process was also used to identify other factors which may not be directly related to enabling and constraining factors. I made an effort to search for other factors and points of interest within the data. Once the factors were identified, I organized the transcript excerpts that described the factors and looked for patterns to emerge. I then examined and articulated the themes that were common to some or all participants. The responses of each individual respondent was also analyzed separately and I conducted a cross-case examination of the data to determine if any patterns are unique to any specific subgroup (i.e. students who attended college before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 and students who attended college after the passage of the bill). I also conducted a comparative analysis of themes that emerged between men and women respondents. The findings were then discussed with knowledgeable sources to determine if the findings truly represented the subjects of this study. The member-check process was aimed at enhancing the validity of the study. The analysis and interpretation was closely supervised by the chair of my doctoral committee.

The theoretical interpretation for this study is based structuration theory and critical theory. They served as a lens to view the findings of the study. Structuration theory is used to identify and the specific relationships between agency and structure as experienced by the participants of this study. However, the researcher looked beyond a value neutral explanation by using elements of critical theory to examine ethical considerations. The theories provide an organized way to understand the experiences of student veterans.

A starting point for understanding the theoretical context for this study is to identify micro and macro-level phenomena. The GI Bill can be described as a macro-level phenomenon

because it is a broad, static, and institutionally structured societal effort to promote education for veterans. A student-veteran's family life can be described as a micro-level phenomenon because it is something specific to the individual and varies widely. Sociologists can explain the role of student-veterans and the role of the GI Bill by examining their relationship to each other. For example, the creation of the GI Bill was a response to specific societal needs (e.g., to recruit soldiers and create an educated class).

This study followed in the footsteps of Olson (2011) by using Giddens' (1984) structuration theory to examine enabling and constraining factors. Giddens' (1984) theory is based on sociological concepts known as agency and structure. Agency refers to an individual's ability to exert free-will and structure refers to the aspects of society that can inhibit free-will through adherence to an established set of social rules. Agency can also be understood as a person's ability to act with free will and autonomy whereas structure can be understood as the social rules that put people on a track that leads to pre-determined outcomes. Early theorists thought of agency and structure as polar opposites whereas Giddens (1984) thought of agency and structure as things that were intertwined. Giddens (1984) recognized that societal elements are non-linear because multiple, often competing, social factors affect each other at the same time. Giddens' (1984) structuration theory lends itself to the analytical methods pioneered by Strauss (1987) because elements of agency and structure can be identified through the thematic analysis of interview transcripts.

Critical theory seeks to critique social phenomena by examining power structures and identifying how people do and do not benefit from the social situations in which they are positioned. Critical theory was used to help interpret the experiences of student veterans by providing a moral orientation. Freire (1970/2009) used critical theory to examine praxis,

pedagogy, and power relationships while advocating for important changes to education systems. Freire felt it was his moral duty to liberate society through education and a shared approach to creating knowledge. Similarly, my study sought to identify enabling and constraining factors for pursuing higher education and interpret those factors in a critical manner while advocating for educational opportunities for veterans.

Structuration theory and critical theory provided the theoretical framework for this study. The participants' experiences can be explained by understanding both the macro and micro relationships between macro and micro social phenomena. Structuration theory builds on this concept by examining the relationships between agency and structure. Critical theory was then used to understand power relationships associated with the noted relationships and thus offers a moral orientation for how the data is interpreted.

### **Validity**

Some of the primary threats to validity of this qualitative research project included personal bias, preexisting relationships, and reactivity. No study is without threats to validity but threats can be mitigated through several key practices. Disclosing biases, maintaining transparency, and conducting member checks contributed to the validity of this study. The use of triangulation, especially across different forms of data, also enhances the validity of the findings.

My personal biases represented a potential threat to the validity of the research. Creswell (1998) noted that “qualitative researchers bring their values, biases, and understandings to a project” (p. 114). I am a combat veteran with extensive experience as a student. My experiences have shaped my perceptions of how veterans operate within higher education environments. Moreover, my experiences and past observations of my veteran peers have shaped the way I perceive higher education professionals who work with veterans. The personal experiences can

both inform and distort my proposed study. However, it is not uncommon for veterans to study veterans affairs because a plethora of relevant material has been published by veterans (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Hamrick & Rumann, 2011; Lokken, et. al., 2009; McGrevey & Kehrer, 2009). Given that a large amount of credible research has been conducted by veterans, my study should not lose credibility solely on the basis of my status as a veteran. In fact, Holstein and Gubrium (1995) argued that "the interviewer's background knowledge can sometimes be an invaluable resource for assisting respondents to explore and describe their circumstances, actions, and feelings" (p. 45). Maxwell (2005) also noted that a researcher's background experience can be leveraged to benefit a study. Accordingly, I intend to leverage my experiences to understand the experiences of other veterans. I addressed my personal biases through open disclosure and personal comments added to field notes. I also made a conscious effort to aggressively search for non-conforming evidence that could invalidate my personal beliefs.

Preexisting relationships were another challenge to the validity of this study. I served in the West Virginia Army National Guard and had the opportunity to work with a wide range of personnel who were previously or who are presently college students. Accordingly, I intentionally avoided interviewing veterans that I deployed with or supervised.

The reactivity of the participants was also an important validity concern because their behavior may change due to my presence. Moreover, they may have told me what they think I wanted to hear during interviews. One way of dealing with the challenge was to ask the participants if my interpretation of events is correct and ask if anything has changed as a result of my presence. Member checks, as described by Maxwell (2005), were used to keep me on track.



The credibility of any study would be limited in cases where data were gathered from a single source or type of source. This study took a broad approach to gathering data by conducting interviews, soliciting feedback from cultural informants, and conducting member checks. The Seidman (1991) method of interviewing each participant three times allowed for a type of built-in triangulation. Each interview was built on the last interview(s) and allowed me to ask follow-up questions, review previous responses, and ask if I understood everything correctly. The three-step sequence also allowed for the possibility of patterns to emerge and themes to repeat within some or all of the interviews thereby increasing the validity of the study.

The main dangers to validity included personal bias, the influence of preexisting relationships, and reactivity. The threats were mitigated by disclosing biases, maintaining transparency, conducting member checks, and through triangulation. The noted strategies, applied in concert, enhanced the validity of the study.

## CHAPTER 4

### GARY

#### *“I hated college life.”*

This chapter examines the lived experiences of Gary (a pseudonym) by using data from a series of three interviews conducted with him. The initial biographical narrative is composed, in large part, of his direct quotes. The extensive use of quotes woven together to produce a biographical narrative is a strategy aimed at maximizing the opportunity to give voice to the participant while focusing on the research objectives. His experiences with a campus climate occurred before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) and he is one of three participants from that time period. This chapter, in part, answers the following research question: How do a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate before the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly? This chapter will provide a biography, analysis, and discussion of Gary's lived experiences.

#### **Biography**

Gary was 45 years old during the time he was interviewed. He was originally from the southern coal fields of West Virginia. His father worked in the coal industry and was a Vietnam veteran. The participant described “one point in the late 70s, early 80s where the mines hit a big down turn. And they closed a bunch of mines where my Dad was working.” Gary described the situation the following way:

The bad thing was he had enough time in the mines to where if they'd called him back he could've made it to retirement. So instead when he got laid off he stayed

laid off and they would call in younger people in to do the same thing. So my dad was never able to get back into that again.

His mother worked two jobs to “make ends meet.” He spoke of the hardships his family experienced and their ways of overcoming them. When asked about growing up in West Virginia, he said, “I can remember my mom... had a friend who was a manager of a Long John Silvers [who would give her leftovers] ...So when she got home that was dinner.... We were all sitting around eating the cornbread, hushpuppies, and stale fries. That was our dinner 'cause she couldn't afford anything else.” Following in his father's footsteps, Gary enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1987. When asked about his motivation to join the military, he replied, “I just knew that was the only way to get immediate medical benefits.” He also noted: “Another reason why I joined the service was to alleviate the extra mouth to feed.” He traveled extensively during the time he was in the military and served in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Germany, Honduras, Iraq, Korea, Kuwait, and other locations. “I'm proud of what I did. Proud that I served,” he said, noting he retired early in 2004.

He initially struggled with poverty following his military service. When discussing his economic situation he said he had, “No savings, no nothing.” He described his situation as having “zero income, zero money in the bank, no place to live.” He moved to the West Virginia county which was the target location for this study, because it was located within close proximity to several veterans' service organizations. He was initially homeless but he worked diligently to improve his situation by enrolling in college, seeking employment, and applying for housing through a government program. He noted, “I tell people about this, especially veterans coming in and things like that, and they look at me like I was stupid. ‘You should have went and got this from the welfare office, you should've went and got that.’ I still come from a generation that is

embarrassed to do that.” Indeed, once he began to receive his military retirement payments, he secured housing through a program that charged rent based on a percentage of his income. He expressed an appreciation for this program and noted, “At least I was going to be paying something. So I did that until I graduated college and got my job.”

His early college experiences were difficult, especially because he slept in a car parked on a university parking lot. His financial benefits from his military retirement and his student funding were slow to reach him. This left him in the position of being temporarily homeless. Unbeknownst to him, his car was not properly registered and it had been reported stolen by a creditor due to non-payment. He told me a story of a time when the university police knocked on his car window one morning because they had conducted a check of his license plate and found a problem. The police decided to tow the car. He described the situation like this:

I had no bags except for my book bag. So I got this garbage bag and I pop the trunk put all my clothes that I have and I got my little thing, my little book bag, and I go to walk to class and they said, "We're going to tow it, this is where it's going to be. If you can work out a deal with whoever you owe money to, whatever." I walk up to the math class, by now it's 8:15 and [the instructor] has already locked the door. I knock on the door. He walked out, he wasn't going to let me in. He looked and he seen this big garbage bag full of clothes, all my books and I just looked dejected. He shut the door and he looks and says, "What happened?" I said, "I've been sleeping in my car and they just towed it"... So I went in and took the test and for the next two weeks I slept on a park bench, until my money finally came in. At the beginning, you know, that was the beginning of

October when the checks finally hit and I had all these paper checks and I went and got them cashed. I found someplace to live.

He overcame his initial obstacles and embarked on a new journey as a college student. His living situation stabilized as he climbed the academic ladder pursuing multiple degrees. The participant stated, "I went from an associate's to a master's degree in three years." However, for the purposes of this dissertation, I only interviewed him about his undergraduate experience. He viewed education as a necessary step toward a better future, saying, "I believe education is a necessity." He went on to elaborate: "To me, college was a job. It wasn't fun, it wasn't something that I really wanted to do, but it was something that I had to do as a necessity to better my life. I looked at it as a job, as something that had to be completed." He was not entirely satisfied with the ways in which the university responded to him as a veteran. "I hated, hated, campus life" he stated. This was due, in part, to a combination of problems including housing challenges, transfer credit obstacles, difficulties with GI bill certification, and immature classmates.

Gary participated in the Vocational Rehabilitation Program administered by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. This program, available to veterans with disabilities connected to their military service, provides a range of benefits including extensive funding to attend college. Gary leveraged this funding to overcome homelessness and pursue higher education. His personal resilience paired with the available military oriented financial resources enabled him to overcome formidable challenges. When describing the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, Gary said that it "assigns you a counselor, that is supposed to help out with mental health issues but also educational issues, job training, resume writing, different things like that, putting you on that

path." This program provided funding for tuition and separate funding for living expenses which Gary described as approximately "\$1,500 bucks a month."

Gary maintained employment during most of his time as a college student. He was required to balance his time to succeed in each area. He recalled, "After my first semester I took a work study position" and "I would go to class, go straight to [work], walk back to class," and "I didn't spend a lot of time congregating on campus." He also found ways to balance his academic work when undergoing a serious surgery. He said, "The stress leading up to the surgery, then the surgery, then the stress after" was "a rough time, a really rough time." However, he completed much of his academic work from his hospital bed and said, "I refused to stop." When reflecting on his college experiences he maintained what can be described as a military attitude toward handling obstacles as evidenced by his statement that "you don't whine, you don't bitch, and you don't stop until you get the job done, no matter what it is." He never stopped his academic pursuit and he expressed his resilience by saying "No matter what you come up against it's possible to stay focused and you will do the right thing." Accordingly, he balanced competing and intervening priorities in a manner that ultimately led to graduation.

When reflecting on his experiences, he expressed disappointment that his university did not grant him credit for his military education. He described an encounter with a university representative: "She looked at me and I was sitting there with my [military] transcript and she says, 'We don't take any of that'... I'm actually starting all over like I was a freshman just with a load of extra hours on my transcript. I'm like, 'You're kidding me' and she said, 'No.'" His frustration was compounded by an interaction with another staff member who was responsible for evaluating military transcripts. The staff member asked, "Why should I give credit to people

that throw hand grenades?” This situation was especially offensive to the participant. He went on to explain:

They look at it, [military education as] unclassified. It has nothing to do with your degree, [so] you’re not getting anything. It is wrong, and that is the problem with 80-85% of the institutions in the country. They don’t sit down, they don’t evaluate the military education and training based on the current college catalog and courses listed to find out if it’s [appropriate] to substitute one for the other. It actually states inside the ACE [American Council on Education] guide book that you should treat a military transcript like you would a transcript from Duke University for a student transferring in.

His challenges, within the context of academia, primarily included the navigation of procedural bureaucracies. He encountered stiff opposition from his university when attempting to transfer academic credits earned within the military to his civilian university.

When describing the advocacy services provided to him through a vocational rehabilitation program, the participant noted that his advocate “did not know how to fight for me with a college and a university.” The participant went on to elaborate: “All he could say is, ‘Well, that’s their policy. We’ll just have to start you out all over again.’ So I thought it was pretty sad.” The transfer credit obstacles may have slowed his progression through his degree programs but he persisted and ultimately graduated with three degrees.

He also expressed frustration with how university officials dealt with veterans who used the GI Bill. His frustration was based on his experience as a student as well as his more recent employment experience as a university staff member who worked extensively with student veterans. When discussing his experience with the university, he said, “They think *they* certify

eligibility. It's not the case. The Veterans Administration approves eligibility for a benefit. The school certifies enrollment only." However, his university adopted what he felt was an unnecessarily burdensome administrative step directed toward certifying veteran's eligibility. This caused bureaucratic red tape and a domino effect of problems that could have been avoided. When discussing the university certification paperwork, he noted that "if a veteran didn't fill it out or forgot to, their benefits would be late." This, in turn, can and has caused hardships on the student veteran population. When asked about his recommendations for solving this problem, he said university personnel should "do exactly what the job is- certify enrollment" as opposed to taking the unnecessary step of certifying eligibility.

He also expressed frustration with some of his fellow students who were less mature than he was. He was approximately 36 years old when he began attending a university located in the county in which this study was conducted. He attended courses with traditional college students who were comparatively younger than himself and described one encounter this way:

I had this kid that sat behind me and I swear that kid had some bad luck with girlfriends because it seemed like, every other week he was whining, "My girlfriend just broke up with me." I found that to be just so annoying, because there is this 18 year old kid, who is causing me, because I had already bad hearing anyway, to not actually be able to focus... I wanted to strangle him... It drove me nuts.

He went on to say, "There was such an age and experience gap so I couldn't effectively communicate with other students." He described another situation where he frequently observed student athletes sleeping in class: "It was an 8 am history class and I would look and think, how are they going to pass this class?... All of them were in the same position with their heads



pressing up against the wall. That just gave me a nasty, nasty, taste in my mouth about student athletes." When reflecting on his interactions with younger students, he said many of his classmates "were not raised properly and were the rudest little idiots I've ever seen in my life." He also observed other forms of immaturity within the context of a classroom environment. For example, he noted, "I couldn't believe that there were actually a lot of veterans there that didn't care about school. They were there to draw a benefit check and not have to work." He felt that such behavior was unacceptable and sought to participate in social activities with more mature veterans who were members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars organization "because the veterans of that generation were workers that either had or retired from careers. So I found their guidance more enlightening or beneficial than the guys that I knew for a fact didn't give a damn." He firmly believed student veterans should be diligently pursuing their academic goals and veterans who did not take their studies seriously were viewed with contempt. His philosophy also manifested in his professional life when he worked with student veterans on a college campus. He noted: "When a veteran comes in to this school, the first thing that I tell them is, if you're lazy and only here for a benefit's check, get out now. I only want the serious students here."

His frustration was not limited to students. He articulated what he felt was a deeper societal problem with individuals who behave in an irresponsible manner. He said, "The downfall of America is lazy people." This sentiment was best characterized by his comments regarding the university environment: "That's the way it is at the university. People are concerned with that little area that involves that three feet right in front of their nose. They're not worried about anything else. There is no community compassion anymore, none. So, I hated college life." His frustration stemmed from a perception, perhaps common among military service personnel, that individuals should assume a high degree of responsibility for the world

around them. Specifically, people should make an effort to extend their influence to the maximum extent possible in an effort to positively contribute to the outcome of any given situation. This philosophy is rooted in the Army leadership doctrine that states “multiskilled leaders must also be capable of extending influence” (U.S. Army, p. 7-11). Many civilians, from the perspective of the participant, fall short of the expectations associated with responsible behavior. For example, he described a lackadaisical attitude of some professors he encountered. He noted, “They stand up there and they lecture without adequate explanation and it drove me batty because you would want to question what they were teaching and they would say, write down your questions on a piece of paper, submit it at the end and if I have time, next session, I will try to answer your questions.” The participant viewed such actions as a form of laziness and he believed professors should behave in a more responsible manner consistent with their role as leaders within society.

One of the most unexpected outcomes of the interview process was a discussion of the connections between military service and drug use. Gary observed that some "veterans come off of active duty" with a predisposition toward drug addiction because of the ways they were medically treated while in the service. He noted that "Motrin" was a pill that "used to be the military's candy." He noted the use of medication and stimulants were common within the context of combat operations. He described the situation in the following way:

"Combat operations have been going for so long and wounds and stressors have been getting worse and worse. It went from Motrin to Hydrocodone and on top of that Hydrocodone they would give them muscle relaxers to help them sleep and on top of that they would give them five-hour energy drinks in the morning in the mess hall before they went on mission or patrol so they would wake back up. On

top of that they were given an antidepressant pill because they saw their buddies blow up yesterday."

Gary also believed the Veterans Administration often provides misguided help for veterans because, in his words, "the VA hospital is notorious for being a medicinal factory. Cured by medicine, not by treatment." This type of medical history among veterans can lead to drug use when integrating back into civilian life. Gary noted:

It's those people who end up in drug court and a majority of veterans are addicts who committed a crime because of an addiction. A majority of the time it is an addiction that started recently while on active duty to survive for an extended period of time in a combat situation in a high stress environment. So we get them in and we put them through the phases to in-patient treatment. Extensive counseling, extensive monitoring by probation.

Gary recognized this problem and advocated for the use of veteran drug courts, rehabilitation programs, and higher education as part of a holistic recovery effort.

Gary overcame formidable obstacles such as poverty and homelessness in his effort to pursue higher education. He expressed frustration with transfer credit obstacles, GI bill certification processes, and immature classmates. However, he also expressed satisfaction with his academic progress and noted, "My favorite part was knowing that I earned the grade." His experiences are distinguished by persistence and a resilient spirit best summarized by his statement, "I refused to stop." Indeed, he earned three college degrees before 2010 and is presently employed in support of student veterans.

## **Analysis**

An inductive content analysis was conducted of all interview data gathered from Gary and seven themes were identified. The themes are best understood within the broader context of enabling or constraining his academic pursuits. The participant described a number of situations in which his military oriented financial resources enabled him to continue his education. Other factors such as asymmetrical maturity, economic hardship, intervening priorities, negative interactions with campus representatives, and health problems served to constrain his ability to pursue higher education. An ancillary theme, neither enabling nor constraining, was also identified and it is best described as concerns regarding drugs. Each of the themes were recurrent throughout the series of interviews thus indicating the themes represent central issues that are representative of the participant's experience as a student.

**Enabling Factor.** The participant overcame a series of formidable obstacles and discussed them during the interviews. In the context of the numerous and substantial economic hardships he faced, military oriented financial resources were a significant enabling factor for Gary. Accordingly, a thematic category was established and labeled military oriented financial resources. These resources included a military retirement and funding for college brokered through a Vocational Rehabilitation program operated by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Although the resources associated with these sources were slow to reach Gary, he ultimately used them to stabilize his living situation and pursue his academic goals. Moreover, he would not have had the financial means to attend college without these sources of funding. Gary said his educational benefits totaled approximately "\$1,500 bucks a month" in addition to paying his tuition. His benefits, earned as a result of his military service, helped him overcome poverty and enabled him to experience upward social mobility.

**Constraining Factors.** Gary discussed a series of situations where he was frustrated with the actions and/or attitudes of students younger than himself. He entered college at the age of 36 as an experienced combat veteran and he had difficulty interacting with students who he believed did not take college seriously. These instances are articulated within Gary's biographical narrative and they constitute a thematic pattern that is best described as asymmetrical maturity. Gary's strongest statement indicative of this theme was, "There was such an age and experience gap so I couldn't effectively communicate with other students." The existence of asymmetrical maturity, as described by Gary's description of frustrating situations, was a constraining factor associated with the pursuit of higher education.

The participant experienced severe economic hardships before he entered college and during his first semester. His financial hardships are discussed within his biographical narrative and they emerged as a pattern throughout his series of interviews. Accordingly, a thematic category was created and labeled as economic hardship. Gary's strongest statement commensurate with this theme was his description of having, "zero income, zero money in the bank, no place to live." Moreover, he was homeless during his initial entry into college. This situation was clearly a constraining factor for him as he pursued his college education.

The concept of intervening priorities emerged as a theme throughout the series of interviews with Gary. He was required to balance his role as an employee with his role as a student while overcoming severe economic hardships. When speaking about the hardships of being employed and being a student, he noted, "I would go to class, go straight to [work], walk back to class," and "I didn't spend a lot of time congregating on campus." Given his situation, he was required to prioritize competing interests at various points throughout any given day in an effort to pursue degree attainment while remaining gainfully employed. The act of balancing

such priorities served as a constraining factor because having divergent priorities did not allow him to focus exclusively in his academic pursuits (when compared to traditional students who have not entered the labor market).

Gary discussed many situations where he interacted with campus representatives and these interactions tended to have a negative orientation. Given the frequency with which Gary discussed these negative interactions, a thematic category was established and labeled negative interactions with campus representatives. Gary's strongest statements about such interactions were voiced when he quoted campus representatives. A staff member tasked with evaluating Gary's transcript said, "We don't take any of that" and another staff member made the offensive comment: "Why should I give credit to people that throw hand grenades?" The overwhelming instances of interacting with university personnel were described, by Gary, within the context of a struggle, often against institutional policies. Clearly, negative interactions with campus representatives constrained Gary's ability to pursue his academic goals.

He also discussed a number of serious health problems he experienced while he was in college. Serious medical events placed him in the hospital for an extended period of time. The details of the medical conditions discussed with the participant are intentionally omitted from this manuscript in an effort to protect sensitive information. However, the ways he dealt with such illnesses were discussed within his biographical narrative. He said, "I finished my undergrad studies from the hospital" and he described it as "a rough time, a really rough time." Given his medical complications and his effort to complete coursework while in the hospital, Gary's health problems were a constraining factor for his pursuit of academic goals.

**Ancillary Factor.** The nature of the open ended interview process allowed the participant to voice concerns that were important to him. One of the most surprising thematic categories that

emerged was a concern about the effect of drug use in society and among veterans. Although this area is largely outside the scope of this study, it did manifest as a thematic category relevant to higher education. Gary made repeated comments regarding his observations relating to other people's drug use. For example, he described "Motrin" as the "military's candy." He believed some veterans are predisposed to become addicted to drugs and that such veterans should undergo rehabilitation, in part, through higher education. The concern regarding drugs was important for Gary but it did not enable or constrain his path to graduation. Rather, he saw drugs as a constraining factor for other veterans and believed it could be overcome.

**Summary of Analysis.** The inductive content analysis of Gary's interview transcripts revealed seven thematic categories. The category of military orientated financial resources is best understood as an enabling factor. The categories of asymmetrical maturity, economic hardship, intervening priorities, negative interactions with campus representatives, and health problems are best understood as constraining factors. The ancillary category, concerns regarding drugs, is value neutral with regard to enabling or constraining his ability to obtain a college education.

The themes that emerged can also be understood within the context of personal or institutional orientations. For example, a theme with a personal orientation can be understood as a factor where the individual has more control of the outcome of a situation. A theme with an institutional orientation can be understood as a factor where an institution has more control of the outcome of a situation. Most of Gary's themes are best categorized as having a personal orientation. The two exceptions, negative interaction with campus representatives and military orientated financial resources, fall within an institutional orientation. Higher education administrators and practitioners tend to be concerned more with institutional factors and less with personal factors because institutional factors can be changed by leaders within the higher

education community. Therefore, Gary's institutional oriented interactions warrant discussion as they relate to the state of affairs within the sample area before West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) was passed.

## **Discussion**

Gary's experiences serve as an individual glimpse into the state of higher education for veterans, within the targeted county, prior to the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). Indeed, several of his largest institutional-related challenges were later addressed by state legislation. He described frustration and disappointment with not receiving what he felt was reasonable transfer credit for his academic transcript for military training. The difficulty with veterans receiving this type of transfer credit is documented within the existing research (Akerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Akerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Transfer credit obstacles were addressed by West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) by setting a requirement for state institutions to develop a uniform state-wide policy for granting such credit. Indeed, the state legislation served as an acknowledgement that a problem existed and the legislation sought to fix the problem by mandating a uniform approach for granting credit.

The participant also described difficulty interacting with key personnel employed by his university. He was especially offended by a hostile staff member who said, "Why should I give credit to people that throw hand grenades?" He was also frustrated by a professor who did not afford a reasonable opportunity for him to ask questions. When describing a counselor, he noted that the counselor "did not know how to fight for me with a college and a university." The participant was also frustrated with his university's bureaucratic approach to certification processes associated with the G.I. Bill. Specifically, his university was operating from a false assumption that they needed to certify eligibility when, in fact, they only needed to certify



enrollment. Similar hostilities within the context of campus life and similar bureaucratic challenges for veterans are well documented in the existing literature (Stever, 1996; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Hall, 2009; Akerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Akerman, & Mitchell, 2008).

The state legislation (House Bill 4545, 2010) addressed these issues by requiring institutions to appoint trained faculty members to serve as liaisons for veterans. If the provisions within this legislation were in effect and implemented during the time the participant was in college, he may have had a better college experience. As noted in his interviews, he valued the education while simultaneously hating college life. This dichotomy was apparent in his statements that college was “something that I had to do as a necessity to better my life” and “I hated college life.”

The participant did succeed in his academic pursuits in spite of the constraining factors he experiences (i.e., asymmetrical maturity, economic hardship, intervening priorities, negative interactions with campus representatives, and health problems). His personal resilience undoubtedly contributed to his success. Accordingly, college recruiters should consider targeting potential students who have a proven history of demonstrating personal resilience because that characteristic may be indicative of a tendency to complete a college program. Additional quantitative research is recommended in this area to better understand the relationship between personal resilience and degree completion rates.

This chapter has, in part, answered the following research question: How do a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate before the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly? Gary's college experience occurred before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). His

biographical narratives combined with the analysis and discussions yielded information about how he directly experienced and perceived his campus climate before the passage of the law. Gary is one of the three participants who attended college prior to the passage of the law. This chapter provided an in-depth individual account of Gary's experiences. Group analyses of multiple participants will be presented in a later chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### LESLIE

*“Sometimes I butt heads with the system.”*

This chapter examines the lived experiences of Leslie (a pseudonym) by using data from a series of three interviews conducted with her. The initial biographical narrative is composed, in large part, of her direct quotes. The extensive use of quotes woven together to produce a clear narrative is a strategy aimed at maximizing the opportunity to give voice to the participant while focusing on the research objectives. Her experiences with a campus climate occurred before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) and she is one of three participants from that time period. This chapter, in part, answers the following research question: How do a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate before the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly? This chapter will provide a biography, analysis, and discussion of Leslie's lived experiences.

#### **Biography**

Leslie was 31 years old during the time she was interviewed. She was originally from Eastern Ohio and lived a short distance from West Virginia. Several of her family members served in the military. When discussing her military heritage, she said, “My dad and my brother-in-law were Navy; they were in Korea. And I have two uncles that were in Vietnam and a cousin that was in the Marines.” She is the oldest of three siblings and the only one who served in the military and obtained a college education. Her family has ties to rural Appalachia and she noted:

My mom grew up on a farm and ever since I was little I worked on the farm with my granddad until he passed away. Grandma still has the farm. My uncle works it

now, now that the kids have kind of all moved out and away. But mom still lives out in that general area.

When discussing her mother Leslie said, “She came from kind of a poor family, and we were kind of a poor family, so she pretty much had to get a job to support us.” She went on to say “we were kind of poor so I mean there were always things that we wanted that we couldn’t afford to get.”

She became familiar with military recruiters who were stationed within close proximity to her high school and the educational benefits they discussed were an attractive prospect because, in her words, “Neither one of my parents could afford to send me to college.” She enlisted in the West Virginia Army National Guard in 1999 and served as an Automated Logistics Specialist. Her main duty station was in West Virginia but she also served in other locations such as Fort Jackson, Fort Lee, and in Germany. When reflecting on her motivation to join the military, she expressed her interest in acquiring funding for a college education, by noting she would “actually have a shot to go to college and make something of myself.” She decided to join the Army National Guard because the nature of that type of service provided a nexus that allowed her to pursue patriotic service to her country, maintain the feeling of comfort associated with living in a familiar area, and provide a way to attend college. She described the benefits of enlisting as “a way to take classes in college and try out the military” and “still be able to stay home where I was already comfortable” as well as providing “a way to go to college. I didn’t have one before.”

Leslie also participated in a Vocational Rehabilitation Program hosted by the federal Veterans Benefits Administration. She described her benefits by saying "they paid my 100%

tuition. They paid for whatever books I needed. They gave me like \$50 a month for my supplies and then I got a stipend on top of that every month." This program enabled her to attend college and complete her degree. When reflecting on the value of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, she recalled, "Everything was taken care of" in terms of her basic needs as a student. When discussing her first few semesters in college, she recalled using a strategy of maintaining employment and taking only a limited number of courses because, in her words, "I was trying to balance everything out and make sure that it worked." She initially attended college while serving in the West Virginia Army National Guard. She described her strategy by saying, "Whenever I start a semester my first thought is okay I need to make sure that I give myself time to do the assignments." She also noted, "I also have to make sure I have time to study you know for exams and stuff like that while still making sure I have time with family."

She began her academic pursuits at a satellite campus for a large university within the state of West Virginia. She described her first day of college this way:

I remember going to the first day and you're so lost. I mean you don't know where anything is and then you know you find it and you're like, "Oh my God I'm starting to school again." Like I remember how nervous you are at the beginning of every school year as you're going through school. Oh my gosh what's this year going to be like? What are these classes going to be like? And it was very nerve racking but I remember walking into the door and I think my heart just started racing.

She eventually began to take courses on the main campus and experienced difficulty with receiving transfer credit for academic work completed as part of her military service. She

described the situation this way: "I butted heads with quite a few of the offices down there trying to get all my military stuff processed." She went on to elaborate, "The admission's counselor that did the transfer actually had the nerve to look at me and say 'Why should I give you credit for throwing hand grenades.' That's what he said to me point blank." She described her feelings about the situation in this manner: "Of course that irked me to no end because my thought is, is that honestly all you think I did?" She went on to say; "That was just the attitude that they had at the time so, which as far as I know as far as [the university] goes I don't think that's changed much." She was not the only veteran present or the only veteran offended by such comments as evidenced by her statement: "I mean there's like three veterans in this room and we're the ones that have a problem with this and nobody else is saying anything and it's like the amount of frustration you just want to get that out and you know make sure that people know." She eventually received three transfer credit hours and they were granted as physical education credits. However, she was disappointed she did not receive more credit hours and she was disappointed she did not receive credit for the technical training she completed as a soldier.

Her frustration with university bureaucracy was apparent when she discussed key aspects of her college experience. She expressed frustration with a staff member who made a disrespectful comment regarding her attempt to transfer her military credits to her college transcript. Her recollection of the man's statement was, "Why should I give you credit for throwing hand grenades?" However, the context in which the dialog occurred was an institutional framework that made it difficult to receive such transfer credit. For example, even if the staff member had been polite and respectful during the instance she cited, she still would not have received the transfer credit she sought due to the university policy. She noted, "I don't like that kind of bureaucratic system and sometimes I butt heads with the system because of that."

When reflecting on her experiences, she noted, "I think the biggest limitations that I've had is just kind of that bureaucratic office." She believed university officials were operating from when she called a "good old boy" system where she was expected to do something in return for a favorable transcript evaluation. She recalled "if you haven't done anything for them they're not going to do anything for you." Other examples of procedural bureaucracies manifested throughout her interviews. She described a situation in which a campus representative worked in a position to support veterans. However, she believed the university impaired the ability of the staff member to serve veterans by limiting the scope of his duties. She noted, "The worst thing that you can do is limit what they can do because when you limit what they can do you limit how effective they are for the veterans and it kind of makes that position almost useless." She described her university as a "notorious micromanager" insofar as some staff members were limited, compartmentalized, and lacking in the authority needed to get things accomplished.

She also expressed frustration with the slow pace associated with actually receiving educational benefits from the Veterans Administration. She said, "God love them, they are one of the slowest things whenever it comes to the federal government." Additionally, she expressed a frustration within the bureaucratic ways some universities provided advice to veterans. For example, veterans are often advised to apply for certain newer versions of Veterans Administration benefits at the cost of losing other Veterans Administration benefits. However, one type of benefit may be more financially advantageous than another type of benefit and it takes a knowledgeable person to make that type of determination. When discussing university staff members, she said, "I think they should research everything and make sure that they know what's going to be best for that veteran and not just point everybody over in this direction because it's new and it's hip."

Her transfer credit obstacles did not detour her from pursuing her goals and becoming comfortable as a student. She said: "Once I got started I got really comfortable with it real quick cause I guess like my mom says I'm a lifetime student. I'm comfortable in a classroom." She pursued her education with an enthusiastic spirit. She noted, "I was gung-ho" and "it was nothing for me to take 20 credits at the same time." She was able to complete an associate's degree in a short amount of time because, in her words, "I'd just bang it out you know. Cause I mean I had dropped back to working part-time and where I was drawing my GI Bill that helped a little bit with the financial status." In fact, she used her personal experiences with the military and the corresponding funding for college to inform other students about the options available to them. She described a situation where she wrote and delivered a persuasive speech for an English class:

My persuasive argument was that, you know the National Guard would be a good option at that level because I mean you're talking about beginning college students and a lot of them, unless your parents are paying for it or you've won some kind of scholarship, a lot of them are getting loans and they don't know how they're going to pay these loans back and all that stuff. So I was trying to persuade them that the National Guard would be a good thing because it would help them pay for their college plus they would get all this experience like I had.

She described some interactions with fellow students as positive. However, she did articulate a gap in age and experience between traditional students and student veterans. She sought to use her experience and maturity to assist the traditional students. She described a situation where she and other veterans positively interacted with non-veteran students:



We were the parent figures because it was, we were older and we were a little more experienced with the world and so whenever it came to them having problems a lot of them would come to us and talk to us and be like, "Okay, now how would you resolve this so that I get an idea, you know, what I need to do?" And whenever it come down to time to study they wanted us with them because they knew that we're one of those that we're going to keep them on track.

She completed an associate's degree and began working on a bachelor's degree. During that time, she interacted with other veterans on campus and provided assistance to an instructor to develop a course for veterans. It was a freshman-level, veterans-only course designed to introduce veterans to the university, inform them of existing services, and promote study skills.

In her words:

[The class] was geared for veterans only and that way you know we get them kind of in that group and they've got something in common with that group but yet it's a way to get them used to the university life. It was our first attempt at trying to assist with that transition because it really is a culture shock whenever you're a veteran and you're older than most of the students that are on the campus.... A lot of the things that we talked about were what veterans were going to need on campus and off campus. So we talked to them about the different veterans' organizations in the area. We actually had several of [the organization representatives] come in and speak to the class itself.

Her college experience also included a number of challenges. While she served as a role model for some younger students, she was also aggravated by the immaturity of others. Leslie

described herself and other student-veterans in comparison to traditionally aged younger students by saying, "We were older and we were a little more experienced with the world." She also noted, "The biggest challenges that I faced was in trying to be in class with the younger people" because "all they want to do is go out and party." She mentioned, "They really don't care whether they do well. So to me that was kind of a shock because I've never really been like that." She went on to elaborate by saying:

It was kind of hard for me to adjust being around those people and it's still to this day if I had classes with those kind of people it would still aggravate me, really, because I mean you're sitting here thinking all of us are doing this to better ourselves to pursue a degree and then you've got these two or three people that are just kind of sitting in the back of the room and they might be talking to each other, which disturbs the rest of the class you know. Like I said that was my biggest problem with going back to school, really, was that I just didn't really like having those people in the class. I guess I kind of felt like they should just like kick them out of class.

Leslie's challenges were not limited to social dynamics of the classroom. She also encountered academic challenges, especially when pursuing a bachelor's degree in the medical field. She said, "It was a whole different kind of class, whole different kind of studying that I had to get used to" and "it was a whole different kind of thing and I had to kind of get my mind around it. It took that first semester to really get my mind around what they were asking me for."

Leslie was able to overcome her challenges, in part, because she had friends and family members who provided her with support. She said, "I had a wonderful support system" because:

[Family members were] behind me every step of the way and God love them even when there were days where I was just so frustrated I would ball my eyes out and just rant and rave over the phone, they were there to sit there and listen to me and you know try to get me back to that point where I'm focused and I know I can do this.

She successfully completed her undergraduate degrees and went on to work in the medical field. When reflecting on her experiences, she said, "I loved being a student." When asked if she could offer advice to new student-veterans, she responded this way:

I think finding a person that's already done this would be a good idea especially because if you have someone that's already taken the same kind of courses that you're taking now then it would really help to have that person that you could call and say okay, "I'm lost what do I do?".... I think in the military that's the number one thing. You look to your leaders and you figure out how to do the things that you do from what they do. So if you can find someone to talk to, to be there, that understands your situation I think that would be the best thing.

The participant provided her own unique leadership to other students while she was in college. For example, she discussed a situation where she and other veterans were able to serve as a role model for younger students at a satellite campus. She also provided assistance to other veterans on her campus by maintaining employment through a work-study program where she supported the enrollment certification process for student veterans. She also helped to develop a veterans-only college orientation course for freshmen. Within the context of the classroom, she noted, "I was the mentor" and she sought to "assist with that transition" veterans experience

between military life and college life. She described her interactions with other veterans as “coming together and being with someone that I have kind of a kinship with again.” Her caring attitude was apparent in her academic trajectory insofar as she choose a path in the medical field and she later became employed in a medical profession in direct support of veterans.

Her caring attitude also became apparent in her discussion of drug use among veterans. She observed that "we've got a lot more drugs in this area lately." She elaborated on the subject by saying the following:

Here lately we have seen a lot more drug usage than what you would hear about before. I mean it may have been here before but you hear about it on the news you know especially the meth right now is a big thing. And you hear people being arrested all the time for meth charges, having the meth lab, which is very dangerous to anybody that's in the building around them. And we have unfortunately seen a few veterans that you know just they come back and they have a traumatic brain injury or they have the prospects of PTSD and for them it's kind of an outlet. It's a way to numb it basically so they don't have to feel it.

Leslie's lived experiences serve to inform higher education practitioners and policy makers of how a campus climate was experienced within one West Virginia county before West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) was passed. Her biography contributes to a broader understanding of the difficulties veterans experienced as they pursued college degrees as nontraditional students.

## **Analysis**

An inductive content analysis was conducted of all interview data gathered from Leslie and eight themes were identified. The themes are best understood within the larger context of

enabling or constraining her academic pursuits. The participant described situations in which her mechanisms of family support and her military oriented financial resources enabled her to continue her education. Other factors such as asymmetrical maturity, economic hardship, intervening priorities, and procedural bureaucracy, and negative interaction with campus representatives served to constrain her ability to pursue higher education. An ancillary theme, neither enabling nor constraining, was also identified and it is a concern regarding drugs. All of the themes were recurrent throughout the series of interviews with Leslie, thus indicating the themes represent central issues that are important in understanding the participant's experience as a student.

**Enabling Factors.** The participant consistently described the role her family support mechanisms played in her ability to successfully pursue her academic goals. When discussing the role her family members played within the context of college, she said they would provide encouragement to, "get me back to that point where I'm focused." Leslie described her family as a "Wonderful support system." Given the frequency with which she discussed the supporting role of her family and the importance of such support, a thematic category was identified and labeled as family support. Her narrative indicated that family support, in the form of encouragement, was a significant factor that enabled her to achieve her academic goals.

Leslie's military oriented financial resources also played a key role in enabling her to attend college. Indeed, it was these resources that attracted her to the military. For example, when describing her motivation to join the military, she cited the financial benefits for college and indicated she would "actually have a shot to go to college." She initially received funding through the G.I. Bill and she later participated in a Vocational Rehabilitation Program. She recalled that her financial benefits paid "100% tuition" and provided a monthly stipend. Indeed,

she likely would not have been able to attend college without the benefits she earned through her military service. Given her economic hardships, the military oriented financial resources was a significant enabling factor that equipped her with the funding needed to attend college.

**Constraining Factors.** The theme of asymmetrical maturity emerged throughout her series of interviews. She discussed situations where she had difficulty or frustration within the context of her interactions with younger college students. For example, she said, “The biggest challenges that I faced was in trying to be in class with the younger people.” Leslie also recalled, “It was kind of hard for me to adjust being around those people.” Her consistent recurring discussions about the ways in which such interactions occurred established a pattern and it became clear that asymmetrical maturity was a significant factor for how she experienced college. Indeed, her reaction to the disturbances caused by what she viewed as immature students was characterized by her comment that someone should “kick them out of class.” Given the difficulty she faced when interacting with some of the younger students and the distractions she experienced, her experiences with asymmetrical maturity can be understood as a constraining factor for her pursuit of a college education.

The participant experienced several economic hardships as evidenced by her discussions during the interview process. For example, when discussing her family’s socioeconomic status, she said, “We were kind of a poor family.” Moreover, she noted, “Neither one of my parents could afford to send me to college.” She also mentioned that the military’s funding for college was a significant factor that contributed to her motivation to enlist in the service. Given the prevalence of economic hardships, as manifested in her interviews, a thematic category was established and labeled economic hardship. This was a significant hardship for her to overcome and it served as a factor that constrained her ability to attend college.

Leslie was required to balance a number of intervening priorities while she attended college. She maintained civilian employment, served in the West Virginia Army National Guard, and maintained responsibilities as a parent as she progressed through her academic programs. Moreover, she was required to participate in numerous military training exercises, including military operations in Germany, which required her to shift her focus away from academic work in an effort to meet her military service obligations. Given her many and time consuming responsibilities, she did not have the luxury of focusing exclusively on her academic studies. The nature of having multiple and competing responsibilities required the participant to masterfully balance those responsibilities in an effort to succeed in each area. Accordingly, the notion of intervening priorities emerged as a theme that cut across her series of interviews. This theme represents a constraining factor that Leslie overcame during her college experience.

The participant consistently expressed frustration with procedural bureaucracy within the context of her interactions with university personnel. For example, she said, "I don't like that kind of bureaucratic system and sometimes I butt heads with the system." Her main frustration was centered on the transfer credit obstacles she faced when she applied to receive college credits for her military education. Her interactions with university officials tasked with transcript evaluation were consistently negative and one staff member was outright insulting. Moreover, she expressed concern for veterans receiving bad advice from other university representatives and she noted frustration with the slow pace associated with the bureaucratic process for applying for federal financial benefits for college. Given the multiple instances of frustration expressed throughout the series of interviews and the common bureaucratic element at the root of her frustrations, a thematic category was established and labeled as procedural bureaucracy. This

theme captures the central element responsible for constraining Leslie's pursuit of a college education.

Leslie described numerous instances where she experienced negative interactions with campus representatives. She described her campus as the "poster child for what not to do" for veterans. When discussing the social climate for veterans on her campus, she said "we were kind of the shadow basically." She discussed her challenges by noting the limitations imposed on her by what she referred to as "that bureaucratic office." She expressed frustration with a staff member who made a derogatory comment regarding her attempt to transfer credits. She recalled a meeting she attended where a small group of veterans met with university officials in an effort to advocate for a better system to transfer military transcripts into acceptable college credits. During that meeting, she recalled university officials making insulting comments about the military and she said there were "three veterans in this room and we're the ones that have a problem with this and nobody else is saying anything and it's like the amount of frustration you just want to get that out and you know make sure that people know. Look at what the system is really like." When Leslie reflected upon her experiences as a student-veteran, she said "there was not as much emphasis on being veteran friendly back then." Given the numerous instances she described, a thematic category was identified as negative interaction with campus representatives.

**Ancillary Factor.** The participant's concern regarding drugs emerged as an ancillary factor. Although not related to her individual experience as a college student, her concern was articulated within the context of a broader concern regarding drug use among the veteran population. For example, she noted that some veterans, "have a traumatic brain injury or they have the prospects of PTSD and for them [drugs are] kind of an outlet." She also expressed concern for the growing methamphetamine epidemic within her community. Her recurrent



expressions of concern regarding this topic indicate it is a significant concern for her. However, it did not enable or constrain her individual pursuit of a college education.

**Summary of Analysis.** The inductive content analysis of Leslie's interview transcripts revealed seven thematic categories. The categories of family support and military orientated financial resources are understood as enabling factors. The categories of asymmetrical maturity, economic hardship, intervening priorities, procedural bureaucracy, and negative interaction with campus representatives are understood as constraining factors. The ancillary category, concerns regarding drugs, is value neutral regarding her ability to obtain a college education.

The emergent themes can also be understood within the context of personal or institutional orientations. For example, a theme with a personal orientation is characterized by the individual having more control of the outcome of a situation. A theme with an institutional orientation is characterized by the institution having more control of the outcome of a situation. Most of Leslie's themes are best categorized within the scope of a personal orientation. The three exceptions, procedural bureaucracy, negative interaction with campus representatives, and military orientated financial resources, fall within an institutional orientation. Higher education administrators and practitioners tend to give more weight to institutional factors and less weight to personal factors because institutional factors can be changed by leaders within the higher education systems. Therefore, Leslie's institutional oriented interactions warrant discussion because they relate to the state of affairs within the sample area before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010).

## Discussion

Leslie's experiences serve as an individual glimpse into the state of higher education for veterans, within the targeted county, prior to the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). Indeed, several of the issues she discussed were later addressed by the state legislation. For example, she mentioned a need for better referral services and a desire to make it easier for colleges to transfer credits. The recent legislation is an attempt to bridge the gap between higher education institutions and other organizations that specialize in veterans' services. West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) requires state operated colleges to communicate with other veterans' organizations in an effort to promote the wellbeing of veterans. Additionally, the law requires institutions to coordinate disability services with private, state, and federal agencies. Thus, the participant's recommendation comports with the law that was passed after she completed her undergraduate degrees. Indeed, her recommendation for colleges to "make sure that they're offering [veterans] the right things" is a prime example of the intent behind West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). Furthermore, she felt it is important for university personnel to understand and help veterans. This suggestion also came to fruition through a provision of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) that requires colleges to provide counselors who are trained to respond to the needs of veterans. Indeed, providing such services has become commonplace throughout the United States (Cate, 2011; Cook & Kim, 2009).

When reflecting on her college experience, she noted that "There was not as much emphasis on being veteran friendly back then." Her chief complaint was that she was insulted by a staff member's comment when attempting to transfer military training into college credits. However, the bureaucratic framework for transferring credits was also a constraining factor for her. The difficulty veterans face when applying to receive transfer credit for their military

education is documented within the existing research (Akerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Akerman, & Mitchell, 2008). It is a known issue throughout the country and state legislators responded to this problem by passing West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) which, in part, requires state institutions to develop a blanket policy for transferring credits. Had such requirements been in place when she attended college, she may not have experienced the procedural bureaucracy she discussed during the interviews. When asked about her thoughts regarding the modern trend of universities employing specialized personnel to assist veterans, she replied, “I think that it’s a step in the right direction that they’re trying to get the veterans’ advocates.” She had a number of negative interactions with campus representatives and those interactions shaped her experience as a student veteran. West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) now requires individual degree programs to appoint trained faculty members to serve as liaisons for student veterans. If such personnel were available to provide services to Leslie, then she may not have experienced as much negative interaction with campus representatives.

This chapter has, in part, answered the following research question: How do a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate before the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly? Leslie's college experience occurred within the sample area before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). Her biographical narrative combined with the analysis and discussion yielded information about how she directly experience and perceive her campus climate before the passage of the law. Leslie is one of three participants who attended college prior to the passage of the law. This chapter provided an individual overview of Leslie's experiences. Group analyses of multiple participants will be presented in a later chapter.

## CHAPTER 6

### MATTHEW

*“I thought I would just keep my mouth shut and get through this.”*

This chapter examines the lived experiences of Matthew (a pseudonym) by using data from a series of three interviews conducted with him. The initial biographical narrative is composed, in large part, of his direct quotes. The extensive use of quotes woven together to produce a narrative is a strategy aimed at maximizing the opportunity to give voice to the participant while focusing on the research objectives. His experiences with a campus climate occurred before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) and he is one of three participants from that time period. This chapter, in part, answers the following research question: How do a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate before the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly? This chapter will provide a biography, analysis, and discussion of Matthew's lived experiences.

#### **Biography**

Matthew was 66 years old during the time he was interviewed. He was born in West Virginia and his parents hailed from the same area. When discussing his parent's background he said they met at a roller skating venue: “Roller skating was real popular back then and that's where they met. They got married real young and had me. Then he went into the service.” Matthew recalled, "No one in my family had ever graduated from college. No one in the whole family and that's a big family." His stepfather was also a veteran having served in the U.S. Marine Corps. Matthew was raised in a small city environment and graduated from high school

when the Vietnam War was in progress. He described his path to becoming an Airman the following way:

I went to Eastern Kentucky University right out of High School. I played around so much I got under a 2.0 and then I lost my draft exempt status. I knew that I had to figure out what I was going to do before the Marines or the Army got me. I didn't want to crawl around in those jungles. So I joined the Air Force in 1968.

His decision to join the Air Force was an effort to exercise some degree of choice in the outcome of his life. He felt that, if he were drafted, he would have no choice. However, if he decided to join, then he would have a better opportunity ahead. He described his initial entry into military service this way:

I went to Texas to do boot camp and I must have scored pretty high on that test because they gave me the opportunity to go to tech school to become a load master. The load master is the guy that flies on the planes, cargo planes, and he supervises the loading and offloading, does the weights and balances, figures the fuel burn off. Makes sure the plane flies at the center of gravity.

He served in places such as Lackland Air Force Base, the Philippines, Vietnam, and other locations. He recalled the social challenges associated with returning from war by saying the following:

When we come back from Vietnam we didn't get a hero's welcome. They wanted to kill us, call us baby killers, and throw rotten tomatoes at you if you had on a uniform. It was terrible. . . They wanted to blame the wrong people for a war that nobody liked.

He completed his military service and began working as a police officer for a city in West Virginia. When describing his early days working for the police force, he identified racism as a major problem. He discussed what he, as a white male, perceived as a pervasive racially charged sentiment among members of the police force: "They had no peripheral vision; they couldn't see, you know, the ethnic side of anything. It was their way or the highway and that's how they wanted you to be." However, he held more inclusive views that stemmed from his military experience. He explained:

You know after being in the military and being with so many different nationalities and ethnic groups and things, [it was] like a melting pot and you've got to respect these people. A lot of times your life depended on them.

He enrolled in college and began to pursue a bachelor's degree within the state of West Virginia. His experiences with the university campus occurred in the Vietnam War era, several decades before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). He noted, "The sixties were very turbulent" and he experienced such turbulence through the overlapping and often competing roles of being a veteran, a police officer, and a student. These roles were apparent when he recalled the campus protests and riots in the town where he worked and attended college: "That first riot started, not sure how it started, but I was in the communications center working" and "the kids start setting fire to stuff, they were demonstrating against the Vietnam War." He explained the police "had riot gear and riot sticks and tear gas and pepper foggers and all that stuff. This went on for about two or three days." He said, "I don't know if comical was the word but they were dropping water balloons and mattresses and all this stuff on those policemen going into those dormitories." When reflecting on the campus riots he mentioned that, "There was a lot of heads knocked around and all kinds of stuff and there were civil rights violations. You name it.

There were a lot of hard feelings by that time” and “you can remember them calling the officers pigs.” Given the social tension on his campus and his status as both a Vietnam veteran and a police officer, he said:

I was a little, you know, hesitant letting anyone know what I did for a living when I started [attending college]. It’s hard for some kid that got hit in the head with a night stick that didn’t do anything, just to be out after curfew or something to have any respect if you were the one that did it or not. So it was, it was sort of a catch 22 thing for me. I thought I would just keep my mouth shut and get through this.

The participant was stigmatized by his status as a Vietnam veteran and as a police officer. The stigmas were manifested through the hostile campus climate and were articulated throughout the narrative data. For example, the participant said it was a "very turbulent" time and there were "hostile students" on campus who engaged in violent riots against the Vietnam War. He noted that many people "wanted to kill us." Moreover, his status as a police officer was also a source of social stigma within the college environment. He told several stories about how police were disliked by students and often referred to as "pigs," Given the tension present on campus, as demonstrated by the riots against the Vietnam War and the disdain toward police officers, the participant developed a strategy of remaining silent about his military and police experience while on campus. Additionally, when asked if he ever integrated his military experiences into his college course assignments, he said “you had to shy away from it back then because of the animosity for the military.”

Discussing his interactions with younger students, he said, “There were some hostile students.” He said the students “were more upset with a guy going to that war, a lot of them, than

a guy being on the police force. When you've got both going on in your life, it's a lot of animosity." When recalling some of the younger students in his classes, he said, "Some of them you could tell [they] had always been babies. Pretty well spoiled." He said, "I saw some real, just jerks that were pot heads. That's all they ever wanted to do you know. They were anti everything." When speaking of differences in maturity, he noted, "I got married at 24. I was 25 when I went to [the university] so I was older." However, his physical appearance worked to his advantage as evidenced by his recollection that, "I always looked young though. I once had that young baby face look I guess. So they really didn't look at me like I was [significantly older], except when I was wearing a suit." Given his employment as a law enforcement professional, he occasionally wore a suit to night classes. He recalled some younger peers "preferred to take night classes" because "they couldn't get up in the morning." He recalled "one girl in particular" that "never shut up." He discussed a situation where she asked him about his professional attire. She asked, "Why do you wear a suit to class every night? Are you trying to impress somebody like the professor or someone?" He recalled replying by saying "not really. I just got off of work and come in here." However, he was annoyed at her comment that was something to the effect of "I think you're just trying to impress someone trying to get a better grade or something." When reflecting on his interactions with some of his younger counterparts, he said "it would have been so easy to have quit and say the hell with all of you." However, he persisted in his effort to obtain a college level education by maintaining full time enrollment and majoring in law enforcement.

As time passed, he was able to interact with younger students in ways he described as positive. He noted:



As I progressed, you know, going from freshman to sophomore, you could see those kids coming around right in front of you. You know, maturing more and taking it more serious. Not the party animals that they were the year before. Just, there were a lot of them that wanted to get an education and make something out of [themselves].

When discussing interacting with other students within a sociology course, he noted, “They were able to understand me and I was able to understand them, especially the black community which definitely hated police for reasons. But I think when I come out of there I had some respect” and “I gave them some.” Matthew minored in sociology and the nature of the coursework allowed for discussions to occur within small group settings. He described a point where students:

Were actually feeling comfortable enough to say what was really on their minds instead of sitting there trying to get through it. I enjoyed that because I got to see a different perspective of the way people felt, like they were treated and wanted to be treated and wanted to treat other people.

He enjoyed interacting with people in ways that allowed him to learn about alternative perspectives and he believed having an understanding of diverse perspectives made him a better police officer.

The ways Matthew interacted with university professors were noteworthy because he described several encounters that are best categorized as unfriendly. Matthew described an interaction with a speech professor. The participant had to miss class because of an illness and the professor reacted in a negative way as evidenced by Matthew’s account:

[The professor] made me, go to the emergency room and find the doctor that treated me and bring him an excuse for that week or so I was off from that class.

He actually thought there was nothing wrong with me. I said, check out the police station. I missed all that work. If I couldn't go to work, I sure can't go to school. Man, I was so upset with him I couldn't think, but I didn't want to make him mad because I was in that class.

Matthew described a separate negative encounter with a philosophy professor and a graduate assistant. The participant recalled:

One day we showed up for class and he wasn't there and there was a graduate student there with a tape recorder. The guy said, "Okay [the professor] won't be here and when you get through these tapes you can leave. He just wanted you to take notes on it." So he starts playing the tapes, they're in Hindi. So I look around, I was always a smart ass when I was younger. I look around [and say] "does anybody here speak Hindi?" The answer, there was probably twenty of us in there, was "no." I said, "are they all in Hindi?" "It looks like it." Well, we don't speak Hindi so we're leaving and we all left. So we got tested on that.

Matthew mentioned another encounter with a law professor. He recalled, "I'll never forget him. He lasted only like a year because he was flunking everybody." The law professor became upset one day because a tape-recorder was used to record his lecture. When describing the professor, Matthew said "he went crazy, his face turned red" and he "went completely nuts" in class. The common element among the 3 interactions with professors is all of the interactions occurred with a negative connotation.

When discussing his interactions with other veterans on campus, he noted, "Some of those guys came back in wheelchairs from Vietnam. They were going to school for the extra money." Indeed, the funding associated with the GI Bill was an attractive prospect because it was

a substantial source of extra income. He described the process for receiving the GI Bill by recalling what he "had to do first was get accepted, admitted, and show proof from the registrar. Back then there were no computers. Everything was on an index card." Given the cumbersome application process, he said he never experienced any difficulties with receiving the actual payments. He recalled "It's hard to believe with all of the red tape that you have to go through." He also received extra funding through his job as a police officer. He noted that during that time "the government was trying to get some of these policemen educated enough they would handle a situation" in a way that was "a lot different than they did." Police departments, during that time, were beginning to offer incentives to attend college in an effort to establish a more professional police force. Accordingly, he participated in a program where he received incremental pay raises based on the number of college credit hours he completed. Given the availability of financial resources through the GI Bill, the law enforcement program, and his need to support his family, he was extremely motivated to pursue higher education.

He worked full-time as a police officer and recalled, "I was making almost as much money going to school with the GI Bill." He was in a position where he had responsibilities as a husband and as a father. The funding through the GI Bill enabled him to pursue his dream of graduating from college while simultaneously taking care of his family. When reflecting on the value of the GI Bill, he said, "If I didn't have a GI Bill I wouldn't have gone back to school. If it wasn't for the military, I wouldn't have a college education." His discussion of financial resources repeated throughout the series of interviews as to establish a recurring pattern. These resources came from two specific sources that were tied to his employment as an airman and as a policeman. He received funding for college through the GI Bill while simultaneously receiving civilian pay raises based on his academic progress. His financial incentive to attend college

was enhanced by his post-military civilian employer. He recalled that it was “a pretty good chunk of change on top of everything else so the more you started accumulating, the more money you got on top of your GI Bill.” When speaking of the incremental raises he received while working as a member of the police force, he said, “It was called college incentive and it *was* incentive. The more hours you got, the more money you got.” This program was especially beneficial for him as evidenced by his comment that it “doubled my pay for getting an education which was fantastic. So, um, before I knew it I was, in order to get the maximum benefits you had to be a full time student which was 13 hours. So I always carried 13 hours to get the extra money.” When discussing the totality of the financial resources he received to attend college, he expressed appreciation for such funding and noted, “It was pretty good when you’re raising two daughters.” The consistent and repeated mention of such resources indicates they were an especially important factor that enabled him to pursue a college degree.

Matthew’s narrative includes examples of the ways he balanced major aspects of his life to include his full time employment as a police officer, his responsibilities as a husband, his role as a father, and his full time pursuit of higher education. He recalled:

When I first started, I screwed up and I was taking eight o’clock classes. I would get off the midnight shift at 7:00 and go up there. I would be so exhausted from staying up all night long I couldn’t stay awake. So I dropped whatever eight o’clock class I had and I never took another one again.

In addition to adjusting his schedule, he also elected to do as much coursework as possible within his home (as opposed to on campus). This allowed him to better balance domestic responsibilities with academic requirements. When speaking of completing assignments at his

home, he said, "When I started school. All my homework and everything at [the university], every project, or everything, was all right here."

He went on to graduate with a bachelor's degree in law enforcement and he served as a police officer from 1971 to 1996. He retired from the force having earned a high rank and he continued to live within the state of West Virginia. When reflecting back on his college experience, he noted, "I think it made me a better person. I know it made me a better policeman." When asked if he could offer advice to modern student veterans, he said, "Stay in school" so you can "buy your own ticket down the road." He believed a college level education provides a competitive advantage for job seekers and he noted that, "A guy coming off the street with a high school diploma, I just don't think they are going to give him that opportunity."

When commenting on modern social problems, Matthew noted, "I think drugs is the biggest problem this country has got right now." He described the historical evolution of the drug problems within the sample area for this study and recalled, "When I first [came] on, the only drug that we ever ran into, and it was rare, was marijuana. Now I can't even name them there's so many." He went on to say, "Our drug unit consisted of two people in 1971" and "now they've got a task force and the feds coming in and the sheriffs, the counties are merging together to fight this thing cause it's got so big." When reflecting on the situation, he mentioned that considering "the drug problem, what it is now" if he were a young man looking for a career in modern times, he "would not have gone on to the police department."

### **Analysis**

An analysis was conducted of all interview data gathered from Matthew. The data were examined and eight themes were identified. First, the participant discussed situations in which he was enabled to attend college due to the military and employment-related financial resources

available to him. His personal respect for other people also enabled him to appreciate alternative perspectives. Second, the participant discussed constraints associated with activity on his campus to include intervening priorities, negative interaction with campus representatives, asymmetrical maturity, social stigma, and mutually exclusive cultural domains. Each of these coding categories contributes to the understanding of how the participant experienced higher education as a student veteran during the Vietnam War. An ancillary theme, neither enabling nor constraining, was a concern regarding drugs.

**Enabling Factors.** Matthew consistently expressed how military and employment based financial resources enabled him to attend college. Given his responsibility to take care of his family, the benefits he earned as a result of his military service played a central role in his ability to attain a college degree. For example, he said, “If it wasn’t for the military, I wouldn’t have a college education.” He used funding, available through the GI Bill, to help pay for college. Accordingly, this thematic category is referred to as the military oriented financial resources and it is best described as an enabling factor.

Examples of Matthew’s respect for others occurred consistently throughout his series of interviews. When discussing his military experience with people from culturally different backgrounds, he indicated that it was best to “respect these people” because his life depended on it. Matthew also expressed concern regarding racism and he sought to eliminate it from his place of employment. He also mentioned the respect he formed with other people through conversations within a sociology course. Although many students harbored ill feelings toward police officers, Matthew sought to understand the root causes for such feelings. His respectful disposition allowed him to gain a better understanding of other people.

**Constraining Factors.** The participant was required to balance important priorities as he pursued his education. For example, he maintained full-time employment as a police officer, attended to his familial responsibilities, and maintained full-time enrollment in college. He shifted his academic course schedule to accommodate his employment and sleep patterns. He also completed as much work as possible at home as opposed to doing coursework on campus. Accordingly, a thematic category was identified and labeled as intervening priorities. His need to balance priorities served as a constraining factor for him as he pursued his degree because he had less time available to focus on coursework when compared to traditional students who were unemployed and without familial responsibilities.

Matthew described a number of situations where he had negative interactions with campus representatives. Several of his professors acted in ways that can be interpreted as disrespectful, unprofessional, or hostile. Their actions and attitudes represented an obstacle that Matthew had to overcome. Accordingly, a thematic category was identified as negative interaction with campus representatives and it can be understood as a constraining factor for Matthew as he pursued his academic goals.

Matthew experienced asymmetrical maturity as he interacted with younger students on campus. He frequently discussed instances where he felt his student counterparts acted in an immature manner and he described some students as "babies." Matthew was several years older than most of his classmates, was married, and had served a tour of duty in Vietnam. Accordingly, he was in a different place in life when compared to traditional college students. A thematic category of asymmetrical maturity emerged as a significant element of his college experience.

Matthew experienced social stigma as a significant constraining factor that influenced the ways he pursued higher education. He described "hostile students" on his campus who were

against the Vietnam War. He characterized his campus climate as having "a lot of animosity." Indeed, his strategy for dealing with this situation was to hide the fact he was a Vietnam veteran. He recalled, "I thought I would just keep my mouth shut and get through this." His reaction was in response to the prevalent collective attitude, held by many college students during the Vietnam War era that sought to demonize veterans who served in the unpopular war (Stever, 1996). Given the numerous instances where this sentiment was discussed during Matthew's series of interviews, a thematic category was identified as social stigma.

Matthew often found himself positioned between mutually exclusive cultural domains. For example, his status as a veteran and as a policeman was at odds with his status as a student. He mentioned that most students "were more upset with a guy going to that war [than] a guy being on the police force. When you've got both going on in your life, it's a lot of animosity." He was required to shift from one cultural role to another. This type of shift required him to quickly adapt to the unique situations he experienced. He adapted to mutually exclusive cultural domains by making an effort to avoid actions that would draw attention to him. For example, he attempted to hide his veteran status and his status as a policeman from other students. He mentioned his "baby face" appearance worked to his advantage because he did not visually appear older than his classmates. This allowed him to blend in and avoid many of the negative social repercussions associated with being a Vietnam veteran on a college campus during that time. Accordingly, a thematic category was identified and labeled as mutually exclusive cultural domains.

**Ancillary Factor.** The participant expressed his concern regarding drugs several times during the series of interviews. Given his experience as a police officer, he spoke with authority when he said, "I think drugs is the biggest problem this country has." Although his concern



regarding drugs did not directly affect his ability to attend college, he did express frustration with what he called “pot heads” on his campus. When reflecting on the growing drug problems in the U.S., Matthew told me he would not choose to have a career in law enforcement in modern times due to the prevalence of drug users.

**Summary of Analysis.** The analysis of narrative data gathered from Matthew revealed eight thematic categories. These coding categories contribute to the understanding of how the participant experienced higher education as a student veteran. The military oriented financial resources available through the GI Bill and the college incentive program for police officers enabled the participant to attend college. His personal respect for other people enabled him to better understand the perspectives of various groups of people. Conversely, his experiences with intervening priorities, negative interaction with campus representatives, asymmetrical maturity, social stigma, and mutually exclusive cultural domains were constraining factors for his pursuit of a college education. A concern for drugs emerged as an ancillary factor.

The themes can also be understood within the context of personal, institutional, and social domains. A theme with a personal orientation is characterized by the individual having more control of the outcome of a situation. A theme with an institutional orientation is characterized by the institution having more control of the outcome of a situation. A theme with a social orientation is characterized by society exerting most of the control over a situation. The themes of respect for others, asymmetrical maturity, and intervening priorities fall within a personal orientation. Military oriented financial resources and negative interaction with campus representatives are themes that fall within an institutional orientation. Mutually exclusive cultural domains and social stigma fall within social orientation. However, all of the themes were experienced within the context of Matthew's campus climate. The implications associated with

these themes can be discussed within the context of existing literature and modern state legislation.

## **Discussion**

Matthew's experiences serve as an individual example of the state of higher education for veterans, within the targeted West Virginia county, several decades before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). The main themes that emerged from the interviews with Matthew were military oriented financial resources, respect for others, intervening priorities, asymmetrical maturity, social stigma, and mutually exclusive cultural domains. The stories associated with such themes connect to existing literature and have implications associated with historic events and subsequent state legislative efforts concerning student veterans within the state of West Virginia.

The participant received funding through the GI Bill and through an increase of police officer pay based on college credit hours earned. Researchers have consistently identified the GI Bill as a significant enabling factor for student veterans (Mettler, 2005; Humes, 2006; Jasper, 2009; Kleykamp, 2006; Radford, 2009). Indeed, Matthew stated "if I didn't have a GI Bill I wouldn't gone back to school." It's important to note that the GI Bill is not a need based program. Funding through the GI Bill is distributed on the basis of having met qualifying types of military service. However, the participant did have a financial need especially since he also had responsibilities as a husband and as a father. Although the GI Bill was not granted on the basis of financial needs, it did help to fill a financial gap that might have otherwise not been filled. The participant also received pay bonuses for the college credits he earned while working as a police officer. The intent of this program mirrors the intent of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) because the bill encourages the promotion of post-graduation employment opportunities for

veterans. Although the experiences of the participant occurred decades before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010), his narrative indicates that government-brokered post-employment opportunities were being implemented during the early 1970s and this opportunity was experienced as an enabling factor.

Matthew discussed intervening priorities to include his family, his employment, and his studies. Mounsey, Vandehey, and Diekhoff (2013) found that many students need to develop time management skills when they fulfill multiple roles associated with being nontraditional students. Matthew applied such skills when he adjusted his academic schedule, as needed, to accommodate his shiftwork as a police officer. The State of West Virginia has acknowledged the schedule needs for student veterans and responded by enacting West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) which, in part, promotes a Board of Regents degree by requiring campuses to provide veterans with information about the degree. The Regents degree offers a large amount of scheduling flexibility because it is based largely on the accumulation of hours of coursework without a specialized subject major. This will allow future student veterans to have a mechanism in place that will give them more options to balance their priorities.

The participant discussed several negative interactions with his professors. The nature of these interactions ranged from what he viewed as unreasonable requirements to verify an excused absence to anger related outbursts inside of his classroom. The negative interactions associated with Matthew's experience stand in contrast to the intent of recent legislation. For example, West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) encourages faculty members to be specifically trained in methods for successfully interacting with student veterans. The bill establishes a requirement for each academic department to have a trained faculty member serve as a liaison for veterans. If such a liaison were available during the time Matthew attended college, he may

have had the option to seek assistance with procedural matters such as getting an absence excused.

Matthew also described a number of ways he experienced asymmetrical maturity and his experiences stem from his status as a nontraditional student. He mentioned feeling annoyed when a younger student questioned his reasons for wearing a suit and he referred to other students as “babies.” The differences in maturity between student veterans and traditional students are discussed in the existing literature (Cate, 2011; Hall, 2009; Livingston, 2009) and many higher education institutions have recently responded to this problem by promoting veterans' organizations on campuses. West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) requires state operated higher education institutions to establish a student-veteran organization. Organizations such as this are a way for colleges and universities to militate against the frustrations associated by asymmetrical maturity because the organizations provide a venue for veterans to interact with each other (as opposed to exclusivity interacting with traditional students during individual courses).

The participant experienced a social stigma and mutually exclusive cultural domains associated with his status as a veteran and as a police officer. A social stigma is a sign of a moral flaw attached to "a characteristic that differs from the normal or normative in a society" (Hess, Markson, & Stein, 1985, p. 148). In Matthew's case, he was concerned about the potentially negative repercussions associated with his fellow students discovering he was a veteran and he reacted to this concern by disguising his status as a veteran while on campus. The Vietnam era was an especially turbulent time when the moral values expressed on college campuses tended to align with strong anti-war sentiment. Matthew's experiences are consistent with Stever's (1996) report that discrimination and violence were common for Vietnam veterans who attended college during the war. Many student veterans, during the Vietnam era, "endured verbal and physical

abuse, and wiped spit, blood, ink, or paint from their uniforms" (Stever, 1996, p. 43). The historical context of Matthew's college experience fell within a particularly violent time period for students and veterans alike. The dichotomous nature of college campuses and the military establishment arguably reached an apex on May 4, 1970 when four students were killed and nine others were injured on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio when military forces opened fire on student protestors (DeBrosse, 2013). The event became known as the Kent State Massacre and it occurred in the era when Matthew attended college. It was a violent time typified by protests on university campuses (including Matthew's campus) and the social stigma associated with being a Vietnam veteran at that time was an especially difficult problem for veterans.

The social stigma and mutually exclusive cultural domains consistent with Matthew's college experience was consistent with the popular music of that era. The late 1960s and early 1970s gave birth to a plethora of music with lyrics aimed at protesting the Vietnam War. The nexus between higher education, protest music, and Vietnam era veterans is apparent in Neal Young's (1970) song titled Ohio. The song reinforces the anti-military sentiment popular on college campuses at the time by expressing the horror of the Kent State Massacre. The stigma and dichotomy experienced by Matthew was common for veterans of that era (Stever, 1996; DeBrosse, 2013). Stever (1996) demonstrated that veterans fell victim to institutional discrimination while DeBrosse (2013) indicated that such problems were more broadly social in nature. In Matthew's case, the stigma and dichotomies he faced were more a result of the prevailing culture of the time period than the actual institutional mechanisms of the university. This finding suggests that broader social attitudes, outside of the scope of higher education policy and practices, can play an important role in how campus climates are experienced.

The participant's decision to avoid discussing his status as a veteran or his status as a police officer while on campus was a strategy to avoid the types of hostilities Stever (1996) described. Given the narrative provided by the participant, it is clear that he experienced a hostile campus climate. In fact, he uses the term "hostile students" when describing some students on his campus. Stever (1996) maintained hostilities against student veterans were prevalent during that time. Such hostilities are arguably counterproductive for society at large because they provide little opportunity for individuals to understand each other's point of view. Stever (1996) asserted that universities should "provide a neutral, rigorous, and open arena within which soldiers and civilians can converse" (p. 42). He further commented that "a free and open university should be a forum within which both veteran and non veteran, soldier and antisoldier, can interact" (Stever, 1996, p. 41). Indeed, the overarching intent of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) was to establish veteran friendly campuses throughout West Virginia. The intent of the law stands in stark contrast to the social stigma and mutually exclusive cultural domains experienced by the participant while on his campus.

Matthew's experiences with college were not exclusively negative. Like most students, he experienced a range of positive, negative, enabling, and constraining factors throughout his pursuit of a degree. The participant's respectful disposition toward other people, races, and cultures enabled him to overcome a series of obstacles in his professional life and in his academic life. He maintained a high degree of respect toward others even though he experienced the constraints associated with asymmetrical maturity, social stigma, and mutually exclusive cultural domains. His respectful disposition and open mind allowed him to gain a better understanding of and appreciation of how other people think, as evidenced by his experiences within a sociology course. Even though he attended college in what can be described as a hostile

campus climate, he still valued his education and remained proud of his academic accomplishments. His sentiment toward his college education was expressed in his comment, "I think it made me a better person. I know it made me a better policeman."

The narrative data from Matthew's interviews helps place modern legislation into a historical perspective. He experienced a radically hostile campus climate and that type of climate is the polar opposite of the intent of what is now West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). He also participated in an employment program that offered bonuses for obtaining college credits. This program was similar, in a general way, to part of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) insofar as the Bill encourages employment opportunities for veterans. Moreover, the GI Bill has remained a consistent enabling factor for veterans to attend college throughout the last several decades (Altschluer & Blumin, 2009). The availability of those financial resources allowed the participant to attend college but his experiences on his campus were marred by a hostile campus climate at the time. The modern intent of West Virginia House Bill 4145 is to eliminate such hostilities and establish veteran friendly campuses throughout the state. His individual experiences, as articulated in this chapter, can serve as a historical reminder of the ways in which a college campus in West Virginia was experienced by a student veteran during the Vietnam War era.

This chapter has, in part, answered the following research question: How do a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate before the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly? Matthew's college experience occurred within the sample area before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). His biographical narrative combined with the analysis and discussion yielded information about how he directly experience and perceive his campus

climate before the passage of the law. Mathew represents one out of three of the participants who attended college prior to the passage of the law. This chapter provided an individual overview of Matthew's experiences. Group analyses of multiple participants will be presented in a later chapter.



## CHAPTER 7

### SARAH

*“School was my escape.”*

This chapter examines the lived experiences of Sarah (a pseudonym) by using data from a series of three interviews conducted with her. The initial biographical narrative is composed, in large part, of her direct quotes. The extensive use of quotes woven together to produce a narrative is a strategy aimed at maximizing the opportunity to give voice to the participant while focusing on the research objectives. Her experiences with a campus climate occurred after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) and she is one of three participants from that time period. This chapter, in part, answers the following research question: How do a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate after the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly? This chapter will provide a biography, analysis, and discussion of Sarah's lived experiences.

#### **Biography**

Sarah was 23 years old during the time she was interviewed. She was originally from American Samoa (an island in the South Pacific Ocean). Her immediate family consisted of her parents, a baby brother, two older brothers, and three younger sisters. She decided to join the Marine Corps in 2008. When reflecting on her experience, she said it was “the first time I ever left home and been away from my family.” Her decision to join the military was rooted in a desire to leave her island and seek opportunities within the mainland of the United States. She described the situation in her own words:

My family wasn't very well off and I didn't want to stay and go to community college there. I didn't want to feel stuck. It's not uncommon for kids to join the military straight out of high school. It's basically your ticket off the island.

She felt that leaving was her best option because there were limited opportunities in her hometown. She said, "If you want to make something of yourself, then you have to leave." However, it was clear she was also looking for a challenge. When asked about her motivation for becoming a Marine she said, "I just wanted to stand out" and she felt the Marine Corps would offer a "physical challenge."

Her experience with the Marine Corps began in Parris Island, South Carolina where she completed her initial military training. She described her experience the following way:

When I went through boot camp, it was my first winter. It didn't snow but it was freezing. Anything below 70 degrees is cold for me. Out there, it was freaking 20 degrees or something like that. It was just miserable. You just go out and do all of these courses and you barely sleep. You only have time to eat when you stop.

Like, stop, shove it in your mouth and go. It's supposed to stretch your limits.

She successfully completed her initial training and her job-specific training as supply technician and was stationed at a base in Camp Pendleton, California.

She came to the Appalachian region after she completed her military service and lived in West Virginia in the home of her boyfriend and his father. When describing her first experiences in the region, she said, "When I got here I was unemployed and I wasn't seeing any benefits at the time. So I literally had zero in my account." She struggled with living arrangements as she transitioned from military life to becoming a college student. Her struggles included finding places to rent, dealing with difficult roommates, and feeling unsafe in her own home.

She experienced a series unstable housing situations as she transitioned from active military service to becoming a full-time student. She initially lived with her boyfriend and his father in West Virginia but that situation “was just not working out” and she sought other living arrangements. She described feeling “stressed because I didn't have any money and I didn't have any place to stay. I didn't have any family around here; I didn't have any friends. It was really not a good feeling.” She began searching for a place to live by using the internet and communicated with a man regarding a room for rent. She noted, “I was desperate; I didn't have anywhere to go, and he answered my email on Craigslist.” They made arrangements for her to rent a room while the landlord remained in the residence. However, this was a particularly uncomfortable situation. She described it this way:

When I was at the house, I would lock myself; I'd be in the room all day. I wouldn't come out to watch TV. I'd only come out to get something to eat or drink and I'd just go back in my room. It was really just uncomfortable. I felt like I was walking on glass just tip toeing.

Her uncomfortable situation transitioned into a fear for her safety and she felt a need to carry a knife while in her house. She described her live-in landlord as a belligerent alcoholic and tensions flared during a particularly challenging encounter when he “just blew up” and was “screaming in my face.” She explained:

I had my hand on the knife waiting for him to touch me. And if he did touch me, I honestly, I can tell you right now. I would have stabbed him. He eventually backed away. Five days later, I moved out. It was bad.

She then moved into a new place with an acquaintance that “turned out to be worthless” because “she freaking wasn't paying her bills.” Thus, her new living situation was unstable until a more trustworthy roommate was found. When asked how her unstable housing situations affected her college life, she explained, “For me at the time, school was my escape. You know, from that house.” From her perspective, the time she spent on her college campus was a way to escape the challenging situations associated with her residence instability.

She knew she wanted to attend college and submitted admissions applications to a “bunch of local schools.” A community college within the county in which this study occurred was quick to grant her admission. In fact, she chose this school because the admissions process was streamlined in comparison to traditional four-year colleges. She said, “I applied, I got admitted, I came for a school campus visit. I met with a counselor, got my schedule done. The same day, I got my GI Bill.” She noted, “I think four-year institutions require you to do a bunch of paperwork and stuff to get accepted. But, I needed to go to school.” She had a financial need because once she was admitted she could use Veterans Administration educational benefits to help stabilize her housing situation. She became a student, majored in business administration, and began using the GI Bill. She said, “I use the GI Bill and it's awesome. I actually draw the GI Bill and financial aid. Let me tell you, if it wasn't for that I'd be screwed because I'd be without a pay check.” The GI Bill allowed her to focus on pursuing her academic goals without being burdened with employment. She noted, “I'm unemployed right now so I have nothing to do but school. School is my main focus. I'm doing pretty good actually. I mean, it's a big dramatic difference from when I was on active duty.”

She recalled her first day at the community college and described it the following way:

[There was] a lot of confusion. I had no idea where my classrooms were. I actually, was basically just walking around trying to find my rooms. They had staff members walking around the hallways and I happened to see them. They were always just readily available to show me where my classes were so that helped out a lot.

She praised the community college staff generally and the campus veterans representative specifically. When discussing the veterans' representative, she said, "He's friggin awesome. He's always on top of everything. He even takes care of our paperwork." She mentioned, "If we go and drop our courses at [the] registration office [then] he gets a notification [and] he just does whatever he has to do to modify our account." She expressed appreciation for how the veterans representative operated because, in her words, "It's not like he has to come look for us or we have to go hunt him down to take care of our stuff. He just does it." She also described a course she had with another veteran and noted, "Our teacher relies on us a lot for the military side" of class discussions. When discussing her adjustment into the campus she felt "comfortable with the classes."

She also discussed her perceptions of other veterans interested in college:

A lot of veterans are afraid of going to school. What if I can't handle the coursework? [You } know, I was like that too. What if I can't handle the course load? What if I fail? You know? I've been out of school so long, I'm out of practice. They don't realize that when you first start school, you have to take introductory courses. They're all refresher courses. [Because] once it starts coming back to you, you're good from there on.

Indeed, her first semester was not as academically challenging as she may have expected. She said, “It didn't feel like I learned anything new. It was all easy for me” and “it was all introductory courses and it was pretty easy.”

As her time in college progressed, she began to notice differences between herself and traditional students. She expressed frustration with the younger students and noted, “That age group is very immature. I do everything I can to stay away from that.” Due to a gap in maturity she tended to interact more with older students and said “I veer towards the older crowd and talk more to them than I do the younger crowd.” When reflecting on the situation, she said the following:

I was a little naive when I was younger. Especially now since I've been through and experienced life. . . and now I'm sitting on the other side. I'm having to interact with different people every day. It's just I closed in on myself a lot. I closed myself off from meeting people. Mostly because people in my age group [are] just dumb. The shit they talk about is just retarded.

She didn't especially like college but she recognized it as something that was necessary for future career advancement. She described her philosophy this way: “It's just a stepping stone; it's what I see it as. I hate school. If I liked school I wouldn't have joined the military to begin with.” When asked about what advice she would offer to other student veterans, she replied: “Just do it. It's a onetime deal. Go to school, get your education, get it done, get good grades.”

Sarah was the youngest participant in the sample group. She was unmarried and did not have children but she still discussed the ways she balanced various aspects of her life in an effort

to attend college. She noted, "I'm a busy body. There's always an endless list of chores to do. I cut my own grass, I work on the truck." Exercise and physical activities were important aspects of her life. She expressed an interest in kayaking and becoming involved with an extracurricular Wounded Warrior Project directed toward physical rehabilitation through recreation. Sara's strategy for balancing her priorities was to focus on her academic life. She said, "I'm unemployed right now so I have nothing to do but school. School is my main focus. I'm doing pretty good actually." She said she was avoiding employment because, in her words, "I don't want that to affect my school."

When discussing her transition from military service to becoming a college student, she said it is important to "get all of your paperwork done before you get out." The paperwork she was referring to is the application for benefits brokered through the Veterans Administration. She said, "I applied for my VA benefits before I got out" and "I applied for my GI Bill before I got out." Her advice was to "do everything to make a plan because you can apply to school when you are still in. Get all of that stuff done so once you are done and out all you [have] to do is go to school." She was clearly motivated to pursue her education and complete the necessary steps, in advance, to begin that positive change. She expressed a high degree of personal agency when discussing her academic pursuits. For example, she stated, "I feel that I am unlimited because I can do whatever I want and that's just how I feel." Indeed, she noted that she has plans to pursue a bachelor's degree after she graduates with an associate's degree. Moreover, as noted above, she found herself in several unstable housing situations. She recognized her residential challenges and took action to make positive changes by moving and seeking more trustworthy roommates.

Sarah also discussed her individual agency as it related to drugs. She made an intentional effort to remain distanced from drug activity. She said:

You know, as far as my inexperience with drugs, that's how it is. I don't know what any of this crap looks like. I don't know what meth looks like or any of that stuff. All I know is if people are using needles at home, it's probably bad.... Meth, cocaine, and stuff like that. It's just insane to walk in a grocery store and see people that are obviously on something or have done something. It's kind of weird. It makes me feel like I [grew] up sheltered.

She mentioned that, on her island in American Samoa, some young people would smoke marijuana but that was rare and she was not aware of more serious drug use on her island. When discussing a connection between drugs in general, and the Veterans Administration, she said, "A lot of veterans have PTSD and what not. They go to the VA and the VA pushes them out with medication. It's sad." Sarah felt that alternative treatments were good options and she advocated for the use of the Wounded Warrior Project which is a recreational rehabilitation program. Indeed, she expressed interest in volunteering to work in support of the Wounded Warrior Project as an extracurricular project while she was in college.

### **Analysis**

An analysis was conducted of all interview data gathered from Sarah. The data were examined and seven themes were identified. First, the participant frequently discussed how she wanted to escape from key situations, how military oriented financial resources played a role in her ability to pursue higher education, and how positive interactions with campus representatives enabled her to have a good experience on campus. The themes of military oriented financial resources, and positive interaction with campus representatives emerged as factors that enabled



her to attend college. Second, the themes that emerged that were best categorized as constraining include economic hardship, residence instability, and asymmetrical maturity. Each of these coding categories contributes to the understanding of how the participant experienced higher education as a student veteran. An ancillary theme was identified as a concern regarding drugs but this theme was value neutral in terms of either enabling or constraining Sarah's academic trajectory or influencing her experience on campus.

**Enabling Factors.** The idea of an escape repeated throughout Sarah's series of interviews and it emerged in several different situations. For example, when speaking of her home in American Samoa, she said, "If you want to make something of yourself, then you have to leave." Indeed, her decision to join the Marines was based, in part, on her desire to escape the limited economic and social conditions associated with her island. She also sought to escape from what she felt was a dangerous living condition associated with a troublesome roommate. Sarah also said "school was my escape." The idea of escape manifested across individual topics and it appeared consistently across multiple interviews. Accordingly, a thematic category was identified and labeled as escape. Sara's efforts to escape were enabling because such efforts were a reflection of her own personal agency. In life, she didn't wait around to be rescued, she made the escape.

Military oriented financial resources played a key role in Sarah's ability to stabilize her living situation and pay for the costs of attending college. She used the G.I. Bill to pay for college and she noted, "If it wasn't for that I'd be screwed because I'd be without a pay check." Moreover, she did not come from an economically advantaged background. She needed the financial resources that she earned through her military service. Those resources allowed her to

stabilize her housing situation, pay for tuition, and receive a stipend. Accordingly, military oriented financial resources played a key role in enabling Sarah to attend college.

Sarah consistently mentioned personnel employed at her community college interacted with her in positive ways. For example, Sarah described staff members as "always just readily available" and she described how they made it easy for her to get admitted, have her enrollment certified, and begin receiving benefits through the GI Bill. Her discussions of personnel employed by her college were positive; she indicated their speedy response to her application was a decisive factor for choosing where to attend college. Accordingly, a thematic category was established and labeled positive interaction with campus representatives.

**Constraining Factors.** The participant experienced economic hardship as she began her pursuit of a college degree. For example, she said, "My family wasn't very well off." Without substantial financial support from parental sources, she could not initially afford to rent a place to live on her own, and she relied exclusively on the G.I. Bill as a means to attend college. Additionally, she sought to minimize expenses by doing her own maintenance on her vehicle and by seeking roommates to help cover the cost of rent. She intentionally remained unemployed while in college in an effort to focus more on her studies. Accordingly, economic hardship emerged as a thematic category that constrained her pursuit of a college education.

The participant described several situations that are best characterized as residence instability. For example, when moving to the Appalachian region, she lived in a series temporary housing situations. She experienced what she felt was a dangerous living situation when she rented a room from an older man. Given the unstable nature of such accommodations and the pattern of unstable living arrangements, a thematic category was identified and labeled as residence instability. This was a constraining factor for Sarah as she attended college because she

did not have a safe and stable place to live when pursuing her education. When discussing this situation, she mentioned that being present on her college campus was an escape from her residential problems.

Sarah discussed several instances where she experienced asymmetrical maturity. She described many of her younger college counterparts as "immature" and she said, "I veer towards the older crowd." She noted a series of interactions, described above, where she did not relate to the actions, ideas, or attitudes of traditional college students. Given the consistency of this pattern throughout her series of interviews, the thematic category known as asymmetrical maturity emerged.

**Ancillary Factor.** The participant expressed concern regarding drugs in her community. She described seeing people in the grocery store who, in her words, "are obviously on something." She intentionally distanced herself from drugs and drug users but expressed a concern for the negative effect of drug activity within society. Although her concern regarding drugs did not enable or constrain her own academic pursuits, it did emerge as an ancillary factor for this study.

**Summary of Analysis.** The analysis of the series of three interviews conducted with Sarah revealed six themes related to her pursuit of a college education. They include escape, military oriented financial resources, positive interaction with campus representatives, economic hardship, residence instability, and asymmetrical maturity. Each of the themes ties into her experiences as a student veteran and represents significant aspects of the ways her academic pursuits were enabled or constrained. An ancillary theme, concern regarding drugs, was also identified but it is unrelated to how she experienced a pursuit of higher education. The themes related to pursuing an education can also be placed within the context of institutional and

personal domains. A theme within an institutional domain can be characterized by the institution having more control of the outcome of a situation and a theme with a personal domain can be characterized by the individual having more control of the outcome of a given situation. The themes of military oriented financial resources and positive interaction with campus representatives fall within the institutional orientation. Military oriented financial resources are distributed by the U.S. government and necessarily involve procedural processes involving college staff members. Interaction with campus personnel is necessary because of existing application procedures and enrollment certification processes. Thus, institutional entities exert more control over these processes than an individual. However, the themes of escape, economic hardship, residence instability, and asymmetrical maturity can be classified within the context of a personal orientation because Sara had more personal control over the situations in which the themes were based.

## **Discussion**

Sarah's experiences serve as an individual example of the state of higher education for veterans, within the targeted county, after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). The main themes that emerged from the interviews with Sarah were escape, military oriented financial resources, economic hardship, residence instability, asymmetrical maturity, and positive interaction with campus representatives. The stories associated with such themes connect to existing literature and have implications associated with the state legislative efforts concerning student veterans in West Virginia.

Sarah frequently discussed the benefits associated with receiving the GI Bill. She said, "If it wasn't for that I'd be screwed because I'd be without a pay check." This benefit allowed her to overcome her economic hardship and attend college. Indeed, it was her military oriented

financial resources that also allowed her to escape from locations and situations that were undesirable for her. Existing research has shown the GI Bill is widely viewed as an enabling factor for student veterans (Mettler, 2005; Humes, 2006; Jasper, 2009; Sander, 2012a; O'herrin, 2011; Simon, Negrusa, & Warner, 2010; Hall, 2009; Altschluer & Blumin, 2009; McGrevey & Kehrer, 2009; Smith-Osborne, 2009; Kleykamp, 2006; Radford, 2009). Moreover, Sarah made an important recommendation that was consistent with recommendations made by the Business and Professional Women's Foundation (2008), Baechtold & Swal (2009), and DiRamio, Akerman, & Mitchell (2008) that military service members should prepare for their transition into college life before they are discharged from the armed services. She highlighted the importance of applying for GI Bill benefits in advance by advising, "Do everything to make a plan because you can apply to school when you are still in."

Her residence instability was due to monetary challenges and a lack of social support. For example, she said, "I literally had zero in my account" when she arrived in West Virginia. Moreover, when describing her struggle to find housing in the area, she said, "I didn't have any family around here, I didn't have any friends." Her lack of a local social support system is consistent with research by Hamrick and Rumann (2011), and DiRamio, Akerman, and Mitchell (2008) who found that a lack of a support system is a significant factor that inhibits veterans as they pursue higher education. In Sarah's case, she was socially isolated and geographically separated from her family. Therefore, she had few people to turn to outside of college.

Her experiences can also be understood within the context of recent state legislation. She described the veterans' representative on her campus as "awesome" and noted he was "always on top of everything." West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) requires higher education institutions to provide trained representatives to work with student veterans on campus. The veterans'

representative she described served in a capacity to fulfill recent state requirements and her interactions with him were described as positive. Indeed, the presence of a veterans' representative on college campuses throughout the state of West Virginia is a relatively new development. However, when asked what could be improved at her school she said, "I would like more of a community feeling" and "it would be nice to have like a veterans group here at school." Her response indicated that either such a group did not exist or if it did exist, she was unaware of it. When asked about her level of participation in student veteran's activities, she noted, "If there was a campus activity, I did not partake of it." West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) mandates state operated higher education institutions to establish a student veterans organization on campus and research has consistently demonstrated that veterans benefit from such organizations (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Livingston, 2009; Whikehart, 2010; Lokken, et. al., 2009; Toure, 2012). However, the state law does not stipulate what form such an organization must take.

This chapter has, in part, answered the following research question: How do a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate after the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly? Sarah's college experience occurred within the sample area after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). Her biographical narrative combined with the analysis and discussion yielded information about how she directly experience and perceive her campus climate after the passage of the law. Sarah represents one out of three of the participants who attended college after the passage of the law. This chapter provided an individual and anecdotal overview of Sarah's experiences. Group analyses of multiple participants will be presented in a later chapter.

## CHAPTER 8

### DANIEL

*“It’s a huge balancing act.”*

This chapter examines the lived experiences of Daniel (a pseudonym) by using data from a series of three interviews conducted with him. The initial biographical narrative is composed, in large part, of his direct quotes. The extensive use of quotes woven together to articulate his experiences is a strategy aimed at maximizing the opportunity to give voice to the participant while focusing on the research objectives. His experiences with a campus climate occurred after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) and he represents one of three participants from that time period. This chapter, in part, answers the following research question: How do a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate after the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly? This chapter will provide a biography, analysis, and discussion of Daniel's lived experiences.

#### **Biography**

Daniel was 26 years old during the time he was interviewed. He was originally from California. When describing his home state, he said, “It’s overpopulated” but “there are people from all over the world in California. It’s really a melting pot of cultures.” His conversations indicated he valued diversity and enjoyed learning about other cultures. When speaking of his family he said, “My mother is a Wal-Mart employee [and] my father works at a mine right now as a truck driver.” Daniel was a first generation college student who used GI Bill benefits to pay for college. When discussing his decision to join the military he said, “I got to my senior year of high school and said, “You know what? I’m just [going to] join the Navy and do my own thing. I figured it would be a good start on an adult life.”

When discussing his decision to join the Navy, as opposed to any of the other branches, he said the following:

I'm not very much of a gun enthusiast. So when I looked at the four options of Navy, Air-Force, Marines, Army, well the Army and Marines have a big emphasis on guns. I was always kind of a tech guy; I was into computer and electronics. I like fixing things. It wasn't really of my mindset to go out and shoot people; that wasn't really my goal.

He expressed an interest in the technical challenges associated with naval operations and he was interested in the on-the-job education provided by the Navy. Consequently, he became an electronics technician and served onboard a submarine. He described his initial experience this way:

The first time I went under I was nervous; I was touching the walls the whole time. It wasn't that I was claustrophobic; I mean it was kinda tight, like close quarters and stuff, but it took a little while for my head to wrap around the concept that you're in a pressurized tube. So you're in a bubble that's floating through the water, [kind of] a strange thing to wrap your head around. And also the ground constantly doing this thing, where it's just changing different angles.

When discussing his experience in the Navy, Daniel described a situation where he personally participated in anti-drug operations. He recalled, "We did a mission off the coast of Panama; we assisted the coast guard in the capture of some drug runners and submersibles." Some of the world's most sophisticated drug smuggling operations use ocean-going vessels that travel in a manner in which they are mostly submerged like a submarine. This strategy allows drug smugglers to move their product into locations with a significantly reduced chance of being



detected. Daniel felt a sense of pride with participating in this mission and noted, "We worked with the Panamanian Navy, and we worked with our Coast Guard; it was a unique experience."

He couldn't discuss many the details of his submarine experience because most of where he went and what he did remains classified. However, he was married and had children while serving in the Navy.

Eventually, he decided to return to civilian life. When discussing his motivation to discontinue his service in the Navy, he said:

I decided that one reason for getting out was because I thought the Navy was stressing and [kind of] tearing apart our marriage and family and what not. So I got out, and tried to start dealing with that, but the lack of income became a new concern.

Daniel and his wife eventually divorced and she moved to the state of West Virginia (where she had family ties). He eventually relocated to West Virginia because he wanted to live within close proximity to his children who were primarily staying with their mother. He said, "I was very much intent and I told people I'm going to move to West Virginia and see my kids again." He also noted, "West Virginia wasn't my first choice to go to, but when my kids were out here I was like that's where I'm headed to." He experienced some difficulty with establishing a West Virginia residence because most of the rental ads were posted on the internet and it was difficult for him to have a good idea of what was suitable and what was not. He said, "I didn't know the area at all, so I didn't really trust a lot of ads on the internet or newspapers without actually going to a place. I know pictures can be deceiving, and everyone is [going to] talk their place up, so I don't really trust going into a place with those methods." He was admitted to a university within West Virginia and the ultimate solution to his housing problem was to live in a university dorm.

He quickly secured employment as a Residence Advisor within the dorm as he pursued his academic goals and became more familiar with the local customs. When speaking of West Virginia, he noted the following:

This type of area, the family values from the people that are from around here is very positive. It's really easy to ask for directions around here. The social kindness, is that the right word? You can ask some random stranger where to find something and they'll be happy to help you. That's weird to me. You're a droplet in the ocean in California; if you asked someone directions to places they would be like, "Do I know you?"

He majored in computer science while serving as a Residence Advisor and working as a math tutor. He noted, "I think it has been more difficult to maintain really high grades and really high presence in the work field" and "I think it has been really difficult to balance those things out and also being a parent." Given his employment responsibilities, his duties as a parent, and his full time course load, he led a busy life. However, given his description, it was also clear that he was actively engaged in university life and I observed him interacting with students passing him on campus before our interview sessions began.

Daniel expressed frustration with some of his interactions with native Appalachian students and students who were younger than himself. He said, "Socializing has been difficult." When discussing his social interactions on campus, he expressed a frustration with what he believed was a lack of multicultural experience within the campus environment. For example, he noted:

I met a girl from in my sociology class who said the first time she met a black person was when she came here. And I'm like, "you're kidding me. You never

met a black person before?" I'm like, "I was a minority in my high school. In my high school there was more black people than white people."

He preferred to associate with individuals with diverse characteristics who were open to variation from local Appalachian norms. He said:

A lot of the friends I made from this area are not necessarily from here. It seemed easier for me to relate to them. You get a lot of people that are from this area tend to be more traditional, and a lot of them have only been in this area, compared to other places.

A large number of Appalachians self-identify as Christians and Daniel also felt alienated from that group. He noted, "It's a very Christian oriented area. I've never seen so many churches in one area, particularly around here. Not saying I've never been to a church before, but that's something that has been a personal challenge for me." He went on to say, "I'm personally agnostic, but I made the decision a while ago that I'm not Christian. But when I tell people I'm not Christian they associate that with not being a moral person." When discussing his interactions with his traditional student counterparts, he explained, "There's times I'm trying to relate to a person, and they're trying to relate to me and so it's difficult to have the same experience." He said many of the younger students haven't had time to gain the life experiences commensurate with his experiences. This was primarily due to a gap in age and maturity. He also stated:

I was in the Navy for five years, worked at Comcast for a year, been married, divorced, two kids. I'm from California which is on the other side of the country. I've lived up and down the east coast; I lived in Virginia, Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, West Virginia now, all different places. A lot of times I come

off as being arrogant, but a lot of the time I'm just trying to find someone with the same experience. And sometimes that's difficult.

Given these challenges of relating to younger less experienced students, he noted that, "Sometimes it is a bit of an awkward conversation but [it] feels like a bit of a significant generational gap." His experiences interacting with veterans on campus were radically different than his interactions with traditional college aged students. When discussing his interactions with other veterans on campus, he said the following:

[They are] easy to get along with and it's kind of a mutual understanding. Just because you look at the world a little differently I suppose. They are exposed to a lot of different things that a lot of people may not have been. It is just easier sometimes, even if you don't have a lot in common [on a] personal level, you still have a mutual respect for the person.

Daniel used the GI Bill to fund his academic pursuits. However, the process he experienced for actually receiving the funding was difficult. He described the application process as "time consuming" and he said, "I had a question for the [Veterans Administration] about the GI Bill. My phone was on hold for I believe an hour and a half. I was just like forget this. Yeah, they are not going to answer it." However, he did eventually receive the funding and it played a central role in his ability to attend college as evidenced by his statement that the "G.I. Bill pays all the tuition [and] it gives me a monthly stipend that's just over a thousand dollars" and "I think it is a great opportunity. I don't think I would be going to college without it."

He expressed frustration with the ways in which his military education transferred into academic credit. He explained the situation the following way:

I transferred in with 117 semester hours from the military. So a lot of credits, [the university] didn't count them until my first six months at [the university]. You have to establish yourself as a student here at [the university] before your military credits kick in. So I went from being a first year freshman to being a senior in one semester. However, for my degree, maybe one class would count. Maybe three of those semester hours will count towards my degree. I'm a senior by credits, but only three of 117 credits from the military count toward my computer science degree. So I was not too thrilled about hearing that.

He believed he should have been given more credit toward his computer science degree because he completed a large number of complex courses through Navy training which were closely related to his major.

Daniel also noted differences in the ways he received instruction when comparing civilian classroom experiences with military classroom experiences. When discussing civilian instruction received at college, he said the following:

Professors here push for time a lot. I don't like that. I think that is destructive to the educational process especially with math professors who only get an hour to teach it. I know that there a lot of students that are not very involved and don't apply themselves. I get annoyed at that. But if you're in a class and the students are asking questions you should be able to have enough time to answer the questions and make sure everybody understands.

He felt that, on occasion, his professor did not have time to respond to questions and explain material in a thorough way. When discussing his military instruction, he said, "They had a very strict regimen on what the instructor would have to do and when we were graded there were very

strict guidelines on how to grade us." He noted that his military instructors "could put you on the right track" and "they would point out what you did right and what you did wrong."

Daniel described a wide variety of interactions with university personnel on his campus. He said, "The first people I met were actually the [residence advisors]. He recalled, "They had an RA on every floor, for any questions or anything else of the nature." He described his initial interaction with a residence advisor by saying that he "treated me like a person rather than someone who had to impress to keep that money coming into the school, so I really appreciated that. I like being treated like a person instead of a statistic." Daniel became a residence advisor after spending a short time living in a dorm. He remembered positively interacting with other residence advisors and said the following:

I remember one day, we were all together watching a movie or something, I'm like, "I'm having the most awesome time." And I brought back pizza for everyone, and I'm like, "I don't know you guys, but I'm having so great of a time that I need someone to share this with."

When describing interactions with university staff members, he said that his institution had "a veteran advisor on campus [and] she was able to help me out a lot with the paperwork and the acceptance process and I had a lot of questions because I had not been out here before." He recalled, "She was a go-to person; she was a jack of all trades, she might not know the answer to your question but she could find who does and that was very useful because I had a lot of questions." He described interacting with another staff member and said, "There was actually someone who specifically handled my stuff for the G.I. Bill" and he expressed appreciation for that person's assistance. He also described positive interactions with tutors working on his

campus. He said, "At times we do things outside of tutoring" and he recently "had pizza with a tutor." He mentioned interacting with several strict professors and he expressed a certain appreciation for strictness as long as the standards for the coursework were clearly defined. For example, he said, "I feel that they are up front about being strict" and if they clearly articulate "how you obtain" a grade, then "I am fine with a strict professor. In fact I prefer that because I feel like I am learning things." When recalling one of his stricter professors, he said, "My English 101 professor" is strict but "his father was a drill instructor for the Army, so that probably had something to do with it, but he was very forthcoming with what he wanted and he said his door was always open."

Daniel overcame an array of challenges before he began his pursuit of higher education. Those challenges included adapting to the hardships associated with serving on a submarine, mastering the technical challenges associated with his role as a military electronics technician, having children, experiencing a divorce, relocating his residence, experiencing economic challenges, and securing employment in West Virginia. These life experiences placed him in a position in which he felt he was more mature than many of his younger college counterparts. Indeed, research has shown this type of a maturity gap is typical when comparing student veterans to their non veteran student counterparts (Livingston, 2009). While the maturity gap itself was a challenge for the participant, it was clear he was motivated by a desire to overcome academic challenges and he demonstrated a strong desire to learn. His desire to learn was apparent in descriptions of maintaining a positive attitude toward completing technical training in the Navy and his enthusiasm regarding some of his college coursework. For example, when speaking of a philosophy course, he described it as a "mind-blowing thing" and said, "I thought it

was really interesting." He consistently described learning as a positive aspect of his life and his enthusiasm toward learning was an enabling factor for his pursuit of higher education.

### **Analysis**

An analysis was conducted of all interview data gathered from Daniel. The data were examined and seven themes were identified. The participant described a number of situations that enabled him to pursue his educational goals. They include a strong desire to learn, positive interaction with campus representatives, and military oriented financial resources. The participant also discussed several constraints and their associated themes include economic hardship, constraints on transfer credit value, asymmetrical maturity, and intervening priorities. All of the themes are relevant to the participant's pursuit of a college education and they tie into his experiences as a student-veteran in West Virginia.

**Enabling Factors.** Daniel's strong desire to learn manifested consistently throughout the series of interviews. He alluded to this desire when describing his upbringing, military experience, and college experience. For example, he mentioned his parents taught him "you never stop learning." When discussing his military experience, he noted, "You are always learning something." He described his personal learning mentality by saying, "My whole mentality with learning [is] wanting to be challenged and challenging myself." It was clear, from his conversations, that he enjoyed a challenge, especially an intellectual challenge. He noted that some of his professors were more challenging than others. When discussing strict college professors, he said, "I prefer that because I feel like I am learning things." The frequency of his discussion of a strong desire to learn and the consistent presence of this attitude throughout various phases of his life, serve as evidence contributing to the establishment of this thematic category. His attitude toward learning and his initiative to learn new things is commensurate



with a high degree of individual agency and this characteristic helped enable his academic pursuits.

The participant described overwhelmingly positive interactions with campus representatives. He interacted with a veterans' advisor, enrollment certification representative, admissions staff, tutors, professors and other personnel employed by the university. As noted in his biographical narrative, the interactions he described were positive as evidenced by his comment that university staff members "treated me like a person." Additionally, he described his veterans' advisor as "a go-to person." His interactions are indicative of a positive campus climate and a thematic category known as positive interaction with campus representatives was identified as an enabling factor that contributed to his success in college.

Military oriented financial resources emerged as another theme that was central to Daniel's success. He relied heavily on the GI Bill to pay for his tuition and associated educational expenses. When describing the benefits of the GI Bill, he said that the "G.I. Bill pays all the tuition; it gives me a monthly stipend that's just over a thousand dollars." When reflecting on the value of the program to him, he said, "I think it is a great opportunity. I don't think I would be going to college without it. I get rather paranoid about finances and what not especially having children living in an area that I am not from." Given his reliance on the GI Bill funding he earned as part of his service in the Navy and his inability to attend college without such funding, military oriented financial resources emerged as a theme that enabled him to attend college.

**Constraining Factors.** Daniel described his move from California to the West Virginia in terms of financial stress. He recalled, "I was giving up a good job for to come out here" and "I was really worried [about becoming] financially stable on my own so coming out here without a job lined up and just utilizing the G.I. Bill was something I was worried about." Given the

economic instability he faced, and his concern regarding such instability, the theme of economic hardship emerged and was commensurate with a constrained ability to attend college. As noted above, Daniel overcame this constraint by using funding through the GI Bill, securing a dorm room as part of his employment as a residence advisor, and by working as a tutor.

The participant also faced institutional constraints associated with his transfer credit value. He received extensive training and took numerous military courses when he was in the Navy and his training was articulated on his military transcript. However, he received very little productive credit for his military experience. His credits did transfer from the military to his college transcript but the credits did little to help him graduate. A total of 117 semester hours transferred from his military education to his college program. However, only three credit hours were actually useful to him. His thoughts regarding this process were expressed during the interview process. Accordingly, an examination of the data revealed a theme identified as Constraints on Transfer Credit Value. When discussing these transfer credits, he said, “To tell you I received a lot is a little misleading.” He explained that “maybe one class would count. Maybe three of those semester hours will count towards my degree.” He majored in computer science in college and took closely related courses while serving in the Navy. He said, “I took some basic networking classes, more advanced network classes, classes on how a hacker might penetrate the network.” The military training did transfer into college credit hours but the transfer did not help him establish productive credit toward his degree. When asked if he could change anything about how the credit transfer system works, he said he wished productive credit could be granted “at least sometimes” for the military training that most closely matches the curriculum of his degree program. He wished “there was some way to get credit for that.”

Accordingly, the theme of Constraints on Transfer Credit Value emerged as a constraining factor for Daniel as he pursued his degree.

Daniel also had a number of intervening priorities that he had to contend with on a daily basis. When discussing some of his key challenges, he said, "I feel it's difficult to balance the time." He mentioned, "With the expectation of being a resident advisor and the way I want to do things I think it has been more difficult to maintain really high grades." When speaking of the challenges of being a resident advisor on campus, he said he's always "trying to do what I can to balance it out." He also had responsibilities as a father and a side job as a tutor. When reflecting on his experiences on his campus, he said, "It's a huge balancing act." Accordingly, the theme of intervening priorities emerged as a constraining factor for Daniel as he attended college.

Daniel discussed his interactions with his traditional student counterparts and he explained, "There's times I'm trying to relate to a person, and they're trying to relate to me and so it's difficult to have the same experience." He said many of the younger students haven't had time to gain the life experiences commensurate with his experiences. This was primarily due to a gap in age and maturity. He said, "I come off as being arrogant, but a lot of the time I'm just trying to find someone with the same experience. And sometimes that's difficult." Given the challenges associated with relating to younger students, he noted that, "Sometimes it is a bit of an awkward conversation but feels like a bit of a significant generational gap." He noted that he and the traditional students "don't have a lot in common on a personal level" but added that he maintains a "mutual respect" for the younger students. Accordingly, the theme of asymmetrical maturity emerged as a significant aspect of his experience on his college campus.

**Summary of Analysis.** The analysis of narrative data gathered from Daniel revealed seven thematic categories referred to as a strong desire to learn, positive interaction with campus representatives, military oriented financial resources, economic hardship, constraints on transfer credit value, asymmetrical maturity, and intervening priorities. They can also be understood within the context of institutional and personal category. For example, a theme placed within an institutional category is characterized by an institution having a higher degree of control over a situation when compared to an individual. Conversely, a theme placed within a personal category is characterized by an individual having a higher degree of control over a situation when compared to an institution. In Daniel's case, the themes of positive interaction with campus representatives, military oriented financial resources, and constraints on transfer credit value can be placed in an institutional category. The themes consisting of as a strong desire to learn, economic hardship, asymmetrical maturity, and intervening priorities can be placed within a personal category. The themes contribute to the understanding of how the participant experienced higher education as a student veteran. The implications associated with these themes can be understood within the context of existing literature and current state legislation.

## **Discussion**

Daniel's individual experiences serve as an example of the ways higher education was experienced by veterans, within the targeted county, after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). The seven main themes that emerged from the interviews with Daniel were a strong desire to learn, positive interaction with campus representatives, military oriented financial resources, economic hardship, constraints on transfer credit value, asymmetrical maturity, and intervening priorities. The stories associated with such themes connect to existing

literature and have implications associated with the state legislative efforts concerning student veterans in West Virginia.

Daniel gave numerous examples of his lifelong passion for learning new things. The emergent theme, referred to as a Strong Desire to Learn, manifested itself throughout the series of interviews and was referred to when discussing various stages of his life. He described "wanting to be challenged" and noted he was "always learning something." Daniel's approach to learning comports with Warren and Manthey (2011) who advocated for a transformation of education by allowing students to engage in "the process of learning what they personally love" (p. 34). Daniel expressed a strong interest in technical fields and pursued those interests by serving as an electronics technician in the Navy and later majoring in computer science when attending college. He clearly followed his interests in life and actively sought to learn about subjects that he found interesting. Moreover, he sought to share those experiences with other people. For example, when discussing the social environment for veterans on campus, he described a conversation where he was able to share his experiences in an effort to give advice. Daniel described the person as "just starting in the Navy and he is asking for some advice for advancement and things like that. I try to give him the best advice I can." Additionally, Daniel said that "being a resident advisor was a way I could give back to the other students." Moreover, he served as a math tutor on campus. He clearly demonstrated strong desire to learn and a willingness to share what he learned. Indeed, West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) encourages veterans to share their experiences because it requires higher education institutions to develop programs for veterans to share their knowledge and military experience. The participant did not participate in such a program on his campus but he, in effect, was fulfilling the intent of the legislation by sharing his experiences within the context of his own strong desire to learn.

The participant consistently described most of his interactions with campus representatives as positive. He perceived staff members to be friendly and he was appreciative of the assistance he received by the veterans representative on his campus. Daniel's experience on his college campus is consistent with the intent of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) because the bill requires state operated higher education institutions to take specific actions to become veteran friendly. The bill requires university personnel to undergo training to be better equipped to interact with student veterans. It is not known if the campus veterans Daniel interacted with attended such training, but it is known that they acted in a way that Daniel felt was friendly and respectful.

His experiences with transfer credit obstacles can also be understood within the context of existing literature and recent state legislation. Several researchers have identified transfer credit obstacles as a constraining factor for student veterans (Hall, 2009; Akerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009). However, in most cases, the chief obstacle is actually receiving the credit for military education. Daniel's case was different in that his military education credits easily transferred to academic credit and were articulated on his transcript (after he established himself as a student at the university). This was due, in part, to the recent legislation articulated in West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) that encourages universities to grant academic credit for military education. However, the participant expressed frustration with the ways in which such credit was granted. For example, he received a large number credit hours for military service but he was disappointed to learn that only three of those credits actually counted toward his degree. His situation indicates the current transfer credit system did not benefit him in a manner consistent with the intent of the state law (West Virginia House Bill 4145, 2010). The law was intended to encourage veteran-friendly campuses and enhance the ability of veterans to fulfill

their academic objectives. Moreover, West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) mandated the state of West Virginia to develop a blanket policy for granting credit for military experience. However, according to the state's own progress report, a blanket policy has not been developed. Currently, "Individual policies exist at each institution" (West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, 2013). However, a statewide rule "is being developed to clarify the issue and to provide guidance to institutions about granting credit for military training and experience" (West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, 2013). Daniel's case suggests state legislators should not only consider how military transfer credits are granted, but they should also consider the value of such credit as it relates to obtaining a college degree.

Daniel's experience with asymmetrical maturity, intervening priorities, and economic hardship is consistent with existing literature addressing the challenges of non-traditional students. O'Herrin (2011) found that student-veterans are often more mature than traditional undergraduate students. A study by Gilardi and Guglielmetti found, "The very difficulties that the employed students perceive show that they are going through a period of transition, not only professionally but also personally, which frames the context of their academic experience, requiring the activation of appropriate coping strategies" (2011, p. 45). Indeed, Daniel's strategy to generate extra income and reduce living expenses was to gain employment as a Residence Advisor. This allowed him to balance competing priorities, generate extra income to support his children, and maintain a social life on campus. His experience is consistent with Saunders and Bauer's (1998) finding that non-traditional students "juggle multiple life roles and often cite financial and family responsibilities as major concerns" (p. 12). Like most student veterans, Daniel relied heavily on military oriented financial resources to overcome his economic hardship and he likely would not have attended college without such resources. However, Daniel's

experience as a non-traditional student was different than Murphy and Fleming's (2000) finding that non-traditional students typically need to re-develop study skills to adapt to the challenges of academic rigor. Daniel seemed well prepared for a wide array of academic challenges and he was the tutor as opposed to the tutored.

This chapter has, in part, answered the following research question: How do a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate after the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly? Daniel's college experience occurred within the sample area after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). His biographical narrative combined with the analysis and discussion yielded information about how he directly experience and perceive his campus climate after the passage of the law. Daniel represents one out of three of the participants who attended college after the passage of the law. This chapter provided an individual and anecdotal overview of Daniel's experiences. Group analyses of multiple participants will be presented in a later chapter.



## CHAPTER 9

### KAREN

*“I just went where the door was opened.”*

This chapter examines the lived experiences of Karen (a pseudonym) by using data from a series of three interviews conducted with her. Her biographical narrative is composed, in large part, of direct quotes. The extensive use of quotes woven together to produce a narrative is a strategy for maximizing the opportunity to give voice to the participant while concentrating on the research objectives. Her experiences with a campus climate occurred after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) and she is one of three participants from that time period. This chapter, in part, answers the following research question: How do a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate after the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly? This chapter will provide a biography, analysis, and discussion of Karen's lived experiences.

#### **Biography**

Karen was 38 years old during the time she was interviewed. She was born in Fort Hood, Texas and moved to the State of West Virginia when she was very young. When describing West Virginia, she said, "The people are so nice here and they're just so open and just kind of gentle to me and that's my experience." Her family had several members who served in the military. Her grandfather served in the Army during World War Two; her father served in Vietnam; and her twin sister served in the U.S. Army. Karen described herself as a single mother with two small children. She was working toward completing a bachelor's degree at a university located within the sample area for this study. Her experiences with the university campus occurred after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010).

When discussing her decision to join the army, she said, "I did it strictly out of patriotism for where I live, for my country. I wanted to give back." She enlisted in the army at a young age and had to receive special permission from her guardian to join. She said, "I went to basic training when I was seventeen." She recalled her grandfather giving her advice: "No matter what you do try to stay in the background. Try to kind of blend in, do your thing. Don't try to stick out or anything like that." Her attempts to follow that advice were not consistent with her personality because she had a strong sense of individuality. She said, "As much as I tried to follow those words of wisdom I'm not the kind of person that can just blend in, period." However, she successfully completed her military training and became a combat medic. She had a very successful military career having served in Korea, Germany, Iraq, and several other locations. Reflecting on her decision to have a military career, she said: "I went with the army because I'm from an army family and my twin sister had already chosen the army too. I had to go too, I guess. We were an army family; it was just automatic. It was natural."

She completed her military service having served for 13 years and began to seek employment within the civilian sector. She expressed frustration with seeking civilian employment within the medical industry because many potential employers would not recognize the value of her military training. She described the situation the following way:

It pissed me off [because I had] way more intense training than you would ever get on a civilian sector. . . . They want degrees, show me your degrees. That's what they want. They just want that degree. That was it. I think it's frowned upon that you didn't go to a civilian college per se. It really pissed me off. I was really irritated. I never had a problem getting a job, but I always felt like my education

and training far surpasses any civilian on the market when it came to my job. I mean *far* surpasses.

Given the need to have a college degree to obtain professional employment in the civilian sector, she made the decision to attend college. She enrolled in a two-year institution and received three associate degrees before enrolling in a state university to pursue a bachelor's degree.

The ability to care for her children also played a significant role in her decision to pursue higher education. When reflecting on her life experiences, she said, "My life is truly, truly complete with these babies. You know what's funny, I thought the army was hard. No. Raising children." When describing her job as a parent, she noted, "I'm telling you this is by far the hardest job I have ever done in my life. But it's rewarding. I mean it's rough. People don't understand, it's rough." Given her perceived need to achieve a college level education to secure gainful employment, her academic pursuits were directed toward the goal of shifting into a position where she would have a better opportunity to provide for her children as evidenced by her statement:

Going to school full time, in the end it's all for, it's all for them. I'm in school for me yeah because my brain wants to learn, learn, learn, but in the end, I think it is ultimately for them.

Karen recalled, "I wanted to get my bachelor's. So all of those associates weren't really doing me any good. So I thought that I would get something a little bit better." She was admitted into the Regent's program. State higher education institutions throughout West Virginia offer Regents Bachelor of Arts programs. These programs are tailored toward nontraditional students by offering a high degree of flexibility and giving academic credit for life experiences. She was attracted to this program because her previous academic credits counted toward the degree

requirements and, in her words, “My military education went towards that degree.” Describing her admissions process she said, “I just went where the door was opened. [The university] had an open door, so, you know, I walked right in.”

When discussing her interactions with younger students, Karen made the following observation:

It’s funny being older and going to school with the younger kids, [because] you kind of feel like, are you kidding me. [In] my psychology classes, love, intimacy, and relationships, I listen to these children and I’m like, "Oh, oh, my God, you guys are so young. You have no idea what is in store for you."

When asked if she keeps in contact with students she met at college, she said, “Most are younger than me so I don’t.” She mentioned that being a veteran in college “gives you a certain amount of strength that I don’t think everyday college students have.” She also believed that being a veteran instills a certain amount of discipline in an individual and she was sometimes frustrated by the lack of discipline among her college peers. It was clear that she was sometimes annoyed by what she perceived as immature classmates. She noted, for example:

When people talk in class or they’re talking on their own I can’t tell you how many times I’ve told them to shut up. You know when the teacher is trying to take control of the class and she can’t. I think that’s the most disrespectful thing to me.

When discussing her interactions with other veterans on campus, Karen noted the following:

The veterans that I do run into are usually older, they’re like me and they’re older and we’re just so focused on what we have to do. It’s funny because I look at other veterans and everyone is just so focused on everything. . . . Veterans are

much more focused than traditional students. That's because of the experience and the discipline.

She articulated her life experiences, particularly those gained while serving in the military, in relation to individual college assignments. She stated, "I used a lot of my background from the military" within a speech class and other classes. She discussed a course where, in her words, the "professor was always asking me questions directly in relation to war in classics, and war now, and how it relates. . . . I enjoy being able to share my experiences." When discussing potential ways for veterans to share experiences, she said:

There should be a lounge. A veteran's support group. There are veterans out there that have PTSD, they need things like that, you know, with dealing with everyday life. Because some people have a very hard time transitioning from military into civilian life, especially if you're active duty. Coming home and after you have been gone like me.

Karen experienced positive interactions with university staff members and individual professors. When describing personnel working in the university admissions office, she said, "They are so awesome over there. They'll bend over backwards to help you." She also maintained an upbeat comportsment when remembering a situation where she had some questions about financial aid. She recalled she had to "go see the financial aid ladies and they always, they answered it for me and they told me what I needed to do." When speaking of the process by which her prior education, particularly associate degrees and military coursework, was evaluated at her state institution, she said:

It only took them I would say a week and a half to actually look at it and say this is what you've got, this is what you need. You need these classes, what do you want to do? It was real fast, real simple. I was really surprised.

Reflecting on her admissions experience she said, with positive enthusiasm, "It was unbelievable" and she described the university as an "open door." When discussing personnel working on her campus, she said, "I never had a problem with anybody." In fact, she mentioned that several of her instructors were interested in her experiences as a soldier. She gave an example by stating "my professor was always asking me questions directly in relation to war." She consistently described positive interactions with her instructors and noted, "It does help that I'm the same age as half of my professors. So they can relate to me." She also mentioned another class where several veterans were in attendance:

I was really shocked to find out there was five veterans in that class. It's funny because if we wanted to talk we raised our hands and I can't tell you how many times the professor said you don't have to raise your hands.

She recalled speaking to the veteran's representative on her campus about establishing a lounge for veterans. She said, "We need to get a group together where everyone can meet in one location like a veterans' lounge." She said, "We're talking shop. That's what you do." Reflecting on the value of her individual program, she made the following remark: "I think it is a sweet program, especially for veterans. That is one of the only times that your military education is going to work for you."

Karen experienced difficulty with the time constraints associated with her daily life. She was able to balance family life with fulfilling academic requirements but the process for finding such a balance was a challenge. She described an average day this way: "I get up at 6 o'clock in

the morning. I get the kids dressed, get them ready, get them off to school. Then I come here to [the university]” and “I spend time studying, sometimes in the library. I don’t have a lot of time to do that because I do have children that I have to take care of.” She said “I have a hard time finding time. I could do about 100% better if I had 10 more hours in a day. It’s hard to deal with two kids and being a single mother.” She described her strategy for dealing with time constraints the following way:

My day ends at 5:30 when my kids come home. That’s my day. From then until they go to bed at 8:00 I’m with them and I don’t do anything else. I have to go to bed with them and if I have something crazy like a test or a paper that’s due, I’ll pull an all nighter. I’m 38 [so] all nighter’s are not good for me. I can’t do it like these young kids can.

She mentioned she had a tendency to complete course assignments at the last minute. She described the situation in the following way:

I’m a huge last minute person. I do everything last minute. People wonder, why do you set yourself up to do everything last minute? I don’t know, but I’m really, really good under stress. If I really, if I have a paper due in two days, I am like phenomenal at putting something together.... My life is a 24 hour job just like it was in the military.

Given the frequency with which she discussed time constraints and the challenges associated with those constraints, the thematic category known as time constraints emerged. It was clear from her narrative that time limitations was a significant constraining factor for her as she pursued higher education.

She also discussed the GI Bill, expressing both appreciation for the funding and frustration with associated bureaucratic processes. When discussing the process of receiving GI Bill benefits to attend college, she expressed a need to make veterans more aware of the benefits available to them. She noted, "I can't think of how many veterans I've met [who] let their GI benefits run out and didn't [ever] go to school because they didn't know how to use them." She recalled experiencing difficulty with her personal application process for receiving the GI Bill: "It's confusing, it really is. It's a pain in the ass." When offering suggestions for other student veterans who want to apply to receive GI Bill funding, she said, "Find somebody, a network, find other people who have done it. That's what you need to do. Find other people" and "go out and find someone who can lead you or tell you what you need to do."

Karen discussed how substance abuse and drug attraction are major problems for homeless veterans. She mentioned seeing veterans dealing with addiction who were living "across from the liquor store." She commented on these situations by saying, "Get those people some help, especially the ones that don't have a way of getting help. Some have really big issues going on - PTSD and so on." She went on to say we should "show them respect, they need respect. They need help."

Karen graduated with a bachelor's degree a short time after she was interviewed for this project. When speaking of her future, she said, "I want to go to grad school, but I don't have that choice right now. I'm going to have to go to work." She discussed potential job opportunities and said, "I would like to work in counseling, counsel veterans or children." She noted, "Children and veterans are my passion." Her narrative has contributed to an understanding of how higher education was experienced within the sample area after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010).



## **Analysis**

An analysis was conducted of all interview data gathered from Karen. The data were examined and six themes were identified. The themes with an enabling quality include open doors, positive interaction with campus representatives, and military oriented financial resources. The themes with constraining attributes include economic hardship, intervening priorities, and asymmetrical maturity. Each of the themes contributes to the understanding of how the participant experienced higher education as a student veteran.

**Enabling Factors.** The participant experienced open doors within several contexts as evidenced by her use of the phrase during various parts of her series of interviews. The repeated use of the “open door” idea throughout her narrative helped to establish the coding category with the same name. Her previous academic experience at the associates level, in her words, “opened up the door” for her to pursue a bachelor’s degree. When speaking of veterans pursuing higher education, she noted, "You’re going to find those doors and open them yourself." She explained that a certain amount of personal initiative is needed to take the first steps when applying for GI Bill benefits and networking on campus. However she also advised student-veterans to seek help when necessary. She stated, “If you get through the door, and if you’re having a hard time, ask for help.” Her key recommendation was to “seek out other veterans,” to get their advice and assistance when experiencing the challenges associated with being a student. However, she also mentioned open doors within the context of community outreach efforts for economically disadvantaged veterans. For example, she described a time in which she received a turkey through a veterans’ program: “There was a knock on my door, here’s your free gift.” The idea of an open door constituted an emergent theme and the stories associated with the theme consistently conveyed enabling factors.

Karen frequently discussed the ways she interacted with personnel employed by the university and her descriptions of those interactions were enthusiastically positive. She described the admissions staff as “awesome” and said “They’ll bend over backwards to help you.” She also mentioned that it was easy for her to coordinate with staff members to transfer her military credits onto her college transcript and she reported interacting with the campus veterans’ representative in a positive way. Given the pattern of positive interactions with university employees that emerged throughout her series of interviews, the theme of positive interaction with campus representatives emerged as an enabling factor associated with her academic pursuits.

When Karen was asked if there was a relationship between her military service and her decision to attend college, she replied by saying, "Yeah- The money, the GI Bill- because it was going to pay for it. So I went." Once she became a civilian, she experienced confusion with the application procedures for receiving GI Bill benefits. She commented, "It’s confusing, it really is. It’s a pain in the ass." However, she was able to overcome the procedural hurdles and use the benefits to attend college. She noted the GI Bill paid a "monthly stipend, they pay for your books, your tuition, all that." This was an especially beneficial program for her because it allowed her to become financially stable enough to attend college while attending to her responsibilities as a single mother.

**Constraining Factors.** Her decision to attend college stemmed from a need to secure gainful employment. Her military skills were not recognized by employers and she needed to pursue higher education as a means for economic opportunity. She experienced economic hardships as she attended college and struggled financially as a single parent. Ultimately, her academic pursuit was aimed at establishing conditions favorable for her immediate family. Accordingly, she used the GI Bill as a means to overcome such hardships. Therefore, the

thematic category of economic hardship emerged as a significant factor influencing the ways she pursued her college education.

Karen was enrolled as a full-time student while balancing responsibilities as a single parent. She explained, in her words, "I'm telling you this is by far the hardest job I have ever done in my life." She described the situation by saying, "When you go to college you have your family to think about too. You have a dedication to them too. You just have to kind of balance and weigh them." When speaking about the strategies she used to balance her responsibilities, she said, "I have a really good support system. I used other family members; I used friends; I used anybody. Hell, I would use anybody else's friends."

Karen discussed several ways in which she interacted with college students who were younger than herself. She said, "It's funny being older and going to school with the younger kids, [because] you kind of feel like; are you kidding me?" She mentioned situations where younger students would disrupt classes by talking and he, on occasion, told them to "shut up." She described some younger students as being "disrespectful." When asked if she keeps in contact with students she met at college, she said, "Most are younger than me so I don't."

**Summary of Analysis.** The analysis of narrative data gathered from Karen revealed six thematic categories referred to as open doors, positive interaction with campus representatives, military oriented financial resources, economic hardship, intervening priorities, and asymmetrical maturity. The themes emerged from patterns in the participant's discussions that cut across the series of interviews. The identification of the themes contributes to the understanding of how the participant experienced higher education as a student veteran. Moreover, the themes can be understood as being personal or institutional in nature. An institutional theme can be characterized by an institution having more control of the outcome of

a situation and a personal theme is commensurate with an individual having more control of the outcome of a given situation. Karen's themes with an institutional orientation include open doors, positive interaction with campus representatives, military oriented financial resources. In Karen's case, all of the major factors that enabled her to attend college had an institutional orientation. The factors with a more personal orientation included economic hardship, intervening priorities, and asymmetrical maturity.

## **Discussion**

Karen's experiences provide insight into the state of higher education for veterans, within the targeted county, after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). The main themes that emerged from the interviews with Karen were open doors, positive interaction with campus representatives, military oriented financial resources, economic hardship, intervening priorities, and asymmetrical maturity. The stories linked with the themes connect to existing literature and have implications associated with the state legislation concerning student veterans within West Virginia.

The participant experienced her bachelor's degree program as an open door that led to degree attainment. Regents Bachelor of Arts programs have been offered by various state universities and marketed to non-traditional students. The programs allow students to obtain a college degree without declaring a major. They grant a degree based on accumulated credit hours and offer credit for work and life experiences (typically through a portfolio process). West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) requires state operated higher education institutions to provide information about Regents Bachelor of Arts programs to veterans. The degree requirements can be understood as veteran friendly because military education readily transfers into academic credit hours that can be applied to the degree requirements. Indeed, Karen's experience was

consistent with the intent of the law because she said her “military education went towards that degree.” She felt the degree program was welcoming for veterans as evidenced by her statement that she “just went where the door was opened.” Her experiences with the Regents degree program were consistent with the intent of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) insofar as the degree was veteran friendly because it allowed her to receive academic credit for her military training while placing her on a fast path toward graduation (when compared to traditional programs with degree requirements associated with a declared major subject).

Karen mentioned a large number of occasions where she interacted with personnel employed by the university and she consistently reported positive interactions with such personnel. For example, she described one staff member as “awesome” and she said many other personnel were extremely helpful during her admissions process, transcript evaluation process, and enrollment certification process. She expressed similar feelings toward her professors and the veterans’ representative on her campus. Given her overwhelmingly positive descriptions, it is clear that she experienced her campus climate as a veteran friendly place. This finding is consistent with the intent of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) because the bill requires state operated higher education institutions to be veteran friendly. Moreover, Karen based her impression of the university largely on her interaction with staff members. They were, in essence, the point of delivery for veteran-oriented customer service. West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) requires some university personnel to undergo specialized training to be equipped with the skill set needed to successfully interact with veterans. The degree to which such training did or did not occur on Karen’s campus remains unknown and is beyond the scope of this study. However, what is known is the intended outcome associated with the training requirement was experienced in a positive way by Karen because she described her campus as veteran friendly.

Karen's military oriented financial resources were used as a way to overcome economic hardships in an effort to attend college. She discussed the GI Bill and described it as a significant source of income that allowed her to pursue her educational goals. The educational benefits she earned by serving in the military, in essence, allowed her to pursue upward social mobility. Her decision to join the military and to attend college can be understood as acts of personal agency because they were self-directed and she was able to exert control of those decisions. However, the structured support of the GI Bill helped her to exercise her personal agency as she advanced through college. Thus, Karen's experience is consistent with Giddens (1984) structuration theory because her experience with higher education was an interaction between individual agency and social structure.

She identified time constraints as a significant factor that inhibited her full academic performance. For example, she stated she could "do about 100% better" if she "had 10 more hours in a day." Her time limitations primarily stemmed from her responsibilities as a single parent and her experiences are reflected in the theme labeled intervening priorities. Her responsibilities with multiple life roles were typical for most non-traditional students and addressed in existing literature (Saunders & Bauer, 1998; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011) and it is well known that older students often attend to familial, financial, and employment responsibilities whereas most traditional students do not. Karen's interactions with younger students presented some opportunities for her to discuss her life experiences in positive ways.

Her understanding of parenthood and her experiences within the military were issues she discussed with other students. For example, when discussing a psychology course related to human relationships, her personal background served to inform class discussion. She was able to look at relationships in a different context as evidenced by her comment, "You guys are so young.

You have no idea what is in store for you." Moreover, she shared her military experiences on several occasions within a classroom environment. She mentioned she "used a lot of [her] background from the military" when participating in class discussions and completing coursework. The participant also described examples of asymmetrical maturity and expressed some difficulty with her interactions with younger students. She described some students as "disrespectful" and she had some difficulty interacting with traditional students. Her story is consistent with the findings reported by Kim and Cole (2013) in that student-veterans often face difficulties interacting with less mature students. However, Karen's action associated with sharing experiences with her classmates was consistent with Kim and Cole (2013) who maintained that veterans "adapting to campus life and the people with whom they are interacting may have a greater impact on their ability not only to progress and succeed in their studies but also to reengage with the communities they left when they joined the military" (p. 12). Accordingly, the notion of communicating and sharing experiences is an act of socialization with positive consequences even if asymmetrical maturity poses a challenge.

West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) encourages veterans to share their knowledge and military experience. The bill requires state operated higher education institutions to develop programs for veterans to share their knowledge and experience. However, Karen engaged in this type of knowledge sharing on her own without participating in a program designed for that purpose. Her actions, in essence, fulfilled the spirit of the law. When she was asked about ways veterans could be better served on her campus, she suggested that there be "a lounge" or a "veterans' support group." Her suggestion mirrored the actual legislative requirement. She noted, "There's not many veterans' groups around in the community. I mean none that I've really heard of. Of course, I've not really looked either." It is not known if a campus organization for veterans

existed at her university when she was a student. Her comment suggests that if such a group existed, as required by West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010), then she was not aware of it. Given this situation, two recommendations can be made regarding campus programs for veterans to share their knowledge. First, if a state operated higher education institution has not established such a program, then one should be established as required by law. Second, if a state operated higher education institution has established such a program, then it should be marketed through public awareness efforts to ensure the student veterans know about the existence of such a program.

This chapter has, in part, answered the following research question: How do a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate after the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly? Karen attended college within the sample area after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). Her biographical narrative, combined with the analysis and discussion, yields information about how she directly experienced and perceived her campus climate after the passage of the law. Karen is one out of three of the participants who attended college after the passage of the law. This chapter provided an individual overview of Karen's experiences. Group analyses of multiple participants will be presented in a later chapter.



## **CHAPTER 10**

### **CROSS-CASE ANALYSES**

The qualitative analysis of the research data draws upon the pioneering work of Strauss (1987) by employing inductive techniques to identify patterns within the narratives. Patterns emerged within the series of interviews for each individual and patterns emerged across the different participants. This chapter identifies those patterns, especially those shared among the central points of variation and those patterns shared among all of the participants. Patton (2002) describes the value of this analytical approach by saying that "common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon" (p. 235). Maximum variation sampling ensured the participants had a diverse set of characteristics. For example, veterans from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines were represented in the study. Moreover, the age of the participants ranged from 23 to 66 years old. The youngest of the participants recalled campus experiences that occurred a very short time ago while the oldest participant recalled campus experiences that occurred decades ago. Given the wide variation, the data were examined to locate "central themes that cut across a great deal of variation" (Patton, 2002, p. 235). This chapter will provide a summary of the individual analyses, an analysis of similarities among all participants, a comparative analysis of before and after the law, and a comparative analysis of males and females.

#### **Summary of Individual Analyses**

Chapters four through nine provided individual biographies of all participants, analyses of the enabling and constraining factors, and discussions about how participants' experiences

were tied to existing research and recent legislation. Table 3 provides a summary of the themes that emerged from examining the interviews from the individual participants.

<b>Table 3: Emergent Themes</b>						
<b>Themes</b>	<b>Gary</b>	<b>Leslie</b>	<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Sarah</b>	<b>Daniel</b>	<b>Karen</b>
Military Oriented Financial Resources	X	X	X	X	X	X
Economic Hardship	X	X	X	X	X	X
Intervening Priorities	X	X	X	X	X	X
Asymmetrical Maturity	X	X	X	X	X	X
Positive Interaction with Campus Representatives				X	X	X
Negative Interaction with Campus Representatives	X	X	X			
Concern Regarding Drugs	X	X	X	X		
Health Problems	X					
Family Support		X				
Procedural Bureaucracy		X				
Respect for Others			X			
Social Stigma			X			
Mutually Exclusive Cultural Domains			X			
Escape				X		
Residence Instability				X		
Strong Desire to Learn					X	
Constraints on Transfer Credit Value					X	
Open Doors						X

The emergent themes, based on patterns of evidence, reveal factors of concern for the participants on an individual level. Their narrative-based biographies, the analysis of their interviews, and the discussions of each individual case provide insight into the ways veterans directly experienced and perceived their campus climates before and after the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly.

### **Analysis of Similarities Among Participants**

The narrative data were examined to identify patterns that were common among all of the participants. This was an effort to find what Patton (2002) described as "central themes that cut across" the entire sample (p. 235). Several thematic categories were identified through the inductive search for patterns and they inform our understanding of how the student-veterans experienced college. The main themes include military oriented financial resources, economic hardship, intervening priorities, and asymmetrical maturity. An ancillary theme emerged for most of the participants and it was identified as a concern regarding drugs. However, it was unrelated to their actual college experiences. The themes were discussed in detail within the chapters dedicated to each participant. Therefore, a brief summary is presented below in an effort to bring the themes into focus.

All participants expressed an appreciation for the financial resources available to them as a result of their military service. The participants all demonstrated a need for funding to attend college and this need was fulfilled overwhelmingly through military oriented financial resources that were made available to them as a result of their military service. Such resources were available through a Vocational Rehabilitation Program and the G.I. Bill. The frequency of discussion regarding these programs and how such funding was essential to the participant's

ability to attend college resulted in an emergent theme that was triangulated among the entire sample. This thematic category contributes to an understanding of how the participants were enabled to pursue higher education opportunities.

The participants in this study were first all generation college students and they did not receive significant funding from parental sources to attend college. Many of the participants indicated they would not have been able to attend college without funding from military oriented financial resources. Several of the participants originated from rural areas and struggled with poverty. One participant experienced homelessness while attending college. Nearly all of the participants had significant parental and/or familial financial responsibilities that limited their ability to pay for college. Given the prevalence of economic hardships expressed throughout the interviews, a thematic category was identified as economic hardship.

All participants described how they balanced intervening priorities while attending college. These priorities included childcare, employment, and other responsibilities. Most of the participants used the terms balance or balancing when discussing such responsibilities within the context of their academic pursuits. The frequency of discussion regarding how they balanced priorities combined with the consistency of this topic across the entire sample population led to the establishment and triangulation of a thematic category referred to as intervening priorities. These priorities affected how the participants experienced their academic pursuits as well as the amount of time they spent on their campuses. This theme, combined with the associated narratives, provides insight into how student-veterans experienced their educational pursuits.

All of the participants described situations in which they were frustrated with what they perceived as the immaturity of their fellow college students. The veterans in this study, like most

student-veterans, were older than most of their peers when attending college. All of the participants served in the military before attending college and they, by definition, were nontraditional students because they were older than most of their classmates. The student-veterans had all served in significant positions of responsibility and some served in combat. Most of them had families or children of their own while attending college. As the differences in age and maturity were discussed, a thematic pattern emerged, and the theme is best described as asymmetrical maturity. This thematic category can be defined as a situation where a student-veteran feels alienated from the general student population due to a difference in maturity. As the participants noted, the differences in maturity were often a source of frustration and this finding informs our understanding of how student-veterans experience their college campus.

An ancillary theme emerged that was unrelated to how the veterans themselves experienced college. The narrative data from this study were extremely broad insofar as individual interviews often strayed from the questions listed in the protocol. This type of flexibility was built into the research design as an effort to allow the participants to be able to express themselves and discuss issues of importance to them. This process also allowed for an unexpected pattern to emerge. Namely, all of the participants expressed a concern about the effects of illegal drug use within society. An analysis of the narrative data revealed a clear pattern among most of the participants. Many participants discussed how drugs were a significant problem for society. It was surprising for this pattern to emerge because the interview protocol did not have any questions related to drug use. However, each interview included instances where drugs were mentioned and discussed. All of the participants for this study discussed how drugs were a significant problem for modern society. Accordingly, a thematic category was created and labeled as drugs. Moreover, each of the participants was actively

involved in some sort of activity that discouraged the use of drugs. Gary, while employed for a higher education institution, advocated for allowing recovering drug addicts to pursue educational opportunities on his campus. Leslie, a medical professional, personally participated in treating veterans who were addicted to drugs. Matthew, a retired police officer, personally responded to numerous drug related calls throughout his career. Sarah took actions to distance herself from the drug culture and actively encouraged veterans to participate in recreational based rehabilitation in lieu of drug based coping mechanisms. Daniel served on a mission to detect drug smugglers using a form of stealth-like submersible vessels. Karen observed the recovery of a drug user and she personally volunteered at a Veterans Administration hospital where she was exposed to veterans dealing with addiction. This emergent category provides some insight into the thoughts of student-veterans within the sample area for the study and it shows how student-veterans are reacting to a major societal concern.

This analysis identified four main themes that were common to all of the participants: military oriented financial resources, economic hardship, intervening priorities, and asymmetrical maturity. The themes are indicative of the ways in which the participants experienced college within the sample area. An ancillary theme emerged and was identified as a concern regarding drugs. All of the themes represent issues that were of concern to the participants and they were discussed, in detail, within chapters four through nine.

### **Comparative Analysis of Before and After the Law**

The central point of variation among the participants was the time period they attended college. Half of the participants attended before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) and half of the participants attended college after the passage of West Virginia House Bill

4145 (2010). The narrative data from these two groups were examined and compared to reveal patterns that indicate notable differences between campus climates from each time period. This analysis focuses on narrative data related to interactions with university employees including professors and other campus officials.

Gary, Leslie, and Matthew attended college before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). They described a wide variety of interactions with personnel employed by their university. Some of their stories were positive but, when the data were examined in relation to interactions with college employees, their interactions were described with a consistently negative orientation. The main issues they encountered involved conflicts with professors, procedural conflicts with staff members, and difficulty interacting with personnel responsible for the evaluation of military transcripts. The chapters dedicated to individual biographies provided a wide range of examples of the consistently negative interactions with college employees. Therefore, a thematic category was created and labeled negative interaction with campus representatives. This finding was triangulated within the series of interviews for each individual participant and the phenomenon was triangulated through the entire group who attended college before the law was passed. This category and the associated narratives can be compared to similar narratives of the participants who attended college after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010).

Sarah, Daniel, and Karen attended college after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). They described a broad mixture of interactions with personnel employed by their higher education institutions. Some of their stories were negative but, when the data were examined within the context of social exchanges with college employees, their exchanges were

described with a consistently positive orientation. For example, they described campus veterans' representatives in an enthusiastically positive manner. The participants also described transcript evaluation processes whereby they interacted with campus personnel in a positive way to receive academic credits for military training. Additionally, the participants described professors and tutors who behaved in respectful ways. The chapters dedicated to individual biographies provide numerous examples of these types of positive interactions. Therefore, a thematic category was created and labeled positive interaction with campus representative. This finding was triangulated within the series of interviews for each separate participant and the phenomenon was triangulated through the entire group who attended college after the law was passed.

The campus climates for student veterans were experienced differently by participants who attended college before West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) was passed and the participants who attended college after the bill was passed. Narratives of interactions with campus personnel prior to the passage of the bill tended to have a negative orientation while narratives of more recent interactions with campus personnel tended to have a positive orientation. This finding is not statistically generalizable beyond the sample of this study. However, the finding does provide insight into how a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experienced and perceived their campus climate before and after the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly.

### **Comparative Analysis of Males and Females**

The narrative data gathered for this study also were analyzed by comparing differences between males and females. The sample population was evenly divided with three males and three females. A clear pattern emerged when the data were examined. The male participants



described little or no integration of their military experience into their academic coursework. However, the female participants described a plethora of ways in which they integrated their military experience into their academic coursework. Examples of this type of integration ranged from writing college papers based on their military experience to presenting speeches about some aspect of military life. The women actively sought to express their military experiences through course assignments while the men avoided such expression. The noted differences between males and females held true before and after West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) was passed.

Two of the male participants attended college before West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) was passed and one male participant attended college after the law was passed. Gary did not mention a situation where he used his military background as part of a class assignment. Matthew, a Vietnam veteran, actively avoided discussing his status as a veteran while on campus due to a prevalent social stigma and hostile campus climate against veterans. Daniel also avoided such discussion, albeit to a much less degree. When asked about integrating military experience into his coursework, Daniel said, "I did talk a little about it." However, Daniel also said "I usually tried to veer away from [talking about] the Navy." The narrative data indicate the male participants tended to avoid discussing aspects of their military service as part of academic assignments while the women participants actively sought to integrate such experiences within their academic work.

One of the female participants attended college before West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) was passed and two female participant attended college after the law was passed. Leslie discussed several instances where she integrated her military experiences into course assignments. For example, she discussed an English class where she wrote about the trip she

took to Germany as part of an annual military training requirement. She also discussed giving a speech in one of her classes where she discussed the benefits of military service. Sarah also provided examples of the ways she integrated her military experiences into her course assignments. She recalled giving a speech about the Wounded Warrior Project and writing a research paper about women in combat. Karen discussed instances where she integrated her military experiences into course assignments to include speeches, presentations, and writing assignments.

The comparison of narrative data between the male and female participants revealed a clear difference in how military experiences were or were not manifested in their academic work. The male participants tended to avoid writing papers, giving speeches, or otherwise discussing their military experiences within the context of individual college assignments. However, the female participants actively sought to integrate their military experiences into their academic work. This finding was triangulated by identifying several individual instances, among the female participants, where such integration was discussed thus increasing the validity of the finding. These differences were gender specific and they were not specific to the time periods before and after West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) was passed.

## **Summary**

This chapter provided a summary of the individual analyses, an analysis of similarities among all participants, a comparative analysis of before and after the law, and a comparative analysis of males and females. All of the analyses were based on narrative data described within the previous chapters. The analysis of data gathered from individuals established themes indicative of the ways the participants experienced their pursuit of higher education. The themes common among the entire sample included military oriented financial resources, economic

hardship, intervening priorities, and asymmetrical maturity. The themes that were different based on the time in which the participants attended college included positive interaction with campus representatives and negative interaction with campus representatives. The themes that were unique to the individual participants included a concern regarding drugs, health problems, family support, procedural bureaucracy, respect, social stigma, mutually exclusive cultural domains, escape, residence instability, a strong desire to learn, constraints on transfer credit value, and open doors. The comparative analysis of males and females revealed males tended to avoid integration of military experience into coursework but females actively sought opportunities for such integration. These findings shed light on the ways in which a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experienced and perceived their campus climate before and after the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly.

This study suggests that campus climates within the sample area have changed over time. Participants reported experiencing violent anti-military protests during the era of the Vietnam War and they reported positive contact with veterans' representatives during the last few years. The perceptions of campus climates have transitioned from hostile to supportive. This study has shown how a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experience and perceive their campus climate before and after the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly. The narratives of the participants who attended college after the law was passed indicated their campuses were indeed veteran friendly. Additionally, this study has articulated how a qualitative exploration of the direct experience and perceptions of a small group of West Virginia veterans can inform our understandings of how the passage of a state law may or may not have affected campus climates for veterans. The stories told by veterans and the

associated analyses and interpretations shed light on the ways campuses have been experienced. This information can be helpful to lawmakers, researchers, and practitioners of higher education.

## CHAPTER 11

### CROSS-CASE INTERPRETATION

The previous chapter provided a cross-case analysis of the narrative data and revealed themes that reflected the central issues concerning the participants. This chapter provides interpretations of the findings presented within the previous chapter. This chapter connects the findings to existing literature, discusses the findings in relation to recent state legislation, and interprets the findings theoretically. Implications for higher education practices and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

#### **Interpretations of Similarities Among Participants**

The cross-case analysis chapter revealed four themes that were shared by all of the participants and an ancillary theme shared by a majority of the participants. The themes shared by all participants include military oriented financial resources, economic hardship, intervening priorities, and asymmetrical maturity. Each of the thematic categories connects to existing literature and recent legislation within the state of West Virginia. An exploration of these connections will help to arrive at a better understanding of how student-veterans experienced campus climates within the sample area for this study.

The use of military oriented financial resources emerged as a common theme among all of the participants. Each of them used resources granted through a vocational rehabilitation program and/or the GI Bill. Altschuler and Blumin (2009) described these types of resources as "an engine of opportunity for millions of young veterans" (p. 6). Indeed, the extent to which these resources benefit students is well-documented in the existing literature (Mettler, 2005; Humes, 2006; Jasper, 2009; Sander, 2012a; O'Herrin, 2011; Simon, Negrusa, & Warner, 2010; Hall, 2009; Altschluer & Blumin, 2009; McGrevey & Kehrer, 2009; Smith-Osborne, 2009;

Kleykamp, 2006; Radford, 2009). Many of the participants said military oriented financial resources were an essential element in their pursuit of a college education. For example, Matthew said, "If I didn't have a GI Bill I wouldn't [have] gone back to school. If it wasn't for the military, I wouldn't have a college education."

West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) does not specifically mention how higher education institutions should respond to veterans who use such benefits to attend college. However, the use of these benefits requires students to interact with university personnel because the military oriented financial programs pay tuition directly to the universities. Student-veterans typically coordinate with a campus staff member to make arrangements to verify enrollment and have tuition payments sent to the university. West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) does have a provision requiring state operated higher education institutions to establish meetings for employees who work with veterans to share best practices. The extent to which this is or is not happening was beyond the scope of this study because this study focused exclusively on how students experienced their campus. Therefore, additional research is needed to understand this issue from the perspective of staff members who interact with veterans. However, students who attended college after the passage of the bill reported more positive interactions with campus employees than students who attended college before the bill was passed. I was surprised by the ease with which most of the participants received their benefits. Indeed, their narratives provided disconfirming evidence of a bias I held whereby I believed all students would have experienced difficulty with administrative hurdles associated with receiving military oriented financial benefits. Contrary to my expectations, most participants from the entire sample said it was easy to receive their benefits. This finding stands in contrast to Livingston (2009) who found that student veterans were often frustrated because "financial considerations were a paramount

concern and student veterans had to navigate institutional bureaucracy to receive veterans benefits" (p. 172).

All of the participants described how they balanced intervening priorities while attending college. Accordingly, a thematic category was established and labeled as intervening priorities. The key things that were balanced were familial responsibilities, employment, and college. A trend in the existing literature has been to focus on how women balance the responsibilities of motherhood with college life (Brown & Amankwaa, 2007; Ricco, Sabet, & Clough, 2009; Farrell, 2006). However, the men in this study also expressed how their responsibilities as parents required them to balance their family life with academic pursuits. Thus, familial responsibilities were of equal concern for all of the men and women who participated in this study. A study by Mounsey, Vandehey, and Diekhoff (2013) found that "many students may need assistance with understanding how to manage time better in order to effectively fulfill multiple roles." West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) does not directly address the balancing acts undertaken by the student veteran population. However the bill does establish mechanisms by which student veterans can seek help. For example, West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) requires every state operated college campus to provide counselors who are trained to deal with student veterans and it requires institutions to communicate with other veterans' organizations within the state to promote the wellbeing of student veterans. If these mechanisms were in place and functioning properly, then student veterans could seek advice or get a referral to other programs capable of providing assistance.

All of the participants experienced difficulties with what they felt was immaturity among younger college students. The thematic category for this phenomenon is Asymmetrical Maturity. This type of problem is discussed in the existing literature (Cate, 2011; Hall, 2009; Livingston,

2009). For example, Cate (2011) found that student-veterans have little in common with their traditional student counterparts. Hall (2009) found that many student-veterans "will encounter a classroom culture shock that can leave them agitated" (p. 8). Numerous examples of this type of agitation were discussed during the interviews with participants and articulated within the biographical chapters and the cross-case analysis chapter. Accordingly, the processes of socialization for student-veterans are often different than the processes for socialization among students of a traditional age. Livingston (2009) found "student veterans are forced to seek out new avenues of socialization, a task which is complicated because they have a difficult time relating to younger, non-military peers" (p. 174). Higher education institutions have little, if any, control of the maturity of their students. Thus, the problems associated with asymmetrical maturity are especially challenging to deal with through institutional practices. However, provisions within West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) require state operated higher education institutions to establish a student veteran organization on campus. This is a potential way to mitigate the effects of what Hall (2009) referred to as agitation stemming from differences in maturity. However, the participants within this study who attended college after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) reported little or no participation in campus organizations for veterans.

The most surprising category that emerged from this study was concerns regarding drugs. Although unrelated to the participants' direct experiences with college, the finding is interpreted as an ancillary theme. All of the participants discussed some aspect of how they felt drugs were a significant problem for society and it emerged as a theme for four of the participants. Rozenbroek and Rothstein (2011) identified drug use as a significant problem among college students. Moreover, drug use is a known problem for combat veterans and many veterans have



mental disorders in addition to being addicted to drugs (Miller, Reardon, Wolf, Prince, & Hein, 2013). However, little is known about drug use specifically among the student veteran population. Accordingly, this is an area that warrants additional study. The participants' concerns regarding drugs are related to West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) to the extent that the bill requires state operated higher education institutions to coordinate disability services with appropriate federal, state, and private organizations. Flacks (2012) noted that drug addiction is often not characterized as a disability within the context of legislative programs due to a stigma associated with the deviance of drug use. However, as Flacks (2012) noted, this is a hotly contested issue. This issue may arise during future efforts to provide services to student veterans and state legislators would be well-advised to provide specific guidance on this issue. All of the participants expressed concern about drug usage in modern society and some participants described how veterans can become addicted to drugs. However, little is known about the extent to which student veterans use drugs. A qualitative or mixed methods study aimed at gathering data regarding this population would be useful to researchers, legislators, and higher education professionals.

The themes shared by all of the participants included military oriented financial resources, economic hardship, intervening priorities, and asymmetrical maturity. Each of the thematic categories has connections with existing literature and West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). The exploration of these connections helped to arrive at a better understanding of how student-veterans experienced campus climates. Accordingly, the analysis of themes held in common among the sample has demonstrated how a qualitative exploration of the direct experiences and perceptions of a small group of West Virginia veterans can inform our understandings of how the passage of a state law may or may not have affected campus climates for veterans.

## **Comparative Interpretation of Before and After the Law**

The analysis of narrative data from before and after the establishment of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) revealed stark differences in the ways the student-veterans interacted with university personnel. Participants who attended college before the bill overwhelmingly reported negative interactions with campus representatives while participants who attended college after the bill overwhelmingly reported positive interactions with campus representatives. This difference between the two groups suggests that the campus climates improved for the latter sample group. An interpretation of how the experiences of the participants changed throughout time provides insight into how higher education practices have transformed in a way that benefits veterans. O'Rand (1996) described this type of scenario by noting "the movement of individuals within and between institutional contexts brings into focus how lives are shaped at social interfaces and, in turn, how institutions may themselves be transformed" (p. 3). The comparative analysis of how student veterans experienced their campuses before and after West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) focused on their interactions with personnel who were employed by the university. The negative experiences that occurred prior to the passage of the legislation and the positive experiences that occurred after the legislation are directly related to several key provisions within West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) and to other relevant literature.

The participants described a myriad of bad experiences with university personnel during the time preceding the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). The totality of the individual experiences resulted in the establishment of a thematic category referred to as Negative Interaction with Campus Representatives. All of the participants had difficulty receiving academic credit for their military education and these obstacles were encountered during times when the student veterans personally interacted with campus employees.

Participants described encountering difficult people and bureaucratic hurdles. A study by Livingston (2009) found that "student veterans had to navigate institutional bureaucracy to receive veterans' benefits. The frustration evident in bureaucratic navigation affected student veterans' perceptions of campus attitudes, primarily in regards to administrators" (p. 172). When discussing campus climates for veterans, Summerlot, Green, and Parker (2009) noted that "challenging climate is usually found at schools with a history of political dissent and strong anti-military movements" (p. 73). You may recall Matthew's description of violent protests against the Vietnam War at a university within the sample area for this study. Matthew described a "very turbulent" time and "hostile students" on his campus who engaged in violent riots and "wanted to kill us, call us baby killers, and throw rotten tomatoes" at veterans. Given the prevalence of negative experiences among the student veterans from this time period, I can reasonably conclude that the state operated higher education institutions within the sample area were once hostile campus climates for student veterans I interviewed who attended college during that time.

Research has shown that bureaucratic obstacles are a known constraining factor for student veterans throughout the United States (Hall, 2009; Akerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Akerman, & Mitchell, 2008). In the case of this study, university personnel served as the nexus between student veterans and favorable academic outcomes. Most of the participants had a strong desire to receive academic credits for their military education. A study by Persky and Oliver (2011) concluded that "easing the transfer of military credit" would "show veterans that the case institution respects and values the education veterans received while serving in the military" (p. 113). They recommended that "specific counselors should be trained as veteran credit transfer specialists" (Persky & Oliver, 2011, p. 114). West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010)

later addressed the kinds of credit transfer difficulties described by the participants. For example, the bill requires state operated community colleges to grant transfer credit for vocational training received at military schools and the bill requires the state develop a blanket policy for granting credit for military experience (West Virginia House Bill 4145, 2010). The extent to which the state institutions actually followed through with this legislative mandate is unclear. However, the direct experiences of student veteran participants who attended college after the bill was passed are clear.

The participants described a plethora of good experiences with campus personnel after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). The totality of the individual experiences resulted in the establishment of a thematic category referred to as Positive Interaction with Campus Representatives. Summerlot, Green, and Parker (2009) found that "in a supportive environment, veterans are unlikely to feel the need to hide their military affiliation. Many of these supportive campuses are veteran-friendly and strive to supply infrastructure to support veterans" (p. 73). Certainly, West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) has provided the legislative framework to better serve veterans. Participants from this period of time reported their military education easily transferred into academic credit reflected on their college transcripts. Given the overwhelmingly positive description of interactions with campus personnel combined with reports of ease with receiving military education transfer credits, I can conclude the state operated higher education institutions within the sample provided friendly climates for the student veterans I interviewed who attended college in recent years.

The key point of variation among the sample was the time the participants attended college. Half of them attended before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) and half attended afterward. The two halves were compared by examining narrative data. Student

veterans who attended college prior to the law experienced Negative Interactions with Campus Representatives. This finding reveals how a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experienced and perceived their campus climate before the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly. Additionally, student veterans who attended college after the law was passed experienced Positive Interactions with Campus Representatives. This finding reveals how a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experienced and perceived their campus climate after the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly. Moreover, the ways they experienced positive and negative campus climates were tied to existing literature and connected to provisions within West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). This has demonstrated how a qualitative exploration of the direct experience and perceptions of a small group of West Virginia veterans can inform our understandings of how the passage of a state law may or may not have affected campus climates for veterans.

### **Comparative Interpretation of Males and Females**

The analysis of narrative data from males and females revealed differences in their propensity to integrate their military experiences into their college coursework. Males tended to avoid such integration while females actively sought such integration. Examples of integration of military experiences into college coursework included writing papers, giving speeches, or otherwise discussing their military experiences within the context of individual assignments. A thematic category called Integration of Military Experience into Coursework was established. A discussion of this topic will allow connections to be made to existing literature and West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010).

Two things happen when students integrate their military experience into college coursework. First, the process identifies the student as a veteran. Second, it allows the veteran to share experiences. McGrevey and Kehrer (2009) found that "military service members and veterans make a valuable addition to any student population because they bring unique experiences and skills to campus" (p. 93). Likewise, West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) encourages veterans to share experiences because it requires state operated higher education institutions to develop programs for veterans to share their knowledge and military experience. None of the participants in this study shared experiences through such a program. However, the women did share such experiences through the integration of their military experience into college coursework.

Conversely, the males tended not to integrate their military experiences into their coursework. A study by Summerlot, Green, and Parker (2009) found that "many college students found themselves better off not identifying as veterans, so they attempted to blend in with their fellow students as much as possible" (p. 71). Previous research has shown that attempts to blend in usually occurred on campuses that were not military friendly (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). For example, "veterans at these schools often do not identify themselves as veterans due to the fact that reactions to military service can be varied and emotionally charged; instead, they opt to conceal their military experience. Concealment allows them the freedom to speak their minds without being judged for being veterans and protects them from becoming targets of criticism from those on campus who hold anti-military views. This concealment often extends to the classroom" (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009, p. 73). Matthew, the Vietnam War veteran, certainly falls within this category. He avoided identifying himself as a veteran or integrating his military experiences into his college coursework because, in his words, "you had to shy away

from it back then because of the animosity for the military.” The reasons why other male veterans did not share experiences through coursework are less clear.

The comparative analysis of males and females has revealed how a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experienced and perceived their campus climate before and after the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly. One female participant attended college before West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) was passed and two of the females attended college after the law was passed. Two of the male participants attended college before the law was passed and one male attended college afterward. The sample group was divided along gender lines in regard to the propensity to share military experiences through coursework.

### **Theoretical Interpretations**

The narrative data from the individual participants were analyzed and discussed in chapters four through nine. Because the connections between those themes and existing literature and modern law were discussed in the earlier chapters, the interpretation within this section will focus on the theoretical ramifications of the individual themes. This is accomplished by using structuration theory and critical theory. All of the themes can be understood as phenomena existing within a societal framework. This framework can then be broken down to understand the interplay between individuals and boarder societal elements by using structuration theory. The value of such interplay is then interpreted through the use of critical theory to determine what can be improved and what should be sustained.

All of the participants were U.S. military veterans and they experienced highly structured environments commensurate with the nature of military service. However, they also experienced social contexts related to structural features of their higher education institutions before and after

the passage of a state law requiring colleges to become veteran-friendly. Many of the individual themes derived from the narratives of each participant can be interpreted in relation to agency and structure. Giddens' (1984) structuration theory is especially useful because it can expose relationships between individuals and societal elements. O'Rand (1996) noted that "sociologists have long recognized the promise of cross-level analysis for linking individual behaviors to social structures and for distinguishing the separate processes or operating between levels" (p. 3).

Giddens (1984) defines agency as the ability for humans to make decisions "with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs" (p. 14). Stated differently, agency is an individual's action taken to affect something. In this study, all of the participants made the decision to join the military, to attend college, and their decisions had an effect on their lives and the lives of other people. Giddens (1984) defines structure as "recursively organized sets of rules" (p. 25). The prime examples of structures in this study are higher education institutions, the GI Bill, and West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). The individual participants can be understood as interacting with these structures through the use of social agency and/or the adherence to structural factors. This phenomenon warrants examination because "social transitions over the life course provide strategic subject matter for cross-level analysis" (O'Rand, 1996, p. 3).

The themes were interpreted through the lenses of Giddens' (1984) structuration theory and critical theory. Burrige, Carpenter, Cherednichenko, and Kruger (2010) noted that "Giddens clearly links human actions with social structures in his concept of duality of structure: Human actions and interactions create social structures, and those social structures influence the actions and interactions of humans" (p. 25). From a pure structuration theory perspective, elements of agency and structure continuously interact with each other. Therefore, no single theme identified



within this study can be *exclusively* described as an element of agency or structure. However, an interpretive value can be applied using critical theory. Some of the themes can be interpreted as existing *predominantly* as elements of agency or structure based on examining who or what exerted the most control of the situation(s) that gave rise to the themes.

Each theme was examined to determine if it fit *predominantly* within the category of agency or structure. Some themes did not fit into either category and this is expected because Maxwell (2005) noted that "no theory will accommodate all data equally well" (p. 43). When working with themes that did fit *predominantly* within contexts of agency or structure, the data were paired with an attribute designated as enabling or constraining (within the context of the participants' pursuit of higher education). The results are summarized in Table Four. The individual participants pursued higher education with varying degrees of personal agency and/or influence of social structures as manifested through the identification of themes based on their narratives. Virtually all of the themes were related to elements that either enabled or constrained the participant's pursuit of a college education. However, concern regarding drugs emerged as an outlier theme that does not fit within the noted categories and it is interpreted as an ancillary finding.

The structural elements identified in this study are of particular interest to legislators and leaders within the higher education community because the structural elements can be altered by leaders in an effort to improve higher education for student veterans. Giddens (1984) noted, "The identification of structural sets is a very useful device for conceptualizing some of the main features of a given institutional order" (p. 304). The structural elements that are enabling are examples of what is working and the structural elements that are constraining are areas that can be improved through legislation and/or policy. Table four displays the themes and identifies their

corresponding relationships as they relate *predominantly* to agency, structure, enabling factors, and constraining factors.

Elements of critical theory contribute to this interpretation. Kesson (2011) describes critical theory as "a Western Marxist tradition which explores previously neglected aspects of Marxism in light of contemporary events" (p.96). This study has followed the Marxist tradition because the study is directed toward a praxis through what Sarup (1979) described as a "fusion of thought and action, of theory and practice" (p. 120). Freire (1970/2009) also used critical theory to promote personal agency and break down unjust power relationships. Accordingly, the themes were examined to determine if the individual participant or structural element held the most power within the context(s) that gave rise to the themes. Themes where a social structure held more power were identified as predominantly structural. Themes where an individual held the most power were identified as predominantly examples of agency. Themes that did not predominantly fit within either area were not identified via a designation within Table Four. A comparison between the structural elements identified in Table Four and the constraining factors will shed light on the negative effects of unjust power relationships.

<b>Table 4: Thematic Interpretation</b>				
<b>Themes</b>	<b>Agency</b>	<b>Structure</b>	<b>Enabling</b>	<b>Constraining</b>
Military Oriented Financial Resources		X	X	
Economic Hardship				X
Intervening Priorities				X
Asymmetrical Maturity				X
Positive Interaction with Campus Representatives		X	X	
Negative Interaction with Campus Representatives		X		X
Concern Regarding Drugs				
Health Problems				X
Family Support			X	
Procedural Bureaucracy		X		X
Respect for Others	X		X	
Social Stigma				X
Mutually Exclusive Cultural Domains				X
Escape	X		X	
Residence Instability				X
Strong Desire to Learn	X		X	
Constraints on Transfer Credit Value		X		X
Open Doors		X	X	

Negative interactions with campus representatives, procedural bureaucracy, and constraints on transfer credit value are all thematic categories that emerged within the context of unjust power relationships at the institutional level. Each theme arose through situations where social structures held more power than the individuals who interacted with the structures.

Accordingly, improvements should continue to be made in those areas and evidence has shown that institutions within the sample are on the right track. For example, interactions with campus representatives were described as mostly negative before the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) and they were described as mostly positive after the law. This finding can not be generalized beyond the participants of this study. Therefore, future quantitative research is needed to determine the extent to which interactions between student-veterans and university personnel are described as positive. Moreover, procedural bureaucracy and constraints on transfer credit value are areas that can be significantly improved.

The field research for this study allowed me to gain insight into how two separate higher education institutions were organized and how such organization was experienced by student veterans. For example, Sarah attended a community college after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) and her institution streamlined the procedures for admission, transcript evaluation, and enrollment certification for military oriented financial resources. Sarah's college handled all of those issues in a single office where a veteran's representative was employed and she praised the ease with which she was able to attend to all matters through one effective representative. However, the four-year university other participants attended after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010) handled admissions, transcript evaluations, and enrollment certifications in separate offices and this involved unnecessary procedural bureaucracy. Accordingly, I recommend that higher education institutions operate a single office wherein student veterans can attend to as many procedural matters as possible while working with a veteran's representative.

Improvements can also be made in the area of transcript evaluation. Student veterans have historically struggled to get higher education institutions to honor the education reflected in

their military transcripts. This study indicates that improvements have been made in this area because participants who attended college recently said their credits transferred easily. However, in the case of Daniel, more than 100 credit hours for military service were awarded but only three of those credits counted toward his degree. His situation indicates the current transfer credit system did not benefit it him in a manner consistent with the intent of the state law (West Virginia House Bill 4145, 2010). Therefore, state legislators and higher education institutions should examine ways that transfer credits can be more beneficial for student veterans seeking specialized degrees.

The common element among all of the structural constraints is a struggle between the individual and a larger societal entity. Half of the participants struggled against their university through negative interactions with campus employees. Participants also struggled to navigate through a complex maze of procedural bureaucracy and one participant was constrained by the value assigned to his transfer credits by his university. These struggles provide insight into how a small group of West Virginia veterans directly experienced and perceived their campus climate before and after the passage of a state law requiring higher education institutions to become veteran-friendly. Moreover, the association of these constraints with structural processes demonstrates that veterans were in some ways marginalized by their higher education institutions. Because the ways in which they were marginalized involved structural factors, those very factors can be reevaluated by leaders within the higher education and legislative community in an effort to make changes that will better serve the student veteran population.

A comparison between the structural elements identified in Table Four and the enabling factors sheds light on the positive effects of macro-level factors. Some structural processes are extremely beneficial and enabling for student veterans. Giddens (1984) maintained that social

structures can have positive outcomes when individuals interact with them. Military oriented financial resources, positive interaction with campus representatives, and open doors are all thematic categories that emerged whereby the institutional-level factors resulted in positive outcomes for veterans.

The availability of military oriented financial resources allowed all of the participants to make choices enabling them to overcome economic hardships and attend college. These macro-level structural resources are enabling veterans' to have a degree of upward mobility within U.S. society. History has shown that the GI bill and other veterans' programs have provided a mechanism by which large numbers of veterans have been enabled to pursue higher education and secure a middle class socioeconomic status (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009; Humes, 2006). Given the recent economic downturn and the shrinking middle class (Maharidge, 2011), the structural resources in place for veterans are a rare example of a functional mechanism by which individuals can achieve an upward socioeconomic mobility.

The veterans who described positive interaction with campus representatives experienced additional macro level social structures in a beneficial way. The contact veterans had with individuals employed by higher education institutions occurred at the point of delivery of key services. This contact resulted in decisions that affected how college was experienced. The positive experiences described within this study are discussed in detail within the comparative interpretation of before and after the passage of West Virginia House Bill 4145 (2010). However, the narrative data from this study indicate that modern student veterans are experiencing campus climates in a manner that can be described as veteran-friendly. One of the participants described interacting with her university in terms of open doors. She felt her university was a welcoming place for student-veterans because her military education credits

easily transferred into her degree program, the admissions process was streamlined, and university personnel treated her with respect. These interactions were positive ways in which the university, as a macro-level structure, established a veteran-friendly campus climate. The ways in which she interacted with the university in a positive manner were influenced by the structural elements established by the university, in part, because policies and processes were in place to establish conditions favorable for student-veterans.

### **Summary**

This chapter has provided interpretations of similarities among all participants, a comparative interpretation of before and after the law, a comparative interpretation of males and females, and a theoretical interpretation of the themes identified by this study. The interpretations tied the elements of this study to existing theory, research, and law. The research questions posed within this study have been answered through the individual and cross-case analyses and cross-case interpretation. This study fills a gap in knowledge by providing insight into how veterans experienced campus climates within a county located in the state of West Virginia. Atlas Research LLC (2013) made a recommendation for additional research to "study the impact of legislation to encourage the growth of military-friendly colleges and universities in the state" (p. 22). Cate (2011) identified "a need for empirical research about student veterans so that colleges, universities, and policy makers make more informed decisions about their possible needs" (p. 137). Rumann and Hamrick (2010) suggested for additional research to be conducted on the perceptions of veterans concerning their college experience. Livingston (2009) called for additional qualitative research addressing veterans in higher education settings. This study was a response to those recommendations for additional research and it contributes to the body of knowledge regarding veterans' affairs.

This study provided insight into what it is like to be a student veteran. The key finding for the study is that all of the participants identified asymmetrical maturity, intervening priorities, and economic hardships as factors that constrained their progress while attending college. The identification of those factors raises new questions. For example, to what extent are those factors applicable to the broader population of veterans within West Virginia or to veterans in other states and regions? Are the experiences that gave rise to these factors typical? Additionally, all of the participants identified military oriented financial resources as the main factor that enabled them to pursue their educational goals. This finding suggests that such benefits are serving their intended purpose by providing a means for veterans to transition into civilian life and increase their socioeconomic mobility by obtaining a college degree. Moreover, the study revealed that veterans who attended college before House Bill 4145 (2010) was passed experienced predominantly negative interactions with campus representatives and the participants who attended college after the bill was passed overwhelmingly reported positive interaction with campus representatives. This suggests that legislative efforts to establish veteran friendly campuses in West Virginia may be working.



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## APPENDIX A

### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD LETTER



**Office of Research Integrity**  
Institutional Review Board  
401 11th St., Suite 1300  
Huntington, WV 25701

FWA 00002704

IRB1 #00002205  
IRB2 #00003206

September 26, 2013

Linda Spatig, Ed.D.  
Leadership Studies

RE: IRBNet ID# 394614-1

At: Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral)

Dear Dr. Spatig:

<b>Protocol Title:</b>	[394614-1] Campus Climates Experienced by United States Military Veterans
<b>Expiration Date:</b>	September 26, 2014
<b>Site Location:</b>	MUGC
<b>Submission Type:</b>	New Project                      APPROVED
<b>Review Type:</b>	Expedited Review


In accordance with 45CFR46.110(a)(6 & 7), the above study and informed consent were granted Expedited approval today by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Chair for the period of 12 months. The approval will expire September 26, 2014. A continuing review request for this study must be submitted no later than 30 days prior to the expiration date.

This study is for student Michael Jessee Adkins.

If you have any questions, please contact the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Coordinator Michelle Woomer, B.A., M.S at (304) 696-4308 or woomer3@marshall.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

## APPENDIX B

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

	Marshall University IRB	Written Consent to Participate in Research	
	Approved on: 9/28/13		
	Expires on: 9/28/14		
	Study number: 394614		

### Campus Climates Experienced by U.S. Military Veterans

You have been selected to participate in a study about how military veterans experience college. This study involves research. The purpose of this research study is to gain an understanding of your opinions about higher education within West Virginia. This will take less than 6 hours of your time. If you choose to be in the study, the researcher will record a series of interviews. You are not obligated to answer any of the questions. The interviews will occur within the Cabell County metro area at locations negotiated between the interviewer and yourself. The recording can be stopped immediately upon your request.

There are no foreseeable risks or benefits to you for participating in this study. There is no cost to you. If you have questions while taking part, please stop the researcher and ask. The researcher will take steps to safeguard your identity. The researcher will link your answers to you via the recording and this link will be omitted later (within a transcript) in order to protect your identity. The audio recordings and the transcripts of the recordings will be destroyed after the study is complete. Your name will not be published within the doctoral dissertation associated with this research.

If you have questions about this research study you may call Michael Adkins at (304) 634-8251 or Dr. Linda Spatig at (304) 696-2875. If you feel as if you were not treated well during this study, or have questions concerning your rights as a research participant call the Marshall University Office of Research Integrity (ORI) at (304) 696-4303. The IRBNet reference number for this project is 394614-1.

Your participation in this research is voluntary and you will not be penalized or lose benefits if you refuse to participate or decide to stop. You will be compensated in the amount of \$20.00 for participating in an interview and you will receive a copy of this document.

You agree to take part in this study and confirm that you are 18 years of age and older. You have had a chance to ask questions about being in the study and have had all questions answered. By signing this consent form you are not giving up legal rights to which you are entitled.

Do you consent to participate in this study?

Please check the appropriate box:                      Yes  No

_____	_____	_____
Printed Name (of prospective participant)	Signature	Date
<u>Michael J. Adkins</u>	_____	_____
Printed Name (Co-Investigator)	Signature	Date
<u>Dr. Linda Spatig</u>	_____	_____
Printed Name (Principal Investigator)	Signature	Date

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## **APPENDIX C**

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

A series of three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. The format articulated by Seidman (1991) was used where the first interview focused on a biographical narrative, the second interview focused on details of current experiences, and the third interview focused on reflection. Open-ended questions were asked and the interviews remained conversational with the researcher asking follow-up questions that were unique to the individual discussions. The following tentative set of broad questions represents a starting point and each interview proceeded in a manner that could not be predicted by the researcher on an a-priori basis. The questions were intentionally written in a format consistent with everyday spoken-language as opposed to rhetoric of academic writing.

## Protocol for Interviews With Students

### Interview 1: Biographical Narrative

- Can you tell me a little about yourself?
- Can you tell me a little about your family?
- What motivated you to join the military?
- How did you come to be a college student?
- What motivated you to attend college?
- How did you choose your major?
- What kind of a relationship is there, in any, between your military service and your decision to attend college?

### Interview 2: Details of Current Experience

- What was an average school-day like for you?
- What was your favorite part of being a student?
- What kinds of challenges did you have as a student?
- Did you use any military benefits to attend college?
- What was the process like to get military benefits for college?
- Did you get academic credit for your military training?
- What do you think about your campus?
- Does your education help you with your job?
- Were there any campus activities that helped you get where you are today?
- Do you keep in contact with other students you met during college?
- Do you have any prior military experiences that affect your daily life?

### Interview 3: Reflection

- How do you make sense of your college experiences?
- Given your military background and experiences in college, has there been anything in particular that has helped you to pursue your academic goals?
- Given your military background and experiences in college, has there been anything in particular that has limited your pursuit of academic goals?
- Where do you see yourself in five years?
- What advice would you give to student-veterans?
- What advice would you give to colleges/universities?