

## National Guard Service Members in Higher Education: A Continuous Transition

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*For students in the National Guard (NG), it is reasonable to assume their continual transition in and out of military training may pose academic challenges. With data from qualitative narrative inquiries and using Schlossberg's transition model as a theoretical framework, this study focused on the transition experiences of seven NG students from two public universities within one south-central state. Findings suggested that NG students experience unique challenges compared to other military-affiliated students, although the difficulties presented do not outweigh their overall academic success. The variability across student experiences suggests opportunities to refine, coordinate, and continue individualized assistance to NG students.*

Like most nontraditional students, military veteran students are often older than their student peers, more likely to work a steady job outside school, support a spouse and children, and be less involved with the campus environment and culture than traditional college students (Remenick, 2019). Because of the unique challenges student veterans experience, they frequently struggle to transition to the college environment and find themselves leaving college prematurely (Gregg et al., 2016). Although it is essential to understand the various challenges and characteristics veteran students have when transitioning to college, it is equally important to understand the distinct characteristics of military-affiliated students. This study centered on the transition experiences of students serving in the National Guard (NG) while enrolled in college in an effort to understand how those experiences impacted academic success.

Unfortunately, research indicates not all institutions of higher education are holistically knowledgeable about their diverse military-affiliated student population.

Molina and Morse (2015) discussed how campus veteran services' limited knowledge of military-related undergraduates might contribute to systems of assistance that ignore substantial variations in the conditions for supporting NG students. Borsari et al. (2017) suggested colleges do not have sufficient support programs promoting or providing specific services to the many different types of military-affiliated students. However, higher education communities can become more knowledgeable in helping NG students succeed and provide NG students with more reliable and individualized support through continued research.

The primary research question explored in this study was the following: How do undergraduate students at two universities located in the South describe their college transition experience while serving in the NG? While NG students and veterans share similar challenges transitioning to college, most NG students transition back and forth between the military and college multiple times. As such, it was assumed their continual transition would affect their academic success and that effective services were needed to support the transition.

## **Literature Review**

### **Challenges of Military Transitions**

Veterans and service members, including those in the NG, are not strangers to transition. Many have endured combat deployments, been separated from loved ones, and received various forms of intense training. Student veterans and other service members can experience combat-related stress, leading to psychological disabilities, feelings of social isolation from their college peers, and challenging interactions with faculty (Ambrose, 2015; Gregg et al., 2016). As these individuals progress through this cultural change, it is essential to understand the difficulties coinciding with the transition process.

### **Students Veterans and Service Members**

The differences between student veterans and traditional students, such as age, can make it hard for student veterans to feel welcomed and connected to their college peers. In addition to the age differences, a prominent part of the military culture is a deep sense of camaraderie. Military-affiliated students lose their connection when their college peers are people with whom they are unfamiliar (Nevarez et al., 2017). Furthermore, military culture instills a hierarchal structure every member must follow to maintain a well-balanced sense of uniformity. The loss of clear expectations and rules and individual decision-making that accompanies the transition to

college means that military-affiliated students may struggle to maintain a sense of psychological well-being (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). Equally crucial to the academic and social challenges military-affiliated students may face are health concerns from combat-related injuries and stress. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) are two widespread issues impacting more than 400,000 service members who deployed to either Iraq or Afghanistan beginning in 2000 (Ambrose, 2015). Mental health issues, such as PTSD and TBI, can lead to other health concerns, including substance abuse and suicide (Ambrose, 2015), especially if left untreated. Johnson et al. (2014) suggested military culture has historically regarded receiving mental health counseling as an indicator of vulnerability and a danger to job security. Further, these researchers suggested service members view civilians as incapable of understanding the challenges military-affiliated students face, which may lead them to underutilize the mental health services provided by colleges and universities. Similarly, Currier et al. (2018) found that military-affiliated students relied less on counseling and medication because they were more likely to experience personal stigma and uncertainty about the effectiveness of treatment than peers who did not serve in the military. Gregg et al. (2016) suggested that because of these challenges, student veterans frequently struggled to transition to the college environment and found themselves leaving college prematurely. Understanding student veterans' experiences is essential if leaders want to step into action to support their academic success and raise awareness within the field of higher education. For this study, it was necessary to understand the particular characteristics of students serving in the NG.

## **National Guard Students**

The NG is a distinct and vital U.S. military reserve component founded in 1636 as a citizen authority created to safeguard homes and cities from stringent assaults (Army National Guard [ARNG], 2019b). The U.S. NG consists of soldiers in the Army National Guard and airmen in the Air National Guard, also known as the Air Guard. NG service members primarily train in their home states, allowing governors or the president to call upon them in emergencies (ARNG, 2019b). Their training cycles will last as long as their initial enlistment, which may be as little as four years, extending through reenlisting for 20 to 30 years of total military service.

Like other military-affiliated students, NG students share numerous challenging transition experiences resulting in challenges, such as mental health issues after combat deployments and social acceptance from their peers as they enter higher education. However, unlike active-duty military, who have full-time military

service agreements and daily military structure, or veterans who no longer have service commitments, NG members typically fulfill military duties one weekend a month and two full training weeks each year. During monthly training, typically on weekends, NG students experience a culture of structure that each service member must practice to maintain a well-balanced sense of unity. When the NG student returns to campus on Monday and the structure is withdrawn, research has indicated they may struggle with a sense of psychological well-being (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). Because serving in the NG is not a full-time commitment, students in the NG must cope with continually transitioning from their monthly military service commitments back to their civilian employment, family responsibilities, and college enrollments that are not similarly structured to military service.

In addition to service differences, there are demographic differences between students in the NG and other military-affiliated students. A person can be as young as 17, attend basic training for NG, and still attend college at the traditional age of 18 years (ARNG, 2019a). According to Kim and Cole (2013), the average age of a student veteran is 25 years and older. As such, NG service members may be the same age as their traditional college peers, be less likely to have a spouse or other dependents, and may still have parents supporting them financially. Students in the NG are also more likely to be women. Molina and Morse (2015) reported one third of NG members (33%) and reservists (31%) in school were female, while about 1 in 5 active-duty service members (22%) and veterans (21%) in higher education were women. Molina and Morse further reported students in the NG had the highest average earnings (\$47,503) compared to reservists (\$34,937), active-duty personnel (\$35,413), and veterans (\$30,538).

Gregg et al. (2016) placed transitioning as a priority interest on campus, and institutions are becoming increasingly aware of this challenge for veterans. Additionally, extensive research exists regarding the assistance and support student veterans receive when going to college (Kelly et al., 2013; Kim & Cole, 2013; Kurzynski, 2014). However, there is still limited research covering the college services supporting the unique differences members of the NG encounter while pursuing a college degree.

## **College Services for Veterans and NG Students**

Colleges and universities have seen an increase in student veterans and other military-affiliated students on their campuses since the passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Borsari et al., 2017). Educational benefits play a substantial role in a person's decision to enlist in the military. Since implementing the Post-9/11 GI

Bill, the federal government has continued to invest billions of dollars in veteran education, and millions of veterans have transitioned out of the military and into higher education institutions (Kirchner, 2015). With these high enrollment numbers, evidence shows educators must rethink how to serve this growing population of students on their respective campuses (Remenick, 2019).

One of the challenges that higher education faces is a lack of information about military students. According to Kelly et al. (2013), only 32% of institutions record retention and completion rates specifically for undergraduate student veterans. Furthermore, just 25% report having a detailed understanding of why military students withdraw, and only 10% of colleges and universities know the first-year retention rate of their student veterans. Institutional researchers face a significant challenge in merely identifying the different military student populations.

Many institutions have improved their student support services and academic resources to be more veteran-friendly (Kelly et al., 2013). Although these veteran-friendly support services are designed to help military-affiliated students, they are not necessarily tailored to the specific transitional needs of students in the NG. For example, as previously stated, age differences between students in the NG and other military-affiliated students are common. An 18-year-old student in the NG who lives in a residence hall and has no children would not necessarily need childcare services to attend class compared to a student veteran who may be a single parent. Institutions that wish to enhance NG students' success significantly need to create holistic initiatives to mediate the students' transition into higher education, and it begins with awareness. With a better understanding of the different types of military-affiliated students, each department on campus can then play a role in serving them, enhancing instead of detracting from the overall academic success of this student population.

One crucial example is to examine the veteran service offices on campus and how their services influence the academic success of NG and other military-affiliated students. Kurzynski (2014) found that veterans collaborate as a close team, fostering a sense of security and dependability. Having consistent support staff who accurately understand their culture is pivotal. Kurzynski also suggested the central source for student veterans to understand the college experience is a veteran's service office. The presence of a dedicated office for student veterans is a reliable indicator of the institution's commitment to serving veterans and other military students (Kelly et al., 2013). Researchers also found that organizations with such a center were more likely to create new programs and services to support student veterans (Kelly et al., 2013). For current and supplementary support programs to successfully navigate the complex experience of military-affiliated students, including NG students, it is

crucial to recognize student transitions from a theoretical lens.

## **Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the 4 Ss**

NG students have unique individual backgrounds and can provide the college campus with a distinct perception relating to their transitional experiences. They find themselves continually transitioning from their military service commitments back to their regular full-time jobs, family responsibilities, and college enrollments. Schlossberg's (2011) transition model provides a framework for understanding the experiences NG students share. Schlossberg described a transition as any experience that occurs in changing interactions, habits, assumptions, and responsibilities. The transition model brought together concepts and practices rooted in three types of transitions: (a) anticipated or predictable transitions, such as graduation from college; (b) unanticipated or unforeseen transitions, such as divorce or sudden death of a loved one; and (c) non-events or expected transitions that do not occur, such as failure to be accepted to medical school.

NG students are a distinct population with different demands from those of other military-affiliated students. The transition model offers a structure for interpreting their transition (Schlossberg, 2011). Transitions are essential areas to engage with members of the armed forces when moving from being a soldier or airman to a student, employee, and family member. As individuals progress through a change, they will evaluate and re-evaluate the significance of the experiences throughout the transition process (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). When members of the NG are not training, they may experience feelings of tension related to their military unit, household, and employer because they are unable to move efficiently between responsibilities (Podlogar et al., 2017). Similarly, when NG soldiers are training, they, their families, and their employers may be unprepared to deal with the time commitment covering these various transitions (Podlogar et al., 2017). It is vital to understand whether the transition experiences affecting members of the NG's civilian employment and family life also affect their academic success.

The transition model is essential to understanding how NG participants handle the continual transition process while enrolled in higher education. By applying Schlossberg's (2011) transition model, professionals working in military support services can determine whether the individual resources a student in the NG receives are sufficient in supporting the transition process. Whether the transition is anticipated, such as weekend training, also known as drill, or unanticipated, such as deploying to help with a natural disaster, understanding the experiences of college-enrolled NG students is critical for providing the correct individual support.

For instance, an NG student may need academic referral services for dealing with missing classes on a Friday due to deploying for an unanticipated event, as opposed to a combat veteran dealing with PTSD who may need a referral to mental health services. If the support for the student is not adequate or the transitional challenge is unclear, knowing the basics of Schlossberg's transition model can give perspective in enhancing the transitional aid for the student.

In addition to the type of transition, it is vital to understand the characteristics of the transition process. These characteristics can be classified as the 4 Ss: situation, self, support, and strategies. Although Schlossberg's model has not been widely used on NG students, this section describes challenges associated with the transition to higher education for military-affiliated (e.g., veterans, NG, active-duty) students.

Situation relates to how individuals assess transition and sense of control over what is happening (Goodman et al., 2006). The literature has suggested differences between military and academic cultures can pose challenges for veterans, potentially relating to their perceptions of the situation (Borsari et al., 2017; Molina & Morse, 2015). For example, NG students may have difficulty adjusting to their surroundings if they are referred to veteran services because the NG student is not yet a veteran.

Self-related factors focus on how inner resources and personal characteristics influence coping and can be separated into two categories: personal characteristics and psychological resources (Goodman et al., 2006). For example, specific personal characteristics, like age, can make it hard for older military students to relate to their peers (Olsen et al., 2014). Psychological resources refer to personality characteristics and internal states, which can influence how individuals manage transitions. Combat veterans may struggle with managing their mental state if they have PTSD or a TBI, and this can also be true for NG students who have experienced combat (Ambrose, 2015). Thus, having a support system aware of military-related student situations and self-related factors is essential.

Support addresses how caring, affirmation, and positive feedback can facilitate transitions (Goodman et al., 2006). The need for various forms of support is crucial, and research has suggested that military-affiliated students often feel unsupported on college campuses and that their institutions do not recognize their individual needs (Elnitsky et al., 2017; Molina & Morse, 2017).

Strategies to cope with various transitions are influenced by the individual's ability to manage transitions by modifying the situation, controlling the meaning of the problem, and managing stress after the transition (Goodman et al., 2006). With the right support, institutions can assist military-related students, including those who

are NG service members, transition to campus by enhancing their coping behaviors.

In summary, institutions of higher education should ideally develop ways to classify military students, such as those serving in the NG, compared to active-duty students and veteran students early in the college admissions process, allowing them to provide a more supportive pathway for the different types of military-affiliated students. As more NG members enroll in college, the need for more individualized military support is presumably going to increase. Because the transition process requires cooperative intervention across campus organizations to achieve shared objectives, the transition model and application of the 4 Ss can be used as an analytical base instrument for military support service leaders to help NG students transition into and through the college environment.

## **Method**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the transition experiences of NG students enrolled in college and to understand its impact on academic success. Schlossberg's (2011) transition model was used as a lens for identifying themes across their experiences. From an understanding of the students' experiences, it is possible to make recommendations to colleges and universities about individualized support services that could be offered through departmental collaboration to assist NG students in and through the continual transition from military service to campus. The central claim for the use of narrative inquiry in educational research is that human beings lead storied lives, personally and socially, and the study of a story is the study of how human beings experience the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Therefore, the researcher chose a qualitative approach, specifically narrative inquiry, for data collection procedures to understand the student's story or experience in a higher education setting.

## **Participants**

Purposeful sampling was used to select from an NG student population interest list developed after recruitment emails were sent to NG students from each university's school certifying official (SCO). The SCO is a school official who is authorized to submit enrollment certification to the Department of Veterans Affairs for dissemination of education benefits to military-affiliated students (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2021). The SCOs also possessed a master list of NG students attending their respective institutions. Interested volunteers responded to the researcher directly via email to participate in the research. Purposeful sampling in qualitative research is extensively used for the association and selection

of information-rich problems related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Additionally, purposeful sampling involves recognizing and selecting individuals or groups of individuals who are exceptionally knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The researcher selected a sample of seven NG undergraduates from two public universities within one south-central state who were in their sophomore, junior, and senior years. First-year undergraduate students were not included in the study because the researcher wanted participants to have had more time to experience the transition between college and military service. Additionally, graduate students were not included because enrollment in a graduate program suggested students had successfully navigated the transition from military service to higher education. Length of military service, military rank, and combat deployments were not among the inclusion criteria for participation, as the researcher did not believe they would make significant differences in the continual transition experiences of NG students. Race, gender, religion, and U.S. citizenship are not limiting factors on enrollment in higher education; however, there are age requirements for active service in the NG (Aiken et al., 2013; ARNG, 2019a). For this reason, participant age was among the criteria for inclusion in the sample.

## **Data Collection**

Prior to conducting interviews, each participant received an informed consent letter detailing the purpose of the study, procedures, potential risks, benefits, and the voluntary and confidentiality elements of the study. Data were then collected through semi-structured, narrative inquiry interviews conducted by phone. The interviews were audio-recorded and secured. The interview questions included both closed-ended demographic requests and open-ended questions about student experiences. However, as an active participator in the interview narratives, the primary researcher provoked the participants to respond more about a topic or lingered at critical points of open-ended questioning to see if the participants had more to say when answering questions. The limited demographic questions included the current year in college, the branch of military service, gender, and race.

Demographic questions created a diverse participant profile of seven students serving in the Army NG. Six identified as male, and one identified as female. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect students' identities. Annie, the sole female student, identified as White. Bennie identified as Hispanic. Carl and Dominic both identified as Black or African American. Ernie, Frank, and Garrett identified as White. The participants were asked a series of questions regarding

college transition experiences that were later transcribed for analysis.

## **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) model of trustworthiness was used to establish protocols for this qualitative study. Specifically, the researcher focused on strategies to enhance the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings. For example, a member-checking process was built into the study design. The researcher emailed each participant, giving them the opportunity to review the interview transcript and verify its accuracy; however, none of the seven participants responded to the request. The interview questions were clear and remained the same for each participant to ensure consistency in the data collection. Additionally, the researcher approached this qualitative study with a genuine interest in gaining the confidence of the participants and understanding their stories from their own vantage points rather than from the researcher's experiences, biases, or subjectivities. The researcher explained their role in the research process along with potential biases or predispositions before conducting the interview. Further, the researcher evaluated any information (e.g., notes, transcription, coding) that may have contradicted the study results.

## **Data Analysis**

Following each interview, the participant's recorded narrative was transcribed and summarized using a qualitative data management company, Rev, to help ease the transcription process. Following transcription, the researcher used Dedoose software to aid in coding each narrative into themes and sub-themes as necessary, attempting to keep the description as genuine as possible. Using the Dedoose software, the researcher documented the sections in which interviewees addressed specific terms, topics, and themes that surfaced during the interview. The specific terms, topics, and themes were analyzed using Schlossberg's theory as a guiding framework. For example, the researcher used Schlossberg's definitions to label participants' descriptions of transitions as anticipated, unanticipated, or non-event. After each theme was theoretically categorized, they were coded. Each code was extracted into a separate secured Excel document, and the researcher began to combine the concepts and themes found in the transcripts to generate a summary to explain the findings that emerged.

## **Findings**

Understanding NG students' experiences when transitioning between the military

and college has not been extensively explored in educational research. After continually reviewing and examining the transcripts to identify concepts, three main themes emerged from the comparative analysis: (a) military service as an overall academic asset, (b) transition and its challenges, and (c) approaching problems and support.

## **Military Service as an Overall Academic Asset**

Students were asked to describe their overall experience serving in the military as related to their academic success. Frank suggested, “the different opportunities that I wouldn’t have if I wasn’t in the military while also being a student at the same time has definitely been very helpful for me.” Ernie added, “I think as a student, it’s made me more appreciative of just my bachelor’s degree because I feel like I’ve definitely had to work for it.” And Dominic claimed, “I think it’s been an asset, definitely with the benefits, helps prepare for school, and I actually got a job through the military.” In each interview, participants unanimously shared that serving in the NG was an overall positive asset and benefited their academic experience, which is a key takeaway given the known challenges student veterans face. Additionally, a few students specifically appreciated their military education benefits as an opportunity. Annie shared, “It’s just completely made my life so much easier to not have to worry about that part of college, the financial part of college.” Similarly, Carl explained, “I most definitely would not be able to go throughout college with no student loans without the National Guard.” Understandably, military benefits, including free tuition, clarify why military service is a positive academic asset.

Several students also commented how the military discipline and training helped ease their transition, making it less stressful. Garrett simply stated, “The military is pretty much an asset because of its training.” Bennie claimed, “the challenges from the training that I had from the army, it helped me to be more disciplined in my school.” And Dominic pointed out, “I know a lot of my military buddies. We don’t stress as much. We will do it. We’ll get it done, but we’re not going to stress like a regular college student.” All the students saw NG service as an overall positive experience academically, detailing that discipline, training, and service experience are all assets that helped with the transition to higher education.

## **Transition and Its Challenges**

Although the participants agreed that being a college student while serving in the NG was an overall positive experience, more than half of the students said it was a difficult transition in the beginning. All the students agreed the transition came with

challenges. Participants were asked to describe their challenges in transitioning in and out of military life. Garrett explained, "It was rocky at first, being a military personnel and then transitioning to a student." Similarly, Ernie expressed, "I would say it's been easy, but at the same time, I look at it, and it's like, man, I could just be in the military because I feel like that's more of a home for me than college is. Frank agreed, "So I would say the transition was bumpy at first, but once I adjusted, it was a piece of cake."

In addition to a rough start, there were several other specific challenges the students discussed. The majority of the students discussed cultural differences, social difficulties with peers and faculty, lack of time, and weekend training as some of the common challenges they faced while transitioning into and through college. Frank admitted it was culturally different in college, where he explained:

At first, when I came to college, it was a little difficult to go into military life and come out, especially because right when I started college, I just got back from basic training, so it's a little bit of a culture shock.

Bennie agreed the culture was different in college and asserted, "I would say the military wakes up a lot earlier than anything I've experienced academically....and I don't have an option in the Guard." Whereas Carl noted, "But you learn to kind of adopt both of the cultures and kind of coexist there, but it does take time to learn that." The comparison of culture between the military and higher education is not a new topic; however, the interviews in this study suggested that cultural differences should not be forgotten. Specifically, cultural differences between serving in the NG and college led to a few students experiencing social challenges with their peers and faculty.

Bennie began to speak faster and raised his voice during the interview when he mentioned his college peers who did not understand:

Because they are not disciplined. And that's the thing we have to get used to is, not everybody is in the military, not everybody's the same, not everybody went here or there, not everybody has gone through the same journey as we all have, but that was the thing that I had to just accept.

Garrett and Annie felt the same about their peers, with Garrett commenting, "I'll have peers tell me of their stresses.... It has been emotional because I'm like, you do not understand the things that I'm going through." And Annie admitted, "A lot of the times I do get really jealous of people who aren't in the military and going to college because I'm like, your life is so easy." Surprisingly, only Ernie mentioned a

difficult time adjusting to faculty: “I have teachers nowadays that don’t communicate anything, and you have to go look for yourself.”

Although transition challenges affected some of the students’ cultural attitudes and social interactions, five of the seven participants mentioned time as a persistent challenge affecting their transition. Students explicitly expressed how their military service takes time. For example, Annie commented, “Being in school and in the National Guard and having a part-time job and I’m in a sorority, I feel like I’ve had to completely just become this huge time manager.” Frank agreed, “It takes time. It’s definitely taken time from me.” Dominic also described the challenge of military service taking time away from school: “My unit is actually about two hours away, so driving there and then driving back to school, it can be tough.” Specific to time, it is highly important to understand all seven participants expressed that going to drill or weekend training affected them academically. Carl shared, “Most of my stress from school has come from trying to balance it with drill weekends.” Bennie argued, “I’d say sometimes I feel like I need to be working on something for class, but instead, I’m at my drill.” Dominic commented, “I remember being frustrated that I have drills during finals, which happens every single year.” Ernie again expressed his frustration with the faculty:

And so, you have to ask a professor, ‘Hey, I’ve got drill.’ You send your drill letter just to prove that that’s what’s going on. And you have to work with your professor there. And so that’s definitely an adjustment.

Carl expressed a similar concern about final exams, noting, “It does sometimes feel like it’s not fair that I decided to serve my country, and I have to not be able to study for my finals because our drill weekend falls on finals week as well.”

There is a challenging reality of some of the experiences revealed by the students during the interviews, specifically students expressing how drill weekends affected their academics is a principal concern needing to be further addressed and handled with the proper support. NG students admitted transitioning in and out of military service is not an easy adjustment; however, they also acknowledged that the transition became easier in time. It is important to understand why their transition became easier in time to solidify what works for their support.

## **Approaching Problems and Support**

Whether or not a student is in the NG, transitioning into college presents challenges. Participants were asked to compare the way they approached problems as a student

to the way they approached them in the military. Bennie declared, “I think as a student, I’m a lot more apprehensive whenever I approach problems,” and Ernie replied, “So problems as a student, I’d definitely say problems as a student, you have to kind of handle it yourself.” Whereas Frank noted, “Whenever I have a problem with the Army, I’m usually a lot more assertive about it and a lot more like, hey, how can we get this done?” And Garrett explained, “in the military, it is important to use your chain of command.” The difference in how students approached challenges in academic and military settings might suggest an area where additional analysis is needed.

Still, when asked if they felt they had or could find sufficient support on campus to aid in their transition experiences, all seven said their university offered support. One participant appreciated their military peers as support; another mentioned that having a veteran’s lounge was helpful, and another mentioned their fraternity and student services. However, all seven participants specifically said the support of their university veteran’s office or VA office was extremely helpful. Annie responded, “Definitely, the VA office has definitely helped me.” Dominic also said he felt supported and explained, “The veteran’s service office here at the university has really helped.... It’s really helped me figure out what I can do to make it a little less stressful.” Ernie acknowledged, “Things that I didn’t even know that I needed, things that I didn’t know I could get, money that I was missing out on.... And just by coming to this office, I ended up helping myself a lot.” Carl added, “The veteran’s service office has been really a huge asset to me lately, just getting all these things done for semesters to follow.”

In summary, undergraduate students described their college experience while serving in the NG as a positive asset but found it academically challenging during their weekend drill training. The findings suggest that NG students and veterans share similar challenges in transitioning to college, as suggested in the literature review. However, transitioning back and forth multiple times between the military and college (i.e., participating in drill weekends, emergency deployments) affected perceived academic success. Yet, it is encouraging to see all the students felt supported when they sought assistance from their campus veteran resource offices.

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

This qualitative study centered on the experiences and effects of continuous transitions from military to civilian life on NG undergraduate students’ academic success. Using a narrative inquiry approach, the researcher found the NG student transition experience differed from that of student veterans and other military-

affiliated students. This discussion of will align the findings with previous research and the theoretical framework for this study, which was adapted from Schlossberg's transition model (2011).

## **The Positive Synergy of NG Service and Academics**

Students serving in the NG and other military-affiliated students share similar challenges; however, a unique difference for NG students is their continuous service and transition in and out of the military to civilian life. One theme that emerged was participants' unanimous agreement that serving in the NG was an overall benefit to their academic success. Prior research has suggested that military-affiliated students frequently struggle to transition to the college environment and find themselves leaving college prematurely (Gregg et al., 2016). However, NG students suggested their service training was a benefit to them academically, which could be viewed from the perspective of Schlossberg's concept of self.

The self-related factors that influence coping are personal characteristics and psychological resources (Anderson et al., 2012). One key takeaway revealed by the interviews is the value of NG service training and how it instills traits such as discipline (i.e., a psychological resource), allowing NG students to handle college stress differently than their peers. NG students are uniquely situated for success, and colleges should capitalize on their strengths. Future research might explore how to maximize the strengths NG students bring to higher education from their military training experiences.

Support systems that treat all military-affiliated students the same only have a vague understanding of NG students' unique characteristics and may operate from a deficit perspective, failing to acknowledge the strengths these students bring to campus (Molina & Morse, 2017). And although the literature revealed service members might face increased difficulties when they concurrently adjust to civilian life and transition to college (Borsari et al., 2017; Gregg et al., 2016), institutions should avoid assuming that because students are in the NG, they are naturally going to struggle in school. Educators can then understand with a new perspective that NG students' experiences are an asset to their academic performance.

## **Transitions Impose Unique Challenges**

NG students are continually transitioning from the military to their civilian and college routines, and it was assumed this would pose several academic challenges. Gregg et al. (2016) placed transitioning as a priority interest on campuses, and

institutions are becoming increasingly aware of this challenge for veterans. However, there is a gap in the literature involving the frequent transitions of NG students into higher education. Unlike their veteran counterparts who no longer have military service requirements, NG members have a unique set of challenges imposed on them due to their service experiences (Griffith, 2017).

Schlossberg (2011) described a transition as any experience that occurs in changing interactions, assumptions, and routines. Part of the transition model is anticipated transitions, which can quickly be turned into unanticipated situations. A vital theme formed when students in this study discussed their anticipated transitions (i.e., monthly drill training), and findings indicated students unexpectedly experienced an interruption in their academic routine, suggesting they found it hard to find time to focus on their academics due to their drill training. This unanticipated situation was made exceptionally clear during academic finals for some of the students. Although NG service strengthens many qualities of students, it can also limit their academic time. Understanding these limitations may be extremely helpful for faculty who have NG students in their classrooms. Additionally, educational leaders should understand that although NG students have training schedules during the academic year, their situation does not guarantee they will have time to focus on academics, and this can impose stress.

Schlossberg explained that coping strategies are influenced by an individual's ability to manage transitions through one's behaviors (Anderson et al., 2012), yet students frequently need support in identifying and adopting appropriate coping strategies. Military-related support services could implement individualized services, such as military-affiliated new student orientation. This can be especially helpful if educators can focus on the strengths of NG students to aid in the alleviation of transitional stress. To better understand the strengths of NG students, faculty and staff could participate in a Green Zone training dedicated to better understanding military-affiliated students. If postsecondary institutions can continue to understand the many types of transitional challenges NG students face as they attend college, higher education can then start to provide proper support to help them navigate the complexity of attending school.

## **Needed Support Services**

This study undergirds and affirms the need for support services specific to NG students. Unfortunately, not all institutions of higher education are holistically military-friendly. Molina and Morse (2015) discussed how campus veteran services' restricted knowledge of military-related undergraduates might contribute to

systems of assistance that ignore substantial variations in the conditions supporting NG students. Borsari et al. (2017) suggested colleges do not have sufficient support programs promoting or providing specific services to the many different types of military-affiliated students. The support for a student veteran who is transitioning one time from the military to civilian life may not work for a student in the NG who is preparing to transition back into the military for weekend training, back to college life on Monday, then back into the military a month later.

However, there are solutions to help ease the specific issues students in the NG face if leaders in higher education look at the programs that offer support to military-affiliated students. One crucial example is to examine the veteran service offices on campus and how their services influence the academic success of NG students. Students in this study relied on their veteran's service office for a reason, and other campus services could capitalize on learning what crucial support the veteran's service offices offer. Kurzynski (2014) went so far as to suggest the central source for student veterans to gain an understanding of the college experience is the veteran's service office. Participants in this study shared the importance of interaction as a positive influence their campus veteran's office had on their transition. Although several students shared how their transition was rocky at first, they all concluded that they found much-needed support through their campus veteran's service office. Providing specialized support services, such as Green Zone training, would help higher education professionals better understand this student population's unique transitional challenges and its influence on the students' academic success (i.e., enrollment, retention, GPA, and graduation). In essence, higher education is in a unique position to provide NG students with more reliable and individualized access to services and benefits by supporting their campus veteran's service office.

## **Limitations/Future Research**

Limitations to this study were that first-year undergraduate students were not invited to participate because the researcher wanted participants to have more time to experience the transition between college and military service. Additionally, graduate students were omitted because the researcher believed they had enough time in college to successfully navigate the transition experience between college and military service. Further, the sample did not consider demographics, length of service, military rank, or combat deployments as deciding inclusion factors for selection because the researcher did not believe they would make significant differences in the continual transition experiences NG students share moving to and from military and higher education. However, military branches, such as Army and Air Guard, and military rank, could influence how individuals experience training

during drill weekends. For example, this study did not have any volunteers from the Air National Guard. A pivotal limitation of this study was that both universities had a military resource center with no comparison of a college or university without such a center.

Findings in this study show that campus veterans service offices positively influence the NG student transition, but understanding the nature of the relationship between the offices and the different military-affiliated students could offer further insight into providing individualized support. For example, a comprehensive quantitative study, such as a survey addressing why NG students go to their campus veteran service office, could better explain the effectiveness of services and could be applied to other military groups. Ultimately, the findings in this study contradicted the researchers' assumptions that NG students' military service poses challenges to their academic success. Noting this contradiction, the researcher further recommends that colleges and universities focus on what NG students describe as "success" while transitioning to their respective campuses.

## **Conclusion**

The literature review described NG students as having individual characteristics that set them apart from other military-affiliated students in their transition to college. NG students have unique transition issues as they continually adjust from the military to college life, such as weekend drills and longer service requirements that affect them academically. To better understand the meaning of the constant transitional experience between college and NG service, educational leaders must consider the unique nature, setting, and influence of these students' transitions. Findings show NG students have an overall positive experience serving in the military and attending college. Further investigation of these military transition experiences can be used in higher education to collaborate between educational leaders, faculty, and college services to meet the individual needs of NG students. Examining how a college's veterans service office offers individualistic support, as suggested by the findings, is one way to implement a positive pathway specifically supporting NG students.

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