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# Supporting Women Veterans: Transitioning from Military Life to University Life

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SUPPORTING WOMEN VETERANS:  
TRANSITIONING FROM MILITARY LIFE TO UNIVERSITY LIFE

KRISTEN M. ZELLERS

April 28, 2017

A Senior Honors Thesis Presented in  
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## Background

For years, I have been interested in the military and veteran populations. Two years ago, when I made the decision to pursue a career in military psychology, I began to seek out those populations to interact and engage with them. During this process, I attended seminars, met with many different veterans, asked people to talk about their military experiences, and attended meetings with various veterans and servicemembers. One of the seminars specifically about female veterans caught my attention. This seminar included a panel of female veterans speaking about the adversities they faced both in the military and throughout the process of reintegration into society and transition into a university setting. I began to notice that many of these women continually spoke about not being recognized as veterans and not being respected for their service. All veterans face adversities in the years following their military service, but for women, people not believing that they are veterans makes things much harder.

The military is and has always been a male-dominated institution. People often forget that women can and are serving in our armed forces, and when people remember, they have this image of what a woman in the military is “supposed” to look like. These factors in combination with many more can lead female servicemembers and veterans to struggle with their identities. My goal in this study is to explore the experiences of female veterans. I hope to help give these women a voice and share their stories. Each veteran, male or female, has his or her own story and we need to recognize and accept this. Additionally, I hope to provide suggestions to universities regarding what resources would be valuable for female veterans to have access to on campuses so that they may feel accepted and develop a strong personal identity.

Supporting Women Veterans:  
Transitioning from Military Life to University Life

Kristen M. Zellers

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### Abstract

Many researchers have analyzed the various adversities that women servicemembers/veterans face in the military, upon reintegration into society, and upon transition into a university setting. These researchers suggest that women veterans experience an identity crisis throughout those three stages of their military career and future plans (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009; Heineman, 2016; Women Warriors, 2011). What the research lacks is a more in-depth analysis of the women's experiences and a look into how prevalent identity crises are among female veterans. The present study analyzed these ideas. Student women veterans ( $N = 9$ ) from three different universities in the Mid-Western United States completed hour-long interviews, which included 25 questions regarding their military, civilian, and university experiences. Results propose that women veterans experience a stronger identity crisis upon reintegration into civilian life and transition into a university setting than they do while serving in the military, suggesting that the reintegration process may be more disorienting than being in the male-dominated culture of the United States Military. Twelve themes concerning their experiences also emerged. Implications of these results and what services/resources universities should offer to women veterans are discussed.

## Supporting Women Veterans:

### Transitioning from Military Life to University Life

Less than ten percent of United States citizens serve in the military at some point in their lifetimes (Tavernise, 2011). This means that an overwhelming majority- over ninety percent- of the population within the United States has not experienced life in the military and what exactly that entails. They have not gone through basic training, faced multiple physical tests and evaluations to assure that they can handle the physical demands of the military, or faced psychological and emotional challenges evoked by serving in the military. Moreover, the majority of United States citizens have not faced the struggles in trying to reintegrate into civilian life and transition into a university setting after serving in the military and experiencing those adversities.

While most of the United States population has not personally served in the military, many people in the United States are related to or close with someone who has served in the military. These connections to the military give many people a basic understanding of the hardships service members face. Most times, though, this knowledge or understanding is comprised of surface-level information. Much of the United States population does not have a deep understanding of the unique culture and experiences servicemembers face in the military and veterans face while reintegrating into society and transitioning into a university setting.

To further complicate things, women only make up about 14.6 percent of Active duty servicemembers in the United States military (Statistic Brain Research Institute, 2016). Experts also project that by 2035, women will only account for about 15 percent of the total veteran population (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2011). Furthermore, about 1.4 percent of all women have served in the military, compared to the roughly 13.4 percent of all



men. Being that there are more women in the United States than men, these statistics show that the military is a male-dominated field, where a much larger number of men are serving and have served in the military than women. These historically gender-based differences create further adversities of which many military women struggled with in the past and still do today. Being that women veterans and women active-duty service members are and historically have been a minority in the military setting, most people have less insight and understanding of the unique challenges these women face both in the military and upon their return home from serving in the military.

Since the development of the GI Bill in 1944, veterans have had greater access to education opportunities. The GI Bill allows members of the military to return home from deployments or service and obtain an education/degree at a public college or university (Kirchner, 2015; McCaslin, Leach, Herbst, & Armstrong, 2013). The government pays for this education up to a certain dollar point depending on what the tuition cap is in that state. In addition to this financial support, after 9/11, the Yellow Ribbon Program was created to help allow veterans to obtain an education from private schools and graduate programs where the cost is over the state tuition cap. This program allowed for veterans to obtain more money to pay for these more expensive universities (McCaslin et al., 2013). Through the GI Bill and the Yellow Ribbon Program, further education became readily available to veterans and many chose to capitalize on that opportunity and utilize the resources provided to them, thus, increasing the number of veterans to attend college. Although attending college and receiving an education is beneficial to veterans in multiple different ways, transitioning to the university life is also difficult for many.

All veterans, male and female, experience difficulties in reintegrating into civilian life and transitioning into a university setting from life in the military for many reasons. These reasons range from adjustment issues, to changes that occurred over the course of a deployment or multiple deployments, to psychological distress, to feeling out of place, and many more beyond and between these (Badalucco, 2015; Heineman, 2016; Kirchner, 2015; McCaslin et al., 2013; Women Warriors, 2011). Most of the reasons and factors that appear to influence reintegration into society/civilian life and transition to the university life fall into three different categories- structural and experiential differences, societal pressures and university differences, and identity pressures. The level of difficulty in reintegration depends on the presence, severity, and unique combination of hardships for both male and female veterans, and while there are a multitude of factors that can influence both men and women, there are also some struggles that are either elevated for women veterans in comparison to men or are unique and specific to female veterans.

The differences in structure and experiences of the military, society, and the university contribute to the struggles veterans face during reintegration into civilian life and when they decide to attend college or a university. The military is a highly structured and disciplined institution (Anton, 2015; Kirchner, 2015; McCaslin et al., 2013). There are multitudes of rules, regulations, and policies that servicemembers must follow to maintain order and cohesion throughout the military. There is often a strict schedule to adhere to and the system of rank promotes a reliance on authority where one must report and listen to those of higher rank, thus, providing further structure (Kirchner, 2015). This interconnectedness lays the groundwork for a deep level of respect for and reliance on one another. For veterans, reintegrating back into civilian life from this structured lifestyle poses difficulty. Civilian life is much more unstructured

and relaxed (Kirchner, 2015; McCaslin et al., 2013). As a civilian, there is not a strict schedule to adhere to, many people are on different schedules, and there is more autonomy regarding decision-making- one does not need to report to a “higher authority” before deciding to do something or act on something. This immense change in environment can be disorienting to a veteran, causing him or her to struggle in readjusting to a new lifestyle and feeling comfortable in that lifestyle. In addition to adjustment problems, veterans experience issues trusting other people because they built strong connections with others in the military and they knew they could trust those people, but this is not the case in society (Kirchner, 2015; McCaslin et al., 2013). This can result in veterans feeling uncertain and apprehensive, so they are on high alert to their surroundings and cannot feel comfortable or at ease in the civilian environment.

Like civilian life, university life is also more unstructured and autonomous than life in the military, and the difference can pose challenges for veterans during transition into a university setting (Kirchner, 2015; McCaslin et al., 2013). Transitioning into university life can be more difficult for veterans than reintegrating into civilian life because many veterans choose to go to college while they are still trying to acclimate to civilian life, and so, the veterans must acclimate to civilian life and university life simultaneously. Additionally, there is greater freedom and autonomy in a university setting than in civilian life (Kirchner, 2015). In civilian life, it is likely that the veteran has a job that he or she goes to at the same time each day, and at this job, he or she likely has a boss or manager to whom to report- resembling the rankings in the military. In university life, though, class schedules can vary daily, the student can create his or her own schedule, the level of homework varies, and the student must allocate adequate time to complete assignments in addition to other responsibilities. This different type of environment allows for a greater level of autonomy and “freedom” and places more responsibility on the student to create

his or her own schedule each day. This can once again be disorienting to the veteran. He or she may not know who to turn to for help at the university, creating a further disconnect between the veteran and his or her environment and causing feelings of not fitting in. The differences in the structure of the military in comparison to the structures of civilian and university life, alone, can be enough to create adjustment struggles for veterans, but there are experiential differences among these varying environments that add struggles as well.

Many veterans experience and notice changes that occurred while the veteran was in the military. It is common for veterans to feel as though they changed while they were away (Blow, Curtis, Wittenborn, & Gorman, 2015). This change can be in terms of worldview, understanding, personality, etc., and when the veterans return home, they realize that most things back home remained stagnant. Feeling that they changed, but everything/everyone at home remained the same, can create feelings of disconnect within veterans (Blow et al., 2015; McCaslin et al., 2013). They feel as though they no longer fit in in a place they once did, before their service, and sometimes, they may even desire to go back into the military to feel those connections with others again. On the other hand, many veterans also return home from military service and feel as though their families changed, grew, and learned to survive without them (Blow et al., 2015). Some veterans see that their families did not struggle while they were away or their families learned to adapt their lifestyle so that they could survive while their loved one was away serving the country. This can lead to many veterans feeling unneeded or out of place in their own families. They do not know their role in the family anymore, and thus, they feel as though they do not belong or are not wanted. Dealing with the changes that occur of the course of a deployment, multiple deployments, or military service in general poses as a hardship for many veterans.

Veterans also experience an increase in responsibilities both upon reintegration into civilian life and transition into a university setting. While these individuals were in the military, the military provided them with all that they needed. The military provided things like housing, a paycheck, and medical care to the servicemember. Upon leaving the military, though, the servicemember (or veteran at this point) no longer has these things provided for him or her (McCaslin et al., 2013). He or she is responsible for assuming these added responsibilities, often with minimal help, unless his or her family and loved ones offer to help. The added responsibility of acquiring things that were once provided to them places a lot of additional stress upon veterans, and this stress can worsen while transitioning into a university setting. Not only do veterans feel stressed resulting from added responsibilities, but in a university setting, veterans will also experience stress from “normal” school requirements and assignments. Additional responsibilities ail many veterans.

The final experiential difference between life in the military and civilian life or life in a university setting is servicemembers’ exposure to traumatic events while in the military<sup>1</sup>. Many servicemembers face various forms of trauma while in the military and this can have adverse effects on them, physically and psychologically, which can make reintegration into society and transition into a university setting difficult (Anton, 2015; Kirchner, 2015; McCaslin et al., 2013). Being in the military, deploying, and going to war and combat zones exposes servicemembers to numerous traumatic events, and studies suggest that trauma can actually negatively impact one’s

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that people who are not in the military do not experience trauma. This is just bringing attention to the fact that exposure to trauma while in the military is not uncommon.

physical health. Studies link trauma to the development of various negative health behaviors (e.g. smoking, overeating), which can also lead to health problems, including, heart disease, chronic lung disease, liver disease, high blood pressure, poor sleep, and other stress-related physical problems (Anton, 2015; DeAngelis, 2013). Exposure to trauma can also lead to various psychological problems, which can include, adjustment issues, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), depression, anxiety, substance abuse (likely as a coping mechanism), and many more (Anton, 2015; Badalucco, 2015; Blow et al., 2015; DeAngelis, 2013; Heineman, 2016; McCaslin et al., 2013). Some studies even suggest that of the people returning from combat, roughly 20 to 30 percent show signs of PTSD (Blow et al., 2015). The combination of all these possible physical and psychological struggles can make reintegrating into society and transitioning into a university setting highly difficult for veterans and can negatively influence both the relationships they have with their families and their families in general, thus adding to the reintegration and transition struggles.

Many women in the military are at an increased risk for trauma-related problems because female servicemembers face possible trauma through combat and through military sexual assault/trauma (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009). According to the United States Department of Veterans' Affairs, of the female veterans who sought healthcare through the Veterans' Administration, 23 percent reported experiencing sexual assault and 55 percent reported experiencing sexual harassment while in the military, and according to the Department of Defense, 6.8 percent of women in the military reported unwanted sexual contact/conduct (National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, 2007; U.S. Department of Defense, 2008). Although not every woman in the military experiences military sexual assault or military sexual

trauma, it exists, it is fairly common, and it can lead to further trauma-related problems among female servicemembers/veterans.

Two of the more prominent trauma-related problems are PTSD and a decreased level of trust in people. Since a commanding officer or fellow servicemember(s)- two groups of people female servicemembers trust and rely on while in the military- are likely the perpetrators of military sexual assault/trauma (MSA/T), female veterans who experienced MSA/T develop trust issues with others. In the military, these women trusted those around them, and those people betrayed that trust, making it difficult for female veterans to trust other people both inside and outside of the military. This worsens the ease of reintegrating into society and transitioning into a university setting for female veterans because they may not be able to trust or rely on anyone but themselves, eliminating the possibility of necessary support systems. In addition, studies suggest that women in the military are at higher risk for developing PTSD and experience it differently than men. Munsey (2009) suggests that women who experience sexual harassment and trauma at any point before or during their military career have a higher risk of developing PTSD than those who did not. Additionally, Badalucco (2015) suggests that women are over twice as likely to develop PTSD than males, and Anton (2015) indicates that women experience PTSD symptoms more than men. The increased possibility of PTSD in combination with the increased symptoms of PTSD make it difficult for female veterans to adjust to and effectively function in civilian life and life in a university setting because they often feel lonely and like no one can understand them.

In addition to these added possibilities that can make the reintegration and transition process more difficult for female veterans, it can worsen upon transition into a university setting. Students at colleges and universities are inquisitive and like to explore different topics. Many

college students also have knowledge of military sexual assault and know that women are more likely to be victims than men. The problem is that, out of curiosity, many students will ask female veterans about sexual assault in the military. Regardless of if the female veteran is a victim of MST or not, questions of this nature can make female veterans feel uncomfortable, ostracized, and uneasy. It can make them feel out of place or like they do not “fit in” at colleges and universities and it can simply make female veterans upset and angry with other college students, making it hard to connect and interact with them. At the same time, if the female veteran was a MST survivor, people inquiring about that trauma can elicit bad memories and may even trigger certain PTSD symptoms. In either situation, being questioned about military sexual assault, regardless of if the female veteran was a victim, can further feelings that people do not understand them and contributes to additional struggles for female veterans to transition into a university setting, beyond the basic struggles all veterans can face.

Societal pressures and university differences also contribute to the hardships veterans face in reintegration into civilian life and transition into a university setting. To begin, there is a negative stigma among many citizens regarding veterans and their mental health and behavior (Badalucco, 2015; Kirchner, 2015; Heineman, 2016; Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009). Based on the more prominent information that people consume through various forms of media, many people believe that most veterans have psychological problems as a result of their military service. Veterans are aware of these stigmas surrounding their status and often feel uncomfortable and unimportant because people often assume and do not care to discover the truth regarding veterans’ mental health (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009; Heineman, 2016). They know that people view them differently, and thus, they experience difficulties connecting with people and feeling comfortable with people. Being stigmatized and stereotyped in that way causes many veterans to



want to hide their veteran status from others, so people will not view them differently. Dealing with the stigmas, alone, add to the adversities veterans already face, but awareness of the stigmas can influence veterans beyond feeling out of place. In a study, Kirchner (2015) suggests that the stigmas and stereotypes surrounding service members and what they may face (e.g. PTSD) impact performance and cause discomfort in classroom settings. Not only do the stigmas cause veterans internal conflict and lead them to possibly want to hide their veteran status, but they can also adversely impact veterans' performance and comfort in a classroom setting, once again, adding to the profuse amount of hardships they face.

In addition to the stigmas, veterans struggle to transition into a university setting because there are often stark differences between themselves and the traditional students. To begin, veterans are older than traditional students (Heineman, 2016; Kirchner, 2015; McCaslin et al., 2013). Often, veterans feel uncomfortable because they feel as though they stand out in a classroom setting, not because they "look like a veteran," but because they look older than the traditional students. Being uncomfortable retracts from some veterans' ability to concentrate and succeed in class because they are constantly aware that they do not "fit in" with the "normal" clientele of colleges and universities (Kirchner, 2015). The age gap also leads veterans to struggle in relating to traditional students. Traditional students and veterans have different maturity levels, motivation levels, world views, and opinions, and they are each at different points in their lives (Heineman, 2016; Kirchner, 2015). These differences lead many veterans to feel more disconnected from the traditional students and not know how to interact with them. The differences may also lead to frustrations among the veterans. As mentioned, traditional students are at a different time in their lives, they are focused more on the social aspects of college than they are the academia aspects of college, whereas it is the opposite for veterans

(Heineman, 2016). Many veterans already have friends and families with whom they interact, they are not in college to “have fun,” they are there to obtain an education and advance their careers. This vast divide makes it difficult for veterans to connect with traditional students, and many times, veterans grow frustrated with traditional students for not taking classes seriously, being late to class, not turning assignments in on time, procrastinating, not respecting the professors, etc. (Heineman, 2016). The vast array of differences between traditional students and veterans makes transitioning to the university difficult for many veterans.

Pressures to act in cohesion with expected gender roles cause many female veterans to struggle in both reintegrating into society and transitioning into a university setting. Society holds a set of “norms” and “rules” that govern how men and women should act within society and what types of jobs or duties they should assume, and these socially accepted parameters are known as gender roles (March, Van Dick, & Hernandez Bark, 2016). Women are expected to be the caretakers of the house and the children, they are expected to be supporting and warm, and they are expected to engage in careers that involve caring for others (March et al., 2016). Being in the military does not align with the expected gender roles of women. While the military does involve a deep care and regard for others, many people do not view the military in that way. So, when women return home from military service, many people expect that the female veterans will assume the “typical” female gender roles, which puts pressure on female veterans to do so. Female veterans then either struggle in assuming these roles or they struggle with not assuming these roles and facing backlash from people in society as a result. These pressures make transitioning into a university setting more difficult for female veterans as well. Many female veterans are single parents- women are almost three times as likely to be single parents as men (Women Warriors, 2011)- or are married and have kids, and in either case, they are expected to

be the ones to care for the kids. Being the caretakers makes it difficult for female veterans to attend college because they struggle to find childcare, afford childcare, or both (Heitzman & Somers, 2015). If female veterans cannot find or afford healthcare, attending college can be extremely difficult, if not impossible, because they do not have someone to watch their child or children and they cannot take them to college with them. This struggle alone causes many female veterans to not even want to attend college, and if they do attend college, it adds a lot of stress on them by giving them another responsibility and expense that they must figure out how to handle (Heitzman & Somers, 2015). Female veterans once again take on additional hardships, beyond what all veterans struggle with, in reintegrating back into society and transitioning into a university setting.

The final category of adversities that veterans face upon reintegration into civilian life and transition into a university setting are identity pressures. During basic training, the military works to strip people of their pre-established identities, depersonalize, and deindividualize servicemembers (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009). The military does this so that they can then rebuild people and shape them in a way that encourages cohesion and uniformity throughout all members of the military. During this process, servicemembers develop a new identity and sense of self. They form identities deeply rooted in the military, military ideals, their jobs in the military, etc. and they have a strong idea of who they are and what their purpose is. Upon leaving the military and reintegrating into society, veterans lose much of these identities because they are no longer in the military (Baechtold & DeSawal). They then face identity crises because they lose the strong sense of who they are and must work to find themselves again.

This identity crisis can worsen upon transition into a university setting. Now, not only are veterans relearning who they are, but they also must assume new roles as college students and

adjust to the college environment (Persky & Oliver, 2010; Wheeler, 2012). Veterans must develop new identities through the new roles they assumed and this can cause internal conflicts and crises, making it extremely difficult to focus solely on their studies and nothing else. Additionally, as mentioned before, veterans struggle to connect with traditional students (Heineman, 2016; Kirchner, 2015; McCaslin et al., 2013). Not connecting with traditional college students causes veterans to feel as though they cannot identify with them or identify as college students themselves. They realize that there are distinct differences between themselves and the traditional college students and keeping those differences in mind, they do not feel like they align with what a “college student” is, and therefore, they cannot identify as a college student or traditional student. In university settings, veterans can only identify as non-traditional students and veterans, and as mentioned before, because of the stigma around veterans, many do not want to openly identify as such. The culmination of each of these factors contributes to added difficulties in reintegrating into society and transitioning into a university setting for all veterans.

The experiences with identity crises may worsen for female veterans as well. The military is a male-dominated institution, where many images are predominately male, and within the military, masculine traits are often praised, encouraged, and respected (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009; Heitzman & Somers, 2015; Women Warriors, 2011). This can be overwhelming and discouraging for many female servicemembers as they feel they must adapt certain “male characteristics” to appear strong and gain respect. Additionally, many female servicemembers feel that they need to hide their feminine qualities so they are not seen as weak by fellow servicemembers (Badalucco, 2015; Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009; Heitzman & Somers, 2015; Women Warriors, 2011). Being a minority group within the military, women feel pressures to act

and portray themselves in a certain manner so they are accepted and respected by those around them. They fear appearing weak or making mistakes because they believe that will discredit their capabilities and cause people to both treat them poorly or differently and believe that women do not belong in the military (Badalucco, 2015; Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009; Heitzman & Somers, 2015; Women Warriors, 2011). Additionally, female servicemembers feel pressure to portray themselves with the perfect combination of femininity and masculinity. If they appear too feminine, others will not respect them and will not believe that they can be leaders, but if they appear too masculine, people will think they are too harsh, assertive, threatening, and are trying too hard (Baechtold & DeSawal; Women Warriors, 2011). This results in female servicemembers constantly dealing with balancing on the fine line of femininity versus masculinity and never knowing exactly how to present themselves, which results in uncertainty regarding who they are and how they want others to perceive them, leading to identity crises within the military. The experience of an identity crisis may worsen upon reintegration into society as well.

In civilian life, many female veterans may experience feelings of invisibility or belittling on multiple levels, and each of these can cause female veterans to struggle with their identities. To begin, not only do female veterans not want to identify as veterans because of the negative stigmas surrounding the title “veteran,” but many people also do not recognize women as veterans (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009; Heineman, 2016; Women Warriors, 2011). Female veterans and servicemembers feel like many people, including some in the military, do not accept, respect, or recognize women in the military and female veterans. Feeling this way causes many female veterans to experience identity crises because they begin to not feel like veterans, and thus, they do not want to identify as a veteran, which influences their identity, sense of self,

and confidence regarding who they are. In addition, as a result of people not viewing women as veterans, female veterans feel as though their trauma is ignored or undermined (Badalucco, 2015). In connection to the expected gender roles present in society, female veterans' PTSD is often misdiagnosed as depression because people think about the preconceived notion that women are emotional and do not think about the fact that these women could have been exposed to trauma (Badalucco, 2009). This also places pressure on female veterans to identify with gender-cohesive characteristics as opposed to identifying as a veteran, which can once again, cause an identity crisis.

Identity crises can worsen for female veterans as they transition into a university setting. Like many veterans, female veterans struggle to feel like they fit in both with other college students and on college campuses. They experience similar struggles as male veterans in the transition into a university setting, but they also experience a few added struggles as well (e.g. finding childcare, further disconnect with "veteran" identity). Finally, by adding college into their lives, female veterans struggle to find a balance among all their possible identities (e.g. mother, wife, veteran, civilian, student) (Women Warriors, 2011). At this point (deciding to attend college), female veterans not only have to learn how to find themselves and discover who they are, but they also must adapt new possible identities and determine which factors they want to integrate into their identities and sense of self.

As described, many researchers have analyzed the various factors in the military, in civilian life, and in a university setting that can make reintegration into society and transition into a university setting difficult for many veterans. Researchers have also expanded this to analyze various factors that are specific to female-veterans, determine that female veterans may experience identity crises resulting from various adversities they face both in and out of the

military, and point to various resources and services that would be beneficial for female veterans to help them along the way. What previous studies lack, though, is an in-depth analysis of the possible identity crises among female veterans. Previous studies have not analyzed the prevalence and prominence of identity crises among female veterans to discover how common they are, when they are common, and what factors contribute to the severity of identity crises. While previous studies have provided suggestions on what services and resources colleges and universities should have on their campus to better serve their veteran population, they have not focused on services that may benefit female veterans and/or their experiences with identity crises, specifically. The present study hopes to address these components and factors of the possible identity crises among female veterans and how colleges and universities can help their female veteran population.

While many universities may already have multiple resources (e.g. financial aid advising, a contact person) available to student veterans, only 32 percent of schools that have veterans' services actually provide organizations (e.g. Veterans' Associations, support groups) for veterans (Kirchner, 2016). Of that percentage, few, if any, provide services specifically for female veterans. Additionally, more women are starting to enlist in the military, especially since the 2016 decision to open all combat Military Occupational Specialties (MOSs) to women. More women in the military indicates that there will be more female veterans, and with the G.I. Bill in place, many of these women will likely use these benefits to attend college and further their education after their military service; we can expect that colleges and universities will see an increase in the female veteran population on campus. With this in mind, colleges and universities must be aware of the unique experiences of female veterans and what services and resources female veterans find useful and important in helping them successfully transition into a

university setting. Knowing how to better serve the female veteran population will benefit all colleges by allowing those that have veteran's services to change, improve, or add services to appeal to and help female veterans (as well as male veterans) and by providing those that do not have veteran's services with the tools and information to implement services and resources for all veterans, including females. In doing so, these colleges and universities will increase their student veteran population and support veteran success, thus, increasing their student body overall.

This research study is a qualitative and quantitative exploration of female college student veterans and their experiences in transitioning to life as a college student. The purpose of this research is to analyze the prevalence of identity crises among female veterans (i.e. uncertainty in knowing who they are, what their purpose is, and how they want others to view them), identify which factors may contribute to the severity of identity crises more than others, and determine how these possible identity crises may influence female veterans' ability to easily and successfully reintegrate into civilian life and transition into a university setting. Colleges and universities can then use this information to create or adapt services and resources to better serve the female veteran population on campus.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of nine women veterans who are students at three different universities in the Mid-Western United States. Three of the women attend one small, private university, three attend a second small, private university, and the remaining three attend a larger, public university. The age of the participants ranged from 23-years-old to 62-years-old, with an average age around 34-years-old. The women were both graduate and undergraduate



students, with six being undergraduate students and three being graduate students. Each of the participants had a different major and area of focus, ranging from an English major, to a pre-engineering major, to a woman in graduate school to obtain her law degree. Additionally, the length of time the participants had been students at their respective university ranged from three months to six and a half years, with an average of roughly 3 years.

Regarding the participants' military background, eight were in the Army (one of which was in the Army National Guard) and one was in the Navy. The length of time the women served in the military ranged from 3.5 years to 39 years, with an average of 8 years. Eight of the women were enlisted and one was an officer. For the enlisted women, their rank ranged from an E-4 to an E-6, with four being E-4's, two being E-5's, and two being E-6's. The officer was a CW5, Chief Warrant Officer 5. Finally, the number of times the women were deployed ranged from zero to four, with an average of one deployment. Four women were never deployed, and of the remaining five, each woman had served in at least one combat deployment (the combat deployments ranged from zero to two, with an average of one deployment).

Due to the nature of the research study, there were recruiting restrictions. Over 200 women were recruited to participate in the study, roughly 25 women volunteered to participate, and 9 were invited to complete the interview because of recruiting restrictions. The researcher required that the participant(s) be a woman, a current student at a university, a veteran<sup>2</sup>, and the participant needed to be able to meet the researcher in-person to complete the interviews. The

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of this study, the researcher defined the term veteran as being someone who was no longer serving in the military, this includes still being in the Reserves, and someone who was Active Duty at some point in her military career.

study focuses specifically on the experiences of women veterans, therefore the participants needed to be women veterans. Additionally, the participant needed to be a woman who was a current student at a university because some interview questions focused on the participant's experiences in college, in a university setting, and the resources in which the participants found useful. Finally, the participants needed to be able to meet in-person so that the interviews could be recorded in a manner that would allow for clear recordings for later reference and analysis and the researcher could easily provide the participant with the compensation and obtain the required information to do so<sup>3</sup>. In some cases, the required information included the completion of forms that contained the participant's social security number and the researcher did not want to jeopardize the participants' identities and personal information by electronically sending it back and forth. In-person meetings were easiest and more protective of the participant's identities and personal information. Overall, although the researcher required a specific population of participants for proper completion of this study, all participants were invited to complete the research study and participation was voluntary.

### **Materials**

This research study required various materials. The materials included a three-page long informed consent, an incentive/compensation acceptance or opt out form, and a two-page list of twenty-five interview questions.

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<sup>3</sup> The researcher applied for and obtained a research grant for this study from the host university. This grant required the completion of various forms by both the researcher and the participants.

The researcher went over the informed consent- included in Appendix A- with each of the participants before beginning the interviews. This document provided an overview of the research study, explained that the research study was voluntary and there would be no adverse effects of choosing not to participate, explained the potential psychological risks that could result from discussing their military experience, and provided details on how the research study could benefit the participants. This document also included that the participants would be offered a twenty-five-dollar gift card to Target as compensation for their time. The participants were informed that they were not required to accept the compensation if they chose not to. Finally, the informed consent included that the results of this research will be presented at two different research presentations on the host institution's campus and may be published on an online database. In either case, the participants were informed that any identifying or sensitive information would be removed to protect the participant's identities and privacy. Should there be any questions, the informed consent provided contact information for all involved persons. The participants provided consent by signing this document.

Since the host institution provided funds to the researcher to complete this research, the host institution required that there be a paper trail of all disbursed funds in the case that the IRS would audit the university. Being that much of the grant money was in the form of compensation (i.e. gift cards to Target) for the participants, the participants were required to complete either an acceptance form or an opt out form. The acceptance form included the gift card number, the amount of gift cards received, the dollar-amount of the gift card, a question about whether the participant was a student at the host university, and a question about if the student had received \$600 or more from the host university for participating in various research studies in the past year. If the participant either was not a student at the host university or had received \$600 or

more from the host university in the past year, the participant was required to fill out a W-9 form that was on the back of the acceptance form. If the participant was a student at the host university and had not received \$600 or more from said university in the last year, she just needed to provide her university identification number. If the participant chose not to accept the gift card, she was required to fill out the opt out form. The opt out form included a statement declaring that the participant did not want the compensation and it included lines for the participant to sign her name, write her name, and write the date.

The final material was the document with the twenty-five interview questions- included in Appendix B. The interview questions were created by the researcher and included both quantitative and qualitative questions. The interview contained multiple sections of questions- basic, military experiences, reintegration into civilian life and transition to the university, the participant's specific college and its resources, and a final question for the participant to share any additional information. The basic questions included the participant's age, the branch in which the participant served, and their years in service. The military experience questions included how frequently the participant interacted with other women, the hardest part about being in the military, the connections with others in the military, and the experience of an identity crisis while in the military. The reintegration and transition questions addressed the presence/absence and strength of an identity crisis once out of the military, and the pressures from others to act in a certain way. The college-specific and resource-oriented questions included why the participant chose to attend that university, what resources are useful, and what resources would be beneficial. The quantitative questions included in this interview elicited either number responses or categorical responses that corresponded to a number. Therefore, upon completion of the interviews, the researcher translated the categories to numbers (e.g. University A translated to

the number 1) and then recorded each of the numbers for later analysis. The remainder of the questions were qualitative questions, and the researcher analyzed the responses for common themes and recorded those.

### **Procedure**

The researcher obtained permission from three different universities to recruit participants from those universities. The research study and data collection procedures were reviewed and approved by the host university's institutional review board (IRB). Upon approval at the host university, the researcher contacted the other two university's IRB chairs to determine the process to complete research on each of those campuses. The other universities only required that the researcher send the IRB approval letter from the host institution to the IRB chair of the other universities. Upon receiving permission to recruit at the various universities, the researcher determined that being that the desired/targeted population is small and specific, it would be necessary to offer each participant some form of incentive to participate or a form of compensation for their time and involvement in the research study. The researcher applied for and obtained a research grant from the home institution in order to acquire the funds to provide incentive/compensation to each participant in the form of a twenty-five-dollar gift card to Target. Upon receiving the research grant and permission to recruit at the universities, the researcher began the recruitment process, which was slightly different from one university to the next.

At one private university, the researcher was able to obtain a list of women veterans who are students at that university. The researcher then sent out an email to each woman veteran inviting her to participate in an hour-long interview and offering a twenty-five-dollar gift card as compensation for doing so. The researcher explained that the interview would address three different topics- her experiences and life in the military, her reintegration into society and

subsequent transition into a university setting, and details about her current university. Once responses were received, the researcher and the participant found a date and time to meet to complete the individual interview.

At the second private university and the larger, public university, the researcher was unable to obtain a list of the women veterans in attendance because veteran status is confidential. The researcher did, however, complete an email, send it to either the financial aid advisor at the university or an individual who works in the veteran's services office at the university, and each of those individuals then forwarded the email out to the women veterans on their respective campuses. This email contained an invitation to participate in the study through an hour-long interview, an introduction about the researcher and the research study in general, information about the gift card, contact information to reach out to the researcher in the case that someone wanted to participate, and then more detailed information about the three main topic areas of the interview. The researcher then waited for the women veterans to make the first connection and reach out, and from there, the researcher and the woman veteran found a date and time to set up the individual interview.

All interviews were conducted during a limited time period from the end of February through the beginning of March during the Spring semester of 2017. Each interview was scheduled by email conversation with each of the participants, where both parties involved agreed upon a time, date, and place and exchanged contact information so that the researcher and the participant could notify the other of an emergency or delay or simply find each other.

Each of the interviews was conducted in a quiet room at each of the participant's respective universities- apart from one interview, which was conducted at the participant's home due to scheduling conflicts. For the interviews, the researcher and the participant met up and

went to a private room so no one could overhear the conversation. The researcher then went over the informed consent with the participant (and gave each participant a signed copy), explained that she was not required to answer any questions or share any information if she did not feel comfortable doing so, offered the gift card to the participant and had her complete the correct form, and then asked permission to record the interview for later reference. The researcher then turned on the voice recorder and completed the interview, asking each participant the same twenty-five questions as well as any necessary follow-up questions to any information the participants shared. Once the interview was complete, the researcher stopped the recorder and thanked the participant for her time and participation again. The researcher also followed-up each interview with a thank you email. The interviews lasted between twenty-five minutes and an hour and five minutes, most of which were around forty-five minutes in length.

Upon completion of all the interviews and in between each interview, the interview materials, signed informed consents, and the physical voice recorder were stored in a locked cabinet, while the audio files of the interviews were stored in a folder on a password-protected computer. Once all interviews were completed, the researcher carefully transcribed each interview, input the quantitative data into SPSS for correlational analysis, and analyzed each of the interviews to discover and record common themes among them all.

## **Results**

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative interview data were entered into SPSS for correlational analysis, and descriptive statistics about the participants were also computed through this database. The researcher ran correlations on all possible quantitative data and found two relevant and significant correlations. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to assess the relation

between age and the level of an identity crisis upon reintegration into civilian life and transition into university life. A significant strong negative correlation was found,  $r(7) = -.68, p = .042$ , 2-tailed, indicating a strong linear association between the two variables. Women veterans who are older report experiencing less of an identity crisis while reintegrating into society and transitioning into a university setting. Whereas younger veterans report experiencing more of an identity crisis while reintegrating into society and transitioning into a university setting. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to assess the relation between the level of an identity crisis in the military and the level of an identity crisis upon reintegration into civilian life and transition into university life. A significant strong positive correlation was found,  $r(7) = .70, p = .033$ , 2-tailed, indicating a strong linear association between the two variables. Women veterans who report experiencing a stronger identity crisis within the military also report experiencing a stronger identity crisis outside of the military, which supports previous research and the researcher's hypotheses.

It is also valuable to note that when asked to report the level of an identity crisis in the military on a scale of one to ten with one being not at all and ten being all the time, the participants reported an average of three and one-third. While when asked to report the level of an identity crisis upon reintegration into society and transition to a university setting on the same scale, the participants reported an average of five and two-thirds. The female veterans reported the experience of an identity crisis outside of the military as being nearly twice as strong as the experience of an identity crisis within the military. It is also valuable to note that one-third of the women reported not experiencing an identity crisis within the military, while only one-ninth of the women reported not experiencing an identity crisis while reintegrating into society and transitioning into a university setting. This suggests that identity crises for women veterans are



more prevalent, as well as more severe, during the reintegration process than while serving in the United States military. The idea that components within society may contribute more to the development of an identity crisis than other factors is interesting because many people may believe that the male-dominated culture of the military in conjunction with limited interactions with other women in the military contribute more to the development and advancement of an identity crisis among female veterans.

Finally, the level of an identity crisis in relation to the frequency of interactions with other women at the job site was explored. Using the same scale of one to ten, with one being not at all and ten being all the time, those of whom reported frequent interactions with women in their job reported experiencing an identity crisis at an average of three, those who sometimes interacted with women in their job reported an average of five, and those who rarely interacted with women in their job reported an average of two and one-fourth. This suggests that the level of interactions with women at a job site does not correlate with the level of an identity crisis reported, thus, not supporting the hypothesis that the more women interact with other women in the military, the less of an identity they will report experiencing.

### **Thematic Analysis**

The researcher analyzed the interviews using the grounded theory approach to identify themes and categories in which those themes fall under (Orcher, 2014). The researcher began by analyzing each of the verbatim transcripts and identifying common themes among them all. Twelve total themes emerged through the analysis. The researcher then separated the twelve themes into two categories: those that are relevant to their experiences in the military and those that are relevant to their experiences in civilian and university life. Each of these themes were

not present in every interview, but they were present in many interviews and in many cases, the majority of the interviews.

**Themes regarding military experiences.** Seven themes regarding the women's military experiences emerged through the analysis. See Table 1 for a complete list of these themes.

*Strong drive to succeed in the military.* Many participants expressed that while they were in the military, they had a strong drive to succeed and do well. This drive was common among the participants, but the root of it and reasoning behind it varied. Most of the women felt the need to do well to prove to both themselves and other people in the military that they could do it. One woman expressed that "I felt like because you are a woman, you were automatically expected to be less intelligent. So, they expected you to not be able to do as much in general... that just made me more motivated to show them that we could do it." She was driven to succeed to prove to those who doubted her that they were wrong, and this was common among many of the women. The women believed that many people, mainly the men, held certain levels of expectations for the women in the military and these levels were often lower than the expectations for the men, so they wanted to exceed those expectations and prove them wrong. One woman shared,

You are always looked at as the weaker of the two sexes, and you are always trying to prove yourself that you can do this. Not just with yourself, but with others around you, and mostly the males because there are a lot of beliefs among the men... that you do not belong there. You do not belong in the military, you do not belong on the front lines, you should be bearing children and staying at home with children.

Proving that they did belong in the military alongside the men was a strong motivator for many of these women. Additionally, being told that they could not do something because they were a woman led many of these women to want to succeed. One woman stated, "that has always been

one of my motivators... if people tell me I cannot do something, that has always been a motivator to try to do it.” For many of these women, the drive to succeed came down to exceeding expectations and proving people wrong.

Other women also felt the need to succeed so that they could speak their minds and not face reprimands for it. Some men believed that women “belonged in a certain atmosphere that was not the military,” stated one woman, and “it forced me to feel like I needed to do better than them so that I could tell them how I felt and not get in trouble.” For this woman, succeeding and moving up in ranks meant that she could say certain things to these men that she would not otherwise be able to say, without reprimands, if they were of higher ranks than her. Being a higher rank than some of the men would allow her to correct them on what they said without facing negative consequences.

Some of the participants also felt the need to succeed because they did not want to seem weak. In this sense, it is not because they did not want to seem weak to the men in particular, but because they knew there were certain expectations for people in the military and they did not want to fall short of those expectations and face the consequences. “If there was a need to prove myself, it was because I didn’t want people to think I was weak,” one woman stated, “What drove me to succeed and keep going and complete the mission was that I did not want to be ate up.” The fear of not succeeding at their jobs or the mission that was assigned to them was enough to drive some of these women to do well. They did not want to let others down, nor did they want to fail at something they chose to do- serve in the military.

Finally, some of the women commented on how they wanted to succeed for the women who will join the military after them. One woman stated, “a lot of women came in and saw the pave we had built for them and they were able to be like ‘okay, these are the standards and this is

what we need to do.’ Before me, there was only a set few number of people who gave me a direction to go in so it was like ‘okay, so I am doing this for my sisters coming in after me.’” Being that women have only been in certain military MOS’s for a limited amount of time, there has not been a precedence or standard set on what should be expected of women and what women should strive for. Some of these female veterans have taken it upon themselves to succeed and set a high standard for those women coming in after them so that there are high expectations for all members of the military and not just men.

*Military contributed to establishing self and identity.* Some participants spoke about how the military helped them find themselves, establish their own identity, and advance themselves in various aspects. One goal of the military is to encourage cohesion and uniformity, and with that comes the desire to instill similar values and behaviors in people so that they may effectively work together. In a sense, the military works at establishing new identities for people so that there is that sense of comradery. “I think a lot of people come to the military to find an identity,” one woman stated, “they kind of strip you of your identity and make you start over, but everybody’s searching for one.” This reinforces the idea that the military contributes to the possible destruction and subsequent formation of an identity, with which many servicemembers develop a strong connection. Another woman shared, “the military kind of shaped who I was so I will always kind of have that as my identity.” She changed and transformed while in the military and attributes part of her identity to her military experience. This also supports the notion that the identities people develop in the military are strong and sustain for years in the future, possibly even for the rest of that servicemember’s life. Other women stated, it “molded me into the person that I am today,” or “it made me into a better person, both the bad experiences and the good. It’s definitely character building.” The majority of the participants spoke about how the military had

a positive impact on their self-development, regardless of the strength of their identity and sense of knowing who they were prior to their military experiences.

Beyond stating that the military helped them establish themselves, these participants also mentioned how it provided them with tools and resources to help them in the future. One woman stated, “it’s a good foundation for anyone going in at eighteen and establishing themselves... this is helping me go further than I ever thought I would be.” Beyond establishing yourself, the military can help build foundations that will help you in the future as well. These foundations can be regarding personal goals and standards or even skills that are applicable to various aspects of life. When discussing motivation in a school setting, one woman mentioned, “I’m about completing the mission. That’s still my mentality, which I will absolutely never let go of because those are good like skills.” She stated that the military provided her with skills and drive to succeed outside of the military as well. Many participants shared the belief that the military helps servicemembers succeed in all aspects of life.

*Quality of interactions with men and women in the military is subjective.* When discussing interactions and connections with both men and other women in the military, most of the participants talked about how the interactions varied from person to person. They did not believe that they could say that the interactions with one gender was more positive, uplifting, and supportive than the other or that they felt closer with one group of people over the other. Many of the participants shared that they were close with both the men and the women in the military and had both positive and negative interactions with each gender.

Regarding the men in particular, the participants agreed that “some of them felt... that we belonged in a certain atmosphere that wasn’t the military... [and] some of them embraced the fact that we were there.” It varied from man to man on whether he supported women in the

military, which had an influence on the quality of interactions between these female veterans and the men in the military. The participants shared that there were some men they did not get along with, but there were others who had their backs and they would turn to for advice in a time of need. Regardless, the interactions with the males varied. Regarding the females, some of the women mentioned that they felt a stronger connection and had better interactions with the females because they could “help you with anything or tell you you needed to fix your hair or stuff like that.” Some experienced more positive interactions with women because they better understood each other’s’ struggles and could connect on a deeper, more understanding level and support one another. At the same time, though, the participants also mentioned that at times there would be altercations among the women for various reason (e.g. petty drama or power struggles while trying to prove selves to others). The participants agreed that interactions with men and women varied.

The participants also agreed that many of the interactions with others in the military were either out of convenience or were forced in a sense. One woman stated, “you really tend to gravitate towards the people you see all the time,” and another shared, “you... were sort of forced to spend more time with the people that you worked with directly... I think it was really just circumstantial more than anything... just because of the work schedules and all of that.” In either case, it is common to develop connections and interact with those of whom they see consistently and there was not much of an opportunity to choose who they interacted with and how those interactions progressed. The reasoning behind the interactions contributes to the nature and quality of the interactions, thus, influencing the varying interactions among men and women in the military. Finally, one woman even stated, “you have to be able to trust the guy (or girl) next to you, so you had to force those connections.” Regardless of if they liked the person or

agreed with their beliefs or not, these female veterans knew that completing the mission was the most important piece, so they made sure to create connections with everyone for the benefit of the mission. Forcing these interactions with both men and women could also contribute to the quality and variability of the interactions because had the participants been able to choose who they trusted and interacted with, they may have developed stronger connections with some people over others.

***Common to interact with women in living quarters, rare to interact with women in job.***

In connection to the quality of interactions with men and women in the military and gravitating towards those of whom they consistently saw, the participants spoke about how they would frequently interact with women in their living quarters and not in their job/at their job site. Of the nine participants, eight frequently interacted with women in their living quarters and one did not because she always lived off base. The participants explained that the barracks were separated by gender, so it was common to live with many other women (especially in basic training when they lived with 50 other women at one time). Most participants lived with at least one other woman throughout their entire time in the military.

On the other hand, though, of the nine women, two often interacted with women at their job, three sometimes interacted with women at their job, and the remaining four women hardly ever interacted with other women at their job site. Since they spent most of their time at their job site or interacting with those in their job, many of the participants did not frequently interact with other women and if they did, the interactions were brief or limited. One woman explained, “the whole time I was in the [military]... I maybe worked directly with like five or six women over the course of four years... because I worked with so many men, I typically just hung out with the dudes because that is who I had to see every day.” For this woman, it was highly uncommon to

work with women or see other women at her job site, and for this reason, she developed stronger connections and had more interactions with the men in the military as well. Another woman stated, “the only time I really got the chance to interact with other women was when I was just coming home off a mission and was trying to get some sleep before the next one came around.” This was because she did not have any other women at her job site, in her squad, or on the same mission, so she only interacted with other women in her tent, which only had two other women in it, and even then, the interactions were brief because they wanted to sleep. One participant was an exception. This woman explained, “at all times I was with at least one other women,” but at the same time “only maybe between five to seven percent of the battalion were females.” She was always with another female because the military believed that if the women were in pairs, they would be less likely to get raped. If it were not for this view, she would not have frequently interacted with women because her job was male-dominated. Overall, most of the participants had limited interactions with other women, especially in their jobs.

***Rules and regulations while pregnant.*** Only a limited number of the participants were pregnant while in the military, but many of the participants mentioned pregnant women in the military, the rules and regulations surrounding pregnancies, and possible differential treatment resulting from being pregnant. Of the participants who spoke about pregnancy in the military, some women spoke about it in a positive manner and others spoke about it in a negative manner. One woman stated, “sometimes [pregnancies] were treated differently in a nice way, and then other times it was treated differently in a ‘you are not as good as us’ way.” Regardless many of the participants mentioned women being pregnant in the military in the conversation about their military experiences.



Many of the female veterans spoke negatively about being pregnant while in the military. This was because they were treated poorly as a result of being pregnant. One woman explained that her negative experience was because she got pregnant, but she was not married. This woman shared, “they have a lot of morals and values in the military... and so, when I got pregnant, I was not married, I just had a boyfriend that I was with for a while... and I got pressured and I got forced into a marriage.” This woman felt forced into a marriage that she did not truly want simply because she got pregnant outside of the military. She expressed that many people held negative views of her and she felt as though they viewed her as someone who slept around and did not have morals, and these negative views of her had adverse consequences on her military experience. Additionally, another woman shared that how the people in the military treated her while she was pregnant was why she got out of the military. She stated, “I only got out because I was looking up options on staying in, like things I could do and different jobs, and I had asked one of my bosses for help, and it was a male, and he was like ‘well no one told you to get pregnant’... and they would say stuff like ‘well if the [military] wanted you to have a family, they would have issued you one.’” Finally, another woman shared a story about how when she was pregnant she was asked to take over a position and the commander of that company said, “we can’t have a pregnant woman doing that.” Each of these women faced negative backlash for being pregnant although it did not appear to have a strong bearing on how well they did their jobs or their overall performance in the military, and each of these women distinctly remember the details surrounding their pregnancies while in the military.

A few of the women spoke positively about being pregnant in the military because they focused on the rules and regulations and how those were put in place for the safety and well-being of both the unborn child and the pregnant mother. A woman who was pregnant while in

the military spoke about her experience, “when you reach 28 weeks, you can only work eight hour days... no if’s, and’s, or but’s. So, nothing really oppresses a pregnant person, I think it [the rules] all works in favor.” This woman could not think of any negative experiences that she dealt with while being pregnant in the military, she only spoke of how the rules were put in place to benefit the mother and encourage a positive and healthy development for the child. Another woman spoke about how she noticed that commanding officers in the military treated pregnant women differently than other women and men in the military, but “a lot of the times it was more for safety reasons rather than oppressive reasons. You know, you cannot crawl on top of a helicopter because you have a small person inside of you.” Some of the participants- often those who did not directly experience discrimination or negative differential treatment while they were pregnant or those who were not pregnant- did not believe that pregnant women were treated poorly in the military and even supported the rules and regulations regarding pregnant women in the military. While there were varying views and experiences among those who shared about being pregnant while in the military (or witnessing pregnancy in the military), many participants believed that experience to be important enough to discuss during the interviews.

*Main struggle when expressing self and gender was regarding hair.* During each interview, the researcher asked the participants about how they portrayed themselves in the military and what factors, especially regarding femininity, they struggled with in deciding on their appearance/portrayal. Nearly all participants spoke about their hair, be it the length or style, being the most difficult factor in determining how to present themselves and their gender. They mentioned other things like make-up and the struggles they dealt with when they could wear civilian clothes, but while in the military and while in uniform, their hair was the biggest factor. This is because there are certain hair regulations in the military. “Female appearance... was more

difficult than men, because your hair was supposed to be slicked back. If you have fly-aways, if you have crazy hair, you are in for some rough mornings,” one woman explained. How their hair looked was important for staying within regulations, and many women struggled with it. Many women had an internal conflict on if they should cut their hair for various reasons or if they should leave it longer to hold onto a piece of femininity. “The long hair gave me some degree of femininity,” one woman stated, and being that there is not much opportunity to express femininity in the military, her hair was an important factor in maintaining that.

Two of the women decided to cut their hair short, one because the hair regulations and the other for cleanliness on a combat deployment. The first woman explained, “I cut it [my hair] really short thinking, ‘oh, I won’t have to put it up, it won’t be in the way’ ... I found it very difficult having short hair in the military. Once it grew out long enough, I had to put it up so it was not touching my collar, and in trying to keep every strand up, I had to use hair clips and I used to get in trouble for that.” This woman’s goal was to make things as easy for her as she could, so she thought cutting her hair was one way of doing that. Although she did not talk about hair in terms of gender expression, she did struggle with her hair and saw cutting it and changing that about herself as a mistake. Finally, one woman explained,

I cut all my hair off, and you know, it was just for cleanliness more than anything... I knew where we were going to be and what life was going to be like and just to have a bunch of hair that was going to get dirty and sweaty and gross all the time, was not a good idea... it was a little bit of a kind of kick in the teeth because you do feel like you are kind of losing your identity a little bit.

This woman was going on a combat deployment and she made the decision for herself to cut her hair to make things easier on that deployment, and once again, while she did not cut it as a form

of expression and did not think about her gender expression while deciding to cut it, she did experience some struggles with it. For many women, their hair is a way to express femininity and becomes part of their gender identity, and to cut it or change it drastically does have an influence on identity that many women struggle with. Some participants chose to keep their long hair, but struggled to stay in regulations, while others chose to cut it short and struggled more with their identity.

*Commonality of poor treatment as a result of gender.* Despite some of the participants explaining that they felt accepted by others in the military and they did not feel as though people held different views or expectations of them because they were a woman, each participant shared at least one time in which she was treated differently because her gender. One woman in particular spoke about how she never struggled in the military and she stated, “it was very easy for me to get accustomed to the military,” but despite this, she still experienced discrimination at one point. This woman explained, “I had a guy selected over me that was lesser qualified for going to a school that would allow him to get a promotion. That was the one time and that was because my boss was a jerk, because he did not like women.” Although this was the only time this woman experienced being treated poorly because of her gender, it did not take her long to provide one example where she did experience some form of discrimination. This was common among all participants. Another woman who reported getting along well with the men in the military shared an example of one squad leader who would “go out of his way to try to give me difficult tasks to see if I could do it like all the other guys could.” She explained that the guys she served with would stick up for her, but at the same time, she still experienced discrimination and poor treatment because of her gender.

Many of the participants could provide multiple examples of times in which they were treated differently because of their gender. These examples ranged from those shared previously about when the women were pregnant, to not being promoted, to being yelled at or receiving strange looks because they were the only woman in the room, to not being recognized as a member of the military, etc. Two different women also discussed their experiences with men in the military making advances on them and the consequences of their responses to those. One disclosed, "I can remember, for instance, leaders that would be in charge of me and try to come onto me, but I would not do anything and would say no, and then my whole assignment would change. I would just be moving trash around instead of doing my job as a punishment kind of and everyone knew what it was but no one said anything because they were the boss." Not only did she face punishment for not engaging in a relationship or physical/sexual acts with a commanding officer, but other people- men and women- knew what had happened and did not say or do anything about it because that officer was of higher rank. Another woman mentioned, "respect is supposed to be so high in the military, but there were multiple times where just because I was a woman I was... hit on even though I was in uniform. And if I said no, I was treated worse by that person in the future... they would be disrespectful to me and would give me tedious tasks to do." She elaborated by mentioning a time when a commanding officer was harassing her and the only reason people serving with her took action was because they did not want her to take the problem higher up. They knew if she did that, more people would get in trouble and "they were more worried about themselves... to protect their image." Each participant had stories of this nature, where they explained times in which they were treated differently because of their gender, and none of the participants could provide examples or

stories about seeing men in the military being treated this same way or being disrespected to the same level as the women.

**Themes regarding civilian and university life.** Five themes regarding the women's experiences in reintegrating into civilian life and transitioning into a university setting emerged through the analysis. See Table 2 for a complete list of these themes.

*Struggle to adapt language and behavior to what is socially acceptable.* Some of the participants explained that the military and civilian life are highly different from one another, with different expectations and ideas of what is acceptable and what is not. Two strong differences between the military and civilian life are what people in each view as acceptable behavior and acceptable language. Some of the women mentioned how they had to “watch their language” and adjust how they said things because it was not socially accepted in civilian life. One woman explained, “there are things that I said in the military that two years on I would not have dreamed of saying in the civilian world. I have to cut down on the horrific jokes that I like.” She explained that in the military people often insult each other, say crude things, tell inappropriate jokes, etc. all of which are normal and acceptable in the military, but not in society. In society, they are things that would offend people. Adjusting this way of speaking was difficult. Another woman mentioned, “I really had to watch how I spoke and cursing and saying words that were okay in that environment, but not okay here.” Both women expressed experiencing struggle in reducing that unacceptable language when reintegrating into civilian life.

Other women spoke about certain behaviors that are more accepted in the military and the struggles they experienced in adjusting those in civilian life. As opposed to the behaviors being crude, raunchy, or of that nature- like the women who mentioned their language and word

choice- the behaviors were more in terms of how they carried themselves. One woman spoke about her rank and job in the military. She explained that people of her rank “kind of have this no-nonsense approach to a lot of things where you feel like you know better than everybody else, you are just a big know-it-all,” and while that is entirely normal in the military, it is not a trait people admire and accept in the military and many people urge “you are not in the military anymore, so just tone it down a notch.” Other women mentioned how many people will tell them they need to lighten up, relax, stop being so uptight, etc. These behaviors and ways of carrying oneself are acceptable and sometimes valued in the military, while in civilian life, people value flexibility and compassion, and the participants expressed struggling to change these behaviors to coincide with what society wants/ values and what society sees as acceptable.

*Belief that people in society hold negative views of servicemembers/veterans.* Many participants expressed concerns regarding what people both in society and at universities think about servicemembers and veterans. This concern influenced how the women acted in these settings and created a sense of uneasiness within each of these women. One woman explained, “I really never told anybody that I was a veteran. Not that I did not want people to ask or anything, but I think people just have their own idea of the military. For example, my sophomore year, somebody found out I was in the military and they were like, ‘do you kill people?’” She does not talk about her veteran status because people make assumptions about servicemembers and veterans and with those assumptions come inappropriate and insensitive questions, like have you killed people? Another woman elaborated on the assumptions that people make and stated, “I think a lot of people are like, ‘wow, you were in the military, you were a baby killer, or... you just did all of this for money.’” She discussed that people have these views and do not even try to see it from another perspective, and that is a problem today, people need to be more sensitive to

the experiences of servicemembers. Finally, another woman stated, “It’s [being a veteran] not something I really want to broadcast, it’s not that I am not proud of being a veteran, it’s because there are a lot of anti-military sentiments with a lot of young people these days... They think we all just want to be a bunch of baby killers.” Once again, the combination of experiencing interactions with other people who are not sensitive or supportive of servicemembers and the beliefs that these participants have regarding what other people think about people in the military has contributed to many of these women not wanting to make their veteran status known.

Although they believe that many people do not hold positive perspectives on the military and people in the military, many of these participants believe that it is their responsibility to educate others about the realities of the military and life within the military. They believe that they can use college classes/classrooms as a tool to help educate others so that they may develop a more positive view, or at least a more realistic view, of the military and people who serve. One veteran shared an example where she was in a class in which the other students were expressing their views and understandings of the military, of which were incorrect, and she took that opportunity to correct them. “I was able to tell them about a little bit of what goes on and I told them that it’s not like people go out there and blow up houses,” she shared, “we have to get permission to, and then confirmation, and then think about all that’s going on around it with all the innocent people.” Another woman expressed, “as a veteran, I think there are a lot of educational experiences that you can provide to some of the younger generation.” In both situations, and in many other situations, the participants believe it to be important and even necessary to use their experiences and knowledge to teach others about the military.

Finally, the female veterans explained how not only do people outside of the military hold negative views of the military, but they also do not know what various servicemembers



went through. Put more simply, “in the military, you walk around with a certain amount of respect already, with a little patch on your chest or collar that tells people, ‘hey this is who I am, this is what I have done for this, and this is what you do when you see me.’” In the military, everyone has a rank and wears certain ribbons/patches/etc. that display who they are. This is not the case in civilian and university life. There is nothing showing or explaining to everyone else what that veteran went through and who they were. There is not that immediate understanding of what that person sacrificed, and thus, there is not that immediate respect nor is there a knowledge of the experiences each of these women had- this can lead to misconceptions about the military as well. Lacking these things can lead to many veterans feeling like others do not view them in a positive light or do not care about what they experienced.

***Hardship of developing connections with traditional students.*** Participants expressed frustration regarding connecting with traditional students in a university setting. They feel that there are too many differences between themselves and the traditional students to form valuable and strong connections with them. Many women discussed how the age gap caused some difficulty in connecting with the traditional students. “As far as transitioning into school I guess the biggest thing I had, had nothing to do with being a soldier, it had to do with being older than everyone else... I did not form any really close friendships because I could not relate,” explained one veteran. The age gap between veterans and the traditional students suggests that they are in different points of their lives, they have different maturity levels, they have different goals and reasons for being in school, etc., and this can make it hard for veterans and traditional students to connect with one another. This can also lead to different worldviews and understandings of the world between the two groups of people (mentioned when discussing the negative views people have of the military). One woman even proclaimed, “I have seen things that they will never see

in their lives.” Having vastly different experiences leads to different outlooks and conclusions, and there can be enormous differences in views between college students who went to college right out of high school and older individuals who joined the military, traveled, and went on deployments around the world, which makes it difficult to form connections.

Additionally, the participants expressed the most frustration when talking about the differences in levels of motivation and maturity between them and the traditional students. One woman explained that she struggled transitioning into a university setting because of these differences. “I don’t think I was ready to associate with people with no motivation or kind of a lackadaisical attitude,” she stated. The same woman also mentioned how she is goal and mission-oriented and many traditional students are not. It is difficult for veterans to connect with traditional college students when veterans want to focus on getting the job done and the traditional students want to focus on having fun or “experiencing college life.” Moreover, other women mentioned how many traditional students will play on their phones, not pay attention, skip class, be disrespectful in other ways, and then proceed to get mad if they miss a quiz or do poorly in the class. One woman exclaimed, “we are adults, you know you are supposed to be here.” The participants expressed irritation with the level of responsibility and self-motivation to succeed among many traditional college students.

This disconnect with the traditional students and expressing frustration with it is so significant among these female veterans because they want to “fit in” in college, they do not want to stand out. “I do not want there to be this huge gap between me and the other students,” explained one veteran. “I don’t think a lot of female veterans, especially the younger ones, want to be singled out... I don’t think you want to be that different. I think you want to blend in,” stated another. These women do not want to stand out, they do not want others to label them and

view them differently than the rest of the students. They want to be comfortable in a college setting so that they can create friendships and succeed in their classes, all while feeling accepted.

*Importance of connections with other veterans in a university setting.* While the participants did not say that connections with other veterans once they are out of the military is imperative to their successes, many did make note of how beneficial and important it is to have connections with those who they can relate to, understand their experiences, and can help one another with whatever may be necessary while completing their degrees- things that are not possible with traditional students because they cannot fully understand what it is like to be in the military, and therefore, cannot relate.

Many participants agreed that a great way to build those connections and have a support system like this is through a Veteran's Association on campus. Of the three universities in this study, two already had Veteran's Associations in place. A woman who was involved with it at one of the universities explained, "in the Veteran's Association, there is that comradery you experience in the military, even though none of us ever worked together, we get together and it is that same feeling where we can talk about anything and everything and it is just this mutual understanding of each other." Another woman involved in one of the Veteran's Associations explained that it is a great support system because everyone is on a similar path, they experienced similar things, and they share a deeper level of understanding. Since the participants expressed a lack of support among the traditional students- either because they cannot relate with one another or the traditional students do not view the military positively- connections with other veterans is extremely valuable and helpful.

Participants suggested that not only would a Veteran's Association be helpful in creating connections and sharing experiences/struggles with other veterans on campus, but they also

suggested that having a sub-group specifically for female veterans, having sub-groups for veterans within different programs and majors, and having connections with veterans in the community outside of the university would all be valuable as well. These different groups would just allow for veterans to build more connections and a stronger support system while helping each other acclimate to civilian life, again, and a university setting. In the area in which this research was completed, there is a locally-founded female-veteran's support group that many of the participants expressed interest in wanting to build connections and have meetings with. While the female veteran population is growing, there is still a small number of female veterans (and at one of the universities in this study, there is a limited female veteran presence) and this population has unique experiences that even male veterans would not understand. So, being able to connect with more female veterans, share experiences, provide advice and resources to one another, etc. would be very valuable among the female veteran population, and creating those connections beyond the university expand resources and support. Veteran-specific sub-groups in different programs/majors is another group that could contribute to helping student veterans feel comfortable and succeed in a university. One woman shared that at her university she and another veteran created a group for veterans within their program. She explained, "there was nothing for veterans, so we started one and it has just become this great way for us to all get to know each other, network with other veterans in the community... and then to do some community service outreach projects directed towards veterans." Connections with other veterans in multiple environments is key.

Finally, many participants have mentioned the value of a mentorship program where veterans who have been on campus for a longer time can help the new veteran students in growing acclimated to the university and accessing the important resources. The participants

articulated how difficult the process with the Veteran's Affairs Office (VA) and dealing with the G.I. Bill was, with many explaining that that was one of the biggest obstacles in transitioning into a university setting. Therefore, many spoke about how having a program that helped with those things- as well as any other struggles regarding being a student veteran- would help ease the process and reduce some stress. This type of program is in place at one of the universities in this study, and two of the women involved with it spoke highly of it. One explained, "I learned a lot kind of on my own my first two years here, so finding this program and being able to help someone else, at least I can take off some pressure on them." There are many resources for veterans available on campus that many of them do not know about, so creating a mentorship program where their peers can help them through the process, serve as a lasting resource and friend, guide them, and show them what was successful/what worked for them would provide access to all available resources, allow student veterans to get the most out of their university, and allow student veterans to utilize all the benefits available for veterans.

*Importance of the availability of childcare on college campuses.* When speaking about what resources would be beneficial for female veterans to have access to on a college campus, childcare or daycare was the most discussed topic. The participants continually stressed how helpful childcare would be so that they could immerse themselves more in their studies and get more out of their education. Many explained how either themselves or people they know had to be late to classes or miss classes, and thus, miss out on parts of their education because they needed to take care of their children and they did not have anyone else who could do so. Also, many mentioned how not only are many male and female veterans single parents or married with kids, but many other students are single parents and would benefit just as much.

Participants not only explained the importance and benefits of access to childcare, but also provided suggestions about how universities can implement this on their campuses. One woman remarked, “I know that there are people here that are going to school for that kind of thing, so it’d be great practice and great hours for them.” She suggested that the universities include it in their coursework somehow. Another woman explained, “there is an education program, they could implement that into a class even, where the students watch the kids.”

There are many different programs that include curriculum on child development/life-span development (e.g. nursing, psychology, education), so universities could make it into a class and provide some students with hands-on experience and other students with childcare while they are in class, working on homework, in meetings, etc. If universities could not include it in the coursework, they could offer it in some other way. Universities can make one room on campus into a childcare facility and they could employ people to work there. Participants expressed how it is so important and would be so helpful, that they do not care if they would have to pay for it or not, thus, allowing it to either be part of a program or be disconnected from the programs and just be another resource. Either way, having access to childcare, regardless of if it was free or if they had to pay for it, would benefit a large group of students- ranging from veterans, to single parents, to any student who has a kid, to students who are completing their education to go into a field that involves children, and more.

### **Discussion**

This study explored the experiences of female student veterans as they adjusted to life in the military, reintegrated into civilian, and transitioned into a university setting. The findings provide insight into how common identity crises are among female veterans, how strong these

crises are in various situations, and what different factors and components contribute to these crises. This study's findings are consistent with findings of previous literature and research.

Results of this study reinforce previous research regarding the existence of identity crises among female veterans (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009; Women Warriors, 2011). Previous research mentions that identity crises exist among female veterans and expand upon that by explaining possible reasons why they exist or suggesting that it may negatively impact their future successes, but the research does not specifically focus on the experience of an identity crisis among female veterans. The present study focused on the experience of an identity crisis and provided insight into how prevalent it is, when it is more prevalent, and what factors may contribute to it. The present research suggests that identity crises are more common upon reintegration into civilian life and transition into a university setting with a higher percentage of female college student veterans experiencing crises at this time than in the military. Additionally, the present study was able to provide a number regarding the prevalence/strength of identity crises both in and out of the military to discover that not only does it seem that identity crises occur more often in the reintegration and transition process, but they are also stronger than the level of identity crises in the military. This research provided unique insight into the identity experiences of female veterans, and the subsequent pages speculate on the various factors, connections, ideas, etc. of an identity crisis among female veterans.

Findings of this research suggest that there is a significant strong negative correlation between age and the level of an identity crisis upon reintegration into civilian life and transition into a university setting. This is interesting as many people may believe the opposite. It seems logical that the older a veteran is, the longer she was in the military, and thus, the more accustomed she grew to life in the military. In this perspective, being in the military for a long

time would allow the individual to develop a strong identity within the military and strong connections to that identity, and so it would be harder to adjust to life outside of the military and it would be more difficult to discover and latch onto a civilian (non-military) identity. However, other insights can explain why results of this research study found a negative correlation between age and identity crisis during the reintegration and transition process.

The common themes regarding military experiences in the present study support suggestions from previous research regarding the struggles women face in the military. Some of the themes- specifically, having a strong drive to succeed in the military, rules and regulations while pregnant, main struggle when expressing self and gender was regarding hair, and commonality of poor treatment as a result of gender- each reinforce what many researchers have mentioned before, the military is a male-dominated institution and women face unique adversities in the military because of their gender (Heitzman & Somers, 2015; Heineman, 2016; Women Warriors, 2011; Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009). Many of the participants explained times in which they were treated poorly or differently because of their gender and then elaborated by sharing that it provided them with more motivation to succeed in the military so they could prove themselves to those who doubted them. Participants also spoke about situations unique to women in the military (e.g. being pregnant or having long hair) and how that influenced them and how they were treated differently because of it. Nevertheless, results of the present study reinforce what previous research explained regarding female servicemembers experiences and struggles.

Additionally, results of this study support what previous research has suggested regarding which factors contribute to veterans' struggles in adjusting to civilian and university life and which factors may contribute to added adversities for female veterans throughout these processes. The themes about the participants believing other people hold negative views of



veterans, the struggles to connect with traditional students, the importance of connections with other veterans, and the importance of having access to childcare on campus all reinforce results of previous research (Badalucco, 2016; Kirchner, 2015; Heineman, 2016; Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009; McCaslin, Leach, Herbst, & Armstrong, 2013; Women Warriors, 2011). Participants often explained that the most difficult aspect of transitioning into a university setting was being older than the traditional students and not being able to relate to them on deeper levels, a point that many researchers have continually made. Additionally, participants frequently mentioned that they or other female veterans they know had to miss class or struggled with scheduling/classes because they had to care for at least one child back home. This connects to previous literature discussing that women are single mothers more often than men (11 percent: 4 percent) and how many female veterans take care of children and struggle to attend college as a result (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009; Women Warriors, 2011). Findings from this study, as well as many other previous studies, suggest many different struggles female veterans face in the process of reintegrating into society and transitioning into a university setting.

Furthermore, many of the results from this research study closely align with the themes and ideas that previous research has found regarding needed services for veterans on college campuses. Judie Heineman (2016), for example, analyzed community college campuses and discovered seven major components that community colleges need to employ to better serve their veteran population and be “military friendly.” These components included, providing veteran-specific orientation, assisting with acclimation to civilian life, facilitating veteran interaction, and collaborating with local support agencies and veteran’s organizations, and each of these connects to a theme found in the present study. Many participants expressed interest in receiving a checklist that told them what they needed to do both before and after they arrive on

campus. They also mentioned including an “orientation-like” event where veterans could speak with faculty who work with the student veterans, speak with financial aid, and meet other veterans. Additionally, the results of the present study suggest that the experience of an identity crisis is more prevalent, and often stronger, upon reintegration into civilian life and transition into a university setting. Heineman (2016) suggested that one of the most important things colleges need to do is assist veterans in getting acclimated to civilian life, something that the present study implies and points to as well. Finally, the present study discovered a common theme among the female veterans of the importance of connections with other veterans both on campus and in the community. Heineman’s (2016) suggestions of facilitating veteran interaction and collaborating with local veteran’s organizations perfectly align with those themes.

Developing connections and interacting with other veterans allows student veterans to form a support system of individuals who understand their experiences and can offer help and advice, which is highly valuable and necessary in university settings.

Although, results closely align with Heineman’s (2016) results, the present study takes them one step further in focusing on female veterans instead of all veterans. Heineman (2016) focused on all veterans at community colleges and she mentioned that many people do not recognize women as veterans, but she does not elaborate upon this or provide more information about this. The present study specifically analyzed the experiences of female veterans at both public and private universities and utilized results of the study to provide insight into what female veterans view as necessary and important services and resources. This study provides more specific and focused research to bring attention to a growing population that many people struggle to recognize as legitimate, something that is becoming more important but lacks detailed or focused research.

One possible explanation as to why older female veterans may report experiencing less of an identity crisis upon reintegrating into society and transitioning into a university setting than the younger female veterans is quite simply the age in which they enlisted. Some veterans who are older may have enlisted in the military at an older age. Enlisting at an older age can allow the individuals to develop a strong identity and sense of self before entering the military. While the military does essentially strip people of their identities and make them rebuild themselves, people do not completely lose their identities in the process. It is possible that the older a woman is when she joins the military, the more of a concrete identity she will already have in place, and the less of her identity she will lose in the military. Therefore, when this woman leaves the military, she still has a strong understanding of who she is. On the other hand, the younger a woman is when she enlists in the military, the less of an identity she may have. Many women enlist right out of high school because they want to further their education by going to college and they know that the military is a means of doing so. In high school, though, many people are still trying to discover who they are, what they want to do, and who they want to be. Since they are still trying to discover these things, they do not have a strong identity, and when they join the military, the identity they have is malleable and weak in a way. This makes it easier for the military to strip their identity, thus, causing them to be more susceptible to an identity crisis than the women who enlist at an older age and have a stronger sense of who they are. The younger women will likely develop an identity in the military, and when they leave the military, they may struggle with knowing who they are because they are no longer in the military and can no longer completely identify as that woman. This is just one explanation as to why the older female veterans may report less of an identity crisis upon reintegration into society and transition into a university setting than the younger female veterans.

People view the military as being a more conservative institution, and it generally changes slower than the civilian world in terms of political correctness and things of that nature. Therefore, age and generation could influence the participants' experiences in and views of the military. In other words, when the older veterans and servicemembers were in the military, society may have been progressing more towards gender equality, but at the same time, it was still uncommon to see women in the military and the military had not yet grown accustomed to women being in certain parts of the military or in the military in general. As a result, these women likely recognized that men in the military- and people in society- were not used to women being in the military and that the military progresses slower on social equality than society does. They then may not have gotten as upset when they were treated poorly because "that is just the way it is" in the male-dominated career field of the military and they assumed those views would change over the years. They may have downplayed the negative treatment and discrimination within the military because they recognized that women in the military was still an anomaly at the time. For the younger female veterans, though, they likely served in the military later than the older veterans. They likely served when more women began enlisting in the military and therefore, people started to be more accepting of women in the military and rules and regulations in the military started changing. At the same time these women were in the military, society began pushing for more gender equality and more political correctness. Although, since the military does not align with society on advancements in social issues, it caused incongruities and disparities between life as a woman in the military and life as a woman outside of the military. The younger veterans were likely aware of the differences and recognize that women have engaged in the military and more prominent roles in the military for years now, so they question why treatment is not yet on an even playing field. This can explain why the

younger female veteran participants in this study expressed more frustration with the military and provided more examples of being treated poorly in the military than the older female veteran participants.

Additionally, this provides an explanation as to why younger female veterans reported experiencing more of an identity crisis outside of the military than the older female veterans. When the current younger female veterans were in the military, they may have focused on wanting to gain more equal treatment or respect among all members in the military. This may have caused them to focus more on how they portrayed themselves to others or their level of success in the military. They may have invested themselves in the military more than earlier generations of female veterans did. This suggests that they could have developed more of a military identity in the process because they placed that at the forefront of their minds and the top of their list of priorities. Therefore, when these women left the military, their civilian identity was less established than it was for the older female veterans because they focused on their military identity to gain respect, causing a stronger identity crisis and more of a struggle to discover themselves outside of the military. Other factors could also contribute to why older female veterans reported experiencing less of an identity crisis upon reintegration into civilian life and transition into a university setting than younger female veterans.

Many of the participants, especially those who were older and served in the military longer, also spoke about how they were both Active and Reserves throughout their military careers. They shared that they were not Active the entire time they were in the military. Having some “down time” while being Reserves allowed some of these women to develop and sustain a civilian identity that they may not have been able to do if they were Active their entire military career. This could explain why results showed a negative correlation between age and the

experience of an identity crisis upon reintegration into civilian life and transition into a university setting. The older the participant was, the longer she was in the military, and thus, the higher chance that she served in both Active and Reserves and the more of an opportunity she had to develop an identity separate from the military. Active duty members likely develop a strong military identity- for example, one participant in this study explained, "I loved my job, it wasn't something that I did, it was who I was"- and they do not have the opportunity to develop an identity outside of the military and thus, they may experience a stronger identity crisis upon reintegration into society and transition into a university setting. Whereas, Reserve duty members have more of an opportunity to develop an identity beyond the military, which may reduce the likelihood of developing an identity crisis or at least lessen its severity. Many other factors could contribute to the development and advancement of an identity crisis as well.

Many of the participants in this research study mentioned that they knew many of the people, male and female, with whom they worked and had been around them for several years throughout their military career. Being around these individuals so frequently allowed them to get to know each other and build connections with each other. They were able to earn and develop respect, understand each other on a deeper level, learn about where each person draws the line on certain topics/situations/interactions, etc. This resulted in more trust and support among these individual. Female servicemembers developing close relationships and being familiar with their male counterparts, especially, could reduce the level of negative experiences as a result of their gender that these women in the military face. If the men develop a deeper respect and understanding for their female cohorts, it could reduce or eliminate possible biases they had regarding women in the military and lead them to support the women more. This could allow women to feel more accepted and comfortable in the military, and thus, possibly lessen

their discomfort with being a minority in the military and lessen their experience of an identity crisis despite other possible negative experiences. For example, one woman explained how a “new guy,” who did not know her and was not used to being around women in the military, treated her and the women around her poorly. She explained that he held negative views of the women and found minute details- e.g. one woman failing her physical test- to reinforce his negative views. Despite this one man holding negative views of her, her other male cohorts stood up for her against this man because they developed connections with her, knew what she was capable of accomplishing, and did not understand why someone would question that. Other participants shared similar stories as well, and as mentioned, this could reduce susceptibility to an identity crisis among female veterans.

In addition, participants suggested that the experience of an identity crisis may be worsened for those who deploy. Some deployments involve difficult conditions, situations, and decisions, each of which challenge servicemembers, but they can challenge female servicemembers more. Female servicemembers face the same disorientation and struggles that the men do, but they also face adversities and struggles because their gender (e.g. how they present themselves, how others treat them, etc.). Women experience periods and cannot go to the bathroom like men can, and things like this can cause others in the military to get frustrated with them because they require different resources, some of which people in the military view as special treatment. Women also struggle with how they want to portray their gender while on these deployments. For example, the participant in this study who mentioned cutting her hair because she knew it would be better for her deployment, but at the same time, she felt as though she lost part of her identity by doing so and some of her military cohort joked with her about being G.I. Jane. This participant mentioned struggling with her identity a little more than the men

around her because she cut her hair, she stood out because of it, and she faced some backlash as a result. These factors and factors like these can influence a female servicemember's or female veteran's experience with an identity crisis.

Deploying to combat zones may further contribute to developing an identity crisis. Since the military just decided to open all combat MOSs (Military Occupational Specialties) to women in 2016, women on combat deployments will likely experience more struggles and face more adversities than women who do not deploy to combat zones. Combat MOSs are still extremely male-dominated and many of the men in these fields are still growing accustomed to women being in these positions. This will cause these women to feel like they are not wanted in those MOSs and can lead to them feeling pressures to pay more attention to how they present themselves and carry themselves since they are under strict scrutiny. So, not only might women face more struggles on deployments because of their gender, this worsens on combat deployments because women in combat MOSs are highly outnumbered by men.

The number of deployments may also contribute to the severity of an identity crisis. During each deployment, the servicemembers have distinct jobs and missions to complete and everyone knows why they are in the location they are in and what they need to do there. As someone deploys more, he or she will begin to form a strong identity as someone in the military and as someone who always knows exactly what his or her purpose is. Once these individuals leave the military, they may experience a worsened identity crisis because they see less of a purpose to their lives. Many veterans even want to go back into the military and deploy again because they feel as though they are helping people and making a difference; whereas, being in civilian life, these veterans experience difficulties finding a purpose that compares to that of which they had in the military. For those who did not deploy or deployed fewer times, they may



not build as strong of an identity and sense of purpose in the military and therefore, do not struggle as much with their identity coming out of the military.

As mentioned multiple times before, many participants agreed that the military contributed to them establishing themselves and their identities and contributed to who they are today. Developing as a person and developing an identity while in the military can explain why the identity crises were more prominent upon reintegration into society and transition into a university setting than in the military itself. This is because the participants discovered who they were in the military and felt a strong sense of self in the military, but upon leaving the military, they lost much of that identity and idea of who they were. While veterans can still identify as veterans, they cannot identify as someone who is still in the military and thus, they cannot identify with the things that connect with being in the military (e.g. their sense of purpose, their job, their rank, etc.). Losing all those identities and components of their identities can lead to an identity crisis that is worse than the one they may have experienced in the military. In the military, many participants spoke about dealing with a multitude of struggles and adversities, but each of them mentioned that they had an idea of who they were- they had a job and a mission. Outside of the military, many of the participants mentioned struggling to find their calling and their niche and that contributed greatly to their identity crisis, something they never had to worry about in the military.

Struggles to openly identify as a veteran can also contribute to the experience of and severity of an identity crisis. Many, if not all, participants spoke about believing that many people today do not support the military and hold unrealistic and insensitive views of veterans and servicemembers. Since these beliefs are prominent among these women, many of them do not like to broadcast their veteran status. These women identify as a veteran and are proud to be

veterans, but they do not feel comfortable, or are at least hesitant about, openly identifying as a veteran because they fear what others may think or how others may view them. This can contribute to their identity crisis because not openly identifying as a veteran or feeling conflicted about identifying as a veteran does not allow these women to embrace this part of their identity. If they cannot fully embrace part of their identity, they could start to lose the strong connection they have to that identity, thus creating confusion on who they are. The fact that many people do not view women as veterans and there is not a stereotypical “look” to female veterans can add to this identity crisis as well because if they do not share their veteran status, many people may never know that a woman was in the military. Many people develop part of their identity through how others view them and characteristics others ascribe to them, and if others do not view these women as veterans, they could struggle to maintain that part of their identity.

Some participants mentioned that while they did struggle with their identities outside of the military, some aspects of their lives helped them find at least a small component of their identity. One recurring component was the decision to attend a university and continue their education. Many participants elucidated that they struggled with finding a direction in civilian life/society, but college helped give them a direction. They went from not knowing what they wanted to do or what their purpose was in society to having a goal and a mission to complete through attending college. College provided many participants with a sense of direction and something to feel motivated and excited about. Also, many participants explained that attending college and taking classes helped them maintain a schedule, maintain structure, and kept their minds busy, all of which were things they valued about the military. Each of these components of college itself helped the participants find an identity in terms of who they wanted to be or what they wanted to do. While there are some positive aspects of college that helped the

participants in this study with their identity, there were still other aspects that were negative and caused frustration and confusion (e.g. age gap with traditional students, standing out on campus, etc.). Regardless, while the participants mentioned multiple negative things about universities and the students who attend them (i.e. the university setting), they also included some positive aspects of the university that they appreciated, such as, serving as a tool to develop a purpose.

Another aspect of their lives that some participants suggested helped them find an identity was being a part of a family. Some of the participants had children and they suggested that having children and a husband or wife helped them discover an identity. They explained that their families helped them to identify as a mother or a wife and they focused on those identities rather than the fact that they were struggling to find other identities. In other words, some participants ignored that they did not completely know who they were and rather, they focused on being a member of a family unit and used that as their main identity. Having children and a family that relies on them to provide for them, in many ways, helped some of these female veterans find motivation and find a purpose. Their families gave them direction and at some point, their family is all that mattered to them and they knew they would do anything for them. This could be a factor that actually helps reduce the development or progression of an identity crisis among female veterans.

Throughout the completion of this research study, participants provided vast amounts of information that allowed the researcher to develop a list of services and resources that universities should employ on their campuses to better serve the female veteran population. These include: providing a checklist to veterans to explain to them what steps they need to take before and after they arrive on campus; providing childcare for the women; encouraging and providing opportunities for female veterans to connect with other female veterans both on

campus and in the community; employing a mentoring program where new student veterans can obtain help and advice from older student veterans; creating a sub-group for female veterans out of the Veteran's Associations that may already be in place; and simply helping the female veterans acclimate to civilian life again.

There are a multitude of resources and services that universities can and should provide for their veteran and female veteran populations. While many universities may grow frustrated with lower participation among the veteran population than they may want, it is important to recognize that some veterans may not take advantage of certain resources because they live too far away or have other responsibilities and cannot drive to the campus to utilize the resources or attend the events. It is still important, though, that universities make these resources and services available to female veterans (and all veterans) to assist them in any way possible. Female veterans, and all veterans for that matter, deserve to have the option to seek help if they need it, but not be forced into doing so. Additionally, by including the resources just mentioned on campus, it shows female veterans that the university wants them on campus and that their presence at and contributions to the university are valued. People want to feel wanted and appreciated and if universities can assure that they are making their female veteran population feel that way and feel as though they are a part of the university, that can help immensely in their reintegration and transition process. It will also help encourage the female veterans to both openly identify as a veteran and feel comfortable and safe enough to address their identity crises and work towards discovering who they are and what their purpose is. Many different components and factors can contribute to both the experience of an identity crisis and the level of severity of that identity crisis for female veterans, but many different resources and services- that

colleges and universities, as well as other institutions, can implement- can also help reduce that identity crisis and help female veterans address it as well.

### **Limitations**

While the present study provides immense insight into and understanding of the identity experiences of female veterans, it does include a few shortcomings that should be addressed. To begin, all but one of the participants in this research study were in the Army. There are more women in the Army than any other military branch, therefore it is logical that there are more female Army veterans than any other branch and explains why most participants in this study served in the Army. Also, the researcher focused more on obtaining participants and did not care in which branch the participants served. After obtaining many Army participants, the researcher did not turn people away or restrict participation to only those who were not in the Army. This also explains why the present study includes mostly female Army veterans. Although the demographics make sense, the lack of diversity in terms of the different branches could be a limitation to this study. While the military strives for uniformity and tries to maintain similar rules and regulations across all branches, the different branches are still not all the exact same and can lead to differing experiences. Women who served in different branches of the military could have been exposed to varying environments and could have been treated differently, both of which can contribute to the experience and severity of an identity crisis. Women from other branches could have provided more insight and a broader understanding of identity crises among female veterans, what the identity crises involve, what factors contribute to them, etc. Women in other branches may also be more or less apt to developing an identity crisis for various reasons (e.g. personality traits that correlate to why the women chose to enlist in the different branches).

Overall, this research was limited to the scope of the Army- apart from the one Navy veteran- and including women from all branches would allow for more holistic and valid results.

Similar to how this research study only included women from two branches, the study excluded male veterans. The researcher purposefully excluded male veterans since the focus of the research was on the women, but after analyzing the results and identifying themes, interviewing men could have provided better insight and a different point of view. Interviewing the men about their experiences, their views on women in the military, if they were ever treated poorly, if they believe there is discrimination, etc. could have provided some valuable information. Additionally, including male veterans would have allowed for a comparison between the female veterans and the male veterans in terms of the experience of an identity crisis. All veterans can experience identity crises in the military being that the military essentially strips people of their identities. Just like all veterans are susceptible to experiencing an identity crisis outside of the military because they can lose that sense of purpose and idea of who they are. Comparing the level of an identity crisis both in the military and upon reintegration to civilian life and transition into a university setting between male and female veterans could have provided insight into if overall, female veterans experience more of an identity crisis than male veterans, thus allowing analysis into why that may or may not be true and how we can help change that by either working to reduce the chance of developing an identity crisis or providing a means to help veterans address their identity crises.

This research also focused more on broad, over-arching topics and themes and was not pointed in one specific direction. While this study's focus was female veterans and their experiences with identity, the interview and the research was structured in a way that allowed for broader explanations and topics. As a result, the final themes and other results of the research are

more generalized and less focused solely on identity. While this can be a strength because it allowed the participants to each share their stories and unique experiences, which provided the researcher with rich and indispensable data, it can also be a limitation because it did not solely analyze identity and the factors associated with identity.

Finally, many of the quantitative interview questions involved scales. While the use of these scales did set boundaries and provide examples on what each of the numbers signified, the participants may have reported different numbers when they had similar experiences. In other words, since the questions involving scales were self-report, some of the participants may have had differing perceptions and understandings of what each number meant or what number their experiences correlated to. This may have been especially true in terms of what the participants defined as an identity crisis and how they reported its level of severity. While the researcher explained to the participants that the identity crisis referred to experiencing difficulty in knowing who they were and how they wanted to present their gender to others, some of the participants may have interpreted the term “identity crisis” in other ways. Perhaps the participants understood an identity crisis as not knowing their purpose or direction in life. Additionally, the participants may have defined similar identity crises with different levels of severity because they interpreted it as being more or less severe than others may have. This ambiguity could have skewed the accuracy of the results of this research study.

### **Further Studies**

While the findings of this study provide an immense amount of information about the experiences of identity crises among female veterans, the results also urge for further investigation on the topic and related topics. Since results of this study suggest that identity crises are more prominent upon reintegration into society and transition to a university setting

than in the military, future studies should identify and analyze all factors that contribute to the development and advancement of an identity crisis outside of the military. In exploring these factors, research also needs to expand the participant population to include not only a larger number of female veterans, but also female veterans of all branches. More participants from varying branches will allow for a broader scope of knowledge and understanding as well as a greater level of generalizability regarding the experiences of identity crises among female veterans. It also allows for analysis of the similarities and differences in identity crises among female veterans across all branches of the military. The present study provides the framework for future research on the identity crises of female veterans, and future research must expand upon the framework to gather more generalizable results and conclusions. This can provide more detailed information to all persons, including universities, and can help formulate suggestions on how universities can help female veterans address these struggles and adjust to college life.

Through completion of this research study, some participants mentioned being both Active duty and Reserve duty over the course of their military career. Since being in the Reserves allows for greater freedoms and easier development of civilian identities, there could be a difference in the experiences and levels of an identity crisis between female veterans who only served Active and female veterans who served both Active and Reserve. Further research should expand upon this topic and explore if there is a difference and why that difference may or may not exist. This research should also include women from all branches of the military to gather a more holistic understanding and discover if there are differences in the possible connections among Active duty, Reserve duty, the different military branches, and the experiences of identity crises among female veterans.



Also, based on this research study, more research should investigate the differences in identity experiences among women who were officers and women who were enlisted while in the military. Although the present study only included one officer compared to the eight enlisted women, there was evidence to suggest that female officers have largely different experiences than female enlisted. These different experiences can be both positive and negative, but the difference alone is enough to encourage further exploration on the topic. Although this is pure speculation based on the research, exploring the topic would generate valuable information and discover if female veterans who were officers and female veterans who were enlisted experience identity crises differently. This could also provide suggestions regarding the types of resources and services universities provide and if different services and resources are necessary for women who were officers and women who were enlisted.

Finally, based on results of this research study, there is a possibility that the reasoning behind these women joining the military may have influenced their experiences with an identity crisis. It appears that for female veterans there may be a positive correlation between joining the military for the educational benefits/G.I. Bill and the level/strength of an identity crisis both in and out of the military. Whereas for the women who joined the military because they wanted to make a career out of it or wanted to join for another reason beyond educational benefits may experience less of an identity crisis. Once again, this is speculation based on information and details from the different interviews. Although, there is a possibility that the reason for joining the military is correlated to the level of an identity crisis, where, for example, a woman who joined because she felt compelled to may experience less of an identity crisis than a woman who joined the military out of necessity for her future. This direction may be correct, but results of research focusing on this topic may suggest otherwise. Regardless, further research should

examine the connections and correlations between the strength of an identity crisis and the reasons why women join the military.

### **Conclusion**

“Be sensitive and try not to lump all the military into one, but look at people as individuals,” urges one female veteran, “everybody’s experience is different, no two people have the same experience in the military... they have a lot of similarities, but it is not all the same.” If nothing else, remember this. Every veteran has his or her own story with his or her own experiences. Everyone who was or is in the military deals with his or her own adversities, and while servicemembers may not experience the same struggles, “it is just a different struggle, everyone has their own version of it,” another participant explained. These are things people need to keep in mind. People must recognize this so that they understand that they cannot treat all veterans in the same way or say certain things because it could negatively influence a veteran. For example, people cannot make insensitive comments about people in the military being “baby killers” because they do not know what happened, some veterans may have watched a child pass away right in front of them. Be sensitive to others around you and get to know your audience before making statements that could come across as insensitive, inappropriate, or uninformed. One participant advised how to do this, “don’t assume,” she stated, “don’t judge. Don’t think you know because you heard it on CNN. Ask. Find out. Then form your opinion.” The first step is to reach out to veterans, have conversations with them, and get to know them as individuals.

Also, overall, the experience of an identity crisis among female servicemembers/veterans, both while in the military and upon reintegration into society and transition into a university setting, is much more complicated than originally believed. While most women in this study reported experiencing some form of an identity crisis throughout their military experience (about

66%) and societal experiences (about 89%), the severity of and factors involved in those crises varied from person to person. These factors appear to transcend beyond just one aspect of their experiences, such as how frequently women interact with other women at their job site in the military. One consistency, however, was that all participants reported experiencing either the same level or a stronger identity crisis during the process of reintegrating into society and transitioning into a university setting. Therefore, the experience of an identity crisis appears to be more common and prevalent outside of the military than in the military, but its components and origins vary by person.

In many situations, there is not much that universities can do to directly address female veterans' identity crises, but universities can help make things easier for these women. Universities can direct focus to helping female veterans better handle their identity crises by providing services and resources to help them reintegrate into civilian life and transition into a university setting. These services can include: checklists to explain what the female veterans need to do before and after arriving on campus; opportunities to interact with other female veterans both on campus and in the community; childcare; and many more. In addition, being that many female veterans worry about how people view them and fear being treated and viewed differently because of their service, universities, including the staff/faculty and students, should express their acceptance of and respect for veterans, recognize women as veterans, and make it apparent that they want female veterans on campus. It is important that universities do what they can to both show these women that they are wanted and make them feel like more than just another number on a page, and they can start by simply creating more resources and services specifically for female veterans.

Finally, the participants want others to know just what women are capable of in the military. Each participant expressed the importance of people knowing that women can do whatever they set their minds to, which includes successfully completing any task in the military. One participant explained that, “women can do the jobs, just like men can.” She also explained that women have been in combat with men for years, so many issues that people have with women in combat are not validated because women have been and will continue to be successful in combat positions (as well as many other roles). Additionally, one participant declared, “there are plenty of women in the military that have done some awesome things, especially in the past couple of years, I mean it is phenomenal what women in the military are doing right now.” The women who participated in this study want people to know that women are strong and capable of being successful. Women have done amazing things in the military, they are doing amazing things in the military, and they will continue to do amazing things in the military. It is time for others to recognize this and understand the importance of respecting female veterans and helping them address their struggles and adversities, including identity crises, throughout their military career and their reintegration into society and transition into a university setting.

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Table 1

*Themes Regarding Military Experiences*

- 
1. Strong drive to succeed in the military
  2. Military contributed to establishing self and identity
  3. Quality of interactions with men and women in the military is subjective
  4. Common to interact with women in living quarters, rare to interact with women in job
  5. Rules and regulations while pregnant
  6. Main struggle when expressing self and gender was regarding hair
  7. Commonality of poor treatment as a result of gender
-



Table 2

*Themes Regarding Civilian and University Life*

- 
1. Struggle to adapt language and behavior to what is socially acceptable
  2. Belief that people in society hold negative views of servicemembers/veterans
  3. Hardship of developing connections with traditional students
  4. Importance of connections with other veterans in a university setting
  5. Importance of the availability of childcare on college campuses
-



## Appendix A-

**SUPPORTING WOMEN VETERANS:  
TRANSITIONING FROM MILITARY LIFE TO UNIVERSITY LIFE  
Subject Informed Consent  
January 27, 2017****Introduction**

You are invited to participate in a research study during the Spring 2017 semester. The study is being conducted by Dr. Pam Cartor and Kristen Zellers- Honors student- and is sponsored by the Department of Psychology at Bellarmine University. The study will take place in the psychology department's interview room on Bellarmine University's campus. This location will help maintain privacy and confidentiality throughout the process. Approximately 8-15 subjects will be invited to participate. Your participation in this study will be completed in one day and will last for approximately 45-50 consecutive minutes.

**Purpose and Background Information**

Veterans returning home from service face many difficulties in their return, their reintegration into civilian life, and their transition to university life. Women veterans face similar struggles to male veterans, but also face different struggles because their gender. Research suggests that one of the difficulties for women veterans in their transition to university life is experiencing an identity crisis and struggling to discover who they are- something that is prominent while in the military and upon return home. The purpose of this research study is to examine the adversities women veterans face in their transition from military life into university life, specifically focusing on the identity crisis women veterans may face, which factors within military service seem to impact the level of identity crisis the most, and how much of an impact this struggle to find an identity has on their transition to the university. This study hopes to discover suggestions about what college campuses can do to help women veterans with this identity crisis and with the transition to university in general.

**Procedures**

In this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview with Kristen Zellers. You will only be asked to participate in one interview that will last between 45 and 50 minutes. This interview will be recorded using a tape recorder so the researcher may reference what participants shared and maintain the accuracy of statements. This interview will ask you about your military experiences, your experiences upon return to civilian life and transition to life at a private university after your military service, the adversities you faced throughout this process, as well as what resources on campus you find beneficial in helping you succeed in college among other things. If there is anything that you do not wish to share, you feel uncomfortable sharing, or may render you prosecutable under law, you may decline to answer or choose not to answer. This interview will help the researcher gain an understanding of your unique experience and compare it to the experience of other veterans. This will also help the researcher determine what different resources would be beneficial for women veterans to have access to on a university campus.

**Potential Risks**

There are short-term mild psychological risks associated with participating in this research study and interview. The interview will include questions about your military experience, which may result in the resurfacing of past stressful or distressing memories and situations. The questions in the interview are structured to not intentionally evoke uncomfortable emotions and memories, but it is possible that this may occur. The distress you may feel during this interview may be more than you experience daily, but it will be short-term and should subside upon completion of the interview or soon thereafter. The results of this research will also be presented to Bellarmine University students, faculty, and administrators at the Honors Thesis Presentations and the Undergraduate Research Event in April. This suggests that there is some risk that these individuals may see some sensitive information or information that may reveal your identity. The researcher will take all possible steps to eliminate any identifying information (e.g. specific dates, places, etc.), but cannot guarantee complete confidentiality. There are no other reasonably foreseeable risks of this research study.

**Benefits**

The possible benefits of this study include a deeper understanding of the life and experiences of women veterans for the researcher. This understanding will aid the researcher in gaining knowledge and understanding that will be relevant to a future career that helps veterans upon their return from service. This research study also includes benefits for the participants. These possible benefits include allowing the participants to share their stories, share what they believe would be helpful resources to have available on campus, and offer opinions on the resources and programs already in place on campus. This may cause change on this specific campus in the form of providing additional resources for women- and possibly male-veterans that may help aid in their transition to university life, cope with or effectively deal with their military experiences, and address the struggles that accompany those experiences. The benefits may also include changes in the resources available on the campuses of other universities. These would also help women veterans in their transition to university life or help veterans in dealing with the consequences of military service. The data collected in this study may or may not benefit you directly. However, the information learned from this research may be helpful to other women veterans- or veterans in general- in the future either on this campus or on other campuses.

**Compensation**

Some money received through a grant from the Office of Sponsored Projects at Bellarmine University will be used to provide the participants with compensation. Each participant will be offered a \$25 gift card to Target as compensation for their participation in the research study. Each individual may either accept or deny the gift card. Should any individual choose to no longer participate in the research study, he or she will still be offered and given the previously stated compensation- provided the participant would still like the compensation.

**Confidentiality**

Although absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, confidentiality will be protected to the extent permitted by law. The tape recordings of the interviews will be stored in a file on a password-protected computer for the duration of the study, and no one will have access to the recordings other than the researchers- Dr. Pam Cartor and Kristen Zellers. Upon completion of the research study, the tape recordings will be destroyed to maintain and protect confidentiality. Participant's names and any other identifying information will not be directly connected to the data from the research study. Though there may be some identifying information that is included, all steps will be taken to assure that confidentiality is maintained. The researcher will omit any specifics about dates, places, etc. to both protect the participants and their identities. The study sponsor- Bellarmine University- or the Institutional Review Board may inspect your research records. Should this research study be released or published, your identity as a subject in this research will not be revealed.

### **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw your consent at any time without penalty or losing benefit to which you are otherwise entitled.

### **Your Rights as a Research Subject and Contact Persons**

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may call the Institutional Review Board Office at 502.272.8032. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions, in confidence, with a member of the Board. This is an independent committee composed of members of the University community and lay members of the community not connected with this institution. The Board has reviewed this study.

You acknowledge that all your present questions have been answered in language you can understand. If you have any questions about the study, please contact Dr. Pam Cartor, (502) 272-8195, or Kristen Zellers, kzellers01@bellarmine.edu.

### **Consent**

You have discussed the above information and hereby consent to voluntarily participate in this study. You have been given a signed copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject or Legal Representative

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date Signed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date Signed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Explaining Consent if other than Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date Signed

## Appendix B-

## Interview Questions

## Military Experiences of a Woman Veteran

**Basic Questions**

1. How long have you been a student at your university?
2. What program are you in? What is your major?
3. How old are you?
4. In which branch did you serve?
5. When did you enlist? How long did you serve? What years were you in service?
6. How many times did you deploy?
  - a. Did you deploy to combat or non-combat zones?
7. What was your rank while you were in the military?
8. What was your job in the military?

**Military Experience**

9. To what extent did you get the opportunity to interact with other women in your living quarters? What was the nature of those interactions? How were those interactions?
10. To what extent did you get the opportunity to interact with other women at your job site? What was the nature of those interactions? How were those interactions?
11. On a scale of 1-5 with 1 being weak and 5 being very strong, how much of a connection did you feel with the men in the military? What about the other women?
12. What would you say was the most difficult part about being in the military?
13. Did you experience difficulty in determining how to present yourself to others in the military in terms of the extent to which you expressed your gender (i.e. expressing self as butch or femme)?
  - a. On a scale of 1-5 with 1 being butch and 5 being femme, how do you think you portrayed yourself while in the military?
    - i. Did this ever fluctuate? When and why?
    - ii. What factors were hardest to decide on in regards to this (e.g. hair length, how you communicated with others in the military, make up, etc.)?

14. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being all the time, to what extent do you feel you experienced an identity crisis while in the military? In what way? What did that involve for you?
15. Were there any factors that you felt caused you to be treated poorly or differently in the military (e.g. being pregnant)? Tell me about it.

### **Reintegration to Civilian Life and Transition to College**

16. What would you say was the hardest part about reintegrating into society? Transitioning to college?
17. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being all the time, to what extent do you feel you experienced an identity crisis while reintegrating into civilian life and transitioning into the university? In what way? What did that involve for you?
  - a. Tell me about how this may have impacted your ability to reintegrate into civilian life and transition into university life.
18. On a scale of 1-10 with 1 being not at all and 10 being immensely, to what extent did you feel any pressures from society, friends, family, etc. to act a certain way when you came back? If so, what were they?
  - a. Did these have an influence on your ability to reintegrate into society and/or transition to the university?

### **College- Specific and Resource-Oriented Questions**

19. Why did you choose to go to your current university for college?
20. Is it difficult for you to openly identify as a veteran on campus? Why or why not?
21. Host University Specific-- Were you invited to participate in the PAVE program? Did you choose to participate? Why or why not?
22. What services on campus have you found to be useful?
23. What services would you like to have on campus as a woman veteran (e.g. childcare, psychologist/therapist, women veterans group meetings, etc.)?
  - a. Are there any details of those that you think are necessary?
24. If you were going to access the counseling center, would it make a difference if the therapist was a male or female? What about if the therapist had experience with veterans before or not?

### **Final Questions**

25. Is there anything else about the military experience as a woman that you think would be valuable for people to know?