

## Student Veterans in Transition: Re-enrolling after War Zone Deployments

### *Introduction*

Since the passage of the first Morrill Act in 1862 with its stipulation of military tactics instruction (Neiberg, 2000), federal government provisions have directed or enabled colleges and universities to prepare and educate armed forces personnel and, more recently, to educate veterans. Currently, numerous campuses offer distance education and online instruction for military personnel (Blumentyck, 2006) and house Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) programs that provide military training to students. Most recently, students affiliated with National Guard or Reserve units (collectively termed "the Guard and Reserves") have been activated and deployed for service in Iraq and Afghanistan, among other locations. Student servicemembers often face problems associated with mid-semester academic withdrawals and subsequent re-enrollments (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2007). Additionally, Guard and Reserve units are subject to multiple activations and deployments, so individuals re-entering college may simultaneously be students, veterans, and armed forces members. Many aspects of these complex transition experiences are not well understood by faculty, staff, and administrators (DiRamio et al.).

The authors acknowledge and appreciate the contributions of Dr. Susan R. Jones, Dr. Lori Patton, Dr. Randy Plunkett, Dr. Leah Ewing Ross, Dr. John Schuh, and the two anonymous reviewers to the development and refinement of this manuscript.

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*The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (July/August 2010)  
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Prior research on student veterans focused less on individual-level transitions and more on topics such as the impact of federal assistance programs for veterans (Angrist, 1993; Bound & Turner, 2002; Lewis, 1989), and veterans' academic achievements (Joanning, 1975; La Barre, 1985; Love & Hutchison, 1946). In this study the transition experiences of college students who returned from war zone deployments and subsequently re-enrolled in college were explored. One recent study focused on student veterans' transitional experiences (DiRamio et al., 2008), but the current study differs from and complements the prior study by emphasizing person-level transitions of students who had completed some college prior to deployment. This study is warranted due to the paucity of literature on student veterans and their transitions (DiRamio et al.). The timeliness and importance of this study are grounded in increased U.S. military reliance on Guard and Reserve troops and in the growing numbers of student members within these units (Lederman, 2008). The findings from this study advance research on student veterans' transitions and assist educators and researchers to better understand and serve this growing population of students.

#### *Related Literature and Theoretical Framework*

U.S. colleges and universities have served as sites for training citizen-soldiers since the early 1800s, consistent with long held wariness in the U.S. of a powerful standing military affiliated predominantly, if not exclusively, with the U.S. service academies (Neiberg, 2000; Smith, 1985). The 1862 Morrill Act formally incorporated military training into land grant universities, and ROTC was created in 1916 in part to avoid expanding cadet enrollments at service academies (Neiberg). Mandatory ROTC was abandoned by most colleges and universities by the 1960s, but ROTC programs have collectively produced the largest share (36%) of U.S. military officers as of 2004 (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, Personnel & Readiness, 2004).

Colleges and universities also educate returning veterans. Large-scale funding for veterans' pursuit of higher education began with the initial GI Bill (Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944). GI Bill educational benefits funded training and postsecondary education for all qualified veterans, and 2 million of the 14 million eligible World War II veterans had used their GI Bill benefits for postsecondary education by 1950 (Thelin, 2004). The GI Bill led to accelerated expansions of colleges and universities, broadened higher education access (Shaw, 1947), and ushered in unprecedented student diversity (McDonagh, 1947). Reports and studies from this era proposed institutional changes to meet veterans'

needs such as revised curricula, course design, or instructional delivery (Allen, 1946; Anderson, 1947; Carpenter & Glick, 1946; Howard, 1945; Kraines, 1945; Washton, 1945); grants of credit for prior coursework (e.g., completed during service), independent study, or military experience (Hillway, 1945; Justice, 1946; Klein, 1945; McDonagh; Ritchie, 1945); and enrollment pending official benefit approvals (Hillway).

Some reports from that time offered profiles of returning veterans that documented, for example, veterans' equivalent or higher academic achievements (Carpenter & Glick, 1946; Justice, 1946; Love & Hutchison, 1946) with respect to pre-war performance or as compared to non-veterans' achievements (Love & Hutchison), and student veterans' financial needs (Carpenter & Glick; Justice). In light of these findings, researchers also described appropriate services for veterans, such as counseling and advising (Flynt, 1945; Hillway, 1945; Kraines, 1945; Ritchie, 1945; Washton, 1945), grace periods or refresher courses to foster re-adjustment (Justice; McDonagh, 1947), job placement services (Howard, 1945; McDonagh), and family housing assistance (Hillway; Justice).

After GI Bill educational stipends were raised through the Readjustment Assistance Act of 1972, slightly more than half of all Vietnam veterans enrolled in college or graduate school and realized higher career earnings, on average, than non-student veterans (Angrist, 1993). Studies of Vietnam veterans' transitional experiences often focused on academic achievements (e.g., Joanning, 1975; La Barre, 1985; Teachman, 2005) and emotional and physical factors complicating their transitions to higher education. Additionally, a number of campuses were sites of highly visible protests and demonstrations during the Vietnam War period, and anti-war sentiment was high (Figley & Leventman, 1980; Heineman, 1993). Enrolled veterans often downplayed their veteran status in order to avoid rejection or stigmatization by their civilian student peers (Figley & Leventman). To complicate the situation, economic difficulties faced by colleges and universities during that era meant that few institutions developed outreach or support programs for returning veterans (Figley & Leventman).

The 1991 Persian Gulf War period introduced large-scale activations and deployments of Guard and Reserve personnel for support and combat missions. Reports documented the enrollment discontinuity patterns—higher education to military deployment to higher education—that characterize contemporary student veterans. Problems associated with mid-term withdrawals from college (Collison, 1991; Dodge, 1991) prompted federal action to extend student loan deferments and preserve Pell Grant eligibility of deployed students (DeLoughry, 1991), provisions that also cover current students (Woo, 2006).

Military forces serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom (principally Afghanistan), or the more general “War on Terror” are comprised of increasingly large shares of activated Guard and Reserve units, including their college student members. For example, between September 11th, 2001 and April 28th, 2009 a total of 710,418 National Guard and Military Reserve personnel had been activated in Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom with 133,623 of those servicemembers currently activated as of April 28th, 2009 (Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs, 2009). Contemporary scholarship, stipend, and educational benefit packages have made Guard and Reserve enlistment attractive to students (e.g., Bachman, Freedman-Doan, & O’Malley, 2001; DiRamio et al., 2008; Manning, 2005; Wasley, 2007). For example, through the Simultaneous Membership Program (SMP), Guard or Reserve members can join ROTC and earn stipends and tuition assistance from multiple sources (Wiedemann, 2005). A recent federal study found that 80% of all colleges and universities have enrolled student veterans who withdrew for military service; about two-thirds have implemented policies regarding tuition refunds or academic transition provisions (Woo, 2006).

In combination, postsecondary student financial aid policies, U.S. foreign policy, military recruitment packages and benefits, and military personnel policies and deployment practices have given rise to the most recent generation of student veterans. Colleges and universities enroll student servicemembers who concurrently undertake full-time study and part-time military service and who could be activated multiple times during their college enrollments. However, very little is known about student veterans’ post-deployment transitional experiences.

The current study draws on the adult transition work of Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006), as does another study on student veterans (DiRamio et al., 2008). As outlined in the following section, we gravitated towards theoretical aspects of the transition model that emphasized individual changes as well as emerging and contested senses of self. Consequently, we also incorporated the multiple dimensions of identity model (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000) into our theoretical and analytical framework. The six respondents in the current study were enrolled at one research extensive university, and all but one returned to the institution following pre-deployment college enrollment (the sixth entered as a transfer student), and all six were interviewed on multiple occasions. In light of the potentially sensitive nature of the topics, these provisions allowed extended time for building rapport and trust with respondents and permitted in-depth focuses on multiple aspects of respondents’ transitional experiences and the meanings they made of those experiences.

*Adult Transitions and Identity*

Goodman et al. (2006) defined a transition as “any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 33). They identified work, individual, and relationship transitions, yet acknowledged significant overlap among the three. Students’ post-deployment transitions may encompass all three because of the combinations of roles, functions, and environments that are involved. According to Goodman and colleagues, transitions can be anticipated, unanticipated, or nonevents. Returning student veterans may experience all three alone or in combination. For example, activated Guard and Reserve personnel may anticipate scheduled returns that do not occur (e.g., nonevent) and scheduled returns that do occur (e.g., anticipated), but they cannot predict the timing or nature of their orders (e.g., unanticipated). Additionally, colleges’ and universities’ fixed enrollment periods do not predictably coincide with the military’s discharging of veterans at any given time. Student veterans must attend to asynchronous expectations and demands of both settings as well as their own personal transitions.

Additionally, we incorporated the 4 S System of factors (situation, self, support, strategies; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006) into our theoretical framework. Transitions can have both positive and negative effects for the same person, and the four factors can influence the transition outcomes (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Of the four factors, we anticipated that situation (e.g., academic and military environments and expectations) and support (e.g., friends, family, fellow veterans or servicemembers, institutional policies and services [or their absence]) would be particularly salient to respondents’ transitions back into college.

Personal and environmental contexts factor prominently into transitional experiences and often prompt identity re-examinations among individuals undergoing or completing transitions (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Abes, Jones and McEwen’s (2007) model of multiple dimensions of identity, a reconceptualization of Jones and McEwen’s (2000) model, emphasizes individuals’ meaning-making and identity self-perceptions in light of multiple, concurrent social identities such as, in this case, “student” and “veteran.” Social identities are “roles or membership categories that a person claims as representative” (Deaux, 1993, p. 6). Additionally, social identities wax or wane in prominence depending in part on environmental and contextual influences, and the complexities of individuals’ meaning-making “filters” mediate the relative salience and impact of a variety of external influences such as peers, norms, stereotypes, and sociopolitical conditions (Abes, Jones, & McEwen). Returning student veterans have acquired

new social identities of “servicemember” and “veteran” by virtue of their transitions into and out of their deployments, and we were interested in exploring the identity constructions and reconstructions made by these individuals.

The purpose of this study was to explore the transition experiences of college student veterans who had returned from war zone deployments and subsequently re-enrolled in college. In order to understand these students’ experiences from their unique perspectives we chose a qualitative, phenomenological research design using Schlossberg’s theory of transition as our guiding theoretical framework. The findings of this study can be used to inform faculty, staff, administrators, and the higher education community in general about the transition experiences of veterans returning to college.

### *Methodology, Methods, and Design*

We adopted an interpretive theoretical perspective grounded in constructionist epistemology for this study. Social constructionism stipulates that knowledge is constructed by processes of interpreting interactions with and in the world, while also incorporating cultural influences (Crotty, 1998). Phenomenology served as the guiding methodological framework because of the aim to understand respondents’ experiences from their perspectives (Crotty; Merriam, 2002) and the meanings they made of their transition experiences. Interviewing was the principal data collection method since it involves interacting with respondents and soliciting descriptions of relevant experiences and ascribed meanings. Archived campus newspapers from 2001–2008 were also reviewed for relevant news reports, opinion and editorial pieces, and letters to the editor. Bob (one of the study’s respondents) authored some of the opinion pieces and submitted letters during his deployment, and three feature stories profiled individual students who had returned to the university following war zone deployments. This document analysis complemented interview data and provided degrees of insight into the campus environment, sociopolitical positions and arguments, and perspectives on contemporary U.S. military engagements.

### *Design and Data Collection*

A series of semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2006) was held with each respondent. The interview guide was developed and refined through expert reviews and a pilot study of one respondent (Rumann, 2006). The first meeting focused on building rapport and in some cases, initial data collection; the second interview focused on the interview

guide topics; follow-up interviews or contacts involved clarifications, additional questions, and requests for supplementary information. All interviews were conducted in person and were audio taped with respondents' consent. Each interview contact lasted an average of 90 minutes; all interview tapes were transcribed verbatim for analyses. A limited number of observations and participant observations supplemented the data and fostered continued rapport and trust-building (see *Respondents* sub-section below).

#### *Research Site and Respondent Selection*

All respondents were enrolled at one large research extensive, land-grant university in the Midwest enrolling approximately 25,000 students in a range of academic majors. Relatively large Army and Navy ROTC programs are affiliated with the university, and a total of 83 National Guard units (not counting field maintenance facilities) are located within a 100-mile range of campus. Since Fall 2002, 176 students at the university have withdrawn upon activation and have subsequently re-enrolled.

Potential respondents were identified through purposeful and referral sampling (Esterberg, 2002). Selection criteria included respondents' withdrawals from college upon activation, re-enrollment in college upon their return, and full-time, undergraduate student status at the time of data collection. Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, initial contacts with prospective respondents began via e-mail. The first respondent had self-identified as a returning veteran in campus newspaper columns he authored. He and subsequent respondents referred additional prospective interviewees. Seven individuals who met the selection criteria were invited to participate; six accepted the invitation, and the seventh was interested but declined due to limited availability. In the initial meeting with each prospective respondent, the purpose and design of the study was explained and informed consent was obtained. At the request of four respondents, this initial meeting segued into data collection.

#### *Data Analysis and Trustworthiness*

Data were open coded through a first review to identify initial topics or subjects (Esterberg, 2002). Potential categories were generated through use of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and thematic findings were created following additional inductive analyses of categories and coded data. Each researcher independently reviewed transcripts and documents and identified potential categories and themes; thematic findings were refined through iterative

discussions. Credibility of findings was maximized through prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) using a minimum of two interviews and two follow-up contacts with each respondent over the course of nine months. Each respondent was asked to review his or her interview transcripts for accuracy and was invited to add clarifications or additional information. The reviews resulted in few changes, most of which were corrections of military terminology or clarifications of activities and duties. Member checking (Lincoln & Guba) was conducted through distribution of a draft of initial findings with supporting evidence to all respondents via email with a request for their comments. Five responded to this invitation, and all endorsed the thematic findings. All field notes, interview transcripts, documents, researcher memos, and correspondence were organized and preserved, constructing an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba) that also assisted researchers with reviewing evidence and findings. Participant observations and document analyses provided a modest basis for triangulation, but triangulation was enabled principally by multiple respondents and multiple analysts. Two outside experts reviewed the findings and data analyses.

### *Respondents*

Six student veterans, five men (pseudonyms of Bob, Jim, Joe, Richard, and Steve) and one woman (pseudonym of Karen) were the respondents for this study. See Table 1 for summary information about respondents. Five respondents re-enrolled at the university as full-time students following their return from duty; Karen transferred to the university from a small private college. Bob, Jim, Richard, and Steve had been deployed to Iraq; Joe to Afghanistan; and Karen to Kuwait. At the time of data collection, each respondent had served one deployment, lasting from 11–16 months (including training periods). At the time of the first meeting, respondents had been re-enrolled between seven weeks (Jim, Richard) and five semesters (Karen).

As Guard or Reserve members, Jim, Joe, and Richard were subject to additional activations. For Bob, Karen, and Steve, who had each joined ROTC after their returns, war zone deployments were possible upon their graduation and commissioning (Bob has since separated from ROTC). Bob, Joe, Richard, and Steve were Greek organization members. All respondents lived in off-campus houses or apartments; none of the respondents lived alone or with parents. Joe's, Karen's, Richard's, and Steve's immediate or extended families had traditions of military service. None of the respondents characterized their families as wealthy, and all six noted that financial support for college had been a factor in their decisions to enlist.



TABLE 1  
Respondents

Pseudonym	Academic Major	Age & Class Standing	Affiliation(s)	Military Occupational Specialty (MOS)	Deployment	Re-enrollment (at time of Data Collection)
Bob	Political Science	21, Junior	Army Reserve, ROTC (initially)	Logistics Supply Specialist	Total: 15 months. Iraq: 11 months.	3 semesters
Karen	Psychology	24, Senior	Army National Guard, ROTC	Administrative Specialist, Force Protection	Total: 13 months. Kuwait: 11 months. (original plan—Iraq)	5 semesters
Joe	Political Science	24, Senior	Army National Guard	Supply Specialist (Infantry during deployment)	Total: 15 months. Afghanistan: 11 months.	2 semesters
Richard	Engineering, concurrent MBA enrollment	24, Senior	Marine Corps Reserve	Field Artillery Cannoneer (Security during deployment)	Total: 11 months. Iraq: 8 months.	1 semester
Steve	Industrial Technology	23, Senior	Army Reserve, ROTC	Transportation, Heavy Equipment	Total: 16 months. Iraq: 13 months.	4 semesters
Jim	Computer Science	21, Sophomore	Marine Corps Reserve	Field Artillery (Prison Security during deployment)	Total: 11 months. Iraq: 7 months.	1 semester

During the course of the study, the first author observed Bob deliver an oral presentation on Iraq in one of Bob's courses, observed a morning ROTC physical training session, attended a university-wide recognition program for veterans, and participated in an ROTC-sponsored 5K run.

### *Findings*

While this study focused on veterans' transitions and re-enrollment in higher education, most respondents tended not to separate "civilian" transitions from "student" transitions. Although we highlight findings with the most relevance to higher education, the findings reflect the interwoven nature of the respondents' transitions. Virtually all respondents reported practical transition concerns, most of which related to university infrastructure or policies that complicated re-enrollment. According to respondents, minor annoyances (e.g., closed e-mail accounts, temporary loss of technology and facilities access) could be readily addressed; more serious problems (e.g., lapses in student insurance, cancellation of financial aid, or being off-sequence for infrequently offered courses) required more time and, in some cases, intervention by others on their behalf. Respondents also were pleasantly surprised by some aspects of their transitions. For example, Jim was able to break his lease with no penalty, and Richard's housing was held for his return. Richard commented positively about university staff: "The people I talked to, I felt took concern with my situation. . . . It wasn't something they were unfamiliar with. At the same time they didn't treat me like, 'Oh no, another one of these.' They understood what they had to do." Four themes of role incongruities; maturity; relationships; and identity redefinitions characterized personal aspects of respondents' transitions.

#### *Role Incongruities*

Respondents described three principal incongruities: military and academic life, the incompatibilities of lingering stress and anxiety with returning to college, and enacting aspects of the "student" role during deployment and aspects of the "military" role during college.

All respondents described routine, repetitive aspects of military life, and Bob, Joe, Richard, and a veteran profiled in the campus newspaper each used the movie *Groundhog Day* (i.e., reliving the same day) to characterize most days of their deployments. Another student veteran profiled in a newspaper article proclaimed, "It was boring." Respondents also compared the "routines" of military and academic life. According to Richard,

Coming back to the university there is kind of some repetition that is similar, but I think you don't focus on the fact it is similar so much. . . . I think the mental stimulus of being in a university and the fact that new material is coming up, you might be going to the same place physically but there is that added layer of—you're not going to a physical location that is the same every time and just kind of waiting for something to happen which is often the case with these military tasks. Instead you are going and you're actively engaged. The focus isn't so much on your physical location and saying, "Oh, no, I'm in the same room again." The focus is on "I am ready to handle this new material."

Jim contrasted requirements within the two environments:

[During deployment], the tasks are set up. You know what to do. Within the first month or so everything becomes routine. It is the same every day. It gets really old, but you know exactly what is going to happen. . . . In the Marine Corps someone will tell you outright what they want. There is no guesswork involved. . . . For college, there is no clear "Do this, go home, you're done."

Most respondents had experienced, as returning students, vestiges of the high stress levels and tensions of deployment. Some respondents traced their stress to combat and/or anticipation of combat, such as an IED (improvised explosive device) attack on Steve's convoy or Richard and Joe facing hostile fire, rocket attack, or ambush. However, respondents also associated lingering stress with poor leadership or low morale, such as sequential appointments of ineffective leaders for Steve's units, or the categorical rejections of Karen's and other women's requests to accompany their units into Iraq: "I'm a soldier, you know? Yeah, I'm a girl but I'm here with the rest of you guys for a frickin' year. The least you could do is treat me like everybody else and let me go to Iraq on missions."

Joe subsequently found that he was uncomfortable in large, loud football crowds; was uneasy with people walking closely behind him; and tended to sit with his back to the wall in classes with no familiar faces: "It's not that I don't trust people, it's that I don't want to have to, you know?" Steve identified the emotions available during deployment as "rage, anger, and hate" and added that, when he had been startled, "The very first thing that came into my mind that first year [back] was, 'Where's my cover?' I'm always looking for what I'm going to dive behind when someone starts shooting." Many respondents had short tempers upon their return; it took Karen three months to overcome this:

They call it combat stress disorder, but I think everybody gets it a little bit. Like for some you get used to the adrenal[in] rush because you're always in the action or you're sometimes in the action. So you get used to having the rush of being scared. But for a lot of us, it was, like, we got the rush of there's always something pissing you off.

Later, Karen said that some of her psychology coursework and discussions with ROTC staff members helped her understand and acknowledge her own delayed stress reactions.

Some respondents described creative ways to be students during their deployments and continue learning. As one extreme example, Richard ordered books electronically, completed six credit hours of coursework via distance education, researched graduate programs online, and used the base carpentry shop to make a desk and chair for his quarters—“probably the best desk to be built out of 2x4s and plywood. . . . It was all to keep things moving along. I didn’t want a lapse, especially knowing that school was coming back.” Jim learned sufficient Arabic to communicate with base shopkeepers, Karen initiated her on-line transfer to the university and researched military careers, and Steve—calling himself a history nerd—described with awe visiting sites of Biblical and historical significance in Iraq.

For many respondents, e-mail correspondence with college friends highlighted growing differences in perspectives and priorities. Karen told of “the friends who send you a three page e-mail because their life is so horrible because ‘this’ happened, when ‘this’ is no big deal when you’re in Kuwait, Iraq, or wherever. It just isn’t as important. . . . There are such bigger issues going on in the world.” Virtually all respondents discussed maturity and perspective as a deployment outcome with direct relevance to their college re-enrollment.

### *Maturity*

Joe disparaged students’ preoccupations with celebrity news, and Jim said, “I don’t think college has changed all that much, just me. . . . I think more about what I want to do for the rest of my life.” Respondents described themselves as more mature, with clearer perspectives and increased goal commitment. Richard said, “You are kind of put into a more real but less comfortable context that most college students aren’t familiar with. . . . Going over there and seeing someone from the base get killed every couple of weeks, it changes your understanding of reality.” All six respondents said that their deployment experiences had motivated them to complete their degrees. For example, Steve, who characterized college now as “freakin’ easy,” had “seen what it would be like to be an enlisted man in the Army stuck in a crappy situation. That’s what my job could be without an education for the rest of my life. . . . It was way easier to apply myself and focus.” Bob concluded that being a combat veteran “helps me focus and have a drive when I need to have that drive. I think I can do better in school now than I did before.”

As they described their initial semesters after they returned to college, virtually all respondents reported clearer perspectives on what should matter. A number of respondents noted that they had taken college less seriously prior to their deployments, such as Jim who re-enrolled on academic probation, and Karen, who was able to start over academically since her course credits but not her grades had transferred. Respondents tended to credit directly or indirectly their deployment experiences for their clearer perspectives. For example, Richard concluded that deployment had provided a “big gap” that gave him “an opportunity to be divergent and increase my focus on other things and to say, ‘No, I don’t need to worry about that. I’ve got my own stuff to worry about.’ . . . I can depend on myself and maybe not rely so much on what my peers are doing.” Jim said that, at times, thinking about his deployment experiences “helps me get out of bed in the morning. I’ll be like, ‘This sucks, but Iraq was worse. Shut up and get out of bed.’” Karen and Steve credited ROTC with encouraging their academic foci. In a newspaper profile, one student veteran reported that she is now more serious about her studies and appreciates “everything we have over here,” after she saw the living conditions of some local Iraqis, and after she slept on cots under military vehicles while she and her unit established a new camp.

Although some respondents reported initial concerns with their own short tempers or anxieties upon their return from active duty, they also expressed confidence in their priorities and abilities to make prudent choices. Although a few examples were trivial, most were substantive. Jim said that people should “just pull the lettuce off” instead of “bitching about getting lettuce on a burger,” but he also reported being more likely now to walk away than engage in fights or escalating arguments. Joe remarked, “little things tick me off a little bit easier, but I don’t get riled up as easily as I used to.” In light of his deployment experiences, Steve was now less concerned about the rigors of his upcoming (state-side) infantry training.

Most respondents emphasized the importance of keeping busy and staying active as ways to reinforce their motivations and goal-orientations. Some respondents affiliated with programs that required them to structure their time and progress toward goals. For example, the ROTC program provided some daily structure for Bob, Karen, and Steve; Richard began a master’s degree program concurrent with his undergraduate program. Karen endorsed structure and self-discipline as a means to her own ends of a healthy life and a desired military career, noting that when she first joined the Army National Guard, “I just wanted the college money and I was out. And now it’s like my lifestyle,

and I crave that structure.” Respondents also emphasized choosing or initiating involvements aligned with their goals. For example, in part because Joe had decided against joining ROTC, but was interested in politics and law, he joined the Mock Trial Association chapter. He became active again in his fraternity and began assembling pictures and video footage from Afghanistan into movies. Joe attempted to start a veterans club but was unable to secure an advisor, a requirement to charter a student organization.

In terms of perspective, some respondents described contributions that their deployment experiences enabled them to make. Karen felt that her accomplishments and maturity positioned her well to succeed in ROTC and become a leader: “Cadets that are enlisted prior to coming into ROTC, they know all the stuff that they teach the sophomore and freshman years of college during the ROTC program.” She continued, “I would say that 80% of the great officers that are produced are SMP [Simultaneous Membership Program] cadets. Like, if you’re enlisted first, you know what it’s like to be the little man, you know, the low guy on the totem pole. . . . I’m not going to treat anyone like crap because I’ve been treated like crap, you know?” Steve noted that he can help others put their frustrations into perspective: “I have brought some people back down to earth when they are bitching about this or the other thing. I tell them, ‘It will only get worse from here, put on your man pants and deal with it.’ That is probably how I can help people the most from my experience.”

Respondents’ clarity of perspectives and goal commitments were also evident as they reported feeling left behind with respect to progress in college and life, especially as friends graduated or moved closer to graduation. Jim’s perspective was representative:

All of my friends are settling down with jobs and women they’ve known for awhile. Everyone else’s lives are falling together, and it kind of looks like yours is falling apart. I’ve got a lot of work to do. That really bugs me. It makes me feel unsuccessful in spite of [my veteran status]. I’m a couple of years back. I want this stuff to be taken care of. . . . The measure of success at college is really graduating, getting a job. . . . When you look at what I’ve done [military service], it’s a good thing, but on that scale [i.e., academic progress] it’s useless.

Respondents had experienced interruptions of two to four consecutive semesters between departure and re-enrollment, and time to degree was extended even more for respondents who had to wait to take infrequently offered courses or had been deployed between sequenced courses (e.g., repeated a prerequisite math course rather than immediately enrolling in the next higher course). These setbacks appeared to be at least partially

offset by combinations of increased maturity, confidence, and motivation to complete their degrees. For example, a newspaper profile reported one student veteran's approach to making up for lost academic time: "You've got to put your head down, and eventually you'll get through." Respondents also reported approaching interpersonal relationships with greater maturity and reflection as they considered reasonable expectations of other people, especially civilians.

### *Relationships*

Many friendships drifted away during respondents' deployments; after deployment, college friends were frequently several semesters ahead of respondents academically. Making friends at college and within military and veterans' communities, and determining when and to whom to disclose their veteran statuses or talk about their experiences, were challenges for some. However, not all pre-deployment friendships cooled or ended. Steve and Joe each had a close friend from childhood in whom they could readily confide. For example, Steve described his friend as "anti-military, really democratic and liberal" but noted that they could talk about anything. Some friends inadvertently helped respondents make new friends. Jim's friends forwarded his emails from Iraq to others, and Steve's friends showed others how to access Steve's online journal he maintained while deployed. Consequently, Jim and Steve both had sets of new acquaintances and potential friends upon their returns. Steve said, "It was easier, because they already had a clue as to what I went through." Although some of Jim's friends had drifted away during his absence, "Friends were added while I was gone. It was really out there to meet people who had heard stories about me."

Most respondents reported challenges with resuming relationships and initiating new friendships. Karen felt more mature and less like the younger students in most of her classes; Bob felt the same about some fraternity brothers his age: "These [guys] were just a couple of college kids and I'm an experienced combat veteran at this point. . . . I still feel justified in saying that I've got a head start on them emotionally, maturity-wise, life experience-wise." Steve described "having to make personal relationships work again" as stressful. Karen noted it had taken comparatively little effort to socialize with military colleagues in close working and living proximity: "I never had to say, 'Hey, so-and-so, let's meet at this time to do this.' Now you have to start readjusting to everyone else's schedule." Richard realized that civilians were not as interdependent as deployed servicemembers: "Once you come back here, you have to remember people are independent and are not chained to you."

You've got to be respectful to them. . . . You just need to remember to be nice to people and think about [things] from their point of view."

After his deployment and immersion in military culture, Bob concluded that it was hard to remember what being a "straight up civilian" was like, and Joe described fundamental differences in approaches to getting acquainted: "The civilians have their drinking stories, and 'This chick I met last night' stories, and the veteran's got the 'No shit, there I was' stories. It's kind of like we're a different breed of person after we get back."

In Joe's experience, veterans had not been particularly sought out or welcomed to join campus groups, and Bob emphasized the need to meet veterans halfway: "The biggest thing was probably the fact that people didn't understand what we had been through, and didn't understand how to approach us. . . . It takes work on both sides to get everything figured out." Richard described the rewards of establishing new friends, and in this case, roommates: "It has built confidence in my ability to just make things work. You don't have to rely on the same group of friends you always had through college."

For the most part, respondents only selectively discussed their military experiences. Bob recalled, "When I first got back I really didn't want to talk about it at all." It took Joe about four months to talk with people about his experiences, and then only selectively: "You don't want to bare your soul to anybody you're pretty sure couldn't relate." In part for this reason, most respondents relished the company of other veterans and actively sought out veterans. Richard was grateful that his unit stayed together for several weeks after their return to complete their active duty period. Especially during her first months back, Karen felt that fellow members of her unit were the ones who cared about her and knew her stories. Although Joe described hostility toward some members of his unit that had begun during deployment and continued to the present, he also found friendships with other veterans: "It was kind of hard to find a niche that wasn't military. A good chunk of my friends that I hung out with were military; I mean even still today."

Veterans served as sources of validation for respondents such as Steve who had ambivalent feelings about "only" being a truck driver instead of infantry, and Karen, who once told a group of veterans of previous wars that she had "just" served in Kuwait: "They were like, 'Don't say *just*. You went through the same things everyone else did.' . . . Their attitude in general helps you, you know, realize what you've done for, I suppose the nation." A veteran profiled in the newspaper remarked about his unit, "You become attached to them—they truly are your family—and [after returning] you feel uprooted." Respondents also said they could laugh



most readily with fellow servicemembers in their units. Even after Karen explained a situation with reference to her deployment experience, her civilian friends did not understand why something had made her laugh out loud. Joe noted that most of the tales told among his National Guard colleagues during drill were “funny stories. . . . I try to make everybody laugh.” Richard cautioned that civilians may “think you are crude when you are just trying to be friendly and open up.”

Conversely, respondents were offended by the crude questions sometimes posed by civilians, such as “Did you kill anyone over there?” “Did you see anyone get blown up?” Karen was taken aback by civilians’ minimizing her deployment as having been “only” to Kuwait (“Well, yeah, but I was still there. I was in Kuwait. You weren’t in Kuwait.”) and assuming she had lost weight because of the hot and dry conditions (“No, it was because I busted my ass while I was there.”). Virtually all discussed their impatience with people who presumed expert knowledge of the war, and some commented on the futility of engaging in some of those conversations. For example, Jim said,

A lot of times when I’m out and hear people talking about what they think is going on with the war, I’m like, “I’ve been there and can tell you what it’s like.” But do I want to get in that conversation, spending 2 hours talking to some drunk dude in a bar? . . . It is real rare to find someone who will actually listen to you. Oftentimes it is easier to be quiet and do your thing.

Jim later added that these occasions often made him “pensive and serious” as he recalled his deployment. Despite Jim’s pride in being a veteran, “I don’t really like everyone knowing I’m a war vet.”

Respondents described going through many changes such as negatives that had for the most part diminished (e.g., jumpiness, anger) and positives that had emerged (e.g., maturity, goal-orientation, judgments regarding self-disclosures). Consequently, respondents were actively determining or integrating who they were pre-deployment with who they are now.

### *Identity Renegotiation*

As Bob reflected on his past and present selves, he concluded:

I think the two biggest problems, being completely separate from each other, that a soldier might have coming back is he either sees the two worlds as completely separate and can’t relate them or he tries to attack the problems in this world the same way he attacked the problems in the other world. And you have to find some kind of middle ground.

For Bob, finding this middle ground is a search for a new normalcy that incorporates both positive and negative deployment experiences:

Normalcy would be to return to a prior condition. This is impossible. Once you've been affected by a life-altering experience such as deployment, it is impossible and counter-productive to make an attempt at "normalcy." A balance between what normalcy would be and the new conditions in the game of life are probably a much more important positive focus. [Trying to return to] normalcy is negative.

Identity re-negotiation also included learning about the presumptions their veteran statuses, and in some cases, their military uniforms, signified to friends and acquaintances, fellow military personnel, and strangers. A student veteran profiled in the campus newspaper noted that children had been particularly excited by his military uniform, such as when he was invited to speak at an elementary school. Jim noted that some disclosures of his veteran status to acquaintances had revealed their preconceived, often negative or condescending notions "of what a war vet should be like," and Bob, after identifying growth related to his deployment experiences, resisted his girlfriend's reflexive assertions that he "needs help," concluding, "You know, *I* was the enlightened one." At military or veterans' gatherings, uniforms activated assumptions and preconceptions among fellow military personnel or veterans. According to Steve, "I'm a different person when I'm in my military uniform. That's for sure, like any military stuff. You go around and you look and see who has combat patches and who doesn't, and you make an immediate assumption about that person, you know what I mean?"

Respondents' statuses as servicemembers and veterans also were associated with different treatment by civilians, including strangers. On multiple occasions, strangers had quietly paid for Joe's drinks and meals at airports. When Joe thanked them, he discovered that their family members, often children, were serving in the military. He also described strangers' expressions of gratitude for his service and concluded, as had Steve, "Once I put on that uniform, you know, I'm a different person in some people's eyes." Although Joe acknowledged receiving recognition from people, he and other respondents categorically denounced veterans who sought special treatment or favors. For example, Jim said: "It's great to have this great accomplishment, but I don't want to go around expecting things. There are some people who get pulled over and [say], 'Hey, I'm a war vet. I don't need no frickin' ticket.' And it's like, 'No, you're a human being just like everybody else. You've got to follow the rules just like everybody else.'"

Most respondents also concluded that they were more interested in and more accepting of others. Respondents described diversity within their units and among fellow servicemembers, especially, but not only,

with respect to social class. Richard said, "It kind of goes along with the same international experience where your approach to life is just that, your own approach. It doesn't make it right. I might be concerned with [my] education; they next guy over might be concerned with boat motors and shotguns. That is perfectly fine." Many respondents concluded that their deployment experiences had fostered broader cultural awareness and affirmations. Jim enjoyed playing soccer and speaking with local citizens and trying Iraqi dishes. Although Joe's word choices confirmed the involuntary nature of deployment, he observed, "Living overseas, being forced to think in a different way, being in a completely different culture, and having to deal with different people forces you to think a different way and come to different conclusions about, you know, everything you were raised up to believe. . . . It kind of carries over into your personal life." Steve described challenges to his world view and his own change in perspective: "Yeah, I think it did help, like realizing [people] come from different backgrounds. . . . It was like, 'Well, I probably shouldn't think this certain way about people.'" Extending these perspectives to individual action recommendations, Steve observed, "We need to pay attention to politics. People just blow it off, like it doesn't really matter. But it [world events] boils down to things like that. A lot of people are doing things like donating school supplies to the kids over there. You *do* make a difference."

### *Limitations*

Findings from this study should be considered in light of a number of limitations. Not all branches of the armed forces were represented in this study and each of the respondents initially entered college as a traditional aged student. Although most respondents reported at least mild symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), none of the respondents discussed receiving official diagnoses or seeking formal treatment. Other than Steve's report of permanent ringing in one ear, no respondents had physical injuries resulting from their service that could complicate re-enrollment. Although most respondents reported some re-enrollment problems, they described their transitions in mostly positive and ultimately optimistic terms, and to our knowledge, respondents are on track to graduate. Other student veterans with different characteristics may well have different sets of experiences or perspectives. Finally, potential transferability or applicability of these findings must be carefully weighed, since emphasis on in-depth respondent engagement rather than potential for external generalizability guided the study.

*Discussion*

Use of Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson's (2006) adult transition model assists in understanding these student veterans' transitions from active duty to college re-enrollment. Consistent with Bob's assertion that returning to a prior sense of "normalcy" was regressive as well as impossible, respondents described principally an individual (as opposed to work or relationship) transition, with the central task of generating and affirming a new identity grounded in cumulative experiences, capabilities, perspectives, and reflections. Experiences in both military and academic cultures provided respondents with a sort of bi-cultural literacy in which they adapted and functioned successfully in both cultures. Although they noted differences between college and the military, respondents emphasized reconciling the two as a key part of identity renegotiation. Among respondents, pursuing reconciliation was evident by their transpositions of student and servicemember approaches and behaviors from one environment into the other. For example, Richard described retaining his focus on academics while deployed and supplementing his living environment accordingly, and Karen described internalizing as a student military discipline and structure in order to make continued progress toward life and academic goals. Additionally, since major transitions can take six months to two years to accomplish (Goodman et al.), student veterans may indeed be actively processing their military experiences and negotiating personal identity at the same time they resume and continue their academic studies. Assessment of the availabilities and qualities of the 4 S factors to maximize likelihood of successful transitioning revealed a number of resources that served to offset challenges for returning student veterans.

Respondents identified their returns to college as positive *situations* and regarded college staff as generally helpful during the initial re-enrollment process. Although the initial transitions into the active duty military role can involve anticipated and unanticipated events, college re-enrollment was not only anticipated, it required a deliberate choice on the part of veterans; the deployment experience provided a primary motivation for respondents to re-enroll and complete their degrees. However, the asynchronicities of their situations (i.e., abrupt departures and delays upon return waiting for semesters to begin or courses to be offered) led respondents to feel successful about their achievements and re-enrollments and also unsuccessful and behind with respect to their (comparatively) delayed academic progress. In terms of environmental input, respondents received cues that conveyed, for example, validation (e.g., from veterans), stereotyping (e.g., questions about combat kills),

or limited awareness or support (e.g., veterans' club advisor search) regarding their experiences and associated identities as servicemembers, veterans, students, and ultimately themselves.

Respondents emerged with a number of strengths with respect to the *self*. Heightened maturity and goal commitment resulting from military service were also found in prior studies of veterans entering college (DiRamio et al., 2008; Howard, 1945; Washton, 1945). For example, referring to WWII veterans, Kraines (1945, p. 291) wrote, "Most of these men [*sic*] do not have the inspired idealism of the adolescent; but they do have a sober, realistic idealism, tempered by experience, and they are eager to work for the ultimate goals they cherish." Love and Hutchinson (1946) attributed veterans' high academic achievements to veterans' clarity of purpose and greater maturity. Greater awareness of and appreciation for cultural diversity was an unanticipated finding, as it also was an unanticipated finding in the DiRamio et al. (2008) study. This finding appears to echo the educational value of out-of-class experiences in fostering and reinforcing learning. Respondents recognized changes in their perceptions of people representing other cultures and/or socioeconomic statuses, and their own experiences as objects of negative stereotyping may have contributed to or reinforced these perspectives. Institutions may explore systematic options for recognizing experiential or independent learning with academic credit—programs that may or may not be limited to the formal CLEP (College-Level Examination Program™) for which testing costs are reimbursable to military personnel and veterans (College Board, 2008). Although such credits may serve only as electives in students' programs of study, such credits can nonetheless validate out-of-class learning and help offset academic delays caused by activations and deployments.

Often, respondents and some civilian friends (*support* elements) mutually fell away as respondents focused on their deployment work, and as civilian friends neared graduation. Respondents were often challenged to make new friends and establish relationships among younger civilian students. Respondents joined or interacted with structured military groups (e.g., ROTC), and/or individually structured their time to create or tap individuals and groups that were supportive. Respondents also aligned with groups or individuals who challenged or motivated them to excel in the pursuit of their goals, which is ultimately another form of support. Particularly at the start of their return transitions, respondents selectively associated more with military personnel and other veterans than non-veterans (DiRamio et al., 2008; Kraines, 1945), and they selectively disclosed their experiences to individuals from whom they anticipated supportive or accepting reactions. Although some sup-

port remained constant, such as longstanding friends, sources of support for respondents tended to flux during the transition period, and respondents consciously and strategically sought supportive environments and people.

Military personnel and other veterans and servicemembers can provide validations of their military service and experiences that campuses or civilian students are less well-equipped to provide. For some returning veterans, ROTC offers a degree of continuity with respect to military culture, but ROTC scholarship cadets are contracted to enter active duty upon graduation. For student veterans not planning on active duty or military careers, campuses can provide opportunities for organized contact and support (minus the “strings attached” of ROTC). College administrators and educators may not recognize the importance of contacts with other veterans for student veterans’ transitions, and individual students may more or less assertively seek out these contacts. Additionally, not all faculty or staff members may recognize the need, or have the time or interest, to support or advise a veterans’ student group on campus, as Joe experienced.

Many transition *strategies* used by respondents have already been described, such as seeking the company of veterans, attempting to form a student group, strategically disclosing experiences within supportive environments, and adopting self-discipline and structure. Time, and how to spend it, also played strategic roles for respondents. The passage of time allowed for re-adjusting and finding niches and friends, yet respondents emphasized the need to stay busy. They felt an increased press to pursue academics and life and work goals—intensified by realizations that they now trailed their former college peers academically and in some cases, with respect to relationships. Strategies of staying busy may occupy one productively as needed time passes and may not be indicative of a resolved transition. Student veterans who appear to be fully engaged students in terms of involvements and activities may be internally managing difficult transitional aspects and re-integrating identity and also trying not to prolong the delays in pursuing their academic and life goals. Additionally, student veterans may begin anticipatory transitioning during deployment, as did respondents who explored future options and laid plans for their returns. Richard, for example, described his guard duty as (often) down time that had allowed him to think, reflect, and plan, but all student veterans’ deployment experiences may not involve such opportunities.

Although this study was designed to focus principally on the phenomenon of transitions, respondents frequently discussed contested or disrupted identities and the relative power of various influences that shaped their emerging senses of self in light of their recently acquired social

identities of servicemember and veteran. The reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007) provides insight into these identity constructions through its attention not only to individuals' experiences within different contexts that can influence constructions of identity, but also to individuals' active meaning-making about these various and potentially competing influences such as peer group interactions and encounters with stereotypes and biases. Two examples of identity constructions among respondents are discussed below.

First, respondents described interacting with civilian students who presumed expert knowledge of the military or who conveyed stereotyped assumptions, positive (e.g., "You're a hero.") as well as negative (e.g., "Did you kill anyone?"), about veterans. Most respondents, after reporting initial amazement, anger, and/or exasperation with these interactions, tended to assess and reject the stereotyped assertions as overly simplistic and naïve in light of their own experiences. They also recognized that their appearance (e.g., uniforms, haircuts, t-shirt emblems) may continue to trigger such stereotypes. While respondents became quite aware of common military and veteran stereotypes that may be assigned to them in light of their social identities as military servicemembers and veterans, their active meaning-making limited the influence—specifically filtering out much of the influence—of these stereotypes on their own evolving senses of self.

A second example, related to the first, is respondents' broadened definitions of "peers" and active cultivation of new peers with military or combat ties. Specifically, respondents sought opportunities to spend time with other veterans, members of their guard or reserve units, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, ROTC student members. These peers understood the complexities of military or combat experiences, laughed at their jokes, affirmed their service, and knew the sets of challenges that may accompany return to civilian life. Indeed, Joe's attempt to start a veterans club would have made access to these peers readily available to student veterans. In terms of identity, respondents recognized that their social identities of servicemember and veteran remained important aspects of their senses of self even though their military deployment—at least for the time being—had ended. Although they were full-time students living in close proximity to the campus, respondents actively and strategically selected parallel environments bearing contextual influences with which they could affirm their increasingly complex senses of self, in the company of peers who were or had been similarly situated. These environments appeared to help respondents pursue what Bob had described as balance and a new "normalcy," in this case, regarding sense of self.

Since identity and identity development were not the primary focuses of this study, we are unable to analyze processes or subtle aspects of identity re-constructions. However, these examples indicate that respondents appear to be, as part of their transition experiences, engaged in meaning-making and selective filtering of influences in order to arrive at new senses of self that incorporate multiple social identities of student, veteran, and/or armed forces member.

### *Implications for Research and Practice*

Future research on student veterans' experiences and associated outcomes will be critical as trends in military recruitment and deployment practices, currently comprising large numbers of Guard and Reserve personnel, continue to evolve. Since growing numbers of undergraduates will likely experience deployment and re-enrollment transitions, particularly during wartimes, this phenomenon warrants additional and sustained examination. Longitudinal studies of transitions can identify long-term and short-term aspects as well as larger transitional processes and outcomes that encompass the initial re-enrollment transitions and outcomes. Studies overtly focused on student veterans' sense-making related to multiple dimensions of identity could reveal a great deal about how student veterans construct and achieve more complex senses of self that incorporate their experiences of the social identities of servicemember and veteran. Studies on veterans' and non-veterans' academic achievement can be replicated or designed. Although studies have identified tailored support mechanisms for colleges and universities to provide to transitioning student veterans (e.g., DiRamio et al., 2008; Flynt 1945; Howard, 1945), evaluation studies must gauge program effectiveness. Finally, studies of deployed students who intend to re-enroll but do not and studies of student veterans re-enrolling with documented disabilities can explore factors such as institutional readiness, students' goal realignment(s), or coordination among multiple programs and services to foster student success.

Colleges can create, and endorse student efforts to create, receptive and supportive environments for veterans. While ROTC programs may actively and latently function to meet some student veterans' transition needs, supporting re-enrolling veterans is not ROTC's principal purpose. Student organizations initiated by student veterans can provide opportunities for interaction and support without, for example, significant post-graduation commitment. Campus-based services for veterans have tended to focus on ensuring access to earned benefits, which is necessary, but may well be insufficient to fully support re-enrolling students.



Highly segmented arrangements such as directing students to community offices for “military” matters and campus offices for “student” matters may inadvertently endorse a segmented sense of self among students who, like the respondents in this study, may be negotiating identities that honor and draw on all aspects of their lives.

A number of crucial changes on campuses can be accomplished relatively quickly. As a postscript, the institutional site for this study recently designated a portion of its institutional student financial aid funds for a program that supplements student veterans’ GI Bill allocations, which by themselves are frequently insufficient to meet major educational expenses. Additionally, a large and active student veterans club, an affiliate of the national Student Veterans of America organization, has recently been established—complete with faculty advisor.

Duplicating a full range of veterans’ services on campuses would be inadvisable, particularly in light of the rapid changes, and interpretive uncertainties with respect to, for example, benefit program eligibilities. Yet campuses can initiate working partnerships with government or community resources so that campus *and* community representatives can offer skilled referrals or assistance to veterans who straddle both worlds especially during the re-enrollment transition. Such campus and community partnerships are not new; Hillway’s (1945) study found that 77 percent of responding colleges had established partnerships and committees to provide services to veterans. Numbers of re-enrolling veterans are now much smaller, but similar arrangements are warranted.

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