PERSISTENCE OF STUDENT VETERANS ATTENDING A COMMUNITY COLLEGE THROUGH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

by

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ABSTRACT

Student veterans attending community college face many challenges under normal circumstances. These challenges can have a significant impact on the experiences of student veterans' educational journey and academic persistence. Current research addresses these unique challenges faced under normal circumstances, but in early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic changed student veteran challenges in an unprecedented way. In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced all institutions of higher education to abruptly close their campuses and shift to online education. This extraordinary occurrence impacted all students, but especially student veterans. The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the experiences of student veterans who attended a community college prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, aiming to gain an understanding of any factors contributing to their academic persistence through to completion of their educational goals, including either a college course, certificate, or degree, while navigating the pandemic. The study sought to describe these experiences during the pandemic and to discover any impact these experiences during the pandemic might have had on student veterans' academic persistence.

KEY WORDS: Veterans, COVID-19 pandemic, community college, student success

DEDICATION

"Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage." – Lao Tzu

This dissertation is dedicated to all past, present, and future military members of the United States. Thank you for selflessly serving your country.

Because all of us believe and understand in the fabric of the common bond of why we call ourselves American is to care for the men and women who wear the uniform; and when they take off the uniform, we care for them when they are veterans. *Steve Buyer*

This dissertation is dedicated to all who provided unconditional love and support during my own educational journey. My heart overfills with love, and I am so very thankful for each of you.

My husband, Dennis, you own this achievement as much as I do. Pursuing this degree meant a great deal of time and sacrifice on both our parts. We missed vacations, beach parties, and time with friends and family. You are my greatest cheerleader, providing me with the love, patience, and support I needed to complete my own educational journey. "Life is Good" is a reminder we tell each other often and indeed it is! You are my strength, my heart, and the love of my life. Thank you for being with me every step of this journey.

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INTRODUCTION

Student veterans attending community college face many challenges under normal circumstances. These challenges can have a significant impact on the experiences of student veterans' educational journey and academic persistence. Current research addresses these unique challenges faced under normal circumstances, but in early 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic changed student veteran challenges in an unprecedented way. In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced all institutions of higher education to abruptly close their campuses and shift to online education. This extraordinary occurrence impacted all students. However, the negative impact on student veterans has been significant. The closing of campuses "compromised student veterans' housing allowances and VA work study payments, each of which require eligible students to be enrolled in in-person courses" (Lopez, et al., 2020). As a result of this financial uncertainty affecting student veterans, Congress enacted two bills in mid-2020 to support student veterans and continue their payments regardless of the modality of classes. This chain-reaction, however, may have already impacted student veterans' choices about pursuing their educational goals and may continue to further impact their choices for years (Lopez, et al., 2020).

BACKGROUND

The opportunity for student veterans to utilize the education benefits rightfully earned while serving their country has never been better. Most community colleges and universities employ dedicated advisors and even specific centers for veteran student and military-affiliated student use only. Military-affiliated students can include veterans, current military service members (Active/Guard/Reserve), military spouses and dependents, and reserve officer training corps (ROTC) cadets. The most used educational benefit for student veterans is the Post 9/11 GI Bill. The original GI Bill was a landmark legislation signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on June 22, 1944. This bill provided World War II veterans the

ability to attend college, as college tuition, housing for the servicemember/veteran and unemployment insurance were covered by the bill. Most recently, the Post 9/11 GI Bill, a bill dedicated to meet the needs of student veterans in the 21st century (Cook & Kim, 2009), passed in 2008. As a result of that bill passing in 2009, a little over 34,000 students used their benefits; however, by 2012, that number increased to just under 1 million (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). This is over a 2,800 percent increase in the use of educational benefits in those three short years alone. Since 2009, veteran students have earned 453,000 degrees and certificates using their Post 9/11 GI Bill (Cate, et al., 2017). In 2015, over 72,029 veterans used their Post 9/11 GI Bill education benefits in the state of Texas alone (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2021) to obtain a degree or certificate.

Over two million service men and women have returned to the United States from recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and they are looking to acquire new skills and knowledge as they transition from the military to civilian life (American Council on Education, 2008; Cook & Kim, 2009). A high number of student veterans will enroll in degree or certificate plans at community colleges due to their open admissions policies and lower tuition costs, with approximately 40 percent of student veterans attending community colleges (Karp & Klempin, 2016).

Ashford (2018) notes some optimistic research findings where student veterans show great resilience and are more likely to finish their degrees than nonveteran students. However, it takes longer for them to complete their degrees than nonveteran students. First-Time-In-College student veteran participants in the U.S. Department of Education's longitudinal Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) study were surveyed twice between 2011 and 2014. The findings showed 28 percent of student veterans earning an associate degree or certificate compared to 23 percent of nonveteran students (Ashford, 2018). Three years after starting college, 50 percent of student veterans surveyed were still enrolled, trying to complete their degrees, but only roughly 33 percent of nonveteran students were still enrolled during the same time span. The study also revealed that 40 percent of student veterans completing in 2015-16 began a postsecondary degree compared with 30 percent of nonveteran students. Ashford's research shows that student veterans demonstrate resiliency and persistence of their higher education goals despite the challenges they face in attaining those degrees.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the experiences of student veterans who attended a community college prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, to gain an understanding of any factors contributing to their academic persistence through to completion of their educational goals, including either a college course, certificate, or degree, while navigating the pandemic. The study sought to describe these experiences during the pandemic and to discover any impact these experiences might have had on student veterans' academic persistence.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

This study is significant as the COVID-19 pandemic and the implications from it are unprecedented in higher education. The impact on student veterans is not yet widely known. Researchers will be studying this impact for years to come, especially as the pandemic began roughly three years ago, and we are seeing small signs of it becoming an endemic and something we will have to live with, just like the seasonal flu.

Much of the current research on the persistence of student veterans has taken place at four-year universities and the research on community college students is limited. There have been several researchers who note the scarcity of research on community college students (Cofer & Somers, 2000; Townsend, Donaldson & Wilson, 2005; Alfonso, 2006; Brandes, 2013). In fact, another researcher, Marti (2008) admonishes that the lack of research on community colleges is a form of research bias. Further, higher education research focusing on community college students accounts for less than ten percent as calculated by Marti (2008). Community college students encounter several of the same barriers, supports, and adjustment issues as university students do, and warrant further research focus.

Along with the lack of research on community college students, there is even less research surrounding student veterans and, if there is data for this diverse demographic of student, that data can be unreliable or contradictory with other data. Take for instance, the results of the Million Records Project, conducted by three different organizations including the Student Veterans of America (SVA), the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the National Student Clearinghouse. The 2014 Million Records Project used previously unreleased data to examine and report on the completion rates for roughly one million veterans attending college, reporting a detailed look at where and how student veterans are

persisting and succeeding in college. The SVA report states 51.7 percent of the sampled veterans completed a degree or credential, taking four to six years to complete. However, that percentage is not comparable to data from the Department of Education (DOE) on student veterans during the same years of 2002 through 2010 (McCann, 2014). The discrepancies could be due to the sample selected according to McCann, as certain populations of veterans were excluded in the SVA report, such as reservists or active-duty service members. These two specific groups of students were not using Post 9/11 GI Bill funding, instead utilizing tuition assistance for the active-duty students and the Reserve Education Assistance Program for the reservists.

Another possibility is that the SVA did not follow a cohort of students for multiple years; the total sample number is instead used to calculate those graduation and completion rates. With these differences, there is not a true comparison between the SVA's data and the DOE's data, meaning that as McCann states, "the graduation results are likely overstated compared to the typical formula the Department uses" (2014, para. 4). This is just one example of data discrepancy, but it shows there is a definite need for common metrics for tracking graduation or completion rates of student veterans. Likewise, there is a need for greater in-depth research for this group to understand their campus and educational experiences so we can then develop programs or initiatives for supporting student veterans.

As a result, this study serves to add to the existing, yet modest, body of knowledge on the diverse group of student veterans of a community college during the pandemic. The research findings may inform and benefit community college administrators by capturing experiences of student veterans to help increase awareness of barriers that may inhibit student veteran persistence.

RATIONALE FOR A QUALITATIVE STUDY

After reviewing both qualitative and quantitative research methods, I determined that a qualitative approach is most appropriate for this study. Qualitative research is used to understand how people experience the world in natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). It involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or occurrences. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2011), in their book, *Handbook of Qualitative Research* state:

> Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings,

attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

The rationale for using a narrative qualitative research method for this study included the importance of "temporality" as the contextual details may include descriptions of the physical, emotional, and social situations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Temporality can be imperative to understanding a participant's story in this type of study. The purpose of this study was to understand the stories of veteran students' experiences and perceptions of their educational journey and the impact of COVID-19 on that journey.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The two questions guiding this study were:

- What are the experiences of student veterans, attending a community college during the COVID-19 pandemic in pursuit of their educational goals?
- What factors contributed to persistence of student veterans at their community college as they pursued their educational goals during the COVID-19 pandemic?

ASSUMPTIONS

A couple of assumptions guided the framework for the research. The first assumption is that the participants would respond to the questions truthfully, honestly, and thoughtfully. Another assumption was that each participant had been honorably discharged, retired from the military, or still serving on active duty in order to qualify for educational benefits from the Veteran's Administration. These benefits could include tuition assistance, the Post 9/11 GI Bill, or the Montgomery G.I. Bill.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study was based on two models of student persistence: Padilla's (1999) The College as a Black Box Theory and Vacchi's (2011, 2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support. Padilla initially developed his theory to help college employees in the student services support department. He thought that his and other models of student success could help student services understand that their mission is to educate students on how to be successful, rather than just to enroll students and get them into classes. Padilla states, "once student affairs is seen as having a fundamental teaching role (i.e., conveying heuristic knowledge) rather than being just a service unit, it will

lead to a fundamental rethinking of the organization and staffing of student affairs" (2009, p. 202). He goes on to posit that, based upon the data collected on student success, even if colleges do not change their practices, a more personal approach "empowers individual students directly by helping them to overcome existing barriers within their own campus environment" (p. 134). This model focuses on barriers to students and can be easily transitioned to model a focused group of students such as student veterans.

David Vacchi's model was conceptualized for student veterans only; it takes Padilla's general student model and helps to focus in on this large, but diverse, group of students. This model emphasizes supports for student veterans rather than the barriers they face, an approach which, in turn, complements Padilla's model.

Their two theories share common factors such as student involvement and both academic and social integration of students. These common factors, along with internal and external influences, have direct bearing on student persistence rates. Vacchi's Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support expands Padilla's College as a Black Box theory by focusing on a broader, yet more detailed timespan of student veteran experience.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Throughout this dissertation, the following terms are used. To diminish possibility of confusion, these definitions are offered as those applied here.

GI Bill — "refers to any U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs education benefit, such as education grants, and stipends earned by active-duty service members, veterans, and their families" (Kagan, 2021, para. 1).

Nontraditional Student — "aged 25 and over, also include those under 25, but who have characteristics indicative of adult responsibilities, such as working full-time, being financially dependent, has non-spousal dependents, is a single parent, as well as having a nontraditional educational trajectory, such as delayed enrollment into higher education or did not complete high school" (Horn, 1996).

Persistence — As defined in higher education, persistence is a student's ability to complete their degree requirements (Yorke & Longden, 2004), by enrolling in college and remaining enrolled until completion.

Veteran — a "person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable" (U.S.C. Title 38, 1958, Section 101(21)).

CONCLUSION

This chapter introduced the purpose of the study: to explore the experiences of student veterans, who attended a community college prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, to gain an understanding of any factors contributing to their academic persistence through to the completion of their educational goals, including either a college course, certificate, or degree, while navigating the pandemic. A brief description of the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits provided to student veterans is explored, along with the significance of the study.

The rationale for a qualitative study and the guided questions of the study follows. The study's theoretical frameworks, The College as a Black Box (Padilla, 1999) and The Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support (Vacchi, 2011, 2013), are introduced along with a definition of terms.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

The intent of this qualitative, narrative research was to explore the experiences of student veterans who attended a community college prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the intention of gaining an understanding of any factors contributing to their academic persistence through to the completion of their educational goals, including either a college course, certificate, or degree, while navigating the pandemic. To support this purpose, relevant areas of research are surveyed. This chapter first reviews overall college student persistence theories, followed by a focused review of veteran community college student persistence studies. Next, physical and cognitive disabilities affecting student veterans and student veterans' needs for academic and social support are explored. Finally, existing research on the COVID-19 pandemic is reviewed, as it pertains to student veterans. This literature review concludes with two theoretical frameworks relative to student veteran persistence: The College as a Black Box (Padilla, 1999) and The Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support (Vacchi, 2011, 2013).

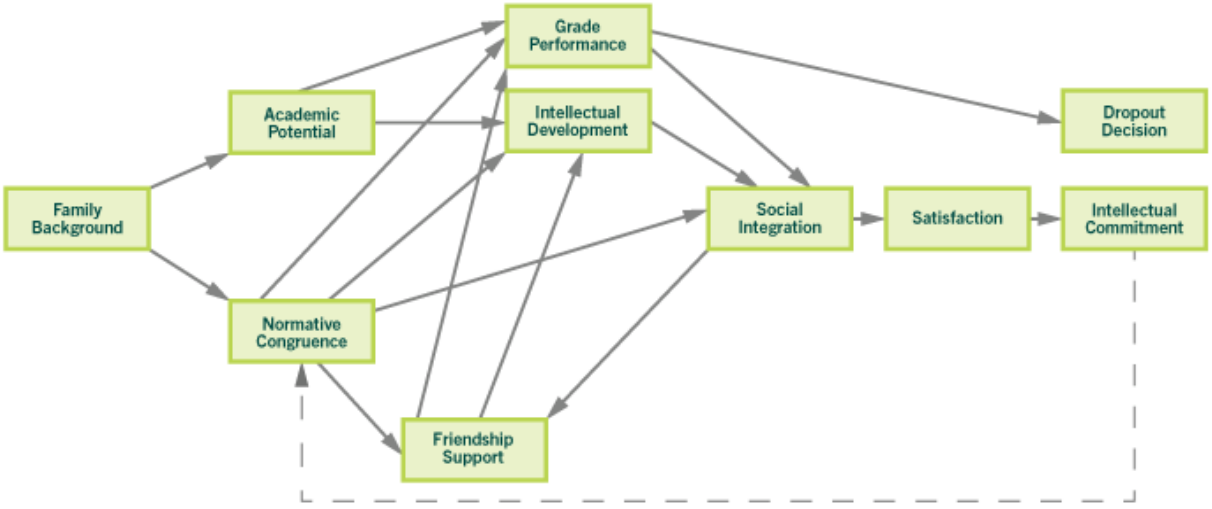
STUDENT PERSISTENCE THEORIES

As attested by Roman, "student retention has been identified for decades as an important measure of institutional effectiveness, because retention and the student enrollments they represent can be translated into amounts of revenue, whether from FTE reimbursements or tuition and fees" (2007, p. 20). The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (USDE / NCES, 2003) defines persistence as a student measure and retention as an institutional measure. Higher education administrators and faculty define persistence as a student's ability to complete their degree requirements by enrolling in college and remaining enrolled until completion (Yorke & Longden, 2004). With these two vastly different definitions, one can see that measuring persistence can be complicated and interpreted in vastly different ways depending upon the institution or organization analyzing data. For this study, the researcher will be using Yorke and Longden's (2004) clear and concise definition.

Persistence Theories

Historically, a focus on the institutional setting and how it can influence student persistence (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Spady, 1970) brought this field to the attention of future researchers. Spady's Undergraduate Dropout Process Model was one of the first to incorporate Durkheim's theory of suicide as it relates to student retention, as both suicide and attrition are forms of removing oneself from society, albeit suicide is a drastic measure (Burke, 2019). In the model, Spady notes there are two "systems" — academic and social — that could affect whether a student would stay at an institution (Spady, 1970). He broke down each system further (see Figure 1 below). Academic support is influenced by grades earned by the student and the intellectual development of the student. Social support could be influenced by friendship and normative congruence. This model depends on the assumptions that a student's satisfaction with the college experience will depend on the available social and academic rewards. Since the development of this early model, the systems and factors noted by Spady have transitioned multiple times, but his assignment of responsibility of persistence to the institution serves as the beginning of this field of research.

Figure 1. Spady's Undergraduate Dropout Process Model



Source: Aljohani (2016)

Subsequently, Tinto's research (1975) focused on pinpointing reasons for student dropout, followed by research on correlations between degree completion and drop-out rates (Pascarella &

Terenzini, 1991). Additional traditional student persistence theory groundwork has been laid by Astin (1970, 1984), Chickering (1974), Pascarella (1980), Choy (2002) and Southerland (2006). Bean and Metzner (1985) and Summers (2003) focused their theories on non-traditional students, including student veterans.

Tinto's Student Integration Model of attrition was the first theory to differentiate between dissimilar types of leaving behavior concerning a student's decision to leave a college or university (McCubbin, 2003). Prior to Tinto's publishing of his theory, students leaving a college or university were simply dubbed as dropouts. Tinto identified distinguishable categories of leaving behavior such as "academic failure, voluntary withdrawal, permanent dropout, temporary dropout and transfer" according to McCubbin (2003, p. 1). The independent factor to Tinto's Student Integration Model are the student's individual characteristics, such as personal attributes, pre-college education, and family background. Family background includes parent's educational level and familial support for the student. Tinto's model is based upon the theory that a student's persistence in college is a result of a successful symbiosis between the student's individual characteristics and the college or university's academic and social characteristics (Cate, 2011). Tinto's model is the most cited, most well-known, and conceivably the most accepted in the field; it has also been "repeated, tested, and reviewed repeatedly since its publication" (Burke, 2019, p. 16). The longevity and modification of Tinto's model from inception to present increases the credibility and validity of said model (Aljohani, 2016).

Relating to retention, research implies that a key factor for persistence is student involvement or engagement at an institutional level (Hagedorn, 2006). The higher the symbiosis between the student and the college or university, the stronger commitment the student has toward their goal at the institution. Bean and Metzner were the first researchers to compare this symbiosis between study and institution to employees and their workplace. As such, Bean and Metzner's (1985) Model of Student Departure is formulated on student attrition happening for the same reasons that employees leave their jobs. It is a causal model in which Bean and Metzner state that colleges and universities are expected to affect student satisfaction. If students are satisfied, they persist at the institution. If they are not, they leave the institution and perhaps abandon their educational goal altogether. The Model of Student Departure's independent factor focuses solely on the student's background and their pre-college characteristics.

These factors include high school GPA, parent's educational level, and the student's socioeconomic status (Cate, 2011). As with Tinto's model, Bean and Metzner's model defines persistence as the result of different interactions between the student and the college or university over a timespan. These interactions are based upon the student's individual characteristics, along with the student's perception of student satisfaction they have related to their college or university. However, the onus leans heavily on student characteristics in the aforementioned studies.

In 1988, Tinto updated his theory to include the role of institutions on student persistence rates. The modified model was one of the first to state that faculty-student contact outside the classroom is of increasing importance to student persistence theories. Uncountable first-generation, student veterans, and other non-traditional students can be intimidated by the idea of seeking out faculty for support as evidenced by a 2007 study by Rob and Hope Longwell-Grice. Findings from their study suggested that college administrators must be "systematic and strategic in finding ways to develop faculty-student interactions" and be proactive in cultivating the relationship between faculty and students (Murphy, 2011, pp. 39-40).

Further insights into how institutions can improve persistence rates, Mentzer et al., (2015) imparts that "early in persistence research, academic, social and financial supports were identified as key methods to keep students in college" (p. 3). For economically challenged students and minority students, the need for continued financial aid is deemed imperative to the persistence rates for these groups (Chen, 2008; Kim, 2007; La Nasa & Rogers, 2009). The impact of student loans on student persistence is highly negative (Kim, 2007; Nora, et al., 2006). Studies evince that financial aid has a positive impact on persistence and debt has a negative impact (Hossler, et al., 2009). Additional study is necessary on the impact of financial support on student persistence, as quite a few studies report contradictory results (Heller, 2010; La Nasa & Rogers, 2009).

Again, institutions need to focus on serving both traditional and non-traditional students and how to better serve them in a holistic way to increase retention and persistence of their students. Increased support in Financial Aid, improving faculty-and student contact outside the classroom, and helping students find their sense of belonging on campus are just a handful of ways college administrators can help students acclimate and thrive on campus (Alavi Tabrizi, 2020).

A recent study of note, Chen & Jang (2010) applied their theory of self-determination to persistence, specifically for online and distance learning students. They opine these students have three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and when those needs are met, a heightened sense of self and increased potential for personal growth occurs. They apply these basic needs to distance learning by applying online, flexible learning classes to autonomy; virtual learning and technical proficiency to competence; and social interaction with the instructor and classmates to relatedness (Chen & Jang, 2010). Institutions must ensure that students have easy access to faculty members, that grading is completed in a timely manner, and that they receive quality feedback throughout their courses. That students need to feel a sense of stability and integration into the class by faculty members is integral to student satisfaction, which satisfaction can then become a predictor of student persistence (Hollenbeck et al., 2011).

Veteran Persistence Studies

Researchers have documented the lack of scholarly materials pertaining to student veterans (Borsari, et al., 2017; Dyar, 2019; Rumann & Bondi, 2015; Vacchi & Berger, 2014; Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2018). In a study completed by Barry, Whiteman, and MacDermid Wadsworth (2014), the researchers conducted a thorough search of databases for the period of 2000-12. Their criteria included English language peer-reviewed primary and/or secondary studies reported in a peer-reviewed publication related to servicemembers or veterans attending a community college or university. They found only 13 published studies meeting this criterion in 2014, which reflects the large gap in the research regarding information specific to student veteran persistence.

Student veterans are classified as nontraditional learners (MacKinnon & Floyd, 2011; Vacchi, 2012) and are one of the diverse populations on college campuses. These diverse student populations bring varying strengths and challenges, along with distinct needs to college campuses (Hittepole, n.d.; Quaye & Harper, 2014). The transition of reintegrating into civilian life can be daunting (Quillen-Armstrong, 2007; Stiglitz & Blimes, 2008). Student veterans are facing possible relocation, loss of structure and support, different health care services and a new career path, along with becoming a college student (Falkey, 2016).

For student veterans, the contrasting styles of learning between the military and higher education can be an impediment. The military uses a hands-on, standardized, step-by-step approach to learning a skill, while college professors primarily use an autonomous approach. Moreover, the military is consistent in their training and evaluation, but professors on college campuses can differ significantly in how they teach, evaluate, and grade. (Byman, 2007; Borsari, et al., 2017). Once the student veteran enrolls for classes on campus, they face even greater challenges, starting with fitting in on campus with nonveteran students. The first noticeable difference is that student veterans are likely to be at least 10 years older than nonveteran students, a factor that can create an age barrier. According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (PNPI), "in 2018, the majority of student veterans were between the ages of 24 and 40; only 15 percent of student veterans were traditionally aged, which is between ages 18 to 23" (2021, para. 3).

The majority of student persistence research to this point has been conducted at the four-year college level, with a meager amount of research being devoted to community college student persistence (Nakajima, et al., 2012). There are 1,044 community colleges in the United States, and they enroll about six percent of all student veteran undergraduate students who are either currently serving or who have served in the military (American Association of Community Colleges, 2019, 2021). Recent research on student veterans (DiRamio, et al., 2008; Livingston, et al., 2011; and Vacchi, 2011, 2013) indicates a rising interest in addressing the knowledge gap of student veterans. However, additional studies need to be conducted to add to the literature of community college student veteran persistence and completion.

STUDENT VETERANS' NEEDS FOR ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

Physical and Cognitive Disabilities

Untold student veterans are affected by physical and cognitive disabilities after serving in the military, especially veterans who served in combat. Student veterans' mental health can be affected by transitioning to college as they contend with issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression (Norman, et al., 2015; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Shackelford, 2009). These mental health issues are related to concentration skills, memory retention, trouble paying attention in class, and reading for assignments, all of which are necessary skills to achieve academic success. Getting help with mental health issues impacts all aspects of veterans' lives, but the impact to their

college endeavors is also clear as data suggests that veterans who were treated for PTSD within a year, were 2.14 times more likely to enroll in college using their GI Bill versus veterans who did not seek treatment (Norman, et al., 2015). These results show that a vast number of student veterans need support both in and out of the classroom.

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and hearing loss are two other physical disabilities student veterans can be diagnosed with, often affecting the functionality of their daily lives (French & Parkinson, 2008; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Shackelford, 2009).

Another serious challenge to student veterans is the correlation between PTSD symptoms and suicide attempts. The PNPI data from Solomon (2019) indicates that up to 35 percent of student veterans have reported suicidal thoughts and seven to eight percent report previously attempting suicide. Veterans need to be diagnosed and treated quickly and thoroughly for mental health issues.

The high rates of physical and cognitive disabilities affecting student veterans mean that colleges are serving increasing numbers of students with disabilities. Colleges have identified a variety of accommodations and supports for student veterans with disabilities (Vance & Miller, 2009). However, a large number of student veterans are reluctant to self-identify disabilities, especially invisible disabilities such as Traumatic Brain Injury (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Shackelford, 2009; Lighthall, 2012). Their reluctance can have a severe negative impact on student veterans' academic persistence. According to Vance and Miller (2009), only "16 percent of postsecondary institutions identified their ability to serve veterans with disabilities as above average" (p. 23). As this is an extremely low percentage, colleges must continue to develop programs to support student veterans.

Veterans' Experiences as Nontraditional Students

A challenge facing student veterans ties in with how long they have been out of high school, as many need to take remedial classes in Math and English to ready their academic skills as a means to completing college-level classes. The need for remedial classes can be problematic financially as the Post-9/11 GI Bill covers only 36 months of tuition, and for some, provides a housing allowance and book stipend (Jacobs, 2012). If required to take remedial classes that do not count toward their degree credits for graduation, the student veteran is using part of their GI Bill that they may need if they wish to attain a degree beyond their associate degree or certificate. To combat this problem, numerous colleges, such as

Sierra College in Rocklin, California, are creating special courses to help with remedial classes. They offer a class specifically for student veterans called Boots to Books that combines a remedial English class with a course on study skills (Jacobs, 2012).

Student veterans may struggle with fitting in on campus as they readjust to civilian life and transition to a college atmosphere. What these student veterans experienced during their time in the military has given them considerably different life proficiencies than nonveteran college students (Olsen, et al., 2014). The need to share similar encounters such as post-deployment issues and homecoming are key factors contributing to a successful transition (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Smith, 2017). Plenty of student veterans feel they have nothing in common with their classmates; they immediately leave campus after their classes and do not involve themselves in any student clubs or activities on campus. This disassociation from campus life can have consequences, as the power of social relationships on campus directly impacts student veterans' decisions to stay in college and complete their degrees (Branker, 2009; Horton, 2012).

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Student Impact – Mental Health

Attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges of college students have become a concern for college administration. In the early throes of the pandemic, Son, et al. (2020), conducted a study of the "effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of college students" (p. 1). An internet survey was sent out to all students at a large public university in the state of Texas: 195 student participants answered the survey, with 138 of those students (71 percent) stating they were experiencing an increase in depression, stress, and anxiety due to the pandemic. The student participants listed an assortment of mental health stressors including:

- Fear and worry about their health and the health of their family
- Difficulty in concentrating
- Disruptions to sleep patterns
- Decreased social interactions due to physical distancing
- Increased concerns with academic performance

This early study concluded that the lockdown and stay-at-home orders had a negative effect on college students and impacted higher education from the very beginning (Son, et al., 2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on all college students, including student veterans, will be fodder for researchers to study for years to come.

Student Veteran Impact

In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced all institutions of higher education to abruptly close their campuses and shift to online education. This extraordinary occurrence impacted all students, but significantly magnified the challenges student veterans face when attending college. The Post-9/11 GI Bill, while providing exceptional postsecondary educational benefits for student veterans, can be complex in navigating through the strict rules and regulations of eligibility under normal circumstances. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, student veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill received housing allowances and VA work-study payments based upon the requirement that eligible students must be enrolled in at least 50 percent of in-person courses (Lopez, et. al, 2020). With colleges and university campuses shutting down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, countless student veterans were thrown into uncertainty concerning their housing allowances, as well as their monthly work-study payment support from the Post-9/11 GI Bill due to being placed in completely online classes.

In April of 2020, Congress enacted two bills, S.503 and H.R. 6322, authorizing “the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to continue paying work study allowances during emergency periods” (Congress.gov, para. 2). The passing of these bills essentially allowed the VA to continue paying student veterans their housing allowances and work study payments through December 21, 2020. Another challenge for student veterans that H.R. 6322 eliminated was the extension or restoration of their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits if the student chose to withdraw from their courses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to this bill being passed, any student veteran who withdrew from their courses faced a reduction in their benefits. On September 30, 2020, H.R. 8337 was signed into law extending the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for veteran students until December 21, 2021, or until the college or university resumed normal operations of in-person training courses, whichever came first.

The financial effects of the economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic impacted student veterans negatively, with Lopez, et. al., (2020) reporting that one-third of respondents of a survey reported a

reduction in work hours and roughly 20 percent of respondents reported being concerned about purchasing groceries and paying their rent or mortgage during the month of May 2020.

Limited research available shows this study is of great relevance as the results give insight into how student veteran persistence rates were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Smith (2017) notes that such improved understanding may potentially lead to increased student veteran persistence rates. Colleges and Universities need to continue to devise and expand plans on increasing student persistence rates given the toll COVID-19 has and continues to take on students as student's academic success depends on it.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As previously mentioned, the theoretical framework for this research is based on the persistence of student veterans. Padilla's (1999) Theory of College as a Black Box and Vacchi's (2011, 2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support share common factors such as student involvement as well as academic and social integration.

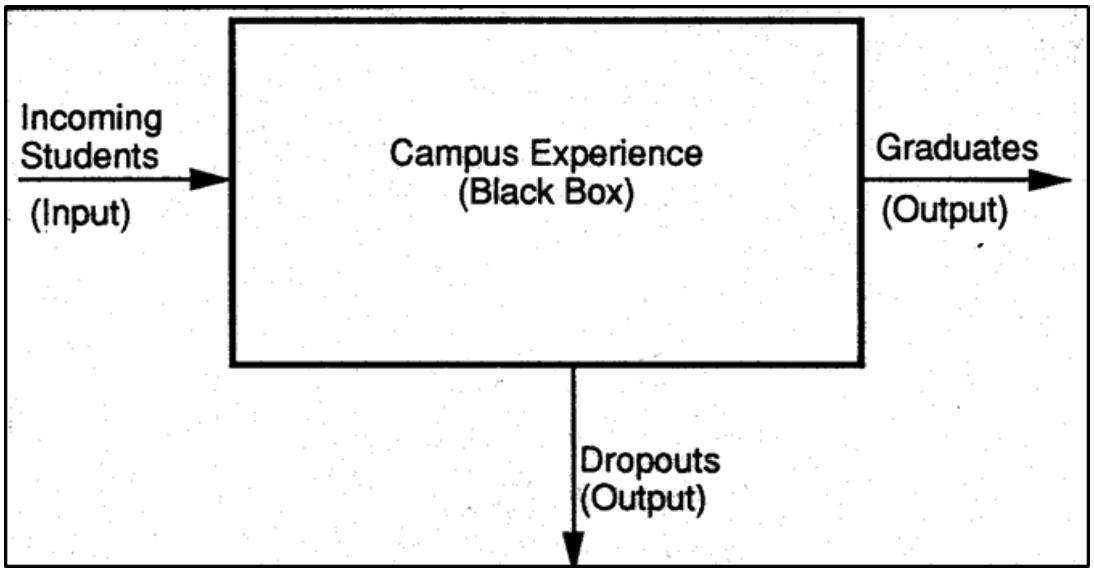
PADILLA'S BLACK BOX

Raymond Padilla's study of Chicana/o students in college and his theory of the College as a Black Box focuses on why certain students succeed in their academic completion of a degree or certificate and why others do not (Padilla, 1999). According to Padilla, several studies report that successful students are those who are advantaged in multiple ways. These efficacious college students are academically talented and supported in their educational journey for a degree or certificate. They may also exhibit an advanced level of motivation and commitment to their educational goals, put much effort into their studies, and feel comfortable on campus, both academically and socially. Padilla then examines students who are not advantaged, yet not only gain access to college but thrive and succeed despite the academic and social obstacles they face. His research began with the "black box" theory from Bothamley (1993), which posits that there is a box with something going in (inputs), something coming out (outputs), and something happening in between, but what occurs in between is insufficiently comprehended, if at all.

Padilla further clarified this theory by defining college as the "black box" with incoming students as the inputs and two output options in which students either graduate or they drop out (see Figure 2

below). The incoming students (input) are shown abstractly arriving at the college campus with diverse backgrounds and experiences, interests, commitments, and goals. These students' academic occurrences are then determined by what type of college campus they attend, their choice of major, and their academic and social experiences on campus (Padilla, 1999). Padilla states that once attending college, students have only there are only two possible outcomes for students: to successfully graduate with a degree or certificate, or to leave the college campus without completing their intended degree or certificate.

Figure 2. Padilla's Black Box



Source: Padilla (1999)

We often do not know the effects of the campus experience part of the black box, what encounters the students may have that will determine whether a particular student completes their program by graduating with a degree or certificate or whether they drop out of their program prior to completion. Padilla describes the campus experience part of the black box as representing obstacles or barriers that the students must overcome to complete their college degree or certificate. Students who are successful in navigating through the campus experience part of the black box and overcome any barriers will graduate with their degree or certificate. Those students who dropped out and left the college campus did not navigate proficiently through campus occurrences as part of the black box and were blocked by barriers or obstacles they experienced.

Padilla conducted a qualitative study for his research and utilized an unfolding matrix for data collection: “The unfolding matrix is so named because it starts out as a single leading construct derived from a given understanding of the local situation” (Padilla, 1999, p. 138). His leading construct included barriers to successful completion of a college degree or certificate, and he asked students to write down any barriers they encountered during their educational journey. He also asked them to share which barriers they overcame, how they overcame those barriers, and if there were any barriers they could not overcome.

From the student data, Padilla (1999) then developed a local model in which he separates barriers into four types: 1. Discontinuity Barriers, such as transitioning from where a person came from and where they are. 2. Lack of Nurturing Barriers, such as lack of family support and understanding. 3. Lack of Presence Barriers, which include social isolation, lack of minority role models. 4. Resource Barriers, which pertain to lack of financial aid support and lack of money.

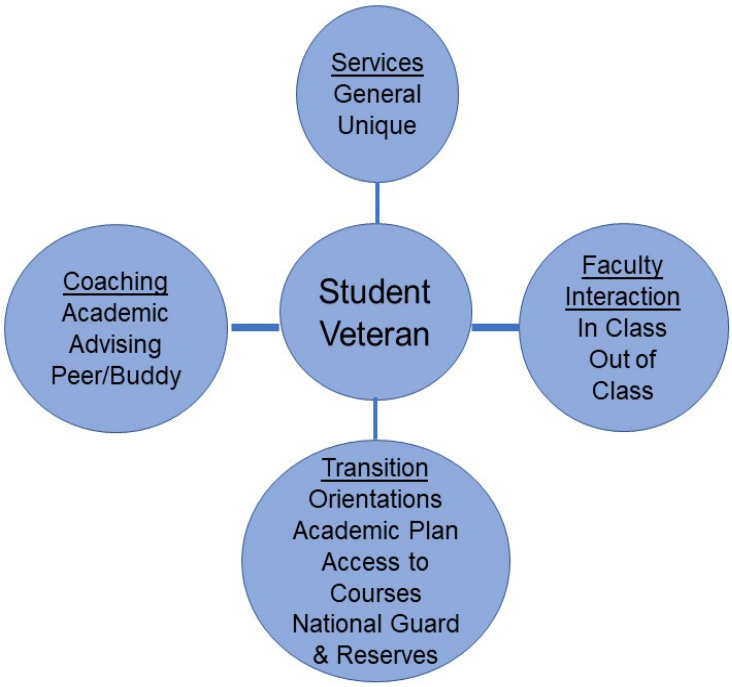
There is a high probability that student veterans will encounter barriers from each of the four types given that discontinuity barriers are already in place as they transition from the structured military to the loosely structured college campus. Nurturing and presence barriers may also be encountered as student veterans no longer have the camaraderie and brotherhood of the military to give them support. Resource barriers are less of a threat as a plethora of student veterans will use their G.I. Bill to pay for their college tuition, but there are several steps student veterans must complete to obtain this federal funding, steps that could also turn into a barrier.

Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support

David Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support combines with Padilla’s College as a Black Box theory by focusing on a broader timespan of student veteran experiences. Vacchi (2011, 2013) based his model on theories by scholars such as Bean and Metzner (1985) and Weidman (1989); however, he took their theories a step further and developed his model “with the use of theory elaboration and considers the student veteran experience from a holistic perspective” (p. 34). The visualization of the Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support (see Figure 3 below) shows a vertical axis of services that student veterans may need from their college during their transition into and through their educational journey. The horizontal axis shown on Vacchi’s (2011, 2013) model is derived from the research of Bean

& Metzner (1985) and Weideman (1989), and “relates to the academic and social experiences of student veterans while in college” (p. 35).

Figure 3. Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support



Source: Vacchi (2011, 2013)

The vertical and horizontal axis show Vacchi’s four cornerstones exploring the impact of college on student veterans. The first cornerstone is college services provided to student veterans. College services supporting student veterans are one of the most researched subjects as colleges strive to provide proper support to this nontraditional type of student. Recurrent themes in student veteran research report various areas where college campuses can support student veterans. DiRamio et al. (2008); Cook and Kim (2009); McBain, Kim, Cook, and Snead (2012), along with other scholars, suggest specific campus support such as veteran’s affair offices, housing, dedicated veteran advisors and counselors, along with services such as college disability or accommodation offices and mental health clinics.

Transition into and through their educational journey is the second cornerstone of Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support. Cook and Kim (2009) suggest a transition course

specifically tailored for student veterans, or a transition coach/peer-to-peer mentor as suggested by DiRamio et al. (2008). Transitioning from the military into college can often be overwhelming to student veterans and this is an area in which college campuses can implement significant comprehensive support.

The third key area Vacchi covers is academic interactions, comprising of contact with the student veteran both inside and outside of the classroom (Weidman, 1989). Recent literature evinces that, if student veterans contend with inconsistent or inadequate faculty or advising interactions, it may have a severe impact on the student veteran's persistence and success rates (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Livingston et al., 2011; Vacchi, 2013).

Rounding out the model, the fourth cornerstone is the importance of personal support for student veterans. Peer-to-peer mentoring is a large part of this cornerstone and can have an extraordinarily strong influence on the persistence and success of student veterans during their educational journey (Tinto, 1975; Weidman, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The camaraderie student veterans come to rely on in the military can be imperative for a proportion of student veterans whether they receive support via peer-to-peer mentoring on campus or if this support comes from friends or family off campus.

Combining Theoretical Frameworks Models for Student Veterans

Padilla's (1999) College as a Black Box Theory and Vacchi's (2011, 2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support both take into consideration how student veteran persistence can be affected by both internal and external factors. This combination of models allows for supplementary clarification of the complexity of student veteran persistence challenges and how to better support them. While Padilla's model emphasizes barriers to student persistence and success, in a juxtaposition, Vacchi's model suggests how to better support student veterans. By combining these two models, one can better understand internal and external barriers, along with internal and external support available to student veterans during their educational journeys. Understanding the barriers and support needs can provide insight for institutions of higher education regarding how to strengthen and improve the student veteran experience.

CONCLUSION

This chapter provides review of current and historically significant literature that inform this study. First, an overview of college student persistence theories and support methods was explored, followed by veteran community college student persistence theories. The next section covered student veterans' academic and social support, including physical and cognitive disabilities, as well as academic and social experiences as nontraditional students. The COVID-19 pandemic and the student veteran impact along with students' mental health impact due to the pandemic is also reported. Finally, the researcher's conceptual framework rounds out this chapter. This study expands these two conceptual frameworks to better understand student veterans and provide comprehension and understanding of factors contributing to their academic persistence during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of student veterans attending a community college prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the intention of gaining an understanding of any factors contributing to their academic persistence through to completion of their educational goals while navigating the pandemic. Examples from the literature review identifies some specific issues facing student veterans prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as transitions from the military into civilian life, loss of structure and support, navigating higher education, post-traumatic stress disorders, physical disabilities, and stress and mental health issues (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Byman, 2007; Falkey, 2016; Quillen-Armstrong, 2007; Shackelford, 2009; Stiglitz & Blimes, 2008; Son, et al., 2020). Through semi-structured interviews with student veterans who attended a community college prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, my goal was to explore their experiences in relation to persistence of their educational goals and factors contributing to this academic persistence. The questions addressed were:

1. What are the experiences of student veterans, attending a community college during the COVID-19 pandemic, in pursuit of their educational goals?

2. What factors contributed to persistence of student veterans at their community college as they pursue their educational goals during the COVID-19 pandemic?

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

QUALITATIVE DESIGN

This study uses a qualitative research method. Denzin & Lincoln (2011) describes qualitative research as:

> A situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative Research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 7)

I chose a qualitative design to conduct this study of student veterans because the story of the comprehension and perceptions of their educational journey and the impact of COVID-19 on that journey adds to the field of data. Talking to people, learning their stories and perceptions, forming themes emerging from those interviews, and getting to the meaning behind their experiences are other reasons why I chose to conduct qualitative research over quantitative research.

The principal goal of qualitative research is to reach depth, instead of breadth, in research and this goal can be achieved by focusing on a smaller sample size of participants instead of a larger, representative sample (Ambert, et al., 1995). Focusing on five to seven research participants allows for "a detailed interpretative account of the cases included" (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 56). Smith and Osborn (2007) also posit that by using a small sample size, in-depth engagement can be achieved in the individual interviews but also permits "detailed examination of similarity and difference, convergence and divergence" (p. 57). A secondary goal is to study why a modest number of people behave and think the way they do instead of focusing on what they do or believe on a larger scale. Finally, qualitative research seeks discovery rather than verification with supplemental information gathered to reflect new behaviors or practices, adding to the research field.

Narrative Design

A narrative approach was chosen for this study as language "shapes oral texts and gives meaning to historical events" (Etter-Lewis, 1991, pp. 44-45). The COVID-19 pandemic is indeed a historical event, and a hybrid approach of life history inquiry and narrative inquiry proved an effective tool during the study. The plan was to seek student veterans' experiences of persistence to their educational goals during the pandemic rather than their whole life story (Atkinson, 2007). As narrative stories are focused on specific situations, this modified or focused life history approach served as the strongest platform for the research.

ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

I have a personal interest in the educational needs of active-duty military and military veterans as my spouse is a 30-year veteran of the U.S. Coast Guard. He completed his bachelor's degree while

serving on active duty. We also have a daughter who is currently serving in the U.S. Air Force and is presently taking college classes when she can during and in between her tours of duty. In addition, in 2010, when the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill was allowed to be transferred to servicemembers spouses and/or children, my spouse transferred all 36 months of his educational benefits to me for my own education. These financial benefits paid for half of my Bachelor of Business Administration degree from Nicholls State University, the whole of my Master of Business Administration degree from Texas A & M University, and partial payment of my Doctorate in Community College Leadership degree from Ferris State University. Thus, I, too, am familiar with the considerable challenges of navigating through the paperwork, rules, and regulations of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill. As a graduate student during the COVID-19 pandemic timeframe, I also had to maintain objectivity as to other students' persistence. The plan for bracketing or epoche' was completed by keeping a journal with any preconceived ideas throughout the research process so were noted and kept separate from the data and analysis of such (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

SAMPLE SELECTION

Site Selection

For the study, I chose the site of a single community college located in the metropolitan area of Houston, Texas. This purposeful selection method was selected due to the proximity to the researcher and the substantial number of military and veteran populations. Purposeful selection is where "particular settings, person, and activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can't be gotten as well from other choices" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). My intention was to conduct in-depth interviews with five to seven veteran students and was afforded the opportunity to interview six.

Approximately 1.6 million veterans live in the state of Texas as of fall 2019 data collection, and there are 14 military installations in the state. The community college selected for the study is located in the largest county in Texas, Harris County, with roughly 186,534 veterans living in the county. Montgomery county is the second nearest county to the college, with 34,677 veterans living within as of fall of 2019 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2021). The college is considered a "veteran-friendly" campus serving over 750 student veterans in the fall of 2019 and has a strong partnership with the Texas

Veterans Commission. A Veterans Affairs advisor is employed by the college specifically for student veterans, as well as a Career Services counselor, also dedicated specifically to student veterans.

According to this college's demographics for fall 2019, the institution enrolled approximately 13,760 students, with 87.75 percent of students attending from in-district, 8.5 percent attending from in-state, and 2.91 percent of students attending internationally from over 50 countries. The racial demographics for fall of 2019 was 55 percent Hispanic, 22 percent Black, 14 percent White, 6 percent Asian, and 2.76 percent other races. The racial demographics for student veterans for the fall of 2019 was 32 percent Black, 30 percent White, 29 percent Hispanic, 5 percent Asian, and 4 percent other races.

Participant Selection

Once IRB approval was granted from Ferris State University (see Appendix A), which is my degree-granting institution, and the community college from which participants were solicited and selected from (see Appendix B), I moved to the next phase in the study. Purposeful selection of participants for semi-structured interviews began by obtaining a college-approved list of all student veterans who were attending the college in the fall of 2019, just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and continued to attend this target college for two years, ending in spring of 2022. The criterion sampling strategy was used to recruit, identify, and select participants (Mertens, 2010). Criterion sampling works well when all participants of the study represent those who have undergone the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and as all student veterans attending the college went through the COVID-19 pandemic, strengthens the reason I chose the criterion sampling strategy.

To determine the essential criteria to use in selecting participants, they were required to meet three essential criteria to be eligible for selection:

1. Must identify as a veteran
2. Must have been enrolled in community college prior to, or during the COVID-19 pandemic
3. Must have already graduated or be nearing completion of attaining their desired educational goal.

DATA COLLECTION

To collect thick, robust, and complex data, multiple methods were used. This use of multiple data collection methods enabled me to verify triangulation, which is used in a qualitative study to develop a

comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1999). In a narrative qualitative study, triangulation is also viewed as a strategy to evaluate validity through the convergence of information from diverse sources (Carter, et al., 2014). Data for this study was collected through demographic surveys, semi-structured interviews, researcher field notes and journal, and member checking by participants. Field notes, journaling, and secondary documents were also included as methods in the study.

For the semi-structured interviews, I pre-formulated the main questions and sub-questions, but the answers were open-ended and expanded upon and/or enhanced by various inquires used at the researcher's discretion (Schensul, et al., 1999).

Phase One

An email invitation (see Appendix C) was sent to the list of possible participants previously identified by obtaining a list from the college's research data analysis team who met the three criteria above. The invitation included an informed consent statement, along with description of the study, and assurance that pseudonyms would be used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were recruited through email addresses, both their personal email address and that of the community college they attended and where the research was conducted. I also enlisted the college's Veterans Affairs advisor to send the recruitment email to the recruitment list as they had direct contact with veteran students and already had established a rapport with a group of student veterans. By collaborating with the Veterans Affairs advisor, I was able to identify potential participants who were interested in becoming part of the study. This email invitation included the link to a demographic survey (see Appendix D) on freeonlinesurveys.com. I originally anticipated 100-150 participants to fill out the demographic survey.

The demographic survey was used to elicit background information along with starting to establish a connection with potential participants. In qualitative research, the researcher tries to get as close as possible to the participants being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The survey asked close-ended questions that were not asked during the semi-structured interviews. Questions included the number of years they served in the military, which branch of the military they served in, gender, age, marital status, level of education, and what level of education they are currently obtaining (or have obtained within the timeframe of study). These questions were used, first, to ensure the three essential

criteria questions were satisfied, and secondly, to begin the narrative inquiry method of understanding the lived experiences of research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Those who were receptive to participating in the study were sent an acknowledgement email along with possible date/times for an initial in-depth interview.

Phase Two

When conducting qualitative research, Miles et al. (2014) proposes the quality and richness of the sample is of greater importance than the quantity of the sample. Therefore, I recruited six participants from the college. Interviews began by communicating with each participant to share how and why I chose the topic of my research, the purpose of my research, and the importance of the student veteran's participation in the study. This open communication served as a means to establish a level of rapport and trust between myself and each participant. Signed permission and verbal informed consent for recorded videos (see Appendix E) were reviewed and read to each participant and permission was acquired prior to each interview as well as verbal permission prior to WebEx recording of each interview.

In-depth interviewing is issue-orientated and useful in a qualitative, narrative study when there is a particular topic the researcher wants to focus on and gain insight from participants. They are participating in a conversation, requiring the researcher to actively ask and listen to their participants (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). As such, the researcher can obtain deeper understandings of the participants' experiences and persistence of their educational journey through the COVID-19 pandemic.

I conducted these in-depth interviews with participants via WebEx, while demonstrating good record-keeping, which is essential to provide relatively incontestable description for further analysis and reporting (Stake, 2010). Of the interviews, five were conducted via WebEx, and one was conducted in-person on the college campus where the participant was enrolled. However, that interview was also recorded via WebEx with the participant appearing on-camera, as the other participants were. Automatic transcription is a part of the WebEx service, and I had asked permission of each participant ahead of time to record each interview, again ensuring informed consent. The automatic transcribing of the interview ensured correct transcription of the data from each participant. Interviews lasted for 60 to 90 minutes, and participants were provided with a general copy of the interview questions in advance. Having an advance copy helped to increase comfort and trust between the participants and myself. The assurance of no

surprises within the research questions is paramount to conducting the conversational style of interview for which I was striving.

At the end of the interview process, I also sent each participant a transcribed copy of their interview for member checking. By member checking, the participants had the opportunity to check for accuracy and resonance with their circumstances, strengthening the validity of the researcher's data. Participants were also provided with my contact information in case they wanted to express any concerns with their interview transcription or to clarify or provide any additional information.

The semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix F) included different areas of focus, derived from the literature review and the theoretical frameworks of Padilla's (1999) College as a Black Box and Vacchi's (2011, 2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support. The areas of focus included:

- Background of participants, including military experience, educational experience, family support, and work experience prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Personal, environmental, and social factors that supported their persistence of their educational journey during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Specific services, activities, and programs utilized by the student veteran that supported their persistence of their educational journey during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Experiences regarding the college's role in helping student veterans persist towards their educational goals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The in-depth approach of asking open-ended questions during the interviews with student veterans was to gain an understanding of factors contributing to their academic persistence through to completion of their educational goals, including either a college course, certificate, or degree while navigating the pandemic, and was imperative to the study.

FIELD NOTES AND JOURNAL

Field notes were gathered throughout the research process as well as for each interview in addition to the interview transcripts. In qualitative research, field notes are an essential component of rigorous research, enhancing data and providing rich context for analysis. A well-framed approach to field notes collection is ideally created prior to study start, then revised purposefully based on findings to incorporate new components while retaining continuity of key items throughout data collection (Phillippi &

Lauderdale, 2018). As I moved through the study, my thoughts, concerns, biases, and reactions were written in the field notes after each interview, so those perceptions and observations were captured immediately. The field notes served to help me separate any bias or preconceived notions from the emerging data and were also used during the data analysis process of the study.

DATA ANALYSIS

The inclusive process of data analysis commences with identifying information or themes from the study's data set that can be used toward answering the research question. Merriam (1998) posits "A unit of data is any meaningful (or potentially meaningful) segment of data and can be as small as a word, or as large as several pages of field notes" (p. 179). Data analysis is not a step-by-step process in that one step must be complete for the researcher to move to the next step. Instead, the steps are interrelated, building upon one another, and conducted simultaneously (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) is a foundational method for qualitative analysis as it can be used across different ranges of studies. It is a method "for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This type of analysis supports the two theoretical frameworks this study is based on by offering a flexible approach for examining what each participant lived through.

Creswell and Poth (2018) presented a sequential process for data analysis that guided me during the analysis stage of my study. First, I managed and organized the data, which included consistent file naming conventions. While converting the WebEx interview data, the recordings and transcriptions for each participant was kept secure and confidential. Collected data was stored securely in digital and electronic formats on a password-protected external hard drive. Second, the reading and memoing of emergent ideas from the data commenced. This step was the beginning of the open coding phase, and I immersed myself in the data, reviewing each interview transcript numerous times before starting to break the data into any significance of verbiage.

During this stage, I discovered the Atlas.ti coding software for qualitative data. Each of the six participant's transcripts were uploaded into the Atlas.ti coding software, and I started using the text highlight color function to distinguish key words and phrases, color code the related categories, and explore patterns. The Atlas.ti query toll was used to retrieve data segments where participants described

their experiences of attending a community college during the COVID-19 pandemic and factors contributing to their persistence during this time.

Beginning to identify and organize those ideas, short phrases and key concepts into memos allowed me to see semblances of themes starting to emerge. Memos are “not just descriptive summaries of data but attempts to synthesize them into higher level analytic meanings” (Miles, et al., 2014, p. 97). Memoing is also a way to track the data and record emerging considerations on the specific steps chosen to achieve data saturation.

The next sequential step in data analysis was describing and classifying codes into themes, which is the heart of qualitative data analysis. Thorough reviewing and familiarity with the data produced 449 initial codes, which included general heading statements and responses that were central to answering the two central research questions. During the next few phases of analyzing the data, I continued to effectuate in-depth coding, putting together detailed descriptions of experiences and perceptions of student veterans, and further developing emerging themes from said data.

Data-driven themes were found to answer the two central research questions. For example, concepts of time include clock hours, semesters, and progressive stages of persistence. Iterating the themes founded in the data led to certain particulars associated with occurrences that happened during the COVID-19 pandemic and their persistence during their educational journey. Participants used common language or themes that described experiences during the pandemic (i.e., challenges, time, money, job) and reasons for their persistence (i.e., family, support, commitment, military culture). They then started to provide an interpretation based on their own views and described in situ “within the context of the setting of the person, place or event” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 189).

Coding and classifying of themes must be thoroughly and properly completed before the researcher can move to the interpretation step of data analysis, which is the fourth step in the sequence according to Creswell & Poth, (2018, p. 189). I obtained peer feedback at this point of early data interpretation to strengthen the validity and reliability of the data.

Representing and visualizing the data is the last step in the sequence of data analysis. Presenting the data using rich descriptions and robust themes allows the researcher to disseminate the information to fellow researchers. By following this sequence, I completed my data analysis meticulously

and thoughtfully, leading to purposeful representation of the data. The six interview transcripts yielded ample information to complete the research. The analysis also connected the student veterans' experiences to the Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support (Vacchi, 2011, 2013), and College as a Black Box theory (Padilla, 1999).

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

In qualitative research, validity takes the form of "subjecting one's findings to completing claims and interpretations and providing the reader with strong arguments for your particular knowledge claim" (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 246). As a qualitative researcher, one must grapple with ensuring that findings are plausible and will be received as a credible interpretation or explanation of the phenomenon being studied. Validity is a process in which the researcher must earn the confidence of the reader that their data is reliable (Lincoln & Guba, 1999). The definition of reliability involves the consistency of responses to questions, or a measure producing the same results when used repeatedly to measure the same thing (Rossi, et al., 2004). For this study, I relied upon the concepts of validity and reliability and applied three different strategies to safeguard accuracy and completeness of the data and their analysis. Those safeguards included member checking, triangulation, and maintaining an audit trail.

Member checking is where a researcher solicits participants' views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations and verifies that the interpretation of their information was consistent with their inner meaning (Ely, et al., 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1999, Merriam, 2009). After all interviews were completed, I sent each participant a copy of their interview transcript for member checking at the end of the interview process (see Appendix G). Member checking helps establish credibility in qualitative research when the research participants verify results.

Triangulation is achieved when the researcher makes use of multiple and dissimilar sources, methods, and theories to provide consistent data to confirm findings. For this study, I provided participants with a demographic survey to confirm eligibility, which included informed consent. I also kept field notes and a journal, thereby furthering the credibility of my study and triangulation. My field notes were handwritten on a form I developed and were specific to each participant interview. The field notes were transcribed into a computer file and saved into a folder using each participant's pseudonym to

protect confidentiality. All written journals and electronic files were securely stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office.

An audit trail was used to organize and keep track of the data, where the data came from, when it was obtained, and how the data was recorded to review the process used for the interpretation of the information. The audit trail helps certify that findings are consistent to the evidence (Merriam, 2009). Having an audit trail document and describing the study in detail so that another researcher can plainly follow the decision trail, protocols, and data collection help demonstrate credibility and plausibility (Krefting, 1991).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to Merriam (2009), "the validity and reliability of a study depends upon the ethics of the investigator" (p. 228). In a study where I asked student veterans to share their circumstances and perceptions of the persistence of their educational goals during the COVID-19 pandemic, the possible vulnerability of participants was taken into consideration. The pandemic was experienced by different people in distinctive ways and the possibility of negativity and trauma related to the pandemic had real potential. Thus, I took the approach of "doing no harm" to the participants, and employed the following ethical consideration steps with the study's participants:

1. Respectfully asked for participants to be a part of the study without deception or coercion.
2. Provided potential participants all necessary information so they are fully informed of the study's purpose prior to deciding to participate.
3. Informed the participants that any recorded interviews will be stopped at any time upon their request.
4. Provided confidentiality to participants by asking them to pick a pseudonym with the assurance that the researcher will keep the pseudonym key in a locked file cabinet in their home office.
5. The researcher obtained all Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals required prior to the start of the research study.
6. The researcher followed all rules and regulations provided by IRB boards of both Ferris State University and target community college.

In addition to protecting the participant's identities, another ethical concern when planning out my study surrounded whether to provide an incentive to participants agreeing to be interviewed. I chose not to provide any incentives, even after a low respondent rate of the initial demographic surveys. The six

participants who did agree to be interviewed were willing to speak with me and share their time and stories with me solely based on furthering research and education.

CONCLUSION

This chapter covered the rationale behind why the researcher chose a qualitative study, followed by a description of the site and participant selection. My role as researcher was explored and the different modes of data collection were outlined, including the demographic survey and semi-structured interviews. Using the data collected through the semi-structured interviews, any necessary follow-up interviews, my field notes and journal, and the analysis of the data was also reported. The validity, reliability, and ethical considerations of the study were also described. The methods and narrative aspect of this study were chosen because I wanted to give a voice and platform to my participant's stories and experiences during the pandemic and how their persistence to completing their educational goals was assessed. By gathering and sharing the highly personal, yet common, significant stories of my participants, I am not only adding to the body of research but providing recommendations on needed additional student supports to administrators in higher education.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the educational journey and academic persistence of six student veterans attending a metropolitan Houston, Texas, area community college during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher sought to gain an understanding of their experiences and factors contributing to their academic persistence during this unprecedented time in our history. The two research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are the experiences of student veterans attending a community college during the COVID-19 pandemic in pursuit of their educational goals?
2. What factors contributed to persistence of student veterans at their community college as they pursued their educational goals during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Six sub-questions were also asked of each participant (see Appendix H for full list), including asking participants to share a small amount of background information about themselves, expectations regarding possible challenges toward their educational goals, personal, environmental, or social factors affecting their persistence, and what helped and hindered their semester-to-semester persistence.

The chapter begins with an overview of all respondent and participant demographics, then proceeds, in order, through each main research question and sub-question, followed by an interpretation of the collective participant responses. Specific individual participant responses are included for each question which highlight the distinct themes that emerged.

RESPONDENT AND PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS OVERVIEW

A demographic survey was sent out to 438 student veterans at target metropolitan community college in Houston, Texas, area. The demographic survey asked questions such as the number of years served in the military, which branch of the military they served in, gender, age, marital status, level of education, what level of education they are currently obtaining (or have obtained within the timeframe of study), and how many semester hours (on average) they took each semester. Table 1 describes the

demographic information from all respondents, broken into two categories: (1) their pseudonym if they were interviewed and they are from here on out called “participants” or (2) a “respondent” identifier if they declined and/or were not chosen to be a part of the study. Of the 13 total respondents, eight agreed to become participants in the study, however two failed to respond to subsequent email correspondence related to scheduling participant interviews. After three email attempts to schedule participant interviews, the researcher stopped communication with the two respondents as they did not want to infer harassment. The other five respondents declined to become participants via the initial survey request.

Ages of all 13 respondents ranged from 25 to 60, with the average age being 39.5. All branches of the military were represented: Air Force (2), Army (5), Coast Guard (1), Navy (1) and Marines (2), along with Army National Guard (1) and the Texas National Guard (1). Seven respondents were married, three were single, two were divorced, and one was separated from their partner. Of the total respondents, nine had children and four did not. Average amount of time served between all respondents was 12 years, with five years being the least number of years served and 34 years as being the greatest number of years served. Five respondents retired from the military and eight were honorably discharged after fulfilling their requisite contracts. The number of respondents who previously attempted to attain a degree was split somewhat evenly, with seven responding yes, five responding no and one not answering the question. Respondents took between six and 15 credit hours per semester, with an average of 11 hours toward their educational completion.

Interviews with the six participants were conducted between November 15, 2021, and February 3, 2022, and completed via WebEx for five participants and one in-person interview (still recorded via WebEx for consistency). Participants interviewed included four men and two women with their age range being between 25 to 49. The gender, age or race was not a focus for the study, but there was a mix of race across the participants interviewed. The six participants served in either the Army or the Marines on active duty or as part of the National Guard or Reserves. Four participants were married, and all married participants had children; the two single participants did not have children. Years served for participants varied from one currently still active duty to a mid-range of nine years served and one who retired after 25 years. Service rank varied, with two E-7s, one E-5 and three E-4s. Previous attempts to attain a degree had four participants answering yes, and two participants answering no. Of the six participants, at the

time of their interviews, three had already attained a degree and three had not yet completed. Participants took between eight and 12 credit hours per semester.

A few participants chose to share personal information that was not directly asked for during the interview, and if deemed pertinent to the focus of this study, it is included in the below narratives.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Pseudonym Name or Respondent Identifier	Age	Marital Status/Children	Work Outside of Home	Military Branch	Years Served/Retired	Rank	First attempt at completing	Hold current degree	Average semester hours
Austin	48	Married/Yes	Yes	Army	21.5/Yes	E-7	Yes	Yes	12
Jennifer	37	Married/Yes	No	Marines	9.5/Yes	E-5	Yes	No	12
Mason	34	Married/Yes	Yes	Army	6/No	E-4	No	Yes	9
Michelle	49	Married/Yes	No	Army	25/Yes	E-7	Yes	No	12
Neil	35	Single/No	No	Army National Guard	9/No	E-4	No	Yes	12
Nolan	25	Single/No	Yes	Texas National Guard	Active Duty/No	E-4	Yes	No	8
Respondent - 1	27	Married/Yes	Yes	Navy	11/No	E-6	Yes	No	6-12
Respondent - 2	30	Separated/Yes	No	Marines	8/No	E-4	Yes	No	12
Respondent - 3	32	Divorced/Yes	No	Air Force	5/No	E-4	No	Yes	12
Respondent - 4	46	Divorced/Yes	Yes	Army	7/Yes	E-4	Yes	No	6
Respondent - 5	60	Married/No	No	Air Force	34/Yes	E-9	No	Yes	15
Respondent - 6	56	Married/Yes	No	Army	13/No	E-6	No	Yes	12
Respondent - 7	34	Single/No	Yes	Coast Guard	7.5/No	E-4	Did not answer	Did not answer	6
Average	**39.5**	**N/A**	**N/A**	**N/A**	**12**	**N/A**	**N/A**	**N/A**	**11**

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

The first sub-question asked of participants was to share a bit of background information about themselves such as where they were from, reasons for joining the military, their experience while serving in the military, and if they took any college classes during their service. Their background information for each participant is included below.

NEIL

Neil joined the Army National Guard shortly after high school in 2006 and served for nine years as a Source Intelligence Analyst. While serving on active duty, he tried going to college for geographic information systems, a program related to what he was doing in the Army National Guard. The first few weeks of classes were unremarkable, but then he “got deployed during that first semester and did not come back until the classes were almost completed” and he did not have an opportunity to catch up and finish. This scenario happened repeatedly to Neil during his time serving in the guard. Legally, he should

have been allowed to complete these classes as per Federal laws protecting active-duty military members who are attending college if they must miss school due to military orders. In fact, in 2010, the Department of Education published regulations "implementing the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008. The regulations, 34 Code of Federal Regulations (C.F.R.) section 668.18, went into effect July 1, 2010. The law is codified under 20 United States Code (U.S.C.) Section 1091c" (Johnson, 2017, para. 3).

When he ended his military service in 2014, he had a small range of service jobs. He eventually grew tired of those kinds of jobs and enrolled in community college classes in late 2019. Neil graduated with his Geographic Information Systems Associate of Applied Science in the fall of 2020.

AUSTIN

When Austin got out of high school, he was working as a welder, and though he felt he was making great money at welding, he wanted to do something different. He joined the Army and was initially deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. He served in the infantry in the Army and said there was little time for college classes as he would go into the field and be out in the woods for 45 days at a time. Thus, during his military career, he only attempted to take a couple of college classes. Austin served in the military for twenty-one and a half years.

After retiring from the Army, he was unemployed, and decided to go to college. He lives only about a mile from the target community college campus and said attending there "was a no-brainer due to proximity." Austin first completed both the AWS Welding Inspector certificate and the Welding Technology Specialization Associate of Applied Science degree at the target community college. An adjunct position became available at the same community college, and Austin began teaching in the welding inspection program. A few years later, when this community college began offering a bachelor's degree in Energy, Manufacturing, and Trades Management, Austin enrolled and completed his Bachelor of Applied Science in May of 2022 as part of the first graduating cohort.

MICHELLE

Michelle was born in the Caribbean but raised in New York. Her mother had a 5th grade education, her father graduated high school, and works in a blue-collar field. She graduated high school early at 17 and joined the Army right after graduation. Michelle served for twenty-five plus years in the

Army. She wanted to go into the military for three main reasons: one, to become independent so her parents no longer had to support her; two, so she could help them with the income she would be earning; and three, to get money for college. She states she “killed three birds with one stone” by joining the Army.

While active duty, Michelle started on a Veterinary Medicine degree, but after having a baby, she decided to put that goal on hold. She had a smattering of college credits from that time but did not pursue any other degrees during her time in the Army. In 2018, after retirement and experiencing an empty nest as her children were all grown, she went back to target college for her Associate of Applied Science in Automotive Technology, graduating in 2020. Michelle mentioned her love of learning led her to enroll in the Bachelor of Applied Science degree program in Energy, Manufacturing, and Trades Management in August of 2020. She graduated with her bachelor's degree in May of 2022.

NOLAN

Nolan came from a military family. His mother served for six years on active duty in the Army, while being a single parent. After high school, Nolan spoke with a military recruiter, as he was not 100 percent sure he wanted to join the military and did not know what to expect. Just after joining the Army, he also started taking classes at Blynn College. He states his attendance at Blynn was not to his satisfaction and not easy due to his military obligations and as a result, he completed roughly six credits at that time. After serving for six years, he got out of the Army, then signed up with the Texas National Guard, in which he is currently serving.

While in the Army, Nolan started taking some face-to-face college classes as online courses were very rare back then. Because of his deployments, though, he had to give his professors a large lead time for when he thought he would be away. Oftentimes, he did not have the pertinent deployment paperwork that he needed for backup for his professors, as the paperwork was not given to him prior to deployment. This caused “some stress due trying to keep professors happy, along with being a good soldier.” So, while active duty in the Army, and while serving in the Texas National Guard, Nolan was able to complete only a handful of credits. He is now on track to graduate with his Associate of Applied Science in Cybersecurity in December 2022.

MASON

Mason was born in Honduras and moved to the United States in 2000. He always wanted to join the Army as that was his dream since he was a little kid. Mason is the first veteran in his family and is "actually the first person who even graduated high school in his family." He served for six years in the Army, got out, and continues to serve as an Army reservist.

He started his college educational pursuits after his discharge from the Army. For a while after discharge, he was a truck driver, and he had not planned to attend college, but soon realized he did not want to continue driving trucks for a living. Mason completed an associate degree, then transferred to a university and completed his bachelor's degree. After that, he went back again to attain a Master of Business Administration in supply chain management. He was attaining an HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning) certificate through target community college in 2020, when the pandemic started, yet he was able to complete his certificate that same year.

JENNIFER

Jennifer was the oldest of five and did not know what she wanted to do after graduation, so she went to talk to different military recruiters. Physical fitness was always an active part of her life, and as the Marine boot camp was the most physically demanding, that was the branch she chose to enlist in. Jennifer joined the Marine Corps in 2005 shortly after graduating high school, serving in the military for nine and a half years.

While enlisted, Jennifer signed up and completed a small number of college classes, but it was hard and she explained that "it seemed every single time, something would come up and impede me finishing my classes." So, she was never able to fully concentrate on her college education while serving in the Marine Corps. Jennifer completed the EMT (Emergency Medical Technician) program at target community college in early 2021.

MOTIVATION FOR ATTAINING DEGREE OR CERTIFICATE

All six participants were also asked why they decided to enter or reenter college. Each mentioned their job/career as being a factor toward attaining their degree or certificate, such as continuing to hone technical skills they learned in the military or realizing a college degree was necessary to work in the field

in which they were interested. A few reported that their skills did not transfer to the civilian job market, so they needed to become reskilled to enter the workforce. Neil remarked:

> I loved what I did in the Army. I love the aspect of going back into that specific work. I didn't want to work for the government or the federal government, at least not given who the president was at the time. I had nothing to do with that. So, my job at the time was a big motivator for me to get a degree. I could do what I did in the Army on paper, and then get a job at, like, the local government a county government doing the same kind of geographic analysis.

Austin's reasons for his chosen educational degree journey were opposite of Neil's, where he promulgated:

> I blew up a lot of stuff, broke a lot of stuff, set a lot of stuff on fire, and I wanted something totally outside of what I did in my last job in the military. And so, I started the inspection program.

However, Nolan and Jennifer's reasons are quite different from each other's. Nolan is still serving in the Texas National Guard, but he is working on his degree because he wants "to be able to go to a normal job and have normal hours so, I'm definitely ready to go back to living a regular civilian life."

After having served for 9.5 years in the Marines, Jennifer was honorably discharged due to a permanent medical retirement after being in a vehicle accident while serving. She applied for the Bachelor of Nursing program but was not accepted because of her chemistry exam grades. Her husband finished the paramedic program at target community college a semester or two prior, and Jennifer said she did not want to waste another six months studying for the nursing entrance exam, choosing instead to sign up for the paramedic program as well. These two participants approached the reason for attaining their education from two different starting points: one who is planning their career from a place of security, and the other who had to try and find a program that worked for them while in a time-crunch.

ACTIVE DUTY AND ATTENDING COLLEGE

Over half of the participants attempted to attain college credits while serving on active duty, and they affirmed their quest for education with the researcher during their interviews. Jennifer relates her encounters:

> I did college at Hawaiian Pacific University. I did it when I was there. I think 2 courses, but every single time, something would come up. You're a Marine first; you're going to skip your class if necessary. Then it turned into ok well, passed it, but then does this college accept what I did there, and then it turns into that. Then I did more classes. I didn't do any in Virginia. I did more classes in California.

> That turned into another struggle, because then they're only transfer credits, and they don't show grade point average. So, I have twin reports from there. Sociology and psychology. I just did anything that was going towards my associate of arts [degree].

Neil also attempted to take some college courses during his nine years of active-duty service, stating:

> I don't know, like, just when I first went to school, I had a real hard time staying with it just cause I was in the mindset of, like, what the hell does English have to do with whatever, and I really just couldn't stick with it. So, whenever these opportunities came up through the National Guard, I was real quick to jump on them instead of sticking with college.

Austin and Michelle served in the Army during their time in the military, and they have similar reasons for not attempting to take college classes while on active duty. Austin reports:

> In the infantry, there isn't a lot of time for college classes, because it's constantly harped in the military that, you know, you can take college classes, and it's true. You can, but in my normal training cycle in the industry, I might go to the field and be out in the woods for 45 days at a time. So, college —traditional college— isn't a thing that happened at the time. This was in the '90s so, at the time, distance learning, you know, was done through correspondence courses and was time consuming. You have deadlines and then deployments. You know, combat action stuff like that. You just don't have time to do it.

Similarly, Michelle explains:

> There is no way you could go to school and be a soldier, sailor, airmen, you know, with all the regulations and everything they needed you and all the requirements. It was just impossible.

THEMES

Every participant faced challenges of varying kinds during the pandemic relating to their classes, family, stress, and time. Every participant mentioned they were going to college to get a better job and have an actual career. Each of the six participants also mentioned time as a factor, such as the time it took them to complete their degrees while going to college during the pandemic. What follows is expanded details of the key themes and subthemes gleaned from the data.

These three key themes and sub-themes emerged from the data:

1. Challenges
    a. Expectations
    b. Time
    c. Finances
    d. COVID-19 pandemic
2. Support

a. Family, Friends, and Peers

b. College Services

c. Missing Support

3. Fortitude

a. Commitment

b. Military Culture

This section describes the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data to increase the understanding of the participants' persistence during their educational journey in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEY THEME 1: CHALLENGES

Each participant started classes at the target community college by the fall of 2019, prior to the beginning of the pandemic. Austin indicated that it had been at least 20 years since he had done any college-level math and that "it was kind of scary." Since he felt trepidation surrounding those classes, he utilized the math lab tutoring services. Michelle also faced trepidation, revealing she:

> was petrified, scared. I was horrified at the thought of going to school because I had graduated high school literally in the last century. So, it was very, very scary. I was very anxious. I was having nightmares; I was having a variety of panic attacks. It was really, really, really hard to get myself to go to school.

Similarly, Neil had been out of school for quite a while, and said he was "worried about going back to college when I hadn't done any sort of intellectually stimulating activity… did I suddenly turn into an idiot because of those years, and I wasn't going to do well in my classes?"

Nolan's challenges were a bit different and stemmed from living in Houston but receiving orders to report for duty in Dallas on short notice while being enrolled in classes. This disruption to his schedule led to missing assignment deadlines and needing to contact professors to extend deadlines. He noted he had to keep organized and on top of things, which created difficulties as he did not have much free time to work on assignments, let alone staying connected with his various professors.

Jennifer got COVID-19 incredibly early, in February of 2020. She was taking a chemistry course at that time and had a lab exam but woke up feeling sick, nauseous, and felt like "something is wrong with my body." She tried to power through, taking 800 mg of Ibuprofen on her way to campus:

> I was like something is really wrong with me. Right now. I need to keep it together. I have to finish this lab exam, and you know, it's where they have little things set up because otherwise you can cheat. So, if you go to each station, you write down what you see in the microscope. It's very, very in-depth. They don't reset it up just for one person. And so, I drove to St. Luke's, and it was very packed, and people were sick, but nobody knew, and they didn't have COVID tests yet. I was tested for pneumonia and flu and everything, and nothing was positive. And I just got it, and I don't know it. It's all over the news, but you can't test for it. So, I don't have a clue if that's what it was, but it wasn't anything else, so I'm pretty sure it was COVID.

Jennifer was extremely sick for a week or two, and after finding she did not do well on her chemistry lab exam, she decided to drop that class along with another class, just calling the spring of 2020 semester "a total loss semester." This affected her finances because, with the Post 9/11 GI Bill, if a student drops a class, then they must repay the VA for the tuition.

Michelle states that attending classes when the pandemic first began,

> was like someone pulled a carpet from under your feet. We were used to a routine; we were used to a building; we were used to a classroom. And all of a sudden, we were moved to fully online.

She goes on to express the sudden confusion regarding student veteran's benefits such as the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill and if they were going to be awarded or not and she goes on to share:

> You didn't know if they received the funds from the G.I. Bill. You didn't know if you could get G.I. Bill help because at the time there were caveats. You had to be, I think it was 50 percent or more of your schooling in person, in order to get 100 percent of your benefit. So, it's like, bro, I can't be in the classroom. They are not allowing us to be in the classroom. How am I going to get my money? How am I going to survive this month? How am I going to pay my rent?

She reiterates the stress she was under during this time, not knowing what, if any, negative financial penalties would possibly be incurred due to not being in face-to-face classes for 50 percent of your course load. She mentioned that once Congress passed the preservation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill's benefits for students who had no choice but to move to 100 percent online courses, her stress level went down, knowing she would receive the same financial benefits as she was receiving prior to the pandemic.

Mason was attending an HVAC workforce class at the college at the beginning of the pandemic and how his workforce class was handled was obviously different from those participants enrolled in fully academic classes. He specified:

> I'm a very visual person. I need to see things with my eyes, and I need to ask questions I would rather be in the classroom. So, the transition into online courses was very tough. It was very challenging for me. Obviously, you have to be adaptable to go online, and especially in the middle of pandemic, but it was very challenging, especially because I have a full-time job. This is a certificate that you have to be in the classroom, hands-on in the shop. Not online. So, yes, online

> learning was not very applicable for this certificate, but it is what it is, there's nothing we could do about it.

He said several times that his biggest challenge was going from in-person instruction to a completely online modality. While appreciative that his professors gave the students an alternative mode of learning through online videos, he mentioned that trying to learn HVAC lessons from videos was difficult for him, because he preferred being in the classroom.

Neil also coped with challenges related to the modality change, disclosing:

> I was pretty frustrated, honestly, like I wanted to avoid online classes. I knew I was not going to do well in that environment and, for the most part, I was right. I really kind of slacked off there. I pretty much wouldn't check any of my online stuff until Fridays. There was a weekly seminar meeting with the honors college that was done via WebEx. So, during those seminars, that's when I would finally, for the first time in a week, check my courses online. I would pretty much just do all my work very last minute. I wasn't really engaged with the courses anymore once they moved online.

Nolan was a full-time student at the beginning of 2020. Because of his commitments as a member of the Texas National Guard, he had a rocky start to his semester. He was deployed to Washington D.C. in early January because of an incident at the Capitol, staying there for two weeks. This put him at a disadvantage in his classes. When the college closed in March of 2020, he was able to catch up on his late work assignments; however, he was then deployed as part of a COVID-19 testing mission. During that time, he was working 12-hour days at a COVID-19 testing location and having to complete his coursework on top of that. He said it was "very difficult and I got a little bit discouraged."

Austin shares a challenge specific to workforce students who resumed in-person classes during the summer of 2020 and relates to safety protocols and length of quarantine periods at the college. The over abundance of caution impacted one of his classes, and he states:

> Back in the beginning of being on campus, you know, everybody's entire class was isolated if a student had to get a COVID-19 test. A fellow student had allergies but didn't know he had allergies. The student said "I'm sneezy. I've got a fever, and my eyes water." The professor insisted this student take a COVID-19 test to see if he was positive. The student's test was negative; he only had allergies, not COVID, but until the negative test came back, roughly seven days later, the whole class had to isolate and wait. That was frustrating, but somewhat understandable as the college only wanted to keep students safe.

He mentioned this happened persistently, which interrupted his learning and prolonged the time to completion of those classes impacted by the safety protocols.

Another participant revealed a distinct challenge related to the COVID-19 Relief Act funding that institutions of higher education received from the federal government. Neil discloses:

> some of the COVID relief funding from the college was a bit frustrating because of the way it was designed. It was meant to be used as financial aid, where the money is used to pay for tuition first, and it's not refundable. There's money left over, but due to the VA paying 100 percent for your tuition, the COVID funding is not refundable to the student veteran. None of that COVID relief money is useful to you because none of the benefits are actually going to your pocket, right? Like, it's helpful if you're paying your own tuition, but as a veteran and since I wasn't paying out of pocket for school, it wasn't helpful to me.

His frustration came from the fact that while other students were receiving refunds from the college, student veterans did not qualify for any federal monies from the COVID-19 Relief Act because their tuition was covered at 100 percent by the VA.

Overall, every participant (inputs) shared a bit of their challenges (experiences) surrounding their work life, home life, and student life during the pandemic. As Padilla's model (1999) intimates, we cannot truly know their experiences, but we can collect their feelings and stories and report them.

KEY THEME 2: SUPPORT

Another similarity mentioned by each participant was how the support from their family, friends, peers, and college services impacted their persistence during this challenging time. The second theme emerging from the data was support. Most participants interviewed for this study reported receiving encouragement from their spouse, family members, friends, and even college employee support, although a lack of or insufficient support was also recounted by some of the participants. Beginning with stories of positive support, Neil affirms that his family and friends were supportive of him while attending college and, due to social distancing, it was easier to concentrate on his classes, although he missed visiting with extended family.

Michelle reported:

> My husband keeps me focused and on track, so whenever I get a little discouraged or I can't find the resource I'm looking for, for a paper, he's like, "Michelle, don't be so hard on yourself. You're the only one in your family that's going to have a bachelor's degree right now. You're an example for your children. Because they're looking at you, and they're saying, 'man, if she can do it now as an adult, and with all these challenges, I can too.'" So, my husband gives me those logs in the fire that I need to get that fire going and keep it kindled.

Austin proclaims that "anytime you have your friends and your family backing you, you owe them everything. It adds to it, it makes it easier. My wife, for example, understands that when I set aside time

for homework and classwork, that's my time." He schedules that time around family time for balance. Mason's wife similarly provides encouragement for him:

> There were times where I was leaving my house at 5 or 6 in the morning to go to work and then after work, I would go to school and never came back home until midnight sometimes. I would call my wife on my way home and say, "you know what, I give up, I can't do this. I'm extremely fatigued, I'm tired. I'm exhausted. I can't do it." And she was very encouraging and would tell me "you have to do it and get through, you already started this program, so you have to finish it." Those words of encouragement were extremely helpful and kept me very motivated.

When Jennifer returned to college in fall of 2020 for the EMT program, family support was a huge part of her educational journey, with her mother and aunt helping with her children, and hiring a babysitter when she could afford to. She mentions "so many little challenges and battles all along the way, and that's still an ongoing thing, but it's a work in progress and to have that support group is everything." She had daycare issues with her children since they were not physically attending school, driving Jennifer to enlist other family members such as her mom and sister to help. She also did not have a computer to do her school assignments and did not have the resources to purchase one right away. Her husband had a computer, but not a camera to do WebEx or Zoom, so she was frustrated "like, how on earth am I supposed to make these little things happen when I don't have the resources to do them?"

Jennifer was also the only participant to mention how having young children in the house during the COVID-19 pandemic was difficult at times. In 2020, her daughter was eight and her son was two, and she revealed:

> Everything had to change, I had to get creative with different ways to make the kids run around, work out, or do something because they would sit there in front of the TV, and they get really agitated. You turn it off, and they get more agitated. You had to make them get physical for a while and then, "okay, we're going to wind down when I'm working on school." Once you have a schedule, you don't want to change that schedule. Then they lose their minds, and it's, you know, irrational throwing this fit for whatever reason. I think that activities, trying to keep everyone engaged, that was very difficult.

Nearly all participants professed they received overwhelming support from friends and family and remarked that they could not have gotten through the challenges of attending college through the pandemic without them. Only one participant, Nolan, who is single, did not mention any familial support during his interview.

When asked to share what helped with their semester-to-semester persistence, the majority of participants mentioned college employees and how they helped students during the pandemic.

Michelle finished an associate degree in the spring of 2020, then later started a bachelor's degree program in the fall of 2020, in the middle of the pandemic. She explained how it was a challenge to enroll in the program due to not being able to physically go to the college to enroll in a brand-new program. Since she had completed her associate degree at the target college, many of the forms necessary for enrollment in the bachelor program were already in the college system. Michelle mentioned her enrollment was easier because her college and VA advisor stayed connected via phone and email to help her with that process.

Austin shared mixed sentiments regarding the college staff as well:

> That … gave out laptops and made internet access available during the pandemic helped a lot. That the instructors, when we swapped modalities, were making every effort to be available, hosting virtual office hours, helped. Then, if you had a question, I knew for 100 percent certainty that my instructors were reachable. Because of my work hours, there were a couple of times that my math instructor got late night emails and replied to me that same night, going above and beyond I mean, come on. Extraordinary circumstances, and they were putting forth extraordinary measures to me.

Nevertheless, he disclosed a different encounter with the target community college's VA advisor:

> That person was about as helpful as a chicken noodle sandwich. I mean… was just not helpful at all. And once I figured out that … really didn't know what they were doing, I cut them out of the loop and bypassed … completely.

Mason also found support in his college professors during the pandemic, stating that they were always accessible by phone or email on weekdays and weekends: "They were going through the pandemic too. They have their own life and families, but they were always there for me, and I have nothing but wonderful things to say about the professors."

Nolan praised his professors and the support he received during the pandemic especially during deployments as member of the Texas National Guard:

> I've had professors that have gone out of their way when they knew that I was doing all sorts of things having to help with the COVID-19 testing and going back and forth from all these places with my unit. My professor called me, and they said, "hey, Nolan, how's it going? You know, I noticed you hadn't been online for a while, what can I do to help?" Honestly, that made such a huge difference to me. That really, really made me go, "wow – I'm not alone, I'm not dealing with this like the only person in the world." I know that they have many students ,and it's real hard for professors to get the one-on-one time with you, but those calls, at that time, for me, made a huge difference.

How her professors managed classes during the pandemic was also mostly positive for Jennifer. She purports that her professors were readily available to answer questions and put all class material in

the D2L student learning platform in an organized manner. One specific professor she identified as being "diligent, and he crosses his t's and dots his i's and he's on top of everything. If you text him on a weekend, he will get back to you quickly, he just doesn't want people to fail." She goes on to report that in other classes, a few of the other professors were not as organized, which in turn, led her to feeling unorganized. Which is why she lauded one professor over others.

In addition to the support from college employees, Michelle also mentioned fellow veteran student classmates encouraging one another:

> Well, what made this 2018 to 2020 cohort special was that the non-military people were the minority. When we started this course in 2018, most of us were military, and then the professor was a Vietnam veteran, and I'm like, we rule the campus. I'm telling you, we were, like brothers and sisters in arms in the classroom, and it was just like, maybe three or four were young kids from high school. I was like this was the best, like the best class I could have ever had; it was that class. Hmm, we can talk about therapy. We could say, "Hey, I can't come on Tuesday because I have therapy. I have to go to my psych." And it was, you know, some of us skipping different days, because some of us had therapy that day. It was fun. And inclusive and inviting, and it was better than a club, better than good. So, you had each other's backs, and you kind of filled in and gave notes for who was missing notes that day and et cetera.

When asked to talk about anything that hindered their semester-to-semester persistence, some of the participants mentioned a lack proper guidance from members of the college. Austin indicated:

> The biggest problem at the time was the person that the college hired to assist veterans didn't really understand the system. And didn't fully explain some of the things. That happens because a lot of veterans come in with the Montgomery bill, so at some point Congress approved the Post 9/11 GI Bill, which gives you a stipend and housing funds, so it's extra money. But what that advisor didn't tell me was that I could have used the Montgomery GI Bill in its entirety, then transferred over to the Post 9/11 GI Bill and used it in its entirety to complete. They were like, just transfer over; you'll get this money; it'll be great. And, yeah, so that wasn't the smartest route.

Neil describes a hindrance to his persistence as related to a specific college department. The situation resulted in an impact to his tuition and fees and his scholarship eligibility, affecting him financially as well as losing a prestigious scholarship opportunity. He had been awarded the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship, which awards undergraduate students who meet certain academic requirements. As part of receiving this scholarship, students were eligible to participate in a for-credit study abroad program during the following fall, spring, or summer semester. The scholarship can be used to cover costs such as program fees, tuition, room and board, books, local transportation, insurance, and international airfare (Lone Star College, n.d.). This scholarship is managed by the college's study abroad department, and the students were supposed to go to Italy during the summer of 2021, but, as Neil

imparted, “the pandemic just upended that.” Instead, the department offered alternatives such as a correspondence course from one of the campuses, as long as there was an international component embedded in the course. Neil opines that he “received zero support from the college study abroad office as to helping me find an alternative to the trip.” He and his Honors College professor sent emails to the study abroad office but received no answer. He reflects “I got no support from them. It ruined a lot of things, and I’m disappointed in the college for not offering that support.”

As a result of not completing the alternative correspondence course, Neil was no longer eligible for the scholarship. He mentions that at that point, he was “pretty jaded against the college and didn’t want to continue classes.” However, he pressed on because he did not want to go back to working in a warehouse during a global pandemic, and if he had dropped out completely, he shares that he would have lost all VA benefits attached to attending college.

Nolan mentions having holds placed on his student account and how they are sometimes handled became a hindrance for him:

> But I remember before sometimes you get the holds on your account to register for classes and you can't remove them until you go into … in person. And so that is something I would say would be, it'd be very, very great if they could provide a bit more leniency for people who are on mission that have orders, that don't exactly have time immediate time to just come back and go and take a data, go inside … and say, “hey, why can't I register for classes?” Because, you know, deadlines. You get pulled last minute, and it can definitely be a little bit difficult just because the timing with the military is always random. There's no telling what could happen two years from now, just like COVID-19, or Harvey, or everything else that's been going on.

As for the overall support received from the college’s employees, the majority of participants reported favorable support from advisors, VA advisors, and even greater support from their professors. There were a few outlier participants, such as Austin and Neil, who expressed frustrating incidences with a couple of departments within the college, affecting them both financially and academically.

KEY THEME 3: FORTITUDE

Most participants interviewed for this study drew upon their military experiences, commitment toward their goals, and lessons learned while serving on active duty to adapt to their environment and complete their education, resulting in the third theme of fortitude. The findings identified theme commonalities from the six participants, such as time management skills, dedicating certain time and

workspace areas to their coursework, and checking the syllabi to “anticipate, plan for, and overcome” any challenges.

Determination to complete missions emerged as a shared element during interviews. When Mason decided to join the military, he noted that “obviously you learn a tremendous number of different skills, leadership skills, time management skills, and many others.” The mentality to “complete the mission, to graduate with my degree, that mentality I believe was learned in the military, the ability to go pursue your goals while having very limited resources.” Austin also credited his military training when it came to completing his educational studies during the pandemic:

> at no point did I think that anything was outside of my realm, because in the military I learned I can do anything I want as long as I set my mind to it; it doesn't matter. Once I start something, I'm not going to stop. I mean, you literally have to kill me and so, I wasn't terrified. I knew where my weaknesses were. You know how to deal with college classes. It's a mission, and how do you deal with any mission? You plan for it, you prepare for it, you execute your plan.

Michelle disclosed that she had to “learn how to learn again with online classes, and it was crazy, but I have skills now that I didn’t have before So, we all had to learn — it's been a learning experience whether we wanted to or not.” She was thankful for her years of military training: “I learned that you don’t have to know everything; you just have to know where everything is.” The importance of having a routine, also learned from her military background, became paramount to her persistence in completing her degree. Jennifer holds similar beliefs, sharing that her determination and not letting little things get to her bolstered her commitment to continuing her classes. She said she learned from the military to complete the mission, that failure was not acceptable, and she leaned on those lessons when things got tough in her classes, allowing her to push through.

Nolan indicated that his conviction to complete his degree, even during the pandemic was strong: “I was really set on completing my degree and wasn’t going to let anything stop me.” The routine and consistency of the military taught Nolan the skill of consistency when going from one mindset to another, for example, working and then coming home to a set time for coursework: “One of the things that really is a very big thing for me when it comes to school or being able to focus on something along those lines is having consistency.” Neil explained that, after the disappointing circumstances relating to the Gilman scholarship with the college, he just wanted to complete his degree, likening it to completing his mission: “It was something that I needed to do, that I just had to complete.”

CONCLUSION

This chapter covered the findings of this qualitative study, where the intent was to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of student veterans attending a community college during the COVID-19 pandemic along with the factors contributing to their persistence. Through semi-structured interviews, the participants provided details of their perceptions on what it means for them to persist through the pandemic despite challenges such as deployments, class modality changes, financial uncertainty, health and safety protocols, family, and social obligations, incorrect or inadequate information, and ineffective communication channels. They all believed they could persist regardless of the challenges brought about by the pandemic and other adverse situations.

The participants had a powerful sense of mission accomplishment and despite any challenges they encountered, they believed in their ability to persist due a combination of the backing from their friends, family, and college, as well as their own tenacity and determination.

CHAPTER V: INTERPRETATIONS, KEY FINDINGS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the experiences of student veterans attending a community college during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on gaining an understanding of any factors contributing to their academic persistence through to the completion of their educational goals. In educational research, this design allows the researcher to focus on providing a detailed account of one or more participants with an interest in both their uniqueness and commonality (Smith, 2017). The study sought to contribute to the body of scholarly research by informing and benefitting community college administrators by capturing experiences of student veterans to help increase awareness of barriers that may inhibit student veteran persistence. The results may also inform college administrators by providing suggestions for program development and strategies related to existing efforts focused on student success, especially during times of crisis.

This chapter includes an overview of findings related to the theoretical framework of Padilla's (1999) Theory of College as a Black Box and Vacchi's (2011, 2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support along with central research themes and findings. This concluding chapter presents an overview of findings related to theoretical framework, a discussion of the central research themes, and presents research implications for theory and practice. In addition, the chapter discusses the limitations of this study, recommendations for future research, the researcher's reflections on the journey, and final conclusions.

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS RELATED TO THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this study was constructed from Padilla's College as a Black Box Model (1999) and Vacchi's Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support (2011, 2013). Padilla's (1999) model defines college as a "black box" with incoming students as the inputs and two output options in which students either graduate, or they drop out. The black box is "the college experience" where

everything the student experiences from enrollment to classes and everything in between affects whether the student will be successful and graduate. These two models bound the study. Use of immersive data analysis then allowed the researcher to discover descriptors to emerge from the data. The researcher used the constant comparative method, defined as the process of comparing each unit of information (coding) to the others in order to find recurrent ideas (Merriam, 1998).

As noted in Chapter 4, some of the participants attempted to take college courses while serving on active duty. Several of them disclosed distinct reasons they either felt that attempting to take college courses would not work for them and they did not even attempt, or they attempted and had mixed results. Their prior attempts, or lack of prior attempts, along with the decision to enroll in college ties directly with Padilla's Black Box model (1999) as this is the input phase of students who all have diverse backgrounds and culture, interests, commitments, and goals, as evidenced in the demographics of the six participants. Their motivation for either starting or continuing their pursuit of a college degree or certificate are similar. During the analysis phase, the participants shared some of their motivations for attending or completing college starting in fall of 2019, through 2020, and into 2021/2022.

Covered in Chapter Two, Padilla lists four barriers to college completion:

1. Discontinuity Barriers – Such as transitioning from where a person came from and where they are.
2. Lack of Nurturing Barriers – Lack of family support and understanding.
3. Lack of Presence Barriers – Including social isolation, lack of minority role models.
4. Resource Barriers – Pertaining to lack of financial aid support and lack of money.

In examining the data, the researcher found examples of all four barriers to success as defined by Padilla; however, each participant intimated an orientation to learning that is focused on tasks and overcoming challenges or problems. The participants all expressed a concerted sense of ownership toward completing their educational journey and receiving their degree or certificate. The fortitude ingrained in each participant resulting from the mindset and skills learned during their military careers allowed them to successfully navigate the barriers to success. These examples of fortitude are associated with grit or control of one's own education (Almeida, 2016).

Certain research contends that student veterans retain their military identity and cultural values when transitioning into the realm of higher education (Alfred, et al., 2014; Durdella & Kim, 2012). Answers

from participants in this study support this. As this study focused on those who persisted through to completion of their educational goals, the findings support the concept that numerous factors affect the campus experience part of the black box, which represents obstacles or barriers that the students must overcome to complete their college degree or certificate, as indicated in Padilla's model (1999).

Furthermore, the four cornerstones exploring the impact of college on student veterans from Vacchi's Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support (2011, 2013) have each been manifested in the findings as shared by all six participants. Vacchi's model goes into exceptional detail with four distinct aspects of how a student veteran's collegiate experience and life contribute to their academic persistence. The cornerstones include college services, transition into college, academic interaction, and personal support.

Evidence that each of the participants underwent some part of Vacchi's four cornerstones emerged from the interview transcripts. The first cornerstone of college services is testified to in the college services support theme of the findings. This theme uncovered both support and some non-support instances faced by the participants as pertains to several participants encountering less than helpful college employees in the VA office or in other college departments. These specific participants mentioned the negative impact on their educational journey. For the second cornerstone of Vacchi's model, transition into and through their educational journey, was also affirmed by each participant. Many of the participants entered college soon after leaving the military, a step that can result in a short, harsh adjustment. In addition, some participants voiced they were worried that it had been too long between high school and college when they began their college career, a time lapse that can present another barrier needing to be overcome.

Academic interactions are the third cornerstone, and Vacchi describes these as experiences of student veterans both inside and outside of the classroom. All six participants expressed positive occurrences from their college professors as well as various other college employees throughout their educational journeys during the pandemic. Personal support for the student veterans rounds out the fourth cornerstone of Vacchi's model. This personal support includes friends, family, and peers. The participants all confirmed demonstration of reinforcement from those around them was instrumental in their choosing to continue their educational journey throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings of this study corroborated and expanded upon some of the experiential and theoretical literature reviewed in chapter two. Both theoretical frameworks were validated in this study, as the combination of the models allowed the researcher to understand internal and external barriers, or challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, finances, time, and student expectations. The authentication that internal and external supports are necessary for student veterans as posited by both Vacchi and Padilla were also realized during the study. The participants relied upon the family, friend, and peer support they received to bolster their determination to complete their educational journeys. Some of the challenges the participants encountered and overcame also show that they can succeed even though some college service departments provided less than optimal assistance.

Fortitude of the student veteran participants is of utmost importance to the continuance and ultimate success of completing their educational journeys. The fortitude these participants brought with them into the "black box" ultimately determined their success. No matter the internal or external barriers, challenges, support or non-support occurring during their time in college, their output was completion of their educational journey. Their black box campus experience affected their journey but did not impact their overall success. The four cornerstones from Vacchi are also elucidated as related to college services, transition into and through the educational journey, academic interactions, and personal support; this study substantiated his model of student veteran support.

KEY FINDINGS

Finding One

Intrinsic and extrinsic factors influenced the participant's persistence in continuing their educational journey throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Extrinsic factors are those over which they had no control. Those extrinsic factors included the global pandemic, causing all non-essential businesses to temporarily shut down. This also resulted in their community college physically shutting down, with all classes being switched to online modalities only. The pandemic threw the participants into a state of uncertainty, which included staying healthy, having increased concern for loved ones, experiencing social distancing from family and friends, having financial difficulties, and encountering technology issues. Intrinsic factors are those over which the participants had control. Intrinsic factors such as overcoming challenges and seeking help played a role in their persistence of their educational journeys. The

existence of these factors for each participant supports the finding that they were able to overcome the unique challenges faced during the pandemic of their experiences, time, and finances as related to their educational endeavors.

The participants each talked about the various challenges they encountered and how quickly they adapted to a changing lifestyle, especially during the early timespan of March 2020 through the beginning of 2021. All participants mentioned stress, health issues, changes in family dynamics, job requirements, income, VA benefits, and college support, along with a myriad of other challenges. A takeaway from this feedback is that each one of them faced challenges they never had to face before. Their military experiences were all different, but several of the lessons they learned were similar in the vein of structure and consistency, leading to their persistence.

Finding Two

Family and college support played a highly influential role in the persistence of each participant. Most articulated that they could not have continued their educational journey through the pandemic if it had not been for their families. Spouses, siblings, parents, and their children all played a part in encouraging the participants to continue attending classes through the pandemic. Family support has been generally predicted to be of value to veterans (Cook & Kim, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Other examples of that family reinforcement range from simple encouraging words such as Michelle's son asking, "how is class going?" and telling her "you can do it, Mom," to parents and siblings helping with the children when the participants were in online classes during the day. Family assisting with cooking, cleaning, and giving advice about which earbuds offer the best quality were all elucidated by the student veteran participants. These familial relationships were positive in nature and directly affected the persistence of the student veterans.

Consistent with the theoretical framework (Padilla's College as a Black Box and Vacchi's Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support) utilized during this study, common factors such as student involvement and academic and social integration are revealed. Vacchi's model of student veteran support includes college services, academic interactions both in and out of the classroom, social support from family and classmates, along with transition to college assistance such as VA advising. Each participant divulged their stories and perceptions, most of which were positive, about how the college oversaw the

unexpected, unprecedented, and abrupt shift in moving all classes to an online only modality. Nearly all participants communicated positive interpretations of their interactions with their professors, VA advisors, academic advisors, and enrollment specialists. Their overall opinion of how the target community college managed the pandemic was favorable. Several participants noted they still felt supported in their online classes, and they had timely and effective communication with their professors. A few mentioned that some of their professors called them to check on them. They were surprised the professors took the time to call each student, yet that encouragement and human interaction made them feel valued during a tumultuous time. For Padilla's model, these "experiences" helped determine each student veterans' outcome of persistence toward completing their educational goal.

Finding Three

Student veterans drew upon lessons learned from their time serving in the military to facilitate their persistence. The structure, consistency, camaraderie, and — to a greater extent than anything else — ensuring mission success lessons served the participants well when faced with the adversity of the pandemic. While the world was in a holding pattern, in many ways for the participants, completing their educational journeys was still their primary mission. They allayed their fears of the unknown, powered through their classes, and continued to work toward mission success. Many of them indicated they had to learn how to be successful in online courses, especially those who were taking workforce classes. Challenges included not having fast enough wi-fi bandwidth for everyone in their household and figuring out where everyone was going to have privacy enough to attend their online classes or work meetings. Having enough computers for everyone in the household was also a challenge for some of the participants.

These student veterans had to meet each challenge head on and find a solution that worked for everyone in the household, all while continuing to attend their online classes and complete assignments. Keeping their end goal of completing their degree, certificate, or diploma in mind, they relied upon the military culture that had been instilled in them to complete their mission, continually striving, and persisting. According to Merriam-Webster (2022), the definition of fortitude is "strength of mind that enables a person to encounter danger or bear pain or adversity with courage." The fortitude of each

participant is evident in their continuance and commitment toward their educational journey through the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The implications of this study contribute to a sharper comprehension of the varying factors that impact the persistence of student veteran community college students in the pursuit of their educational goals. This study is timely and relevant due to the absence of research addressing the persistence of student veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the veteran student community college student perspective, the findings offer various implications for theory and practice. Theoretically, the study has implications on the body of literature on student veteran persistence during the pandemic. Practically, there are implications for community college administrators, professors, academic and VA advisors, enrollment specialists, and other staff members regarding the needs of veteran students.

THEORY AND RESEARCH

To date, the researcher could not find another study conducted on community college student veteran persistence through the COVID-19 pandemic. The study is also one of the first to explore the experiences of these student veterans through the ideologies of both Padilla's College as a Black Box Theory and Vacchi's Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support. By using these theoretical frameworks during this research, implications can be inferred and can inform future research on student veterans and their persistence.

The first implication is that both internal and external factors both equally affect student veteran persistence in diverse ways. Each of the six participants reflected that during the pandemic, external factors were decidedly negative, and internal factors, sometimes which were also negative, needed to be turned into positives in order to combat the negative external factors.

Another theoretical implication of this study purports the significance of familial support as an influence on student veteran persistence. The researcher could find no significant research on the positive influence of family support on student veteran students at either a community college or a university. The findings from this study bolsters the opinion that positive family influence plays a

significant part in the persistence of student veterans. As such, this study could serve as the framework and foundation for further study.

Theory and Practice

Given that the study included participant feedback on how their community college managed the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to supporting their students, the findings of the study can inform college administrators, professors, both academic and VA advisors, enrollment specialists, and other staff members regarding the needs of veteran students. The participants of this study indicated they were mostly satisfied with their college experience during the pandemic timeframe, but there are always areas of improvement, including communication between college support services and students, as well as increasing the number and availability of mental health counselors during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, having a dedicated 24/7 VA phone line, specifically for student veterans, for questions regarding benefits, accommodations, emergency aid, career services, and other military culture/issues is recommended.

Community colleges and universities should also consider increasing the number of VA advisors on their campuses. Ensuring all VA advisors are military veterans themselves would make student veterans more comfortable speaking to those who are intimately familiar with military culture. Ongoing training for college VA advisors is also recommended as benefits change and are updated throughout the year; this may help avoid benefits confusion as mentioned by a few of the participants. Administrators, faculty, advisors, and staff should go through training specifically regarding student veterans. This training should include learning about military culture and the difference between that culture and the academic culture on college campuses. Likewise, learning about the transition challenges many student veterans undergo, and the inimitable experiences student veterans bring to the classroom, and how they affect their academic performances, would be invaluable.

LIMITATIONS

There were a select few limitations to this study. The first limitation was, although there were 438 student veterans eligible to take part in the study, they were not all keen to participate. A sparse number of respondents to the demographic survey (13 to be exact), resulted in the six participants who were

willing to participate in the study. The time constraints of the study by may have contributed to the small number of respondents. However, those constraints were necessary to the foundation of the study as the student experiences needed to take place during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the number of female student veterans who chose to participate was lacking. Of the 438 eligible participants, only 91, or nearly 21 percent were female, less than one percent of those invited responded and agreed to participate in the study. As a result, the voices of female student veterans are underrepresented. Lastly, this study was conducted at one community college in the state of Texas, meaning the findings of this study cannot be generalized to other colleges and universities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

While there is already limited research available for student veteran persistence rates at four-year universities, even less research has been conducted regarding their persistence rates at community college. The researcher could only find very little research in the form of articles surrounding student veteran persistence during the COVID-19 pandemic; thus, this study serves to add to the existing, yet diminutive, body of knowledge on this diverse group. There are limitations to this study, leaving room for further work. For example, although the sample size was large enough to provide valuable information, it may not be large enough to be representative. A significantly diverse pool of participants could be studied using both qualitative and quantitative methods, which is my first future research recommendation. The research could include different populations of student veterans, such as those in other geographic areas of the country, female veterans, and veteran students of color. The perceptions of other groups may differ from those of the participants in this study.

A second recommendation for future research would be a comparison study of student veteran persistence rates during the COVID-19 pandemic between those attending community colleges and those attending universities. This may give administrators of both institutions' deeper insight as to the college support needs of student veterans.

Another recommendation is to explore the importance of family and friend support and influence on the persistence of student veterans and community college students in general. This research could expand knowledge and understanding of the experiences of student veterans and how community colleges might increase the persistence of this group of students.

A final future research recommendation would be to perform a comprehensive qualitative study surrounding the mental fortitude of student veterans who persisted through challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically in relation to the discipline, structure, and importance of mission success in the military, and how those lessons directly relate to student persistence rates.

JOURNEY REFLECTIONS

I am honored and grateful for the opportunity to talk with these six student veterans of our military who demonstrated tenacity and strength during the COVID-19 pandemic while working toward their academic goals. These veterans are loyal, patriotic, and wholeheartedly committed to their families, friends, and our country. Each one was grateful for their VA benefits that afforded them the opportunity to pursue higher education and further their careers. Like the six participants in this study, I also lived through challenges pertaining to persistence and rejected any notion of not completing my degree program. Admittedly, the participants' stories of pushing through challenges no matter what they were, helped bolster my determination as well. So, while they knew they were sharing their experiences and stories for my research, what they did not know was that they were really giving me the resolution to push through and complete my own educational journey. For that, and their participation in my research, I will be forever thankful to Austin, Neil, Michelle, Mason, Nolan, and Jennifer.

CONCLUSION

Student veterans are uniquely positioned for success in their educational journey due to their military training, personal characteristics, steadfast commitment, and work ethic. That these veteran students were able to continue, or even complete their educational journeys during a global pandemic is a tribute to their capability, fortitude, and tenacity to persist successfully toward completing their educational goals. As educators, we need to implement programs and strategies to continue to expand and strengthen the support these student need. Our student veterans know the value of higher education, are aware of the opportunities they receive by utilizing their benefits and they do not take them for granted. They all expressed a desire to complete their degree, diploma, or certificate so they can start solid careers. All departments of community colleges and universities owe it to our student veterans to continuously serve and support them as they did for us while serving their country.

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APPENDIX A: FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL

FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
1010 Campus Drive FLITE 410 Big Rapids, MI 49307
www.ferris.edu/irb

Date: October 19, 2021

To: Susan DeCamillis, EdD and Darlene Luce
From: David R. White, Ph.D, IRB Chair
Re: IRB Application *IRB-FY21-22-24 Persistence of Student Veterans Attending a Community College through the COVID-19 Pandemic*

The Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application for using human subjects in the study, *Persistence of Student Veterans Attending a Community College through the COVID-19 Pandemic(IRB-FY21-22-24)* and approved this project under Federal Regulations Exempt Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Your protocol has been assigned project number IRB-FY21-22-24. Approval mandates that you follow all University policy and procedures, in addition to applicable governmental regulations. Approval applies only to the activities described in the protocol submission; should revisions need to be made, all materials must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation. In addition, the IRB must be made aware of any serious and unexpected and/or unanticipated adverse events as well as complaints and non-compliance issues.

This project has been granted a waiver of consent documentation; signatures of participants need not be collected. Although not documented, informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and participant rights, with the assurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must be provided, even when documentation is waived, and continue throughout the study.

As mandated by Title 45 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 46 (45 CFR 46) the IRB requires submission of annual status reports during the life of the research project and a Final Report Form upon study completion. **Your status check in must occur on or before** September 2, 2022. Thank you for your compliance with these guidelines and best wishes for a successful research endeavor. Please let us know if the IRB can be of any future assistance.

Regards,

David R. White, Ph.D, IRB Chair
Ferris State University Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX B: LONE STAR COLLEGE IRB APPROVAL

Institutional Review Board

Sepember 2, 2021

Darlene Luce
IRB Protocol 2021124

Dear Mrs. Luce:

The research project application for your protocol titled,*" Persistence of Student Veterans Attending a Community College through the COVID-19 Pandemic,"* has been reviewed by the Lone Star College ("LSC") Institutional Review Board ("IRB"). The outcome of the review is as indicated below.

Approved: Expedited 45 CFR 46.102 (2)(i)

This approval will be valid for 12 months after the date of this letter. If the study extends beyond this period, it will be subject to continuing review and will require the submission of a supplemental application at that time.

Please note that any changes to the protocol or procedures for this project after the initial review must be promptly submitted to the LSC IRB for review. Also, any adverse events should be reported to the LSC IRB Office as soon as possible.

The LSC IRB requests that you share the results of this research project with the IRB office when you have completed it. The data from your study could be beneficial to grant writers and others in the LSC System. You will be given full credit for its authorship.

This letter constitutes the official written response of the LSC Institutional Review Board.
Thank you and best of luck in your study!

Pamela Wyatt
Administrator, Institutional Review Board

5000 Research Forest Drive
The Woodlands, TX 77381-4356
832.813.6500 LoneStar.edu

APPENDIX C: INFORMATIONAL EMAIL – SURVEY

Subject: Veteran Community College Students Needed
Greetings:

Are you a student veteran who attended target community college in fall of 2019 through until fall of 2021 or know of one? If so, I would like to send you a demographic survey to determine your eligibility to participate in a possible interview via WebEx and be part of my research study.

Participants must meet the following criteria:

1. must identify as a veteran;

2. must have been enrolled in community college prior to, or during the COVID-19 pandemic; and

3. must have already graduated or be nearing completion of attaining their desired educational goal.

This research is significant because we need to know about veteran experiences with persistence attending a community college prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, in an effort to gain an understanding of any factors contributing to their academic persistence through to completion of their educational goals, including either a college course, certificate, or degree, while navigating the pandemic.

Veteran students can be critical stakeholders in providing guidance and developing policy for veteran educational issues. The time commitment will consist of the following: an in-depth interview for approximately one hour. Please be assured that your responses during the interview will be held in the strictest of confidence.

If you are interested in participating in this research effort, please click this link: freeonlinesurveys.com to fill out the demographic survey, which will take 10-15 minutes to complete. The beginning of the survey will also include an informed consent notice. Once you complete the demographic survey and if you are eligible to participate, I will reach out to identify a date and time that fits your schedule for the WebEx Interview.

If you have any questions about this study or are interested in participating, please contact Darlene Luce at Luced4@ferris.edu.

Thank you for your time, and I hope you will decide to be a part of the study.

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT - SURVEY

FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH
1010 Campus Drive FLITE 410 Big Rapids, MI 49307 | (231) 591-2553 | www.ferris.edu/irb

Informed Consent
Survey Waiver

Project Title: Persistence of Student Veterans Attending a Community College through the COVID-19 Pandemic
IRB Approved Project #: IRB FY21-22-24
Student Researcher: Darlene Luce, DCCL Program, Ferris State University
Email: luced4@ferris.edu Phone: 618-719-9097
Principle Investigator(s): Susan DeCamillis, Ed.D., Ferris State University
Email: decamis@ferris.edu

You are invited to participate in a voluntary survey about persistence of student veterans attending a community college through the COVID-19 pandemic. You are being asked to participate because you meet the criteria of active-duty military, military reservist or military veteran. The researchers are interested in learning about the experiences of student veterans, who attended Lone Star College-North Harris prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, in an effort to gain an understanding of any factors contributing to their academic persistence through to completion of their educational goals, including either a college course, certificate or degree, while navigating the pandemic. The study seeks to describe these experiences during the pandemic and to discover any impact these experiences during the pandemic might have on student veterans' academic persistence.

Information will be collected by a survey questionnaire. We estimate that it will take approximately 10 -15 minutes to answer the survey questions and your participation may be complete when your individual questionnaire is submitted, or you may be asked to participate in an interview over the next 4-8 weeks. Information collected in this survey are educational. This study seeks to contribute to the body of scholarly research on qualitative study research in the field of higher education administration and research related to improving persistence and graduation rates particularly among student veterans.

The survey data will be confidential and will not contain information that can personally identify you, a pseudonym will be chosen by each participant. The survey will be accessed and administered online and will be digitally recorded. Information you provide in this study will be maintained and secured by the study team for 3 years. You may refuse to answer any question you do not wish to answer or you may exit the survey at any time. Participation or nonparticipation in this study will not impact your relationship/employment/ academic standing at Lone Star College-North Harris in any way.

If you have questions about this study, please contact the Principal Investigator, Susan DeCamillis, Ed.D., listed above. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant, contact the Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Participants at: 1010 Campus Drive, FLITE 410G, Big Rapids, MI 49307 (231) 591-2553 or IRB@ferris.edu .

By clicking NEXT, I am indicating my understanding of this information and give my consent to participate in this study.
NEXT

APPENDIX E: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Pseudonym:_____ Age: ___
Marital status: __

Do you have any children? YES____or NO__(if so, how many): _____

Do you work outside the home?
If yes, how many hours do you work per week? _____ What kind of work do you do? _____

Military branch you served in _____
When did your service end? _____
What was your rank when your service ended? _____
How many years did you serve in the military? _____
Did you retire from the military? YES_____or NO __
How many years of college did you complete while in the service? _____

What degree are you obtaining, if any? ____
What diploma are you obtaining, if any? ___
What certificate are you obtaining, if any? __
If none, what are your educational goals? __

What degree(s), diploma(s), certificate(s) do you currently have?

_____

When did you start taking classes and have you been taking classes semester to semester?

_____

How many semester hours (on average) do you take each semester? __

Is this your first time attempting to complete your degree, diploma, and or certificate? YES_____or NO__If you are returning to complete, please explain.

_____
_____
_____

Please check this box if you are interested in a follow-up conversation about participating in research and being interviewed.

If you are interested, please indicate your preferred method of contact:

Phone ☐_____

Personal Email ☐_____

School Email ☐_____

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Darlene Luce

Ferris State University

APPENDIX F: INFORMATIONAL EMAIL – INTERVIEW

Subject: Veteran Community College Students Needed
Greetings:

You have identified as a student veteran who attended target community college in fall of 2019 through until fall of 2021, and you are eligible to participate in this research study. I would like to interview you via WebEx.

This research is significant because we need to know about veteran experiences with persistence attending a community college prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, in an effort to gain an understanding of any factors contributing to their academic persistence through to completion of their educational goals, including either a college course, certificate, or degree, while navigating the pandemic.

Veteran students can be critical stakeholders in providing guidance and developing policy for veteran educational issues. The time commitment will consist of the following: an in-depth interview for approximately one hour. Please be assured that your responses during the interview will be held in the strictest of confidence.

If you are interested in participating in this research effort, please let me know by return email and I will contact you to review the consent form and identify a date and time that fits your schedule.

If you have any questions about this study or are interested in participating, please contact Darlene Luce at Luced4@ferris.edu.

Thank you for your time, and I hope you will decide to be a part of the study.

APPENDIX G: INFORMED CONSENT - INTERVIEW

FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH
1010 Campus Drive FLITE 410 Big Rapids, MI 49307 | (231) 591-2553 | www.ferris.edu/irb

Informed Consent
Waiver

Project Title: Persistence of Student Veterans Attending a Community College through the COVID-19 Pandemic

IRB Approved Project #: IRB- FY21-22-___

Principal Investigator: Dr. Susan DeCamillis, Ferris State University
Email: Decamis@ferris.edu

Co-Investigator: Darlene Luce, Ferris State University Student Researcher
Email: luced4@ferris.edu Phone: 618-719-9097

You are invited to participate in a research study about persistence of student veterans attending a community college through the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher is interested in learning about the experiences of student veterans, who attended Lone Star College-North Harris prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, in an effort to gain an understanding of any factors contributing to their academic persistence through to completion of their educational goals, including either a college course, certificate or degree, while navigating the pandemic. Participation will involve a semi-structured interview which will take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. They will take place in a virtual live-streamed session using WebEx. The researcher will also need to contact you following the interview to clarify questions and/or to request additional information. The interview will be digitally recorded.

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate in this study if you do not wish and you may leave at any time without consequence. If you agree to be part of this study, you will be asked to answer questions about your experiences with classes and your academic persistence while attending Lone Star College-North Harris prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic**.** Your employment status or academic standing at Lone Star College or Ferris State University will not be affected whether or not you decide to participate in this study.

There are minimal risks associated with this research. The information collected during the interview will be used in the researchers' dissertation and could be published in an article, or conference presentation but will not include any information that would identify you. The interview will be recorded, and the digital files will be maintained and secured by the study team for 3 years.

If you have questions about this study, please contact the Primary Investigator, Dr. Susan DeCamillis, listed above. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant, contact the Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Participants at: 1010 Campus Drive, FLITE 410G, Big Rapids, MI 49307 (231) 591-2553 or IRB@ferris.edu

By agreeing to be interviewed, you are giving your consent to participate in this study.

APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The main questions guiding this study:

1. *What are the experiences of student veterans, attending a community college during the COVID-19 pandemic in pursuit of their educational goals?*
2. *What factors contributed to persistence of student veterans at their community college as they pursued their educational goals during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Sub questions about experiences of persistence as a Veteran student during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

1. Let's start by having you give a little background about yourself.

   Prompts:

   - Upbringing
   - Educational background/experiences during military service, prior and after military service
   - Reasons for joining the military
   - Experience in military
   - Deciding to enter or reenter college

2. Describe any expectations you may have had regarding possible challenges you might encounter that might affect your persistence toward your educational goals.

   3. Prompts:

   - Concerns about academic readiness, rigor of classes, class modality
   - Physical limitations; ease of getting around campus
   - Possible mental or cognitive limitations
   - Disclosure of Veteran status or possible needs
   - Outside obligations such as work, family, outside responsibilities

3. Describe your experiences being a student in community college during the COVID-19 pandemic.

   Prompts:

   - What was it like being a student at a community college during the COVID-19 pandemic?
   - What was it like being a veteran student at a community college during the COVID-19 pandemic?
   - What did/does a typical day look like for you as a student during the pandemic (on campus and off campus if applicable).
   - What have your academic experiences during the pandemic on campus been like as a student?
   - What have your experiences as a student been like in class?

- Do any of your instructors know that you are a veteran? If so, has that affected your relationship with your professors?

- Were you involved in any campus organizations or student clubs?

4. What internal and external factors shape the persistence of students in community college during the pandemic?

Prompts:

- Support from friends and family

- Do you feel their support makes a difference in whether you persist toward your educational goals?

- If you work, does working affect your ability to persist with your education? How?

- Do any of your classmates know that you are a veteran? If so, has that affected your relationship with them?

- Has being designated as a veteran on campus made a difference in your educational experience on campus?

5. What helped the semester-to-semester persistence of students in community college during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Prompts:

- What do you think has been the most effective student programs and services provided by your college during the pandemic? Why?

- Are there any specific programs, services, or supports from the college that impacted your persistence? Why?

- Are there any veteran specific programs/services in particular that impacted your persistence?

6. What did not help the semester-to-semester persistence of students in community college during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- What programs or activities were challenges or even barriers to your persistence? Why?

- What are/were the least effective student programs and services? Why?

- Overall, tell me about your experience as a student veteran throughout your educational journey during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Is there anything else that you would like to add that I have not asked?

APPENDIX I: TRANSCRIPT MEMBER CHECKING

Dear [insert name], Thank you for sharing your veteran student experience with me during our interview. Attached you will find the transcript from that interview for your review. If there is something that is incorrect, not factual, or needs additional clarification, please identify, and provide additional information. If you feel we need to discuss this further, please contact me. It is essential that the information contained is correct. Please review and respond with any necessary information, or a note that states it is correct, by next week [insert specific date]. If you have questions, please contact me at (618) 719-9097 or email me at darlene.luce@lonestar.edu. If I do not hear from you within a week, I will assume that the transcript is accurate and will proceed with my study.

Sincerely, Darlene C. Luce