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## Understanding Student Veterans in Transition

Kevin C. Jones

University of Florida, [kevin.jones@ufl.edu](mailto:kevin.jones@ufl.edu)

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## Understanding Student Veterans in Transition

### Abstract

In this research report the author details a phenomenological study documenting identity development in student veterans making the transition from active military service to higher education. This study took place at a doctoral granting proprietary university with a significant veteran population and consisted of in-depth interviews. This analysis illustrates how student veterans construct and achieve more complex senses of self that incorporate their experiences as service member, veteran, and civilian student into a coherent identity

### Keywords

Veterans, Student Development Theory, Phenomenological Research

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## Understanding Student Veterans in Transition

Kevin C. Jones

University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA

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According to a recent report by the American Council on Education (2008), upwards of two million military veterans will take advantage of their government educational benefits and attend higher education institutions before 2020. Despite the fact that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been going on for more than a decade, colleges and universities often find themselves woefully unprepared for the influx of this unique student demographic. Because the experience of being in the military is distinctly different than that of attending college, higher education professionals should seek to understand the connection veterans make between what they experienced during their military service and how these experiences may or may not relate to how they make meaning of their experiences as college students (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009). The way in which veterans created meaning for their life in the military is often different than the way they create meaning as students on campus. This dichotomy is a key challenge for student veterans transitioning to higher education. Much of military training forces servicemembers into pre-assigned identities that, while valued in the military, may have little correlation in their new roles as students in higher education. Understanding how this group makes meaning during this transition will help educators offer appropriate curricular and co-curricular support that promotes openness and adaptability for veterans moving from a regimented, external-authority-based environment toward developing self-authorship and establishing a post-military identity (Reisser, 2011).

### Literature Review

A conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity was developed in which a “core sense of self” or “one’s personal identity” was depicted (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 405). The authors addressed intersecting social identities, with particular attention paid to family background, sociocultural conditions, current experiences, career decisions, and life planning. Jones and McEwen offered an alternative to the strict, linear development models of prior identity theories with their model, describing it as “representing the ongoing construction of identities and the influence of changing contexts on the experience of identity development” (p. 408).

Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) incorporated meaning-making into their revised model of multiple dimensions of identities, illustrating how meaning-making capacity interacts with contextual influence on the perceptions and salience of students’ multiple social identities (2007). Based on an earlier study describing lesbian identity development and meaning making, they created a more complex conceptualization of Jones and McEwen’s (2000)

original multiple identities model (Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes et al., 2007). To create this conceptualization, they applied several tenants of queer theory, specifically intersectionality and postmodernism, in an effort to capture the complexity of the meaning of a core self in a multiple identities model. Their efforts led to a rethinking of what a “core” sense of self actually meant, since some queer theorists argued against the very notion that identity can be defined or that a core identity even exists (Britzman, 1997) and that identity is comprised of fluid differences, not a unified essence (Fuss, 1989). Jones and McEwen’s theory is used to explain how students define themselves within particular social contexts. For educators interacting with students whose past experiences are in conflict with their present identity, like many student veterans, including meaning-making capacity in the model of multiple identity dimensions can provide a lens to understand more clearly how students see themselves (Abes et al., 2007).

### **Position of the Researcher**

A phenomenological researcher’s first challenge is to find a topic and question that have both social meaning and personal significance (Moustakas, 1994). My interest in studying this group stemmed from my own experience as a student veteran who transitioned from active duty as a United States Marine to an undergraduate college student in less than a month’s time. I went from being in charge of a squad of Marines to one of several thousand first-year college students without any preparation or transition assistance from either the military or the school. I served on active duty as an Infantryman in the United States Marine Corps for four years, including service in Operation Desert Storm and countries around the world. Following my active service, I served for seven more years in the California Army National Guard, also in the infantry. I was a non-commissioned officer and worked directly with other Marines and soldiers for my entire length of service and remain actively involved in military and veterans issues today. I am a professor and doctoral candidate with experience teaching at both private universities and community colleges, and serve as Student Veterans Association Faculty Advisor and an academic counselor for undergraduate students. All of these background factors had an effect on how I approached my research as well as the interactions I had with each participant. My goal was to learn how student veterans modified or changed their identity during the transition and adjusted from their former roles as military servicemembers to their current status as undergraduate civilian college students. How colleges and universities mitigate the difficulties these students encounter during this period is of key importance for veteran success in higher education. Research has already shown that peer connections and support are vital for early student success and that colleges and universities should make veterans services more readily available, especially at institutions with a high veteran presence (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). A key step in this direction is an understanding of how student veterans develop their identity during their educational experience after serving on active duty. Unfortunately, the majority of literature related to understanding the experience of veterans comes from non-academic presses and military reports, which primarily focus on personal narratives or telling stories of battle rather than on presenting empirical research findings. To this end, I utilized Abes et al.’s (2007) reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity as a conceptual framework for understanding the contextual influences that affect student veterans transitioning from active military service into higher education.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Phenomenology guided both the theoretical framework of this study and the analysis method. This approach was used to obtain comprehensive descriptions that “provide the basis

for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the [participants'] experience[s]" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13).

### **Purpose and Significance**

The intended purpose of this study was to describe and understand the identity development of student veterans as they transitioned from active duty servicemembers to students at higher educational institutions. (Note that for the purpose of this study, "active duty service" included Federal deployments of National Guard and Reserve forces for at least 180 consecutive days in length). This study was phenomenological in nature and focused on three individual, veteran, full time students completing their first undergraduate degree at a proprietary university in the southeast United States during the Fall semester of 2011.

Despite the increased number of student veterans on campus, there remains a continued lack of understanding regarding this growing population at colleges across the United States. It is crucial that campus personnel have a solid understanding of student veterans' needs and experiences in order to best assist this growing demographic (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Identity development research could demonstrate how student veterans construct and achieve more complex senses of self that incorporate their experiences of the social identities of servicemember and veteran (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Questions remain about how, or even whether, exactly, student identity development theory applies to military veterans. This study serves to move towards closing this gap in the literature.

### **Research Design**

This was a phenomenological study concentrating on the lived experience of three student veterans attending college full time. This method was chosen because of its in-depth interview nature and the focus on participants' lived experiences and worldviews. Servicemembers have detailed life experiences that are often not understood by non-veterans. Phenomenological studies assume that shared experiences have "an effable structure and essence" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 190) making the living history of veterans a key component in any policy or administrative measures affecting them. Because of the time limitations involved in this project, interviewing a larger number of participants was not feasible, especially considering the attention to detail required for personal, one-on-one discussions. Furthermore, since the study focused on student veteran identity development, it was essential to obtain detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences first hand. In-depth personal interviews were the appropriate method for this type of data collection, with the added benefit that oftentimes the conversations led to unscripted and unplanned insights that can sometimes go undocumented in more formal collection methods.

I conducted in-depth interviews with three student veterans at various stages in their coursework at the university. The questions focused particular attention to how each student made the transition from active military service to full time undergraduate college student.

### **Site/Participant Selection and Sampling Strategies**

The interview site was selected for ease of access, high veteran presence on campus, and willingness of participants to take part in this study. The university has an active Student Veterans of America chapter and members previously expressed interest in discussing their experiences in higher education in the hopes that they could help future veterans who attend college.

Specific participants were selected using a criterion sampling, i.e., selecting cases that meet a predetermined level of importance (Patton, 2002). The criterion for this study was to interview three participants with the following characteristics: they must be veterans, first time college students, enrolled full time, and have completed at least one full semester of academic coursework, with preference given to racial and gender diversity. If at all possible, at least one participant must be female. The demographic make-up of the subjects in this study was as follows: three veterans, one African American male, one African American female, and one Caucasian male. One was prior active duty Army, one prior active duty Navy, and one had served an 18 month deployment with the Army National Guard. Two of the subjects had served in a combat zone; one had served two combat deployments.

The requirement for prior military service was critical: the nature of this study regards veterans' transition and identity issues. The reason for selecting only students who had completed at least one full semester of academic coursework was to interview participants who have some significant distance between their initial transition period from their end of active military service to their new role as college students. To speak about oneself requires a certain amount of distance from the event discussed. Students in their first semester of college will most likely not be in a place where they can look critically at what they are experiencing. Indeed, they will most likely be unaware of much that is occurring in their identity development even as they experience it. This lack of emotional distance is the nature of memoir and interviews; a certain amount of time passing between the past and the present often serves to bring clarity to previous events. Additionally, student veterans who have continued past their initial semester in college have overcome significant challenges to get where they are. They will be better able to describe the adjustment process as well as the difficulties encountered from their first days on campus to the approach of their final exams, graduation, and, ultimately, their new identity beyond both "student" and "veteran". The original proposal called for selecting students who were in their last year of a program leading to a degree (either associate or bachelors), but, due to the level of academic commitment required from these students, I was unable to secure interviews with students who met this criteria. Because of the time constraints of this research, I modified the study to allow for student veterans who had completed at least one academic semester, giving them at least some distance between military discharge, college attendance, and the date of these interviews, while still adhering to the requirement that students have enough distance from their initial higher education experience to encourage detailed self-reflection and analysis. Selection was done by on campus solicitation through the Student Veterans of America chapter and the university's student affair's office. Three participants were chosen based on the parameters of the assignment, the length of time given for the study (one semester) and the time constraints involved with scheduling individual interviews and subsequently transcribing them.

## **Limitations**

The chief limitations for this study included the small number of participants (three), the scope of the method used (interviews), and the brief period of time involved (one semester). Additionally, because interviews occurred at the college where the participants attend classes, I ran the risk of inadvertently causing participants to guard their responses or tell me what they thought I might have wanted to hear. They might have been concerned that I had a specific answer that I was interested in, or that if they made the institution "look bad," they would get into some sort of trouble. By the end of the interviews, it was clear that none of the above concerns happened, and that the participants were eager to discuss veterans' issues on campus.

## **Trustworthiness**

A significant issue was the trust of the student veterans being interviewed. In an effort to alleviate their concerns, I explained that this research was designed to help student veterans and that any data gathered was done so with that goal in mind. I shared some of my own background, including my own status as a military veteran, to show commonalities between the participants and myself. Student veterans' academic careers were not be hampered or limited in any way as a result of this study; all participants had the right to refuse participation at any point during the research gathering process. Implied consent forms that explained, in detail, the specifics of this project were required for all participants and served to limit ethical dilemmas that might have occurred during this study. I took additional measures, including sensitivity for participants who did not wish to answer all questions, and the clear explanation that this study was not designed to judge or label any of the participants. The full cooperation of both the University of Florida (through the IRB) and the participants' university were obtained to ensure that all sides were aware of and approved both this study and the methods utilized in conducting it.

## **Data Gathering Procedures**

Three participants were asked a series of interview questions, including why they joined the military, what branch they served in and for how long, whether or not they deployed, what made them decide to attend college? These questions focused on both academic and co-curricular challenges experienced by veterans during this transition, and formed the framework used in an attempt to answer the central research question of how these students have expanded their sense of self and incorporated their new identify as students into their existing identify as servicemembers. While these were the central questions of this study, an additional number of often more detailed sub-questions emerged as the interviews progressed due to this study's flexibility. Because of the phenomenological nature of this project, it is important that accurate, detailed pictures of the participants' experiences and worldviews were obtained and documented in detail.

Each interview lasted for approximately one hour and was audio-recorded for transcription at a later time. Participants were allowed to deviate from the listed questions if these digressions lead to additional insights related to the goals of this study (i.e., student development and meaning making). While one of the strengths of phenomenological study is that natural, intrinsic flow of information, this study had a time limit and participants were not allowed to go off on tangents to the point of reducing the ability of this study to accomplish its stated goals.

## **Data-analysis Procedures**

The data analyzed was predominantly phenomenological in nature, which required an open mind and the ability to seek "what meaning and structures emerge" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 296). In order to describe the essence of the student veterans' higher education experience, I utilized Moustakas' (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data. During this process I used Moustakas' methods as follows: (a) from the verbatim transcript, considering with respect to its significance for the description of the experience, I transcribed each interview and then recorded each non-repetitive, non-overlapping statement; (b) I took notes on each transcript, writing down key phrases and observations, relating and clustering the meaning into themes; (c) the meaning units and themes were synthesized into a description of the textures of the experience using verbatim examples;

(d) a structural description was constructed; and (e) a textual-structural description of the meanings and essences of the participants' experience was constructed.

I focused the themes that developed as they happened organically, not by attempting to fit the narrative into any pre-determined format. These themes revealed commonalities amongst the participants regarding their experience in both the military and in higher education. From the initial, broad-based questions, more detailed sub-questions emerged for analysis at the conclusion of all three interviews. This strategy allowed the participants' own words to reveal their stories, and any themes to arise naturally.

I spent several hours transcribing each interview and subsequently read and re-read each transcript. Previously unnoticed patterns became apparent when I did this. The subjects voiced similar concerns regarding their experiences in higher education despite the differences in their individual backgrounds and environmental situations. I listened to the interviews again because sometimes inflections and tone were lost on the printed page; it was of key importance to understand not only what each subject said, but how he or she said it. I made extensive notes regarding the meaning of what was conveyed, not only the literal translation of what was said.

I bracketed the data by rereading and analyzing the printed interview transcripts. Because of the limited size of the project (three subjects; three interviews) the coding process was similar to classifying the information into general themes; most codes corresponded to an existing category and all of them fit into the overall theme that arose of the process of adapting to civilian life through higher education. This is a key aspect of longitudinal research into how student veterans construct and achieve more complex senses of self as they transition and process through the higher education process.

Although this was not a psychological study, because it sought to describe the lived experience of each participant during a period of transition and adjustment, issues of mental health and combat trauma could have been revealed during the interview process. The goal of this study was not to treat such issues, nor to ignore them, but only to document what had occurred in the participants' lives. Of key ethical and moral concern was that student veterans not feel judged or embarrassed by their service, but understand that this study sought only to describe and document each of their own, personal experience.

## **Results**

Three student veterans were interviewed on campus at the university they all attended. Each expressed willingness, even eagerness, when asked if they wanted to discuss student veteran issues for this study. The individuals involved were from various branches of the armed forces: one Navy, one Army, and one National Guard. Each interview was done separately, and no subjects were ever made aware of any other interviewees. Despite their lack of internal discussion and the variety of their service experiences, several common themes emerged over the course of this study.

### **Interviews**

#### **Patrice**

The first interview was with Patrice, an African American woman in her early 30's. She and I sat across from each other in an empty classroom at a long table with my laptop, the device I used to record our conversation, resting between us. She was at lunch, unhurried, and dressed casually in jeans and a sweatshirt. She appeared relaxed and willing to answer my questions with no apparent hesitations or concerns. We discussed her background and military service.

Patrice joined the Army in 1999, “on an dare” and “because they were hiring.” Her military occupational specialty (MOS) or job was administrative specialist, renamed in 2003 to human resource specialist, and involved various administrative duties for the Army. She stayed in for 11 years, rising to the rank of staff sergeant, and working her way up from administrative assistant duties to being the noncommissioned officer in charge of a battalion administration section before leaving active duty. Her initial assignment was to the 73<sup>rd</sup> Field Hospital, where she worked as a patient administrator. She subsequently moved to a regional support group and, finally, a military police battalion, before leaving active service to attend college. While in the Army, Patrice deployed twice: the first time to Camp Bucca, Iraq, a detention facility that took over prisoner operations after Abu Ghraib closed down, and the second time to Bagram Air Base in Bagram, Afghanistan, a multi-national military compound where the majority of forces in Afghanistan are stationed. She left active military service in 2010.

Patrice left the military because she wanted to earn a college degree, specifically, she wanted to become a registered nurse. She spent significant time with medical units and this exposed her to a different Army. In her own words, “I knew I wanted to get into the medical field because the Medical Corps is treated differently.” She came to the realization that she wanted to be a nurse, and in order to do that, she would have to leave active duty to attend college. Because of the laboratory and clinical requirements, registered nurse programs are unable to be completed online, and frequent deployments preclude the ability to attend on-ground colleges full time for many active duty military students. She chose her current university, a proprietary school, based on how easy it was for her to enroll and the condensed nature of the courses. Attending full time, she was able to complete all of her pre-requisites in 18 months and go straight into the RN program without being placed on a waiting list. The cost of tuition and books was not an issue for Patrice because she is a recipient of the Post 9/11 GI Bill and her college participates in the Yellow Ribbon Program, the combination of which means all of her schooling is paid for by the government as part of her military enlistment contract. She explained how preparing for college and getting all of the required paperwork together was simple for her because of the nature of her military job in administration. She acknowledged some servicemembers who come from other, non-paperwork related occupations might have more difficulty with the process.

While she found registration easy, her initial foray into higher education was not without challenges. Although she had excelled at the many formal military schools and occupational training courses she completed during her Army service, she was surprised to find how different college coursework was and how difficult this made her studies. The Army, she explained, has a standardized way of delivering instruction, whether repairing a machinegun or working in human resources. Students are given written material, followed by a lecture, then additional briefing, than a hands-on practical application. Most learning requires memorization after a set delivery method, whereas in higher education, each professor has his or her own way of teaching a course, even within the same department. According to her, higher education hands students the book, then they read it for themselves and figure it out on their own while attending lectures each week. She found the process challenging because she had to start from scratch in college, whereas in the Army she was continually building on an existing set of knowledge and information, delivered in a consistent, unchanged, manner throughout her time of service.

Although she did not associate exclusively with student veterans on campus, she expressed difficulty understanding the lives of non-veterans students. She stated civilians complained all the time, about trivial things, and found them to have a nonchalant attitude about homework, studying, and school in general. She had trouble understanding this and saw it as a personality flaw, one corrected quickly in the military at the junior soldier level. The Army,

she said, teaches soldiers to find a solution to a problem, not to sit around and complain about something without trying to fix whatever is wrong. She said even after being in college for more two years, she still had not adapted to being a student yet. She wanted to finish her coursework as soon as possible and return to the workforce, where she said she felt more comfortable than she did in a classroom environment.

### **Scott**

In the second interview, I spoke to with Scott, a Caucasian Navy veteran in his early 40's. Again, I conducted the interview at a long table in an empty classroom where I recorded the conversation and took notes while we spoke. Scott had completed all of his classes for the day and appeared relaxed and ready to conduct the interview. We discussed his background and military service.

Scott joined the Navy in 1988 and served as a Radioman in the submarine service, primarily on the USS Alaska, a ballistic missile submarine based, out of Bangor, Washington. He served for five years and left active service in 1993. When asked, Scott said he joined the Navy "because it seemed like the thing to do." He had a full athletic scholarship at Lake Superior State University in Michigan to play hockey but lost it after his second knee injury during his freshman year. He had no other way to pay for college at the time, and, coming from a military family (his father and grandfather both served in the Navy, the former in Vietnam, the latter in World War II), he decided to enlist in the service. Although Scott did not serve in the current armed conflicts, as a crewmember on a ballistic missile submarine, he was a key component of Cold War strategy, and deployed numerous times in the course of his duties. He spent time in Alaska, Hawaii, the Philippines, and various ports in the continental United States. He took part in practice launches designed to send ballistic missiles into outer space, patrolled under the Arctic ice flow, and continually excelled in his duties and Naval educational courses. Shortly after reenlisting for an additional six years, a medical condition was discovered during a routine physical, making him no longer eligible for service onboard submarines. Rather than transfer to the surface fleet, Scott accepted a medical discharge from the Navy and returned to civilian life in 1993.

At the time the United States was in the middle of an economic recession, and jobs were difficult to come by. Scott returned to Michigan and got a job installing carpet, but his prior knee injuries made continuing in that line of work unsustainable, so he used his Veterans Administration benefits and enrolled at Grand Rapids Community College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he studied Criminal Justice. He never completed a degree and moved to Florida a few years later, where he worked in the health and fitness industry for about 11 years. It was from this experience, combined with previous therapy for his knee injuries in college, that he started looking into a more formalized career in medical injury, but one that wouldn't take too much time to complete. He found the physical therapy assistant program at his current university, and decided to enroll. He chose his current school largely because of the PTA program. Even though his school is much more expensive than the community colleges, and he does not have any current veteran's benefits paying for his courses, Scott is happy with his choice of schools. Only three schools in the Tampa Bay area offer the program: his proprietary school and two community colleges. Of those three, only the proprietary school had availability; the two community colleges had no openings in their programs for at least three years, and Scott wanted to get trained and start his new career immediately. He stated registering for school was easy. He did a small amount of initial research, but commended the admissions team for walking him through the process and assisting him with filling out federal student loan and grant forms. Prior to attending college, Scott made financial arrangements in order attend school full time without having to work and, as a result, he felt less stressed and

able to handle the academic demands much easier than if he were also juggling full time employment.

Scott's former school, Grand Rapids Community College, did a much better job of embracing veterans than his current university, something he found ironic considering the United States wasn't actively engaged in armed conflict at the time the way it is now. Even so, he associated with all types of students, not only veterans, and does the same thing today. He doesn't go out of his way to avoid student veterans, he clarified, but he tries to get along with everyone, rather than sticking to one particular group. When he initially returned to college after his Navy service, he found the strict, structured environment of submarine service prepared him quite well for the rigors of academic study. After leaving an atmosphere where mistakes, literally, can cause people to die, doing homework and studying for tests was an easy transition for Scott. Even after being out of the military as long as he has, he finds his self-discipline and drive are still greater than the younger students in his classes. He felt other students were more concerned with partying while he actively wanted to participate in college to learn and get into his program of choice. Scott expressed concern that the federal and state veterans affairs offices as well as colleges and universities around the country were not adequately prepared for the amount of service members who will be coming home as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan draw down over the next few years. He saw this increase in returning veterans as adding to the unemployment rate and the need for veterans' services, but hoped many of them would choose to attend college and this would have a positive effect on their return to civilian society. He said for veterans who had been in the military for several years, especially those with multiple combat deployments, the United States is a different country than it was five or ten years ago. For these service members, who have been deploying over and over again, the military is their world, their home, and most of them have not given any thought towards what they are going to do when the wars are over, or if the military cuts its numbers and allows fewer and fewer people to stay in the service. Scott stated current service members are people who haven't had to look for a job; they've been under the impression they would have a job forever, and many of them are in for a rude awakening over the next few years.

### **Bakari**

The third interview was with Bakari, an African American man in his early 30's. The interview was conducted in an empty office where he and I sat next to each other in front of a long desk with my recording device set in front of us. He was finished with his coursework for the day, and stated he was comfortable and ready to be interviewed. I openly took notes while we spoke. We discussed his background and military service.

Bakari joined the Florida Army National Guard in 1999 and had served, at the time of the interview, for eleven years. A current National Guard staff sergeant, he was the only interviewee currently serving in the military. He said he joined the military because he wanted to do something different. He had tried regular 9-5 employment as well as technical training courses, but neither offered what he was looking for. He served as a petroleum specialist, and his job was to fuel any vehicle assigned to his unit, from trucks to tanks to armored personnel carriers. For most of his career, he was assigned to a field artillery unit, keeping the trucks and tracked vehicles fueled up and ready to go. He deployed once, for 15 months, in 2005. His initial duty was in Kuwait with a support unit, but he was subsequently assigned to an active Army unit and stationed at Abu Ghraib, Iraq, where the artillery soldiers were retrained for duty as guards for Iraqi prisoners. Recently, Bakari decided to attend college full time.

Bakari stated he originally wanted to attend college years ago, but he didn't know what he wanted to major in. He was interested in the medical field so he attended several different

vocational training schools, eventually earning Emergency Medical Technician, Medical Assistance, and Noninvasive Cardiovascular Technician certificates. In all of these areas, he found most hospitals weren't hiring people for these jobs because they had nurses on staff doing the work of technicians, so finding meaningful employment in these areas was difficult. After further researching the medical field, he made the decision to go to a more traditional university and earn his bachelor's degree in nursing. He chose his university based on positive word of mouth from people he knew in the medical industry, and felt he had a good chance of getting a job at a local hospital once he graduated. He didn't want to go to a community college because their nursing programs are very difficult to get in to (an average of 400 students apply for 42 nursing student slots at the nearby community college in Tampa) and he didn't want to worry about transferring schools later on. With the Post 9/11 GI Bill to cover his tuition and books, the price difference between the community college and his proprietary school was not a concern for him.

Bakari found it a big challenge to get all of his military and vocational training documents together during the admissions process. The university has no dedicated administrative person assigned to military and veteran students, something he said doesn't happen at larger colleges. Additionally, because he hadn't been in a formal classroom setting for years, he was apprehensive about being able to focus on his schoolwork and manage his time. He described himself as more of a "hands on" and visual learner, so it has been difficult adapting to the books-and-lecture method of instruction utilized in the majority of his classes. Bakari explained he was never a good student, and has always had difficulty with writing, but is very good at rewriting: he needs to see something done properly first and then he can emulate it successfully, a key hallmark of military instructional methods.

Unlike the other subjects, Bakari, deliberately, made it a point not to associate with other student veterans. He stated many of the vets on campus had just left the military and tended, in his view, to brag and tell stories about everything they did while on active duty. He said he's been in long enough to have done a few things and have heard all of the stories, and now, he just wanted to get his education and move on. He did state that coming off of a combat deployment and then returning to the civilian world was "an eye-opener." He said the biggest change was, when he was deployed, his unit received lots of letters and emails and packages thanking him for everything he had done and for protecting America, as well as similar patriotic messages of support. When he got home, however, no one really cared. When people found out he'd served in Iraq, some of them might say "thank you" but, in Bakari's opinion, none of them really cared or understood what going to Iraq was actually like. It wasn't the same. When it came to work, he was confronted with civilians who seemed to complain about everything, no matter how small, all the time. He couldn't understand it. He had come from an environment where he worked seven days a week, with no days off, for months, in order to accomplish the mission, but in the civilian world people took days off of work with no warning or notice. They complained about their boss, they called in sick. Bakari told me he had just come from war where he didn't have time to think like that. He found the civilian world lax and lazy.

Bakari thought some colleges did a better job than others when it came to their student veterans. He had friends in the Guard who attended large, research institutions in Tampa with a significant ROTC population, who told him they had separate counselor and advising offices for veterans to help them adjust to higher education. The difference between that school and the smaller college Bakari attended came down to differences in attention. At the research university, advisors and staff have accommodations and special programs for student veterans, but in the classroom, vets are just another face in a sea of anonymous undergraduates. At Bakari's small college, while they might not have a dedicated military service representative, he found it easier to work one-on-one with professors when it came to military obligations

interfering with academic coursework. In Bakari's words, "At big universities, the school will work with you but the teachers won't. At this school, the teacher will work with you but the school won't." He stated with the incoming influx of new student veterans over the next few years, all colleges should have an office dedicated to ensuring student veterans have a voice on campus and help with any issues they may have at the school.

## **Emergence of Themes**

During this study, three prominent themes became immediately apparent: the process of adapting (or re-adapting, in the case of reserve and National Guard members who had served in an overseas deployment) a civilian identity, higher education's role in the civilian acculturation process, and the need for comprehensive services for student veterans. Within these three broad areas, the subjects expressed specific concerns regarding veterans' first experience in higher education after military separation, the challenges of adapting to the open environment of higher education after time spent in the severely regimented life of an active duty military service member, and how colleges and universities could better assist student veterans.

### **Adapting to Civilian Identity**

One of the biggest challenges veterans face when they leave active military service is the process of adapting to civilian life. The military is a distinctly hierarchal environment, one posing significant challenges when service members leave and return to the civilian world they left behind, whether years ago, or only a few months. While they were in the military, veterans' decision making involved following rules supported by outside forces; in a higher education environment, self-regulation is the key to a successful transition (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). All three interview subjects experienced difficulty adapting to the civilian world and obtaining the ability to self-regulate.

Veteran status is, of course, only one facet of a student's identity. They are often parents, co-workers, employees, members of a religious organization, and have the same racial and sexual identity issues as any other student. The difference is that, in the military, the social and political environment that determines what identity is acceptable is much narrower than the civilian world, with dominant values determining norms and expectations (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). As demonstrated by Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007), multidimensional identity filters that worked in the military may need to be adjusted and reconceived when a veteran enters a higher education environment.

### **Higher Education's Role**

Another theme from these interviews is the role higher education has in the transition from military service to civilian life. Higher education has often been thought of as an acculturation process, where students absorb the shared knowledge, mannerisms, and thinking process of the academe, if not fully then certainly in such a way as to increase their cultural capital while gaining valuable academic knowledge and skills. Do student veterans who attend college after separating from active military service put themselves in a better position to adapt to the civilian world than those who go straight into the workforce without any higher education experience? It would be easy to make the case that attending a prominent school like Harvard or Duke or Stanford would provide distinct advantages for veterans, but what about community colleges, Liberal Arts schools, or regional state universities? Is there an inherent advantage for veterans if they attend college, regardless of what type of college it may be? Does the mere

act of being around students, taking classes outside of their comfort zone, exploring subjects that are non-military in nature, assist or accelerate the transition to civilian life? Does the higher education experience assist in student veteran identity development and self-authorship? These questions are beyond the focus of this study, but deserve further consideration at a later time.

### **Services for Student Veterans**

The flip-side of intangibles such as civilian acculturation are academic and administrative services offered for student veterans in higher education. Every interviewee expressed a need for increased or improved services for veterans at some level, whether a dedicated military admissions representative, or someone in the financial aid office who could walk through the tangled knot of constantly changing regulations related to the Post 9/11 GI Bill, or someone in student affairs who understands the life-altering effect a school year combat deployment has on a reservist or National Guardsman.

### **Discussion**

These in-depth interviews were conducted in order to describe and understand how student veterans developed their identities and made meaning during their transition from active military service to their current status as a student at a higher education institution. Many student veterans are undergoing a constant dynamic tension as they transition from a previous state (servicemember), to several simultaneous current states (college student, civilian, employee), all while creating and recreating their individual identities along the way. These three interviews show a small sample of what student veterans experience as they go through the dynamics of transition on their way towards balancing multiple dimensions of identity.

Student veterans are often a group in conflict with itself. This is not meant to stereotype military veterans, or reduce what is a very complex group of individuals into a generic mass for ease of categorization. Rather, it is a general statement that those who end their military service are leaving more than just a job; they are leaving a way of looking at themselves in the world, and all that that entails, good and bad. For many, leaving the service is analogous to leaving the priesthood. Both involve reconceptualizing not only what they do, but who they are and, often, what they believe. Student veterans will often undergo simultaneous work, individual, and relationship transitions because of the combination of identity roles, functions, and environments they are involved with (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Future research on student veterans' experience in higher education is critical due to the acute shortage of information on this emergent student demographic. Current military deployments are winding down, and force projection levels are predicted to drop to the lowest in the past fifty years. This will invariably lead to a dramatic increase in student veteran presence on campuses around the country, campuses that remain woefully unprepared for the forthcoming influx. As more military veterans enter higher education, opportunities for research should be of key importance to higher education researchers and student affairs professionals.

### **Conclusion**

The current, decade-old conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are drawing to a close. This is a good thing, but it means millions of men and women will be leaving the armed forces over the next few years. Many of them will find themselves on campuses across the country. At Ivy League and research universities, comprehensive state colleges, small liberal arts schools,

community colleges, trade schools, in vocational and technical programs, at proprietary and online institutions, more and more of them trying to adapt not only to higher education, but to civilian life in general. The challenge to researchers and educational policymakers is this: to provide the best learning environment for student veterans they can, to assist them in any way possible, and do our best to understand what they have already accomplished in the past, and encourage them to do more in the future. It is the least we can do for those who have given so much.

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### Author Note

Kevin C. Jones is a PhD candidate in Higher Education Administration and Policy at the University of Florida's School of Human Development and Organizational Studies in Education. His research areas include student veterans, student veterans in higher education, student identity development, qualitative research, community college administration and governance, higher education policy, and social media in the social science space. Prior to his

academic career he served in the United States Marine Corps. He may be contacted at kevin.jones@ufl.edu.

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