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# Reintegration and College Experience of Military Veteran Students

Hollie Carlson

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REINTEGRATION AND COLLEGE EXPERIENCE OF MILITARY  
VETERAN STUDENTS

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Education

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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The purpose of this study is to quantify the number of undergraduate and graduate veteran students at Indiana University of Pennsylvania who have suffered experience to stressful events in the military, and are now reintegrating back into civilian life as a college student. A survey was electronically dispersed to undergraduate and graduate students, examining if they felt their time in the military affects their academic experience, if they struggle to fit in on campus, and if felt uncomfortable on campus because of unpleasant experiences from the military. The most significant finding after analysis of the surveys, was the correlation between military experience and college experience. The student veterans who reported having fewer traumatic military experiences, more commonly reported having a more positive college experience.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Statement of Problem**

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a relatively newer research topic and is growing in the literature though it wasn't introduced into the formal diagnostic lexicon until 1980 (Wise, 2015). PTSD is a condition experienced after a traumatic life event and is often long term and painful to endure (Vinokur, 2011). PTSD is a disorder brought on after experiencing a traumatic event. During a traumatic event, one thinks that their life or others' lives are in danger. They may feel afraid or feel that they have no control over what is happening around them. If their reactions don't go away over time and they disrupt their life, they may be experiencing PTSD (PTSD, 2015). With the increased rates of PTSD studies have been conducted to show how much specific areas of life are impacted. One study reported that individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder have a significantly lower employability rate than those who suffer from PTSD which translates into significantly poorer return-to-work rates (Matthews, 2006).

Those military members returning home are experiencing posttraumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues at rates that haven't been seen since the Vietnam War (Garske, 2011). According to the Congressional Research Service, the number of military members diagnosed with PTSD grew by 1,611 people in the year 2000 (Fischer, 2014). In 2010, that number increased to 3,139 military members being diagnosed with PTSD that year (Fischer, 2014). In total from the year 2000 – 2013, 34,157 members who had not previously been deployed had were diagnosed with PTSD and 118,829 members diagnosed who had previous deployments (Fischer, 2014).



Individuals with PTSD, particularly veterans, show signs of cognitive impairment when tested with neuropsychological instruments, more so than individuals exposed to trauma who do not have PTSD (Qureshi, 2011). Stress is also known to have an effects on functions of new learning and memory that are mediated by the hippocampus, which can be damaged by a traumatic or stressful event (Bremner, 1999). With the rise in PTSD prevalence, and military members returning to academics and occupational settings, accommodations needed to be made.

This increased presence of veterans on college campuses has left some institutions ill-prepared in providing resources to these students. One study examining veterans on college campuses suggest that combat veterans are a student population with special needs and require support from both policymakers and program providers (Ackerman, 2009). An important means of building inclusive communities on campuses is to provide services that support the needs of unique groups of students. Student affairs programs provide services that assist special student populations (DiRamio, 2008).

With such a large population of individuals being diagnosed with PTSD, and a number of the population who has experienced a traumatic stressful event being unaccounted for, it has become increasingly relevant to understand what some of the struggles are that this population is experiencing. Without an understanding of what these difficulties might be, steps cannot be taken to make reintegration into professional or academic setting happen with more ease.

### **Research Questions**

1. Do student veterans struggle to fit in on campus?
2. Do student veterans feel their time in the military affects their academic experience as defined in part by GPA?

3. Do student veterans feel uncomfortable on campus because of unpleasant experiences from the military?

### **Hypotheses**

1. Student veterans reintegrating onto college campuses will experience different difficulties fitting in on campus.
2. Academic experiences will be negatively affected based on the student veteran's time spent in the military.
3. Levels of comfort on campus for the student veterans will be negatively influenced by unpleasant military experiences.

### **Significance of the Study**

There have been studies conducted on what struggles an individual may encounter when trying to reintegrate back into the work and academic lifestyle after being exposed to a traumatic stressful event (DiRamio, 2008). However, there is little research looking at how military experience might influence a veteran's ability to reintegrate and obtain academic or occupational achievement. This study is being conducted to investigate the struggles veteran students are faced with during their period of reintegration into academia on a college campus. Reintegration after a traumatic stressful event is a serious challenge that hasn't been examined until recently. The men and women who suffer from these events have been researched in many personal and social ways, but extensive research into the affects it has had in their professional and academic life at IUP has never been done. While analyzing results, it will be determined what some of the specific struggles are for an individual after suffering from a traumatic stressful event when attempting to reintegrate into the occupational and academic fields. This study also examines if these student veterans utilize campus-funded support for veterans and if they feel supported as a

veteran. If this research shows there is a high impact of traumatic stressful events on the ability to succeed academically, measures can start being taken to better prepare and provide these individuals with the appropriate resources.

### **Assumptions**

The following assumptions guided this study:

1. All participants have had a traumatic stressful event and experience with reintegration onto a college campus.
2. The participants complete the surveys accurately and to the best of their ability.

### **Limitations**

The following limitations guided this study:

1. A small sample of research participants will be available to participate in this study.
2. The research will rely on the participant's ability to accurately recall information needed for the survey.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Reintegration* – “The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) does not offer a uniform definition of reintegration, but these programs typically emphasize certain areas, including finding purpose in life; inter personal relationships; employment or schooling; and access to benefits, housing, and health care” (DoD, 2011; Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, 2004).

*Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* - PTSD is a condition experienced after a traumatic life event and is often long term and painful to endure (Vinokur, 2011).

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Military Stressors**

Researchers are beginning to examine the significance of what may be happening in the lives of those who have experienced a traumatic stressful life event and the struggles they may be encountering during their period of reintegration. It is important to note the significance placed on the struggles student veterans have such as” problems with cognitive skills, judgment, concentration/memory, difficulty coping under pressure, difficulty interacting with others, responding appropriately to social cues, problems with authority, problems with constructive feedback, and unpredictable absences” (Church, 2009). To face these potential barriers the students need to first recognize that they may be struggling during reintegration.

When looking at traumatic stressful events it is important to note that in the case of the veteran participants, the stressor will most commonly come from a military experience. However, the stressors that are experienced in the military setting have similarities such as being in a violent relationship (Campbell, 2002) or living in a dangerous neighborhood (Ross & Mirowsky, 2001). Exposure to a harsh physical condition or fear of a near death experience is something that civilians may experience a handful of time, but veterans often experience this sort of elevated fear for months at a time (Basham, 2008). After returning to an academic setting, specifically that of a full time, on campus student, finding means of helpful reintegration is a crucial part of the veteran student’s success. There is currently no national-level systematic effort in higher education to assist student veterans, but there is research finding that connecting with other veterans on campus helps student veterans’ transition to college life (DiRamio et al, 2008).

The nature of being in the military often requires an individual to be exposed to what may be a stressful event on multiple occasions. Individuals with a trauma history rarely experience only a single traumatic event but rather are likely to have experienced several episodes of traumatic exposure (Kessler, 2000). The number of veterans coming back with a neurological or psychological disorder such as PTSD continues to grow. Given that most estimates put the lifetime prevalence of PTSD between 9% and 31% for those exposed to combat (Card, 1987; Centers for Disease Control, 1988; Kulka, 1990; Southwick, Morgan, 1993), over 500,000 veterans in this country alone may suffer from PTSD symptomatology.

### **PTSD in the Military**

Compared to people without a trauma history, trauma survivors are at a higher risk for multiple problems including depression, substance abuse, suicidal and homicidal behavior, physical illness, and poverty (Burnman et al., 1988; Byrne, Resnick, Kilpatrick, Best, & Saunders, 1999; Keane & Wolfe, 1990; Kessler et al., 1995; Schnurr, Spiro, Aldwin, & Stukel, 1998). Those individuals who are members of the military are exposed to many risk factors that increase their odds of suffering from psychological disorders such as PTSD including long term exposure to stressful events and the threat of returning to the stressful event (Rona, 2012). The increased exposure to traumatic stressful events increases the probability of these individuals developing PTSD and suffering from long term side effects (Rona, 2012). PTSD in the military is caused by being exposed to stressful events, but is also caused by the emotional responses followed by those events such as guilt and blame (Wessely, 2005).

PTSD may not develop until the military servicemen and women have returned home from their service. Due to the delay in symptoms, the individual might experience trouble recognizing that they are struggling with a serious psychological disorder (U.S. Department of

Veterans Affairs). The delay in recognition can cause an individual to have the inability to recognize .they are having trouble with symptoms of the disorder, such as concentration, making work and especially an academic career increasingly difficult (Sayer, 2009).

### **Returning Veterans**

“Educational benefits was the most commonly cited reason for joining the military in the beginning of the Global War on Terror” (GWT; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2001). “For many of the 2.3 million veterans returning from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, going to college has been a popular method of reintegration (Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America”, 2010). Individuals have different experiences with reintegration in regards to various scenarios.

A study done focusing on reintegration problems for Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans stated that half of their participants reported perceived problems during reintegration (Sayor, 2014). These issues range from a variety of emotional disorders, mental disorders and physical disorders. One of the more serious physical injuries reported on the rise is Traumatic Brain Injuries, or TBI. Studies also report based on surveys of individuals formerly deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq suggest that 10–23 % may have had a deployment-related TBI (Sayer et al. 2014). All aspects of each veterans health needs to be considered during their time of reintegration.

### **Veterans on Campus**

Although every individual reacts to a trauma in a unique way, there are similarities found in those individuals who suffer from PTSD. Symptoms as listed on the PTSD Checklist-Military version or, PCL-M range in severity from mild symptoms, only interfering in daily life in small ways, to very severe symptoms that are invasive to an individual’s everyday life (Weathers, 2013). When veteran students return to the classroom, there is no way to predict how they are

going to be able to adapt and react to being in that setting again and if the classroom is prepared to effectively teach a returning veteran (Zinger, 2010).

These kind of issues quickly become troublesome for an individual who is reintegrating back into academia. After a traumatic stressful event, one often experiences periods of restlessness and frequents bouts of anxiety (Weather, 2013, Zinger, 2010). Having this type of constant mentality makes it increasingly difficult for a student veteran to actively and successfully participate in academics while maintaining a functional quality of life. When returning to a college campus, having a support system in place, or a plan for these students is crucial in their success (Ackerman, 2009). Accommodations for PTSD symptoms such as frequent absences, longer time needed for testing or assignments, and an advocate who understand their situation, are all key elements to helping these students be success in reintegrating into the environment as successfully as possible (Ackerman, 2009).

Another issue these student veterans face is feeling a constant disconnect. Not only is disconnection a symptom of PTSD, but there is also a preconceived disconnection with veterans and most college students because of their experiences and age difference (Elliott, 2011). This element adds another layer of feeling like nobody is there to understand what the student is going through. Finding these connections can foster a feeling of comfort that can keep these students grounded and give them the security needed to seek out helpful resources. The feeling of alienation can add another layer to an individual's symptoms that will compile into the diagnosis of PTSD (Elliott, 2011).

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

Participants for this study were recruited through the Military Resource Office at Indiana University of Pennsylvania's main campus. The Military Resource Center is focused on providing support to veteran students returning to academics at IUP. The office works with other offices on campus to ensure the students have a place to go as a contact for any issues they may encounter. The focus for the office is to ensure the fostering of academic success for the returning veteran students. Eligible participants received study information through their IUP email account.

This survey will attempt to answer these three research question:

1. Do student veterans struggle to fit in on campus?
2. Do student veterans feel their time in the military affects their academic experience as defined in pare by GPA?
3. Do student veterans feel uncomfortable on campus because of unpleasant experiences from the military?

This survey was sent with the following hypothesis in mind:

1. Student veterans reintegrating onto college campuses will experience different difficulties fitting in on campus.
2. Academic experiences will be negatively affected based on the student veteran's time spent in the military.
3. Levels of comfort on campus for the student veterans will be negatively influenced by unpleasant military experiences.



### **Study Sample**

This study includes all students who are identified as military veterans attending Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Both undergraduate and graduate students who served in any branch of the military and are identified as veterans will be eligible to participate. Both male and female student veterans will be invited to participate in this study. The survey was sent to approximately 240 undergraduate and graduate student veterans at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, the total number of veteran students on campus.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected using a combination of two separate survey instruments. Eligible participants received an email asking them to participate in this study. Contact with participants was made solely through the IUP Military Resource Center, sent through the appropriate veteran email list serve and was unavailable to the researcher. Keeping contact through the Military Resource Center ensures complete anonymity for this group of students. Site Approval was granted from the Military Resource Center and reference in Appendix A.

All information about the study was summarized into a brief informational email, referenced in appendix B. This cover page outlined the nature of the study, the participant's role in the study, potential benefits and risks of participation as well as instructions and consent procedures. The participants were asked to complete the survey that was modified into email format through a third party website known as Qualtrics. Student veterans who agreed to participate opened the link through their email that took them to the survey on the Qualtrics website. At that time, participants who completed the survey were eligible to be entered in a drawing for a \$50 gift card to the Co-Op store at IUP.

## **Instrument**

The survey instrument utilized for this study combines The PTSD Checklist Veteran Version (PCL-M) (Weathers, 2013) and the Survey of Student Veterans (Elliott, 2011).

The PTSD Checklist Veteran Version (PCL-M) is a 17 item scale used for individuals to self-report on PTSD symptoms. This instrument is used as a screening tool for individuals who may have PTSD. It is used to evaluate the symptoms of PTSD and monitor how the individual is at any given time or how the individual is progressing. The checklist can be administered at any time to evaluate and aid in diagnosis of PTSD.

The Survey of Student Veterans was developed by Dr. Marta Elliott (Elliott, 2011) as an instrument to measure several aspects of an individual's experience during reintegrating into academics. This survey will evaluate the level of comfort and support an individual feels during their time of reintegration from military to academic lifestyle. The survey can be referenced in Appendix C. The investigation into reintegration goes past the surface of just academics and examines the veteran student's personal, and professional lives as well as demonstrated in the survey.

## **Data Analysis**

The survey was administered electronically using a product called Qualtrics, an online survey software program that allows researchers to develop and administer web-based surveys (Phillips, Guss, & McGarry, 2011). The program provided a private link to the questionnaire that participants accessed through their email accounts. Lastly, the Qualtrics software assisted in analyzing questionnaire results for statistical information related to the study research questions. Participants were only permitted to complete the survey one time, which was automatically

monitored through the Qualtric software. The survey results were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software (Levesque, 2007).

To answer the research questions developed for this study, several tests will be conducted to process the results. For instance descriptive statistics will be used to describe the demographic information. Independent t-tests will be used to compare the self-reported symptoms of PTSD (PCL-Checklist) with the Survey of Student Veterans report. Any differences between gender (t-test) and age (ANOVA) will also be determined.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### **Participants**

The data from this study was collected from student veterans at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. All student veterans who participated in this study served in one or more branches of the United States military and returned as students at the collegiate level at IUP. The participants were student veterans at both the undergraduate and graduate level. The survey was sent out electronically through email using Qualtrics. The electronic survey was sent out for two weeks with a reminder email sent after one week.

Of the 240 students who received the survey, a total of 18 students (7.5%) completed the survey. Due to the limitation of the survey be sent through a third party as well as the students receiving the survey during the final week of the semester, a low response rate was expected. The survey was sent out initially and again with a follow up reminder one week later. During the study, there was a dropout rate of about 30% when students were asked about seeking counseling, leaving 11 participants to fully complete the survey. Of the seven individuals who dropped out of the survey, all seven withdrew from the survey after the same question. Those individuals voluntarily withdrew from the survey after being asked if they had ever sought or received counseling related to their military experience. All individuals responded to the previous question but when asked why they did not seek counseling, those seven participants withdrew from the survey. Students were encouraged to withdraw from the study anytime they become uncomfortable. All students met the participation qualifications as the survey was only sent to student veterans. Of the 18 initial participants 16 of the participants were male and two

were female as shown in Table 1. Table 1 also displays the race, time spent in college, college rank, and grade point average of each participant.

Table 1

*Demographic Statistics of the Participants*

		Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	Male	16	89.9
	Female	2	11.1
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	White	16	89.9
	African American	2	11.1
<b>Years in College</b>	Less than 1	3	16.7
	1-2	2	11.1
	3-4	4	22.2
	More than 4	9	50.0
<b>Education Level</b>	Freshmen	4	22.2
	Sophomore	3	16.7
	Junior	0	--
	Senior	3	16.7
	Graduate	8	44.4
<b>Grade Point Average</b>	3.5-4.0	8	44.4
	3.0-3.49	5	27.8
	2.5-2.99	2	11.1
	2.0-2.49	3	16.7
	Under 2.0	0	--

Of the 18 participants, 16 of those participants were Caucasian while two participants were African American. Eight of the participants, making up about 50% were graduate students while the remaining ten students were undergraduate students. The average age of the participants was 29 years of age.

Table 2 displays the military statistics for the participants. This table outlines what branch of military the participant served in, if they ever completed an overseas tour, if they have

received any type of veteran benefit, what type of benefits they have received and how much of their expenses are covered by veteran benefits. Table 2 displays how frequently and what percentage of participants selected each response.

Table 2

*Military Statistics of the Participants*

		Frequency	Percentage
<b>Branch of the Military</b>	Army	13	72.2
	Air Force	3	16.7
	Navy	1	5.6
	Marine Corps	1	5.6
	Coast Guard	0	--
<b>Tours of Duty</b>	Yes	15	83.3
	No	3	16.7
<b>Veteran Benefits</b>	Yes	17	94.4
	No	1	5.6
<b>College Expenses Covered by Benefits</b>	None	2	11.1
	About 25%	0	--
	About 50%	3	16.7
	About 75%	6	33.3
	100%	7	38.9
	Tuition Assistance Top Up	3	16.7
<b>Type of Benefits</b>	G.I. Bill Benefits	18	100
	Disability Benefits	3	16.7
	Veterans' Scholarship	0	--
	Green to Gold Program	0	--
	Other	0	--
	None	0	--

72.2% of participants served in the Army, 16.7% in the Air Force, 5.6% in the Navy 5.6% in the Marine Corps and 0% in the Coast Guard. 83.3% of the participants completed at least one overseas tour; with the average tours being 1.1667 (standard deviation =.383).

Table 3 displays the average years of military service the participants completed. This information is an overview of the time the participants spent in the military. Also provided in Table 3 is the average number of overseas tours and assignments that the participants completed.

Table 3

*Military Experience of the Participants*

	Mean (SD)	Standard Deviation
Years in the Military	8.388	.617
Number of Oversea Tours and Assignments	1.666	5.166

**Student Veterans Struggle to Fit in on Campus**

The first research question of this study looked specifically at student veterans struggle to fit in on a college campus. Experience for each student veteran varied based on specific situations. Participants were asked several questions pertaining to their college experience. When asked about how often these student veterans say they struggle to fit in on campus, 16.7% report that they often struggle to fit in, 33.3% sometimes struggle, 38.9% rarely struggle and 11.1% report never struggling to fit it on campus as illustrated in Table 4. The student veterans were also asked to what extent they felt unfairly judged in the classroom. These responses, also displayed in Table 4, follow a similar pattern with a majority of the student veterans reporting feeling unfairly judged sometimes or rarely. Finally pertaining specifically to feeling comfortable on campus, 5.6% report often feeling uncomfortable, 16.7% sometimes feel uncomfortable, 33.3% rarely feel uncomfortable, and 44.4% report never feeling uncomfortable being on campus.

Table 4

*College Experience Scale*

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
To what extent have you felt unfairly judged in the classroom?	1 (5.6)	8 (44.4)	4 (22.2)	5 (27.8)
Some student veterans say that they feel like they do not fit in on campus. How often do you feel you do not fit in?	3 (16.7)	6 (33.3)	7 (38.9)	2 (11.1)
Some student veterans say that they sometimes feel uncomfortable on campus because it brings back memories of unpleasant experiences in the military. How often do you feel uncomfortable being on campus?	1 (5.6)	3 (16.7)	6 (33.3)	8 (44.4)

When discussing the student veteran's ability to fit in and have a positive experience, specific questions related to the student veteran's college experience were observed. Based on the total responses from the college experience specific questions, females scored a ten out of possible 15 where males scored an 8.125 out of a possible 15. The higher score represented from the female population indicates a generally better overall college experience. Due to the low number of female participants, there is no significant standard deviation to report. These score are represented in table 5.

Table 5

*Male and Female College Experience*

	<b>Overall</b> (n =18) M (SD)	<b>Males</b> (n =16) M (SD)	<b>Females</b> (n=2) M (SD)
College Experience	8.33 (2.24)	8.13 (2.3)	10 (0)



## Impact of Military Time on Academic Experience

The second research question directly addressed the impact of military time on academic experience. Participants were asked to report on several aspects of their academic experience including their college experience, military relation, and Grade Point Average (GPA). When looking specifically at the GPA of the veteran students, there is no significant relationship between college experience and student veteran grade point average. The significant trend in direct relation to GPA is that a higher GPA is associated with a higher reported college experience. This relationship is represented in Table 6.

Table 6

### *Grade Point Average and College Experience*

	College Experience	
	Pearson Correlation	<i>P</i> (n=18)
<b>Grade Point Average</b>	.368	.133

Student veterans were given the option to elaborate on why they do or have felt unfairly judged inside of the classroom for reasons other than when the professor makes negative remarks about the U.S. military, when other students make negative remarks about the U.S. military, when they offer information about my service or when they are called upon to share information about their service. While 23% of the participants chose to the response “other,” only one participant gave further explanation.

When given the chance to expand on their response, this participant stated that the instruction does not support the non-traditional aspect of the student veteran’s status. For these

student veterans, high school may have been many years prior to their college experience and doesn't serve well as a reference in the classroom.

The student veterans were also asked what made them feel like they didn't fit in on campus outside of no one understanding what they had been through, their military background, opinions about the military and perspective on life because of their military background.

One participant reported the age and maturity gap caused them to have trouble fitting in on campus. Although the age gap could sometimes be minor, there is often a large maturity gap because of the veteran student's military experience.

Another student veteran reports having trouble fitting in due to the general student population's lack of similar experiences or military culture. Another participant reported a similar response, finding trouble with maturity level and life experience of the average civilian college student.

Finally, when asked what kind of situations made the participants feel uncomfortable on campus outside of being in a crowded classroom, eating in a dining hall, walking across campus, or unidentified packages and backpacks, two participants reported that being around large groups of students with self-entitled attitudes or immature students who party can make them feel uncomfortable on campus.

When reporting on the student veterans GPA and time spent serving in the military, there is a moderate significance at the .043 level. The student veterans who reported more time serving in the military also reported slightly higher GPA's. The data showing this significance is represented in Table 7. The student veteran time in the military did seem to have a slight positive impact specifically on their academic experience when relating that experience directly to their GPA and academic achievement.

Table 7

*Service and Grade Point Average*

	Years of Military Service	
	Spearman's rho	<i>p</i>
<b>Grade Point Average</b>	.482	.043

*Note.* \*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

### **Student Veteran's Feelings on Campus Because of Unpleasant Experiences from the Military**

The IUP student veterans were asked a series of questions pertaining to their military experience. The student veterans were asked to rate how often they experienced certain situations while serving in the military. For example, student veterans were asked "how often did you experience being in or witnessing an accident causing serious injury or death?" 27.3% of the student veterans responded by saying they had never been in or witnessed an accident causing serious injury or death, 36.4% responded occasionally, 18.2% responded sometimes, 18.2% responded often and 0% responded always being in or witnessing an accident causing injury or death. The participant's responses to those 10 items are displayed in Table 8.

Table 8

*Military Experience Scale*

	Never	Occasionally	Sometimes	Often	Always
Being in or witnessing an accident causing serious injury or death	3 (27.3)	4 (36.4)	2 (18.2)	2 (18.2)	0 (0.0)
Clearing/searching homes, building, caves or bunkers	5 (45.5)	1 (9.1)	2 (18.2)	3 (27.3)	0 (0.0)
Being combat wounded or injured	9 (82)	1 (9)	0 (0.0)	1 (9)	0 (0.0)
Knowing someone seriously injured or killed	2 (18.2)	3 (27.3)	3 (27.3)	3 (27.3)	0 (0.0)
Physical ambush or assault	8 (72.7)	0 (0.0)	1 (9.1)	1 (9.1)	1 (9.1)
Seeing dead or seriously injured people	4 (36.4)	2 (18.2)	0 (0.0)	5 (45.5)	0 (0.0)
Being in a chemical or biological attack	11 (100)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Tracking combat missions via radio or computer	6 (55.5)	3 (27.3)	0 (0.0)	1 (9.1)	1 (9.1)
Repairing vehicles damaged in combat	5 (45.5)	6 (54.5)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Assisting wounded soldiers or civilians	5 (45)	4 (36)	1 (9)	1 (9)	0 (0.0)

11 of the 18 participants reported on their overall military experience. Given the 10 items pertaining directly to military experience, there was a total possible score of 50 in this category. The average score of 19.18 demonstrates a relatively low level a traumatic events experienced cumulatively while serving in the military as displayed in Table 9.

Table 9

*Overall Military Experience*

	<b>Overall (n=11) M</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
<b>Military Experience</b>	19.18	7.73

When comparing the participants' responses pertaining to their military experience to that of their college experience; a moderately strong correlation between the two variables was found. This relationship shows a significant negative correlation of  $r = -.694$  ( $p > .05$ ), meaning that the lower the military experience score, the higher the college experience scores. This represents that the student veterans who were presented with fewer and less frequent traumatic stressful events while in the military have a more positive college experience. This information is represented below in Table 10.

Table 10

*Military and College Experience Correlation*

	<b>Military Experience</b>	
	<b>Spearman's rho</b>	<b>P</b>
College Experience	-.694	.018

*Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).*

When given the opportunity to expand on different aspects of college life, the student veteran participants reported on aspects of college life that make them feel particularly uncomfortable, given their military background. One participant reported the need for professors to be understanding when they are called away for training or orders. Another student veteran participant reported the need to not assume that all student veterans are the same. A final

participant reported the need for individuals to become more educated about the special needs of student veterans and how to manage a student veteran who may not be handling school well.

There are situations as listed here, and provided above in Table 6, that cause student veterans to feel uncomfortable on campus and further challenge their academic endeavors.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Summary**

This study was conducted to answer three specific research questions regarding student veteran's reintegration back into academia. When conducting this study the questions that were specifically examined were;

1. Do student veterans struggle to fit in on campus?
2. Do student veterans feel their time in the military affects their academic experience as defined by GPA?
3. Do student veterans feel uncomfortable on campus because of unpleasant experiences from the military?

A survey was sent to 240 veteran students at Indian University of Pennsylvania to determine if there was significance in the impact of military experience on college experience. Demographic variables were also considered when looking at significant relationships.

In Chapter 1, there is an extensive outline of the purpose of the study and the need to further investigate the issues being faced by veteran students. Chapter 2 outlines the review of literature that has been completed on this topic. This overview includes some issues these students may face, PTSD, and returning military. Chapter 3 outlines the procedures of this study. The purpose of the study, setting of the study, study sample, data collection, instruments used and data analysis can all be found in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 outlines the data and analysis for this study. Answers to each research question can be found in Chapter 4. Discussion about significant findings can be found in Chapter 4, with further elaborations here in Chapter 5. Chapter 5 will

serve as a summary for the results provided in Chapter 4 and make recommendations for universities dealing with veteran students.

## **Conclusions**

This research study focuses on 3 research questions that relate to a veteran student's experience during reintegration into academia and onto a college campus. In completing this survey, veteran students reported on different challenges they face during their time of reintegration. Each research question is outlined below, with the focus of significant findings related to each question. The impact on college experience due to an individual's military experience is the main focus of this study and is further explained in detail under Research Question 3.

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question explores student veterans struggle to fit in on campus. A series of questions related specifically to the student veteran's college experience were asked during the survey. The students were asked about how often they felt unfairly judged on campus, to what extent they feel they fit in and the level at which they feel uncomfortable being on campus. When separating these questions from the rest of the study, female participants scored a higher possible average score, representing an overall better college experience. The female population scored a ten out of a possible 15 where the male population scored an 8.125, representing the higher level of college experience for the female population.

Other studies are also showing reports of student veteran's issues with different college experiences. Six years ago, in the fall of 2010, over 210,000 veterans used their Post 9/11 GI benefits to attend college (Miles, 2010). A study conducted in the western United States used the PCL-M and additional survey questions to determine if veteran students experience alienation on



campus. When analyzing the results of the questionnaires, this study showed that the presence of the disorder (PTSD) predicted greater alienation on campus, more intimate relationship strain, and more problems with alcohol (Elliott, 2011).

### **Research Question 2**

The second research question asked if student veterans felt their time in the military affected their academic experience. This question was answered by asking the students a series of questions about their college experience. The students were also asked to report directly on their grade point average. The data from the student responses about college experiences was then directly correlated with the participant's grade point average. There is no significant correlation to report, however the trend was that a better college experience was typically linked to a better grade point average.

According to other current studies, many of the veteran students returning to college bring a level of maturity that differs from that of their civilian peers, however they also bring a set of special needs that colleges are struggling to meet (Mangan, 2009). It is still currently unknown how such a service should be designed to meet the needs of these students (Langer, 2012). In alignment with research question 2, a participant in a similar study observing educational goals for veterans with PTSD states that they often felt they could not participate in school due to their stress and anxiety from being surrounded by so many people and having to comply with time constraints (Langer, 2012).

### **Research Question 3**

The final research question examines student veteran's feelings on campus because of unpleasant experiences from the military. The significance of this research question represents the key aspect of this study. This question was answered by asking the student veterans a series

of questions directly related to their military experience. The answers received from these 10 specific questions were then correlated with the college experience of each participant. When running this test, a moderately strong correlation of  $-.694$  ( $p > .05$ ), was shown. This relationship represent that a lower military experience score was related to a higher college experience score. Those students who participated in this study, and who were involved in fewer traumatic military experiences, reported experiences a more positive college experience.

Research being done on military students' performance in academics is limited. One study, however, was conducted to determine whether posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTS) are associated with problem drinking and alcohol-related consequences, as well as academic correlates among military-affiliated and civilian students (Barry, 2012). This study used a variation of the PTSD checklist – civilian version, allowing for measurement of gradation in symptoms. This item is a 17 item questionnaire similar to that of the PCL-M used in this study. Also mirroring this current study, was the inquiry of students GPA on a 4.0 grade scale. According to this study published in the American College of Health Journal, PTS symptoms were negatively associated with GPA ( $b = -.007$ ,  $SE = .002$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $\beta = -.18$ ) and this association was similar for all students regardless of service history (Barry, 2012). These two studies correlate the negative outcome of exposure to traumatic events on a student's grade point average.

Another study focused on veteran reintegration into the workplace. The participants, who were recruited through the help of VA mental health clinics, consisted of veterans who had combat exposure as well as veterans who did not have combat exposure. This study reports that those individuals who were exposed to combat experience had more cognitive problems that interfered with work success than those who were not exposed to combat experiences (Kukla,

2015). Research question 3 states that students with less traumatic military experiences had a better college experience, correlating with how these participants who do not have combat experience, show fewer problems interfering with work success.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendations for Colleges Working with Veterans**

Student veterans were given several opportunities to expand on their experiences on this college campus and what would be helpful to them in making their reintegration process as easy as possible. Students reported several issues that cannot be avoided such as interaction with other students but did offer several pieces of advice for faculty members of the university.

When asked to expand on what the university could do to improve their experience as a student veteran, one participant responded by saying, “Professors need to be more understanding when we are given training or orders.” Another participants responded by reporting, “Don’t make assumptions that we are all the same.”

A final participant reported, “Become educated about student veterans and their special needs and how to handle a student veteran who is not handling school well.”

The overall response was that student veterans feel isolated from their peers due to their advanced life experience. These student veterans reported throughout the survey being isolated from their peers and having different learning styles. If teaching adaptations are made and an effort to understand student veterans is encouraged, it could go a long way in improving student veteran’s reintegration into academia and life on a college campus.

Personal recommendations for universities working with student veterans would include informational seminars for all faculty working directly with the student veterans. Although these individuals may have had similar situation, each student veteran will respond in their own way,

with their own set of individual needs. Each university should include a resource center for student veterans to accommodate their academic, physical, emotional and mental needs.

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Appendix A  
Site Approval Form

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Military Resource Center and  
Veterans Affairs Office  
Pratt Hall, Rooms 101 and 102  
201 Pratt Drive  
Indiana, PA 15705

Phone: 724-357-3008  
Fax: 724-357-3945  
Internet: <http://www.iup.edu/veterans/resource-center/>

April 1, 2016

Dear Dr. Shay:

I am writing this letter to introduce you to a study that I will be conducting with veteran students at IUP that will evaluate the level of academic and occupational success of these students. The purpose of this project is to determine if exposure to traumatic stressful events while serving in the military impacts a student's academic and occupational success. Results of this study will be presented and published.

As the Director of the Military Resource Center and Veterans Affairs Office we are writing you to specifically request site approval to conduct our study. We are interested in working with your office to help recruit current IUP student veterans to complete a brief survey questionnaire. The survey will take the students around 10-15 minutes to complete, and will help identify issues students may encounter during their time of reintegration. The role that your office would have includes forwarding our email including the Qualtrics survey link to all IUP student veterans through your office email so that students who decide to participate can do so electronically. Since Qualtrics allows anonymous completion of surveys, we will never see any emails or names of these students. All information that we receive will be maintained in accordance with federal regulations. By agreeing to this role as part of our study, you will have access to all of the finished data results for use in your office. If this is acceptable, please sign and date below.

This project will be approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724-357-7730) prior to starting this study.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Hollie Carlson BS.Ed, Graduate Assistant  
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230 Zink Hall, 1190 Maple Street Indiana, PA 15705  
Phone: (814)279-1419  
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David A. Wachob, D.Ed, CAPE, CHES  
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Fax: (724) 357-3777  
E-Mail: [d.wachob@iup.edu](mailto:d.wachob@iup.edu)

**SITE APPROVAL STATEMENT:**

Yes, I give permission for you to use Military Resource Center and Veterans Affairs Office as a study site for this research project contingent upon receiving approval by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects.

Signature [Signature]

Date 4/12/16

Print name: Co-y Shay

Title: Director Military Resource Center

## Appendix B

### Participant Information Email

# Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Department of Kinesiology, Health, and Sport Science  
Zink Hall, Room 225  
1190 Maple Street  
Indiana, PA 15705

Phone: 724-357-2771  
Fax: 724-357-3777  
Internet: <http://www.iup.edu/kines/>

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.  
Dear IUP Veteran Students,

I am currently working on my master's degree and I would appreciate your precious time and effort in assisting me in my study of the impact of traumatic stressful events on academic success. This study is in partial fulfillment of completion of my master's thesis research which I am conducting through Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Each participant will have the opportunity to be entered in a drawing for a chance to win a free \$50 IUP Co-op gift card. This Qualtrics survey ensures that entry for this gift card is completely disassociated from your survey data.

This study will focus on any challenges that returning veteran students who have been impacted by traumatic stressful events may encounter during transition into college life. I will use a survey that I would like you to complete about traumatic stressful events and academic success. The survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Your participation in this survey will contribute to our knowledge of your academic success on our campus. There are no potential risks to participating in this research, however, completing this survey might bring back stressful situations that you experienced while in the military. If you feel that this survey might cause increased levels of stress, you are encouraged not to participate. If you choose to participate in this study and become uncomfortable at any time, please contact the IUP Counseling Center at 724-357-2621.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at anytime. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you choose to participate, all information will be held in strict confidence and will have no bearing on your academic standing or services you receive from your District. Your responses will be considered only in combination with those from other participants. The information obtained in the study may be published in educational journals or presented at conferences but your identity will be kept strictly confidential. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact myself or Dr. David Wachob at the email address's listed below. **THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN APPROVED BY THE INDIANA UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS (PHONE 724.357.7730).**

If you consent to participate please click on the following survey link to continue [www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com).  
Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

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Email: [d.wachob@iup.edu](mailto:d.wachob@iup.edu)

## Appendix C

### Veteran College Student Survey Questionnaire

#### Inclusion Criteria Questions:

1. Are you a current student at Indiana University of PA? ('NO' response results in skip-logic to end of survey)
2. Are you now, or have you ever been enlisted in any branch of the U.S. Military? ('NO' response results in skip-logic to end of survey)

#### Demographics

1. Are you male or female?

☐ Male ☐ Female

2. What is your race/ethnicity?

☐ White  
☐ Native American or Alaska Native  
☐ African American  
☐ Asian American or Pacific Islander  
☐ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

3. How many years have you been in college?

\_\_\_\_\_ years

4. What year are you in college?

☐ Freshman  
☐ Sophomore  
☐ Junior  
☐ Senior  
☐ Graduate Student

5. What is your current age? \_\_\_\_\_

6. What is your current GPA? (check one)

- 3.5 - 4.0
- 3.0 - 3.49
- 2.5 - 2.99
- 2.0 - 2.49
- under 2.0

7. In which branch(es) of the military did (do) you serve? (check all that apply)

☐ Army ☐ Air Force ☐ Navy ☐ Marine Corps ☐ Coast Guard

8. How many years did you serve in the military?

\_\_\_\_\_ Years

9. Did you complete any overseas tours or assignments while in the military?

9a. If so, how many tours/assignments?

### **Veteran College Student Survey**

10. *Do you receive Veterans benefits to fund your education?*

☐ Yes ☐ No

If you do NOT receive Veterans benefits to fund your education, please complete Question 10a.

If you DO receive Veterans benefits, please skip to Question 10b.

10a. *Why don't you receive Veterans benefits?*

- ☐ I chose to opt out of the benefits program
- ☐ I did not sign up in time to get them
- ☐ I am not eligible for them
- ☐ I do (did) not know about them
- ☐ Other, please specify : \_\_\_\_\_

Now, please skip to Question 11.

10b. *What type of Veterans benefits have you received? (check all that apply)*

- ☐ Tuition Assistance Top Up (TATU)
- ☐ G.I. Bill Benefits
- ☐ Disability Benefits
- ☐ Veterans' Scholarship
- ☐ Green to Gold Program
- ☐ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

10c. *How much of your college expenses are covered by your Veterans benefits?*

- ☐ None of my college expenses
- ☐ About 25% college expenses
- ☐ About 50% of my college expenses
- ☐ About 75% of my college expenses
- ☐ All of my college expenses

### **Your Experiences at Indiana University of Pennsylvania**

11. *Some student veterans have reported that they feel unfairly judged in the classroom because of their veteran status. To what extent have you felt unfairly judged in the classroom?*

☐ Often ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never

If you have NEVER felt unfairly judged on campus, please skip to Question 12.

11a. Under what circumstances do you feel (or have you felt) unfairly judged in class?

- ☐ When my professor makes negative remarks about the U.S. military.
- ☐ When students make negative remarks about the U.S. military.
- ☐ When I *offer* information about my service.
- ☐ When I *am called upon* to share information about my service.
- ☐ While reviewing readings or other course materials
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_



12. *Some student veterans say that they feel like they do not fit in on campus. How often do you ever feel like you do not fit in?*

☐ Often    ☐ Sometimes    ☐ Rarely    ☐ Never

If you have NEVER felt like you do not fit in on campus, please skip to Question 13.

12a. What makes you feel like you don't fit in on campus?

☐ No one seems to understand what I have been through.

☐ I am different from most students because of my military background.

☐ I have different opinions about the military than most students.

☐ I have a different perspective on life than most students because of my military background.

☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

13. *Some student veterans say that they sometimes feel uncomfortable on campus because it brings back memories of unpleasant experiences in the military. How often do you feel uncomfortable being on campus?*

☐ Often    ☐ Sometimes    ☐ Rarely    ☐ Never

If you have NEVER felt uncomfortable on campus, please skip to Question 14.

13a. What kind of situations make you feel uncomfortable on campus?

☐ Being in a crowded classroom.

☐ Being in a wide-open space.

☐ Eating at a dining hall or eatery on campus.

☐ Walking across campus.

☐ Seeing an unidentified package or backpack.

☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please feel free to take this space to elaborate on any of your answers to Questions 11 - 13.**

14. *Do you now, or have you ever sought or received counseling related to your military service?* (YES answer will skip logic to #15)

14a. *Why haven't you sought or received counseling related to your military service?* (check all that apply)

☐ I do (did) **not need** counseling

☐ I am **not the kind of person** who gets counseling

☐ I **cannot (could not) afford** counseling

☐ I believe if I went in for counseling, **it would hurt** my military career

☐ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

## **Military Experiences**

*Which of the following have you experienced while in the military?*

15. Being in or witnessing an accident causing serious injury or death

1. Never 2. Occasionally 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Always

16. Clearing/searching homes, building, caves or bunkers

1. Never 2. Occasionally 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Always

17. Being combat wounded or injured

1. Never 2. Occasionally 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Always

18. Knowing someone seriously injured or killed

1. Never 2. Occasionally 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Always

19. Physical ambush or assault

1. Never 2. Occasionally 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Always

20. Seeing dead or seriously injured people

1. Never 2. Occasionally 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Always

21. Being in a chemical or biological attack

1. Never 2. Occasionally 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Always

22. Tracking combat missions via radio or computer

1. Never 2. Occasionally 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Always

23. Repairing vehicles damaged in combat

1. Never 2. Occasionally 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Always

24. Assisting wounded soldiers or civilians

1. Never 2. Occasionally 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Always

25. What, if anything, could the IUP faculty and staff do to improve your experience as a student veteran?