

Summer 2015

Community, Identity, and Transition: Student Veterans and Academic Writing at the Two-Year College

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COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, AND TRANSITION: STUDENT VETERANS AND ACADEMIC
WRITING AT THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ENGLISH

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
August 2015

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ABSTRACT

COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, AND TRANSITION: STUDENT VETERANS AND ACADEMIC WRITING AT THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

Mark Edward Blaauw-Hara
Old Dominion University, 2015
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Higher education is experiencing an almost unprecedented influx of student veterans. However, research is sparse on their transition to college, and, in particular, their experiences with college writing. Additionally, current scholarship focuses mainly on veterans at four-year schools. This dissertation describes six student veterans' transitions to academic writing at the community college. Based on a case-study approach, the study seeks to identify key themes in student veterans' experiences with learning and writing in the military and compare them to their experiences learning and writing in college. In addition to locating areas of disconnect, the study highlights typical strengths student veterans bring to college that can set them up for success. It concludes with recommendations for what colleges (and writing teachers) can do to facilitate veterans' transition to the college writing environment.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to acknowledge the generosity of the student veterans who helped me with my research. I am deeply grateful for their willingness to share their experiences with me, and I hope this research leads to better support for other veterans who are transitioning into college. Thank you for your time and honesty.

Similarly, thanks goes out to my wonderful colleagues who helped with this project by filling out surveys, providing emotional support and ideas, and sharing insights gleaned from their own doctoral journeys. Additionally, I am grateful for the financial support and encouragement provided by the college's professional development committee and for my administration's willingness to be flexible with my teaching schedule.

My committee was outstanding from start to finish. Kevin DePew, Michelle Navarre Cleary, and Julia Romberger provided resources, suggestions, and wisdom that contributed to the development of this dissertation and supported my work throughout. My chair, Louise Wetherbee Phelps, deserves special credit for her unfailing patience and wisdom as I struggled to find the heart of this study and to focus and refine the work as a whole. Thank you for helping me grow as a scholar and a professional. And to the first graduate student I talked to in this program, who has turned into a great friend and collaborator—Cheri Lemieux Spiegel, thank you for the style editing!

Finally, I owe my family a deep debt for their unfailing support. I would never have completed this doctoral program without their encouragement and understanding. My parents showed me that it is possible to get a graduate degree as a non-traditional student while holding a full-time job and raising a family. To my children, Joad and Harper, thank you for understanding

when your dad needed to work on his own homework and for your wise advice throughout. And if this dissertation is well-edited, it is wholly due to the preternatural skills of Jami Blaauw-Hara.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is experiencing an almost unprecedented influx of student veterans. A 2011 report from the U.S. Department of Education found that in 2007-08, about 657,000 veterans and 215,000 reservists or active-duty service members were undergraduates—about 4% of the total undergraduate population (Radford). Seventy-three percent of these students were male, which is in stark contrast to the demographics of non-military undergraduates, of which only 35% were male. The student-veteran population differs from the larger population of undergraduates in several other significant ways. For example, 62% of them are first-generation college students, in contrast to 43% of non-military students, and nearly half of student veterans are married or have children (“Veterans and College”). The Department of Education report also found that 43% of military undergraduates attended public two-year colleges. According to *From Soldier to Student II*, the 2012 American Council on Education report, “Institutions have not faced such a significant influx of veteran students on campus since World War II” (5). This study also found that significantly more service members and veterans were attending college than in the previous 2009 *From Soldier to Student* study, showing that this is a growing population. However, we do not know enough about how this current group of veterans transitions to college, including the strengths and challenges they bring to academic writing.

VETERANS’ TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

In many ways, student veterans are ideal college students. In my own writing classes, I have found that veterans often possess strong organizational skills and a developed work ethic,

among other traits. Their attendance is frequently exemplary, and they have been trained to be leaders and mutually reliant team-members (Morrow and Hart). They also tend to have “grit,” a term popularized by Angela Duckworth to describe “having resilience in the face of failure [and] having deep commitments that you remain loyal to over many years” (qtd. in Perkins-Gough n.pag.). In fact, one of the first studies Duckworth and her colleagues performed established that the “grittier” West Point cadets were, the more likely they were to finish their training. I have seen that same strong work ethic and ability to persevere in the face of difficult challenges carry student veterans through draft after draft of papers.

Additionally, many student veterans have a more developed and nuanced worldview than most traditional students, a result of working with diverse people in the military and experiencing different cultures around the world, and they can bring this experience to bear in class discussions and papers (Morrow and Hart; Schell and Kleinbart). In a recent commentary in the *Chronicle*, Mark Street describes the enriched perspectives veterans have brought to his visual arts classes, noting that they provide a valuable counterpoint to the views of the more traditional students. He writes, “Yes, let’s do all we can to make the transition from military service to college classroom easier for the nation’s recent veterans. But let’s also remember that we’re not doing it only for them, we’re doing it for us” (n.pag.). The ACE report *Promising Practices in Veterans’ Education* found that student veterans defined success more broadly than many traditional students, including not only GPA, but also social success and engagement with faculty and their peers—a welcome finding to faculty who strive semester after semester to get students to think beyond grades.

Despite these strengths, veterans frequently find the transition to college difficult. New sources of financial aid, such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, have helped alleviate some of the financial

burdens associated with a college degree; however, many veterans report being confused about actually navigating college (Sander). Adding to this confusion is the fact that unscrupulous institutions—often for-profit—specifically target veterans for recruitment primarily to tap into their GI Bill funding stream (Sander; Sewall), and many of these institutions have been criticized for using purposely misleading practices that can further confuse veterans (Schnoebelen).

Many student veterans also have to overcome a general lack of know-how in planning and executing a successful college experience. In a recent *Chronicle* cover story, Libby Sander writes that military programs designed to help veterans transition to civilian life focus more on how to access healthcare and get a job than they do on choosing a college and getting educational benefits. Additionally, even the most well-meaning schools frequently have systems that are disorienting for veterans. Rumann, Rivera, and Hernandez report that student veterans are often “sent from office to office when attempting to gather information related to GI Bill funding” (55), and that college staff differ greatly in their knowledge about veterans’ benefits. *From Soldier to Student II* found “great diversity in how institutions serve veterans, the variety of services and programs offered, and where services and programs are housed within the administrative infrastructure” (8). The study also reports that less than half of the 600+ institutions surveyed provide employee training for working with veterans, and many have insufficient staff to work optimally with their veteran population. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the ACE report also found that “benefit processing issues and financial issues [...] are a major challenge in serving veterans” (33).

Veterans can also have difficulty deciding on an academic path. Advising and faculty training to work with veterans tends to vary widely (Persky and Oliver; Wheeler), and frequently training programs for how to address veteran-specific issues are inadequate (*From Soldier to*

Student II). Veterans are non-traditional students—a demographic that is well represented at community colleges—yet many community-college orientation programs are designed with more traditional students in mind. As Holly Wheeler writes, “After having served in the military, likely in overseas combat, veterans do not need to be shown around campus or to spend an entire day meeting 18-year-old classmates” (790). Wheeler suggests that colleges develop specialized orientations for veterans that are designed to help them navigate financial aid, meet other student veterans, and introduce them to college resources. Currently, however, few colleges provide such orientations.

Another problem, as Hart and Thompson have discovered, is that much training for college personnel operates from a deficit mindset, focusing on the potential problems veterans might have rather than their strengths. Despite the good intentions of the trainers, such training sessions do not fully represent the student-veteran veteran community. In addition to noting the dangers of stereotyping the veteran community (for example, not all have seen combat, and not all have PTSD), Hart and Thompson note that “most faculty report high achievement among veterans, as well as a high sense of initiative, professionalism, and leadership” (4). Similarly to Street, the faculty who participated in Hart and Thompson’s study were grateful for the “varied cultural experiences and broader worldviews” veterans brought to their classes (4). Lighthall points out that student veterans “are emotionally mature, goal-oriented, mission-driven, experienced leaders. [...T]hey are the kind of role models we need on our campuses” (89). Certainly, we should not respond to the danger of stereotyping veterans as a struggling, disadvantaged population by viewing them through rose-colored glasses; however, it is manifestly evident that student veterans are a complex group that not only can benefit from increased college support, but can also enrich the college community.

STUDENT VETERANS AND COLLEGE WRITING

In addition to the studies that address student veterans' college transition in a general sense, there is a growing body of research that focuses on student veterans and college writing, although taken as a whole, this scholarship is still too sparse. The most complete recent study is the one I mentioned above: Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson's "*An Ethical Obligation*": *Promising Practices for Student Veterans in College Writing Classrooms*. Published in 2013, the study is the result of a 2011 CCCC research grant and represents growing interest in student veterans from the college writing community. Hart and Thompson's two-year study involved surveys, site visits, and interviews with faculty, staff, students, administrators, and veteran-support personnel at over fifty colleges. Among their findings, they note that "despite the fact that most veterans seem to be taking first-year writing courses at two-year and online colleges, those institutions often have fewer resources to provide training to faculty, to offer support for veterans through disability services, psychological counseling, etc., or to make available informal lounges/gathering spaces for their student veteran populations" (3). This is certainly true at my research site, which, despite a commitment to supporting student veterans, only has the funds for one full-time veteran-focused advisor, has only two full-time licensed personal counselors on staff to serve the entire student body, and has very limited physical space.

The other major piece of recent scholarship is *Generation Vet: Composition, Student-Veterans, and the Post-9/11 University*. This collection of essays, edited by Sue Doe and Lisa Langstraat, features chapters by some of the foremost writers on student veterans and academic writing. Taken together, they provide a wide-ranging multi-perspective on veterans' transition to the academy that is profoundly useful to writing faculty. The book also responds to Hart and Thompson's cautions against approaching student veterans from a deficit perspective: many of

the essays instead argue that veterans have a number of skills and attitudes that serve them in good stead once they get to college. However, the book shares the central weakness of the vast majority of student-veteran research in that it largely omits the experiences of community-college students. Out of the seventeen authors, only one, Linda De La Ysla, teaches at a community college, and her chapter is the only one that focuses on community-college student veterans. While it is very possible that the conclusions reached by the book's authors apply to community-college students, the lack of research on this specific group is troubling, especially because so many student veterans are choosing to attend community colleges (Hart and Thompson; "Veterans and College").

Further complicating support efforts is the fact that sometimes student veterans do not publically disclose their veteran status, meaning that faculty likely have veterans in their writing classes but do not know it. Some veterans choose not to disclose their status because they would rather leave their military identities behind; others may not see their service as relevant to their college experience, or they may be worried that civilian students will stereotype them or ask uncomfortable questions. When student veterans do disclose their status, faculty frequently characterize them as "mature, serious students who seek frank, direct guidance as they develop as writers, but may be unfamiliar with or even resistant to academic writing conventions such as recursive revision and peer review" (Hart and Thompson 4). Faculty also characterize student veterans as well-organized and focused on the "mission" (4).

Again, though, faculty currently know far too little about student veterans—not only in terms of how they perform in college, but also about the writing and learning they did in the military. For example, it likely comes as a surprise to many faculty that enlisted military service-people tend to write quite a lot, especially if they have been promoted into supervisory roles. As

Hinton points out, their military writing experience means that student veterans should not be viewed as novice writers, even though they are new to college writing. In fact, they often have a very accomplished sense of audience and purpose, and they understand the military genres in which they have written quite well. Yet because of our lack of knowledge about their writing history, we rarely build upon this experience.

Similarly, we in academia know far too little about how the military functions as a learning organization. Many media portrayals paint enlisted service as primarily consisting of firing weapons and following orders; however, an examination of training materials for enlisted troops and military educational theory (which I address in detail in Chapter Four) shows that service-members at all levels are encouraged to think critically and solve problems, most frequently in teams. As Doe and Doe point out, “The U.S. military is first and foremost a training (and learning) organization” (n. pag.). This training and learning takes many forms, including those many faculty would recognize, such as book discussions and case-study analyses. Additionally, as I noted above, the military trains its members to develop responsibility, self-efficacy, grit, and other qualities that support success in college.

In short, student veterans come to college better prepared to succeed than many other more traditional students. The fact that so many of them struggle in higher education is partly due to the difficulties I outlined above—problems with accessing their benefits, difficulty deciding on an academic path, possible PTSD, or trouble transitioning to civilian life. However, my contention is that a major source of difficulty is a disconnect between military and academy that stems, in large part, from a lack of knowledge. It is true that many entering student veterans do not know a lot about college; however, it is also true that we do not know a lot about them.

As I stated earlier in this chapter, my primary goal for this study is to help colleges—and especially writing faculty—better understand student veterans so they can smooth the transition from the military to the academy. I hope to fill some of the knowledge gaps many faculty hold about the writing and learning experiences of student veterans while they were in the military, and to provide a detailed picture of how student veterans may experience the transition to college and academic writing. Perhaps most importantly, my study is focused on the community college: the student veterans I interviewed either attend or graduated from the community college, the writing faculty I surveyed teach at the community college, and, I am a community-college faculty member and writing-program coordinator. In this way, my study helps to fill a clear gap in current research.

THE STUDY AND ITS ORGANIZATION

For this project, I interviewed six student veterans who were either current or recent students at a community college. All went to the same school, but they hailed from several different branches of the military and were studying different programs. I provide a complete treatment of my methodology in Chapter Three; however, the basics are that I surveyed and interviewed each participant and applied grounded-theory methodologies to code the data and identify themes. I also surveyed college-writing faculty about their perceptions of student veterans and their conceptions of what was important in college writing.

In Chapter Two, I draw from theoretical frameworks chosen to explain the themes that emerged from the surveys and interviews. My primary theoretical frame is adult learning theory, or andragogy. As I discuss in that chapter, a key theme that emerged from my research was that student veterans share many of the strengths and challenges of other non-traditional adult

learners. Although reentry to academia can be jarring, like other adult learners, military veterans do not necessarily enter college at a disadvantage: they bring other skills, knowledge, and attitudes that they have developed in the military that can be very advantageous in college.

That said, entering college is frequently jarring for student veterans, in large part because they need to find ways to reconceive of their identities in a civilian (and academic) sense. The Association for the Study of Higher Education issued a 2011 report arguing that this transition represented an identity crisis for student veterans. Again, such an identity crisis parallels the struggles of adult non-traditional students in many ways, including not just questions of how to conceive of and present oneself in person, but also how to present a writerly identity that is appropriate for college. I explore these issues in Chapter Two as well.

Chapter Three describes my methodology. I detail the evolution of the project from conception through pilot studies and the final study design. I selected a case-study model in which I focused on six student veterans at different stages of their college careers: one participant was in his first semester of school, three were close to their Associate's degree, and two had graduated with Bachelor's degrees. All participants had (or currently) attended college at the same community college: North Central Michigan College (NCMC) in Petoskey, Michigan, which is also where I teach. As I describe in more detail in Chapter Three, NCMC is a small community college that has demonstrated a commitment to its student-veteran community and received a "military friendly" national designation for 2013, 2014, and 2015, which is dependent on a third-party service that evaluates colleges across the country (*MilitaryFriendly.com*). I asked each veteran to fill out a short survey and participate in an interview, which I recorded and had transcribed. I then applied grounded-theory methodologies to identify and refine themes in the transcripts and surveys.

As I noted above, I also anonymously surveyed nineteen current writing faculty at NCMC. These faculty members were a mix of part- and full-time instructors who taught on each of the college's major campuses. The surveys focused on faculty members' perceptions of student veterans, whether they had changed their courses in any way in response to the presence of veterans, and their perspectives on what was important in academic writing. I coded these surveys for emergent themes as well.

Because it is limited by its small numbers of participants and by being confined to one college, this study should not be seen as representative of all student veterans, and one would be wise not to overgeneralize based on my findings. However, there is ample precedent in writing studies for this sort of qualitative case-study research that involves a relatively limited number of participants, and such research has yielded intriguing results that have advanced the field's understanding of writers' identity (Casanave; Ivanič; Prior) and students' transition to college and academic discourse (Herrington and Curtis; Hinton; Rumann and Hamrick). Additionally, as I stated earlier in this chapter, research on student veterans and academic writing has thus far been located in universities; there is a clear need for studies that focus on community colleges, and my hope is that this research will lay the groundwork for more comprehensive studies.

In Chapter Four, I present my findings about the writing and learning my participants did in the military. My participants showed a sophisticated understanding of the genres in which they wrote and the expectations of their audience in the military; as Hinton and Hadlock argue, while student veterans may be new to academic writing, they are not novice writers. Nor are they unskilled learners, which I also discuss in Chapter Four. Training and learning are at the heart of the military. In many ways, the learning environment of the military is significantly different from that of college—for example, it is highly community-oriented, with much of the training

taking place in groups whose members are explicitly encouraged to support one another's learning. However, the modern military also shares many goals with college, including prioritizing the development of critical thinking and decision-making skills. All of these elements are discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

In Chapter Five, I focus on my participants' experiences as they transition to college and, specifically, college writing. In many cases, this transition was bumpy, in part because colleges tend (at least tacitly) to expect all incoming students to conform to the stereotype of the traditional college student: eighteen years old, fresh out of high school, with an undeveloped sense of responsibility and a relatively unformed identity. Student veterans share none of these characteristics, leading to difficulties transitioning to college. Also, although each veteran I interviewed was ultimately successful in their college transition, they found some of the writing expectations of the academic community to be mystifying and difficult to master, and at times they struggled to integrate into the college community.

In Chapter Six, I identify key strengths my participants brought to their college transitions. As I noted earlier, Hart and Thompson argue that many colleges approach student veterans from a deficit mindset, focusing on what they lack rather than what they bring to college. In part to remedy this assumption, I connect student-veteran strengths to research on student success, persistence, and retention. I argue that although many veterans have a difficult transition to higher education, colleges can build on these strengths to help student veterans succeed in college.

This argument lays the groundwork for Chapter Seven, in which I present a number of suggestions for how we can support student veterans' transition to college and, specifically, academic writing. Several of my suggestions approach the topic from a macro level, addressing

approaches to student identity, the academic community, and the ways we approach learning in higher education. I follow these suggestions with more specific thoughts about how we can work with student veterans in writing classes to help them build on their prior knowledge and master the genres and practices that are valued in academic writing. Additionally, I explore how some writing pedagogies may not mesh well with student veterans and provide examples of how other writing faculty have adapted their courses to better fit veterans' needs.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As I coded my interview and survey data (a process I describe in more detail in the next chapter), I realized that the majority of the strengths and challenges described by my participants were connected to their age, prior learning experiences, and time out of school. In this way, they share many similarities to other adult, non-traditional students who are returning to college after time in the workforce. Accordingly, adult learning theory serves as the primary theoretical lens presented in this chapter.

Adult learners not only bring positive experiences and knowledge to college, they also experience challenges that are characteristic of the group. Some of these challenges center on institutional and pedagogical practices that are designed with traditional college students in mind and can alienate or exclude nontraditional adult students. Other challenges go deeper and bring up questions of learner identity, since many adult learners question whether they belong in college and have a hard time seeing and presenting themselves in ways that mesh with traditional definitions of college students. Accordingly, this chapter explores theory on identity crisis, maintenance, and presentation as it connects to adult learners and, by extension, student veterans.

VETERANS AS ADULT LEARNERS

Adult learners are frequently at risk for having difficulty in college. As O'Donnell and Tobbell point out, "Adult students are potentially more vulnerable to difficulties in the management of [college] transitions because of their (often) minority status in [higher education], because they may have little recent experience of formal education, and because they

may have additional life pressures out of university” (313). Also, many adult students at community colleges have not had ideal prior experiences with education; in my observation, this is often true with veterans, many of whom joined the military in part to pursue a career that did not require a college education. Now, they find themselves back in school and do not quite know how to proceed.

Hart and Thompson write that “many of the transition issues that are reported by veterans parallel in significant ways the transition many nontraditional students face when making the move from careers back to college, suggesting the possibility that some of the transitional issues are less about their status as veterans and more about their status as adult learners” (4). Scholars such as Michelle Navarre Cleary and Kathryn Wozniak have also explored the connections between adult learning theory and student veterans and have suggested that adult learning theory provides a useful lens through which to view student veterans’ transitions to college. They connect veteran education to the theories of Malcolm Knowles, one of the progenitors of adult learning theory. Knowles writes that “adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives. Once they have arrived at that self-concept, they develop a deep psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable of self-direction” (65). Student veterans, especially those who have served in combat situations, have certainly become accustomed to being responsible for their decisions and are well aware of the repercussions of those decisions, yet much of traditional education is set up to serve much younger students who are less capable of self-direction. Although student veterans are educational novices, they do not see themselves as similar to traditional-aged students, and they frequently are frustrated to be grouped with more traditional students. The work of Knowles and

others provides possibilities for addressing some of the strengths and challenges common to student veterans.

In his argument for greater focus on adult learning theory, which he terms “andragogy,”

Knowles points out that

all the great teachers of ancient times [...such as Confucius, Lao Tse, Jesus, Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, Cicero, Evelid, and Quintilian] were teachers of adults, not of children. Because their experiences were with adults, they developed a very different concept of the learning/teaching process from the one that later dominated formal education. These notable teachers perceived learning to be a process of mental inquiry, not passive reception of transmitted content. Accordingly, they invented techniques for engaging learners in inquiry. (35)

Knowles notes that key differences between children and adults are that adults are more self-directed and have responsibility for their own lives. They also have a stronger sense of personal identity. He argues that an educational system that does not recognize these differences runs the risk not only of being ineffective, but of alienating adult learners.

Knowles argues for the following six principles of andragogy:

1. “The need to know.” Adults are unlikely to take the teacher’s word that a concept is important; in contrast, if they understand why they need to learn something and buy into that need, “they will invest considerable energy in probing into the benefits they will gain from learning it and the negative consequences of not learning it” (64). He recommends that teachers incorporate “real or simulated experiences in which the learners discover for themselves the gaps between where they are now and where they want to be” (65).
2. “The learners’ self-concept.” As I noted above, adults are used to self-direction. Knowles points out that a curriculum that removes that self-direction and puts all responsibility in the hands of the teacher engenders a psychological conflict in the adult learner, “and the typical method of dealing with psychological conflict is to try to flee from the situation

causing it, which probably accounts in part for the high dropout rate in much voluntary adult education” (65). While student veterans are used to taking orders, they are also accustomed to responsibility and respect. If they feel they do not have the respect of the teacher, they may disengage.

3. “The role of learners’ experiences.” This is a key principle, especially when applied to student veterans. Knowles points out that adults tend to have a wider range of experiences than children, and that these experiences are tied to identity: “to children, experience is something that happens to them; to adults, experience is who they are. The implication of this fact for adult education is that in any situation in which the participants’ experiences are ignored or devalued, adults will perceive this as rejecting not only their experience, but rejecting themselves as persons” (66-67). Knowles urges adult educators to build upon adult students’ experiences and to individualize instruction to take those experiences into account. He also cautions that “as we accumulate experience, we tend to develop mental habits, biases, and presuppositions that tend to cause us to close our minds to new ideas, fresh perceptions, and alternative ways of thinking” (66). This rings true not only with adult students in general, but especially with veterans, who (as I noted above) come from a community of practice specifically designed to deeply inculcate certain habits of mind and practice, some of which are helpful to college performance, and some of which are not.
4. “Readiness to learn.” Knowles connects this principle to adults’ real-life situations, stating that when adults feel a need to learn something new, that is the time to teach it to them. This principle seems tied to the first, “the need to know.” However, Knowles notes that “it is not necessary to sit by passively and wait for readiness to develop naturally[...].

There are ways to induce readiness through exposure to models of superior performance, career counseling, simulation exercises, and other techniques” (67)—in other words, to demonstrate a hitherto unfelt need to adult learners.

5. “Orientation to learning.” Knowles calls this point “critical” (67). Again, he connects adult learning to real-life situations, arguing that the subject-matter orientation of most schooling is inappropriate to adult students. He writes that “in contrast to children’s and youths’ subject-centered orientation to learning (at least in school), adults are life-centered (or task-centered or problem-centered) in their orientation to learning” (67), and he suggests courses organized around the types of problems adults are likely to encounter and projects that replicate real-world applications of knowledge.
6. “Motivation.” While Knowles acknowledges that adults are partially motivated extrinsically—seeking promotions and better jobs, for example—he argues that their primary motivators are intrinsic, such as self-esteem and quality of life.

One will note that several of these principles are similar and center on the acknowledgement and incorporation of adults’ prior experience and felt needs into the curriculum. This seems not only respectful, but a good use of resources: as Knowles writes, “for many kinds of learning, the richest resources for learning reside in the adult learners themselves” (66). In the case of student veterans, for example, a number of authors (such as Street) have noted that their presence greatly enriches class discussions. They often have seen more of the world and its various cultures than traditional students, and they tend to have worked with a great variety of people in a great variety of situations. Encouraging them to draw on these experiences can not only facilitate their own education, but enrich the education of traditional students who sit alongside them.

Of course, we often do not know which of the students in our classes are veterans. However, adult learning theory provides productive ways to shape course activities so all learners are valued, not just veterans. A common thread among the research is the admonition to treat adult learners as individuals. As I noted above, Knowles points out that the diversity of one's experiences tends to increase with age; similarly, Navarre Cleary writes that "the diversity of their backgrounds and current life situations means any generalizations about adult students may be even less reliable than those about 'traditional' undergraduates" (114). One way to deal with this diversity is to give adult learners more control over their own learning, as Jeff Sommers urges (406). Another is to encourage adult students to use their experiences as fodder for writing and discussion; however, as Navarre Cleary points out, we should recognize that this has the potential to inspire resistance from some learners, as "their exposure to different perspectives and developing critical thinking skills can challenge long-held beliefs" and lead to alienation from their home communities (125). Encouraging veterans to draw from and analyze their experiences can be both problematic (such as when writing assignments inadvertently touch on traumatic histories) and deeply rewarding, both to the veteran and to the larger school community.

While keeping in mind the individuality of adult learners' experiences, it is still possible to make some generalizations about the group. For example, mature students tend to experience college differently from traditional students on an emotional level. A number of researchers have noted that adult students frequently have higher levels of anxiety than traditional students, especially in their first year of college. To be sure, many students experience anxiety when they enter college, especially in writing classes—for example, in a broad study of first-year students at CUNY, Zajacova, Lynch, and Espenshade found that out of twenty-seven possible college tasks, students ranked "writing term papers" as the most stressful (688). They also ranked writing

papers as the activity in which they had the second-least perceived self-efficacy, making paper-writing a kind of perfect storm of misery.

For adult learners, though, writing anxiety can be even more acute. Navarre Cleary describes adult students who have anxiety centering on writing that is so intense they experience muscle spasms and mouth sores. In the students she describes, anxiety centers on “not knowing what to write because they had a hard time imagining the university and not knowing if they were writing well enough because they had a hard time imagining *themselves* in the university” (“Anxiety,” 364, my emphasis). Navarre Cleary describes how one student struggled with high-stakes writing assignments and little feedback, and felt as though her prior experience did not apply to the academic world. Another performed much better, in large part because several low-stakes writing assignments with detailed feedback granted her entrance into the requirements of the academic discourse community.

However, even the best designed writing courses sometimes are not enough to counteract the negative self-images some adult learners have regarding their academic abilities or the disconnect they feel with traditional-aged students. Bay describes two mature students whom she recommended for an honors section of composition: one, a veteran, elected not to take the course because he still saw himself as a poor writer (despite his excellent performance in the first semester of composition), and the other found younger students overly limited in their life experiences and elected to take an independent study (308). Additionally, there is often a significant amount of time between when adult learners end their high-school careers and when they go to college, and they may worry (sometimes accurately) that they have forgotten key elements of academic writing in the interim. Navarre Cleary terms this “fear of brain rot” (“What WPAs Need to Know,” 115), and points out that while the anxiety some adult students feel that

their brains have “atrophied beyond repair” is certainly exaggerated (115), their concern that college writing has requirements that are unknown and confusing to them is likely valid (116). She and others suggest that writing teachers can alleviate some of this anxiety (and encourage better writing from students) by being more explicit about our assignments, more detailed in our feedback, and by encouraging open conversations about the struggles we all have with writing.

Despite these challenges, adult learners can be some of the strongest students in a class. Like many teachers, I have typically found them to be hard workers who are extremely motivated to succeed. I rarely have to worry about them doing their homework, and on several occasions have been pleasantly surprised when they tell me they looked up a (non-required) reading or video I mentioned in class. Despite their frequent anxiety about their writing skills, they often become leaders in group work and mentor younger students academically and socially. My anecdotal findings are consistent with current scholarship. I have noted above that researchers have confirmed that adult students bring useful experience to higher education (Knowles, Hilton, and Swanson; Navarre Cleary, “What WPAs Need to Know”). They are also highly motivated (McGivney; Navarre Cleary and Wozniak; Taylor and House)—in fact, that is one of the most consistent findings about adult learners. Some research indicates that this motivation is more intrinsic than in traditional aged students (Knowles, Hilton, and Swanson; Taylor and House). In contrast to traditional aged students, many of whom attend college because their parents mandate it or it just seems like the thing to do after high school, adult learners have made a conscious choice to go back to school. Often this choice involves significant sacrifice, and adult learners are invested in making sure that sacrifice pays off.

However, the writing practices of higher education can be difficult to understand. Theresa Lillis points out that “student academic writing constitutes a very particular kind of literacy

practice which is bound up with the workings of a particular social institution” (39), and argues that the type of writing valued in school is not universal (or universally “good”), but rather tied to the values of higher education. She goes on to highlight the confusion experienced by non-traditional students as they begin to write essays, calling it “so all-pervasive [...] that it signals the need to look beyond a notion of individual confusion, towards an institutional practice of mystery” (53). Lillis does not allege that this mystery is intentional, but rather that the conventions of successful essay writing are so ingrained in the college community that they have become largely implicit. Teachers and tutors, “having been socialized into them through years of formal schooling, and in many cases through socio-discursive practices in their homes and communities” (75), often feel like these conventions are common sense and have difficulty putting into words what students need to do. Lillis argues that this serves to exclude those students from higher education who do not already have an implicit understanding of higher-education writing practices—especially nontraditional students. Veterans, as very nontraditional students, would likely be particularly vulnerable to exclusion.

IDENTITY CRISIS AND COHESION

All students experience an identity shift when they enter college. However, for adult learners such as student veterans, this shift can be more difficult and personally disruptive than it is for traditional students. A key reason is that adult learners have had more time to accumulate life experience, and as Knowles points out, adult learners’ identities tend to be largely defined by their experiences. Also, adult learners have simply had longer to develop their conceptions of self than have traditional-aged students, and as a consequence, their identities are more stable. This does not mean that adults’ identities do not change, as any of us who have taken a new job,

had children, retired, gotten married or divorced, gone back to graduate school, or moved to a new state can attest. However, as these examples illustrate, changes in adult identity tend to be connected to large life events that are frequently as unsettling as they may be exciting. Similarly, the commensurate shifts in identity that such events entail can also be emotionally fraught.

In studies of non-traditional adult learners, a shift to a student identity seems to promote college success and increased self-esteem in adult learners (Shields). Unfortunately, some researchers have found that adult learners are more likely to self-identify negatively after becoming college students (Taylor and House). Especially among working-class students, identity conflict can be intense: Diane Reay writes that “they are trying to negotiate a difficult balance between investing in a new improved identity and holding on to a cohesive self that retained an anchor in what had gone before” (403). Reay notes that this can lead to a sense that they are “impostors” in college and that higher education is an uneasy fit (404). Working-class students can feel as though college membership requires them to give up the practices and beliefs of their home cultures, and to some extent, they are right. Reay writes that “if university is too different, too alien, then, the threat of losing oneself [...] is as likely a prospect as finding oneself. The struggle to find oneself implies finding somewhere where one can have a sense of belonging, however tenuous. This is especially problematic for the working-class, mature students who have to negotiate tensions between maintaining a sense of authenticity and desires to fit in” (404). Compounding adult students’ identity difficulties is the finding that “stress has generally been found to have a negative influence on GPA and on staying enrolled,” and that full-time students tend to earn higher grades and have more of a chance of completion than do part-time students (Zajacova, Lynch, and Espenshade 696).

The above findings have relevance to the student veterans who are the focus of this present study. In addition to qualifying as adult learners who have had a gap in their educational history, many enlisted service-members come from working-class backgrounds and have home cultures that are different from Bloom's "middle-class enterprise" of many first-year writing courses. However, the preceding research should be taken as cautionary rather than deterministic: student veterans *may* experience some of this conflict, and they may not. As writing teachers, we should be aware of the possibility.

The identity shift student veterans make from service-member to college student is addressed in "Crisis of Identity? Veteran, Civilian, Student," part of a 2011 Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) report on veterans in college. The report characterizes life in the military as centering on group allegiance—the individuality of the service-member is subsumed by the identity of the group. In contrast, college privileges the individual, and while it has rules, "it also has flexibility and questions regarding adherence to rules are encouraged" (55). College students are expected to chart their own courses and think independently, and hierarchies are often intentionally blurred. The report notes that "during the transition from active duty to student, which for many may be during their young adult years, their previously determined identity is bombarded by differing relationships and external factors they may confront in a new environment. The need to reformulate an identity arises out of a state of disequilibrium and discomfort resulting from the conflicts between what established identity dictates and what changes are being faced" (54).

The study's authors generate four basic typologies to describe student veterans, which I will briefly describe here:

1. Ambivalent: These students are neither fully committed to their military identity nor to their student identity, and they do not feel in crisis. They tend to be motivated by external factors, and they are at high risk for dropping out of school. They do not have the intrinsic drive that tends to help students succeed at college, and they have not yet bought into higher education.
2. Skeptical: These students “live with a continuing commitment to a military core identity, which serves as their dominant sense of self. The other dimensions of their identity are ‘foreclosed,’ and in this state, these students experience no crisis and no need to explore other aspects of identity” (62-63). Such students tend to be focused on “getting through” college, only engaging minimally. They can find elements of college frustrating if they are not seen as immediately relevant—for instance, general-education writing courses.
3. Emerging: These students “are not yet committed to change but sense that their military identity, which has been dominant, may not serve effectively in other contexts, particularly in the college environment” (63). This group does sense a crisis as they struggle to find ways to substitute civilian social relationships for military ones and build a new civilian identity. They may feel a sense of culture shock on campus.
4. Fulfilled Civilian Selves: These students have experienced the crisis of moving from military to civilian contexts and arrived at a balanced identity that serves them well in college. This does not mean that they negate their military identities, but that they have found a way to draw from their military experiences while functioning adeptly in the civilian world. The study’s authors write that “the various aspects of their identity have balanced out, with the different dimensions appropriately influencing and fluctuating as

the environment dictates while maintaining the core identity. [...] Cognitively and affectively they have found their own voice” (65).

The above study relies heavily on the concept of an “identity crisis,” which has become so ingrained in our society that we rarely consider where it came from. In fact, it is relatively new, and indebted to the work of Erik Erikson, who published in the 1950s and ‘60s. Working from a psychoanalytic perspective, Erikson examined the ways in which competing versions of self are generated and then, hopefully, integrated into a cohesive identity. Erikson’s work is dated, but there are still timely ideas we can draw from it. One is that identity formation is an ongoing struggle. Erikson writes that “the *self-identity* emerges from experiences in which temporarily confused selves are successfully reintegrated in an ensemble of roles which also secure social recognition” (*Identity* 211), highlighting the continual push-pull of society and one’s sense of self. This formulation seems especially consistent with what we know of student veterans’ movement from the military to the academy. Although the field of psychology has largely moved on from the psychoanalytic framework that underpins Erikson’s work, it provides a foundation for much of the study of identity that goes on today.

In James Côté and Charles Levine’s discussion of Erikson, they explore his concept of identity crisis—a term he coined—and how he developed it while trying to help traumatized WWII soldiers. They note that Erikson eventually came to see an identity crisis as typified by a “period during which an individual’s previous [...] identity is no longer experienced as suitable, but a new identity is not yet established” (95). As the ASHE study demonstrates, this concept has application to student veterans who are transitioning to college.

Côté and Levine also provide a useful framework for understanding the social dimensions of identity construction and maintenance that are experienced by student veterans who move from one community to another. They write,

In a late modern society one's inherited characteristic and prior accomplishments often carry little weight in giving one legitimacy in a wide variety of social settings. Instead, people need to strategically guide and control their own actions in order to continually fit themselves into communities of "strangers" by meeting their approval through the creation of the right impressions—the wrong impression management can lead to an immediate loss of legitimacy in certain situations. In late modern societies, therefore, social identities are much more precarious than ever before. As opposed to being a birthright, or a sinecure of social achievement, one's legitimacy can be continually called into question. In order to find a social location to begin with, one often has to convince a community of strangers that one is worthy of their company, and this acceptance can be challenged virtually at any moment. [...] The image-oriented identity of late modernity is based on a projection of images that meet the approval of a community, gaining one access so long as the images remain acceptable. (126-127)

Such community alignments are explored at length in Erving Goffman's various works, including *Stigma*, in which he focuses on the difficulties members of stigmatized groups face as they interact with "normal" society. Veterans as a group are not stigmatized in the same way Goffman's subjects are: writing in the early 1960s, Goffman treated the mental-health patients, gays and lesbians, and disabled individuals who populate his book with a care and understanding all the more remarkable for its time. However, his work has relevance to the current issue because, like Goffman's subjects, student veterans can feel torn between their military and student identities, particularly when, in the college environment, the more traditional students are viewed as "normal" and student veterans are "abnormal." As the ASHE report suggests, aspects of the two identities may not be fully compatible, and success in college may entail some amount of letting go of the veteran identity. It certainly entails the adoption of a student identity.

Goffman's discussion of group alignment highlights a potential danger in our expectations for student veterans. Goffman points out that stigmatized individuals are often

advised to act as “normal” as possible while not concealing their stigma. An individual is often counseled that

by hard work and persistent self-training he should fulfill ordinary standards as fully as he can, stopping short only when the issue of normification arises; that is, where his efforts might give the impression that he is trying to deny his differentness. [...] And because normals have their troubles, too, the stigmatized individual should not feel bitter, resentful, or self-pitying. A cheerful, outgoing manner should be cultivated. [...] Normals really mean no harm; when they do, it is because they don't know better. They should therefore be tactfully helped to act nicely. [...] When the stigmatized person finds that normals have difficulty in ignoring his failing, he should try to help them and the social situation by conscious efforts to reduce tension. (*Stigma* 115-116)

Yet, as Goffman points, out, this advice diminishes the very real difference the stigmatized feel from the “normals,” and it places all of the emotional and cognitive burdens on the stigmatized. They are asked to present an identity that is as close to “normal” as possible, not to threaten the “normal” group, to maintain a state of perpetual good will toward the “normals,” and to take on responsibility to educate them.

The literature on veterans' transition to academia can make similar assumptions. Student veterans are often asked—sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly—to conform to the “normal” standards of academia, and to look and act like “normal” college students. We tend to put them through the same general college orientations and assign them to the same standard first-year classes as non-veteran students. While many faculty welcome their perspective and input in class discussions, we also tend to want them to contribute in ways that sound very much like Goffman's descriptions above: we want them to cheerfully educate their non-military peers, through class discussions and group work, shrugging off questions like “did you kill anyone?” with good grace. We view their veteran experiences as “value added” to the course, but we expect them to treat their veteran identities as existing in the past. Now, the argument goes, they are students. Additionally, as Doe and Langstraat note, there exists a historical ambivalence in

the ways the military and the academy regard one another. Not only do the two sides not understand each other, they also regard many of what they understand to be the guiding ideological principles of the other organization to be suspect (15-18). While this is perhaps not as strongly the case as in earlier times, such as the Vietnam era, certainly some amount of misunderstanding and mistrust exists.

Additionally, many of a veteran's accomplishments seem to carry little weight when it comes to college. The ability to rapidly break down, clean, and reassemble a weapon or five years of experience leading troops do not prevent a veteran from being placed in developmental writing, or from feeling lost and disoriented among traditional-aged college students. Of course, many practices—completing the “mission,” paying close attention to instructions, working with people from a wide variety of social backgrounds—translate extremely well. For the new student veteran, a central challenge is determining which practices work and which do not. As Goffman describes, we present ourselves in a way similar to actors performing a role—i.e., college students act out their understandings of how college students are supposed to act, thereby sending the message to others that they are, in fact, college students. In return, they are treated as college students. Goffman puts it this way:

Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is. In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect. He also implicitly forgoes all claims to be things he does not appear to be and hence forgoes the treatment that would be appropriate for such individuals. (*Practice* 13)

Applying this to student veterans illuminates a circular challenge they face upon entering school: in order to be treated as college students, they need to make a clear claim, through word and

action, that they are, in fact, college students. They need to *act* like college students.

Additionally, a student veteran “implicitly forgoes all claims to be things he does not appear to be and hence forgoes the treatment that would be appropriate for such individuals.” This implies that engaging the moral principle described by Goffman would entail making the identity of college student one’s central identity and letting go of the identity of veteran (and the treatment it entails).

As I noted above, college personnel and faculty are likely not consciously asking veterans to abandon their veteran identities. However, I do think we are asking them to relegate that identity to a supporting role and to promote “college student” to the starring position. This corresponds to the “fulfilled civilian selves” typology presented in the ASHE report, in which student veterans draw from their military identities, but see themselves as civilians. As the report points out, some veterans will not do this. However, an honest look at college expectations suggests that veterans who do not find a way to reconcile the two identities may experience increased challenges to attaining a college degree.

DISCOURSAL IDENTITY AND ACADEMIC PERSONAE

The above discussion of identity has direct ties to the writing classroom because to succeed at college writing, students need to present an identity (or at least a persona) that is consistent with our conceptions of college writing students. In essence, they need to talk the talk of college writers. A student’s fluency in academic discourse not only determines a grade, but also signifies her membership in the academic community. Yet new students, especially if they are adult non-traditional students, often have a tenuous grasp on those discursal moves that signify community membership.

In her major work on writing, identity, and adult learners, Roz Ivanič describes the “discoursal self” as

the impression—often multiple, sometimes contradictory—which [a writer] consciously or unconsciously conveys of themselves in a particular written text. [... This impression] is constructed through the discourse characteristics of a text, which relate to values, beliefs and power relations in the social context in which they were written. [...] Writers construct a “discoursal self” not out of an infinite range of possibilities, but out of the possibilities for self-hood which are supported by the socio-cultural and institutional context in which they are writing. (25-26)

Ivanič claims that “one aspect of [...] ‘discoursal self’ was academic community membership. By participating in these particular discourse practices, the writers took on the *persona* of a member of the academic community” (280). As Ivanič points out, the roles within academia that are available for students to choose from are slippery. For example, we ask students to claim the “student” role, which Ivanič notes is seen as subordinate and peripheral to the larger academic community in that students are generally seen to produce work that is not of publication quality and does not really contribute to the larger task of academic knowledge-making. However, we also ask students to claim the “contributor” role, in which they *act* as though they are full-fledged members of the academic community who design their own research projects, offer innovative interpretations, and build on knowledge.

We ask all students to perform these roles, not just student veterans. However, as Ivanič argues, the act can be more difficult for adult, non-traditional students, who often have a strong sense of their “real selves” that is, at times, at odds with the self they feel they are being forced to portray in their academic writing. Ivanič writes of the students she interviewed that “all of them wanted to associate themselves with some aspects of academic community membership: for example to present themselves as knowledgeable and thoughtful. But many of them felt that the conventions forced them to dismiss other aspects of their identity” (234). As a result, an analysis

of student work revealed “heterogeneous and complex self-representations [...] often jostling alongside each other” (234). As might be imagined, sometimes this jostling was uncomfortable.

Paul Prior’s adaptation of Goffman’s concept of “laminated” interaction provides another perspective on students’ sometimes-conflicting presentations of self. Prior is concerned with activity systems as a way to view disciplinary enculturation. He writes,

The complex intersections of social, pedagogical, and institutional forces, the striking asymmetries in motives and actions between teachers and students and among students, and the varied configurations of interpersonal and intergroup relations that exist in classrooms can reasonably be seen as a durable holistic pattern that defines a distinct system of activity. (24)

However, Prior argues that activity is laminated: “multiple activities co-exist, are immanent, in any situation. Whereas one or more of these activity footings (e.g., school learning) may be relatively foregrounded at any one time, the background activities (e.g., of home, neighborhood, work) do not disappear” (24). Prior’s argument seems to mesh well with Ivanič’s conception of “heterogeneous and complex self-representations” in student work.

Additionally, Prior connects writing strongly with identity. As he charges readers,

We must grapple with the fact that communication is learning is socialization is social formation, that literate activity is not only a process whereby texts are produced, exchanged, and used, but also a part of a continuous sociohistoric process in which persons, artifacts, practices, institutions, and communities are being formed and reformed. (139)

(Prior’s arguments about disciplinary identity connect strongly with Lave and Wenger’s formulations of communities of practice, which I discuss in detail in Chapter Four.) In this section, it is important to recognize that when we ask students to follow what we see as the conventions of academic discourse, we are asking for more than simple organization or adherence to a citation style. We are asking students to perform a complex and sometimes uncomfortable set of maneuvers: we want them to analyze the discourse community for key

signifiers of membership and then adopt an acceptable written persona that shows them to be a member of that community. Additionally, they need to show themselves to be junior members (open to criticism, still developing) while at the same time exhibiting the promise of eventually developing into full members (contributing to the advancement of knowledge). We seldom acknowledge the degree to which the academic moves we value are situated practices rather than universal characteristics of good writing, nor do we give enough thought to how the discursive identities we ask them to exhibit might clash with identities they bring to school.

I do not mean to come off as overly grim, just to point out that the adoption of academic discourse is a complicated process. Many students make the transition quite well. For example, in her case studies of undergraduates in Academic Reading and Writing courses, Casanave found that even though students were not participating in the types of disciplinary communities of more advanced students who had finalized a discipline, “the one-semester experience [of the course] contributed to the beginnings of a shift in the students’ views of themselves as emerging participants in academic practices” (78). A central metaphor of Casanave’s book is the game: she characterizes academic writing as a series of moves that are bounded by rules and have consequences that are largely predictable. Learning how to write in college is, then, learning how to play the game. Of course, I am greatly reducing the nuance with which Casanave presents her argument; by calling it a game, she does not imply that it is easy or frivolous, or that it is not bound up in questions of identity and authenticity. Yet Casanave is ultimately positive: she thinks that introductory writing courses can give students a head start in learning the rules of the academic game, so to speak, and that many students will eventually develop academic personae with which they are comfortable and which lead to academic success. For that matter, Ivanič and Prior are ultimately positive as well. No one is arguing that this transition is unachievable, just

that it is complicated and frequently difficult, and that the complexity and difficulty are heightened in adult non-traditional students such as veterans.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

At the time of this writing, I am in my fifteenth year teaching full-time at a community college. For most of my tenure, I have also served as the Writing Program Coordinator. Over the past ten years or so, I have begun noticing an increased veteran presence in my own writing classes. As described below, my school is relatively small and rural, and there are no significant military bases nearby. These factors made the presence of veterans in my classes more notable, especially as they were appearing so regularly. Many of them told me they had grown up in the area and had returned home after deployment to apply their education benefits to make the transition to civilian life.

As a general rule, I have found veterans as a group to have greater self-knowledge and a more pronounced drive to succeed than the general population of community-college students, and those qualities have tended to help them do well in my writing courses. However, sometimes I have also seen them have what I would characterize as a difficult transition to the college environment, and to college writing specifically. My attempts to use current scholarship to support my practice revealed the research on veterans and writing to be thin. I developed the current study to address this gap.

I started by reaching out to my school's veteran community for advice. First, I scheduled a series of very informal interviews with four current and former students who had disclosed their veteran status to me. Another veteran heard of my research and showed up at my office door one day asking to help out; I interviewed him as well. I did not prepare questions or overly plan these interviews; instead, I started by telling them I was considering this topic and asked

them if they thought it was worthwhile and might be useful. They uniformly agreed that it was a necessary area of research.

Secondly, I asked them for advice on what, specifically, I should look at, or what I needed to be aware of as I started this research. This question produced a wide range of answers. Common feedback centered on the type of writing enlisted veterans do in the military and how it does not translate well to college writing. Several veterans in my pilot group independently identified the transition to writing longer, more elaborate pieces as particularly difficult. They also related trouble integrating their own opinions into their writing; as one veteran put it, “The Army doesn’t care what you think.” An Air Force veteran told me that it felt strange to him to be asked what his opinion was about political matters when he entered college; in the military, he said, it was a general rule to stay away from anything that might be controversial in conversation.

Several veterans also brought up the difficulties they had when they were asked to connect to their writing or to course subjects on a personal and emotional level. One Army veteran told me that the military is very effective at desensitizing new recruits, but very bad at re-sensitizing veterans. Another veteran said that he tried early in his writing classes to “boil things down, make them technical.” However, he learned that in order to be successful in college writing, he had to open up. “You can’t make emotion technical,” he told me. Additionally, several veterans brought up topics such as PTSD and difficulties interacting with non-military peers.

In addition to conducting these informal pilot interviews, I pursued several other avenues to guide my research. I went to a meeting of my school’s Student Veteran Association, having received permission to do so from the group’s president and faculty advisor, and I let them know I was going to do this research and asked for their guidance and blessing. (I received it, and I was

also asked to participate as part of the SVA team in a local adventure race to raise money for veterans' services, which I did.) I made a point to attend veteran-oriented presentations at CCCC and CWPA, as well as reading on the topic. Many of my initial readings were on the recommendation of the presenters, several of whom I contacted privately to ask for advice.

I am grateful for the time all the people I mentioned above took with me to help me develop this topic. In addition to giving me concrete things to study, they let me know through their enthusiasm and interest that this research, if done well, would find an audience and potentially address a real need.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the pilot interviews and reading I did, I developed several specific questions to research. My central question was this: "How do student veterans' military experiences influence their transition to academic writing?" I also wanted to find out how the veterans I spoke with saw themselves as being shaped by the military—for example, what skills or mindsets had they picked up in the military that they saw helping them succeed in college? Did they see their military experience making their transition to college more difficult?

While researchers have examined some of these questions, almost none have done so with a community-college population. Instead, most similar research has occurred in university contexts. Also, while a growing body of scholarship focuses on the writing students do in the military and the armed forces as a learning environment (e.g., Doe and Doe; Hadlock; Hinton), this scholarship is still too sparse.

CHOOSING A QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

Because of the relatively unexplored nature of this area, I adopted a qualitative approach. As Creswell writes, qualitative research is best suited to situations when “the literature might yield little information about the phenomenon of study, and you need to learn more from participants through exploration” (16). The research is open-ended and guided, in large part, by what is learned from the participants (Creswell 19). Stake writes that a key characteristic of qualitative research is that its central goal is to understand what is happening rather than to predict or explain (*Art* 37). These descriptions characterize my goals in my own research: to explore a relatively new area, to learn from my participants, and to understand their experience.

I centered my research on a series of veteran case studies. Robert Yin writes that “the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena. In brief, the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (4). Yin’s discussion of multiple-case design, wherein the researcher studies several similar cases, is of particular application to my research goals. Single-case studies are vulnerable to allegations that the case is unique; while the goal of case-study research is not necessarily to generalize the findings, studying multiple cases allows the researcher to look for trends between the cases and offset potential criticism that the cases are unique (Yin 60-62). Since I hoped to identify such trends, I decided to study multiple student veterans.

The specific term for the type of case studies I did is “collective instrumental case studies,” which is drawn from Robert Stake. Stake defines an instrumental case study as one that provides insight into an issue, as opposed to an intrinsic case study where the goal is to understand the particular case (*Art* 3). Collective instrumental case studies, then, are

“instrumental stud[ies] extended to several cases. [...] They are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases” (“Case Studies” 89). Stake’s description of collective instrumental case studies resonates strongly with my research goals. In Stake’s description of issues that are appropriate for this type of research, he writes that they “are not simple and clean, but intricately wired to political, social, historical, and especially personal contexts” (*Art* 17). This certainly describes veterans’ transition to college writing. It is my hope that my case studies of student veterans will lead to a better understanding of the transitions to academic writing that are experienced by the “larger collection of cases” of student veterans as a whole—or at least provide the first steps in that direction.

I chose to adapt a constructivist grounded-theory methodology most clearly articulated by Kathy Charmaz, who emphasizes flexibility and interaction, highlighting the co-construction of theory through the interplay between participants’ words and views and the researcher’s interpretation (9-10). Creswell notes that grounded theorists remain open to developing their research methodology as they progress through the study, always remaining responsive to that data (which they code as they go) and their participants (431-32). Grounded theorists continue to gather data until they make the subjective determination that they have reached “saturation,” a point where “new data will not provide any new information or insights for the developing categories” (433). Frequently, this means that grounded theorists have fewer participants than might be expected, since they continue only until they see clear patterns. Grounded theory’s emphasis on studying and explaining a process fit my goals: as my research questions illustrate, I am interested in the process whereby student veterans transition to college writing.

As I developed my methodology, I looked to a number of earlier studies for models of successful case-study research involving small numbers of participants. I found a well established track record in writing studies of such qualitative research. The most significant to me was Roz Ivanič's *Writing and Identity: The Discoursal Construction of Identity in Academic Writing*, which was based on case studies of eight adult nontraditional students who were over 25, native speakers of English, and "had experienced some sort of difficulty with academic writing" (111). Ivanič found her participants through either mutual contacts or because she had been their writing tutor. Ivanič analyzed one academic essay from each participant and interviewed them about their choices writing the essay, as well as conducting another interview about participants' literacy histories and current practices. She also integrated her observations of her participants and tried to interview their writing tutors; however, the amount of interaction she had with each participant varied, and she was unable to interview all of the tutors. Ivanič argues that this methodology allowed her to "make generalizations about the nature of writer identity," but that the study was too small to generalize about how student characteristics (such as race or whether they came from a working-class background) might affect the difficulties each student had (113). Despite her small sample size, Ivanič's book is a significant contribution to the field, widely cited in research on academic discourse and student identity.

As I continued to read in preparation for this project, I encountered a number of other researchers who had used case-study research as a method to examine discourse, academic literacy, transitions to college, and other areas that pertained to my research. For example, Christine Pearson Casanave relied on case studies for *Writing Games*, her book on academic writing and identity that I described in the previous chapter. Casanave relied mainly on open

interviews in which she had a set of prepared questions, but she used the questions as a starting point and let the conversation develop naturally:

I was never absolutely sure where one of these conversations would lead [...] I was mainly interested in listening to what people had to say about themselves, about their writing and their writing practices and attitudes, and in watching them discover things about themselves as writers along the way. [...] I want to interact with, analyze, and depict real people, not cases, and to impart an embodied sense of their selves in the stories I construct. (32-33)

The human-centered methodology Ivanič and Casanave used appealed to me, as my goals were also to portray the experience of a small number of participants as individuals and then attempt to draw conclusions from their experiences. Other researchers I encountered further demonstrated the flexibility of the case-study approach and its ability to simultaneously present participants as multifaceted individuals while allowing researchers to make limited generalizations (e.g., Herrington and Curtis; Hinton, “The Military”; Popken; Prior; Rumann and Hamrick). Data collection varied among these studies: single or multiple interviews, observation notes, examination of pieces of writing, participant self-reflections, etc. In sum, case-study research appears to be seen by the field as a flexible, reliable methodology that can generate solid data, especially if the area under study is relatively new.

SITE SELECTION

North Central Michigan College (NCMC) is a small community college located near the tip of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula. It currently enrolls just under 3,000 students, of whom 60% received financial aid in the 2012-13 academic year. In the 2013-14 academic year, 109 students who had disclosed their veteran status attended the college. Table 1 represents a breakdown of this veteran population:

Table 1

Student Veteran Population 2013-14

2013-14	Summer	Fall	Winter	Year (unduplicated)
Female	5	20	17	25
Male	22	50	59	84
19 & under	0	2	4	5
20-24	2	7	6	10
25-29	11	17	18	27
30 & over	14	44	48	67
TOTAL	27	70	76	109

The college's budget is \$14.8 million, and as of summer 2014, the college has 97 full-time faculty and staff and 210 part-time staff and adjunct faculty. NCMC has three primary campuses: one in Petoskey, considered its main campus, which offers all programs and courses, and two in nearby cities that offer limited courses. It also offers a small number of courses at other locations. As of spring 2014, about 40% of NCMC's degree-seeking students had declared the intent to earn occupational degrees; of those, 40% were in health fields, such as nursing.

While its size and budget make it difficult for the college to provide the same level of infrastructure for student veterans as do some larger schools, NCMC's efforts to support its

student veterans have earned it distinction as a Military Friendly college for the past three years. The college has a Student Veterans Resource Center with a mission to “assist students with obtaining their VA education benefits, be a liaison between the student and campus community when it is needed, and provide a network of fellow student veterans” (“Student Veterans Resource Center”). The center also connects student veterans with other veteran services in the area, such as employment representatives and county Veteran Service Officers. Additionally, the section of NCMC’s website that is devoted to student veterans provides a link to the Student Veterans Resource Center Live, which is a comprehensive website, created by the founder of NCMC’s chapter of the Student Veterans’ Association (SVA), that contains sections on topics such as activating benefits, transitioning to college, health and wellness, and finding employment.

The college also has an active chapter of the SVA, although its numbers tend to be small. NCMC has also held regular programs that show its support of veterans, such as featuring speeches by Derek Blumke, the co-founder of SVA and an alumnus of NCMC, and Dakota Meyer, a Medal of Honor recipient. The college also hosts an annual Veterans’ Day breakfast that is attended by community veterans and their families. And, like most colleges, NCMC employs staff and faculty who are veterans themselves.

As I noted earlier, NCMC is also the college at which I have worked for the past 15 years. My status as a faculty member and WPA provided me with experience and access that helped gather data for this study; additionally, it highlighted the need to maintain robust anonymity and confidentiality protocols. As I detail in my sections on participant selection and data collection, these protocols were necessary to ensure not just valid data, but willing and comfortable participants. As WPA, I have influence over staffing decisions, and I wanted faculty

members to be able to be honest as they participated in my faculty survey, without fear that their answers would influence my staffing recommendations. Additionally, many of the veterans I interviewed were current students at the college (although, with the exception of the informal pilot interview group, they were not students in my classes). Without appropriate confidentiality provisions, they might worry that what they said would get back to their instructors and perhaps cause problems for them. As I explained to my participants, I kept all data filed and printed by pseudonym, and the document that linked pseudonyms to real names (when known) was kept in a password-encrypted file.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION AND DATA COLLECTION

Over the course of 2014, I asked several veterans I had previously taught in writing classes if they would like to participate in this research. I also distributed a flyer describing the study and asking for research volunteers to the writing faculty and asked them to share it with their students; I gave copies of the same flyer to the college's veteran liaison and asked her to give it to incoming veterans. Eventually, I got six volunteers. Their pseudonyms, service histories, and brief descriptions follow.

- Brian is a 27-year-old male Army veteran. He enlisted at age 19 and served for 7 1/2 years. When he left the service, his rank was SGT (E5)—Sergeant, E5 pay grade. He is an advanced college undergraduate.
- Logan is a 31-year-old male Navy veteran. He enlisted at age 18 and served for 10 1/2 years, leaving the Navy with a rank of STG1(SW) (E6)—Sonar Technician First Class, Surface Warfare Specialist, E6 pay grade. For the past two years, he has served in the

Army National Guard and is currently a Calvary Scout, SGT (E5). He is an advanced college undergraduate.

- Joseph is a 32-year-old male Army veteran. He enlisted at age 21 and is still serving. Currently, he is in the Army Reserve, holding the rank of SGT (E5) with a Military Occupational Specialty of 46Q (Public Affairs Specialist). He has a BA in English with an emphasis in journalism.
- Derek is a 33-year-old male Air Force veteran. He enlisted at age 18 and served for six years as an aircraft mechanic. He left active duty with the rank of SSGT (E5) and subsequently served in the Air National Guard for six years, leaving with a rank of TSgt (E6). He holds a Bachelor's degree in psychology and political science.
- Mike is a 45-year-old male veteran of the Army and Coast Guard. He enlisted in the Army at age 17 when he was a senior in high school and served for four years as an MP (E4). After a brief stint as a civilian, he enlisted in the Coast Guard at 21 and served for 24 years, ultimately retiring with a rank of E6. This is his first semester of college.
- Alan is a 25-year-old male Army veteran. He enlisted at age 17 and served for nearly 6 years. When he left the Army, his rank was SGT (E5) in the infantry. He is close to his Associate's Degree.

I provided each of these veterans with a consent form (Appendix A) and a short survey (Appendix B) before the interview. Although my supervising institution's IRB agreed that a consent form was not strictly necessary for my research, I thought it was best to give my participants as full an understanding of the process as possible. I focused my survey primarily on demographics and background information on the participants' military and college experiences; while some of the questions I asked were open-ended, I purposely designed them to elicit

focused responses. I asked my participants to fill out the consent form and survey before the interview.

I used the questions provided in Appendix C as a starting point for the interviews, but I concentrated on keeping the interviews semi-structured (following the precedent of the majority of the case-studies I cited above, such as Casanave and Ivanič). A semi-structured interview staging was appropriate to the relative newness of my research area in that it did not close off potential responses. Certainly, it enabled me to get a richer sense of the experiences of my participants than a more tightly structured format. Each interview was an individualized and dynamic event that was dependent on the participant's answers to the initial questions and what he wanted to discuss. It was important to me that I actually listened to my participants, since a key factor driving this research is my belief that this group has been inadequately listened to thus far; accordingly, I concentrated on hearing my participants' responses for what they were saying, without filtering their experiences through the research I had already done. I describe my methods for analyzing the interviews and surveys later in this chapter.

Unfortunately, I was unable to recruit any Marines. One of the six initial veterans I contacted was a Marine, but he elected not to participate, stating that his experience was, in his judgment, atypical and would not serve as a good model for research. When I noted that I was having difficulty finding Marines to participate and asked him if he had any theories as to why, he characterized Marines as more military-oriented than the other branches, stating that they tended to live in areas where there was a significant concentration of other military personnel (as opposed to northern Michigan). Additionally, he characterized them as less academically oriented than the other branches. Whether this is true, of course, is open to debate. However, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that "the Marine Corps was the smallest user of tuition-

assistance benefits provided by the Defense Department during the 2010 fiscal year, awarding 9 percent of the total” (Field). This suggests that the pool of student veterans from the Marine Corps is smaller, which may make it difficult—especially at smaller schools—to get their perspective.

Ideally, I would also have drawn from male and female veterans, but unfortunately, the pool of female self-identified veterans is much smaller at my school. In the 2013-14 academic year, only 25 women who had disclosed their veteran status attended NCMC. I have taught very few women over the course of my tenure at NCMC who disclosed their veteran status. I was unable to find any women veterans who were willing to participate in this research.

Six veterans may not seem like a lot, and, in fact, it limits the generalizability of my results. However, the number is consistent with much well-regarded case-study research. As I noted above, Ivanič had eight participants. In their study of student veterans transitioning to college, Rumann and Hamrick had six, and Hinton interviewed twelve Marine veterans for her study of how student veterans use their prior writing knowledge in college (“The Military”). In light of these precedents, my numbers seem reasonable.

In addition to talking to student veterans, I also gathered information from writing faculty. During the spring of 2014, I sent a survey both electronically and in hard copy to all nineteen current college writing faculty at NCMC (I excluded myself). Of those faculty, four were full-time, and fifteen were part-time. These faculty taught at the three major NCMC campuses. My survey questions focused on their perceptions of student veterans’ writing performance, whether they have adapted their courses in any way to the presence of student veterans, and their understanding of the qualities of effective academic writing. The entire survey appears in Appendix D. I received sixteen complete surveys.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

As I noted above, my interviews with student veterans were semi-structured, informal interviews in which I focused on “the establishment of a human-to-human relation with the respondent and the desire to understand rather than to explain” (Fontana and Frey 56-57). Blakeslee and Fleischer write that informal interviews are more flexible than formal interviews, allowing the researcher to shape the interview in response to the conversation with the participant (132-133). As can be seen in Appendices C and D, I generated a short list of primary and follow-up questions for my interviews; however, I stressed to my participants that I was primarily interested in hearing what they had to say, and that they were free to deviate from the questions if they wished. I also asked follow-up questions that were directly related to what the individual veterans shared in their interviews, making each interview a unique experience. Charmaz suggests that interviewers “devise a few broad, open-ended questions. Then you can focus your interview questions to invite detailed discussion of the topic” (26). This is what I attempted to do.

I followed Creswell’s advice in making sure to ask open-ended questions to allow participants to respond in ways unconstrained by the researcher’s perspective (218). Stake points out that “each interviewee is expected to have had unique experiences, special stories to tell” (*Art* 65), and, like Creswell, suggests that researchers ask open-ended questions to elicit these stories. During the interview, Stake suggests that the researcher avoid taking copious notes, instead focusing on listening and asking clarifying questions. Accordingly, I took minimal notes during the interviews, instead electing to digitally record each interview and have them transcribed. During the interviews, I focused on creating as natural and dynamic an atmosphere as possible, asking follow-up questions as they connected to my participants’ experiences.

Stake also recommends that the researcher should plan time immediately after the interview to write detailed notes, paying special attention to what might not come through in the transcript (such as context and innuendo). I followed this advice, writing research memos to myself immediately after each interview and at many stages in the coding and writing process.

SURVEY PROTOCOLS

As noted above, I gave all of my student-veteran participants an initial survey (Appendix E). I began the survey with demographic questions about age and gender, and progressed to background questions such as when and why they enlisted, their length of service, and their rank. For the second half of the survey, I transitioned to open-ended questions in which I tried not to constrain their responses. For example, one of my questions asked how my participants' military experience shaped their sense of identity. Another asked why they decided to go to college and whether they had any concerns about the likelihood of their success. As I wrote earlier, I used the survey to provide basic (yet still important) data, which freed me up to make the interviews more open-ended.

The surveys I gave to writing faculty were constructed similarly: I began with closed-ended, basic questions such as what courses they were teaching and how long they had taught college writing, and I moved to open-ended questions such as whether the knowledge that student veterans might be in their classes had prompted any pedagogical changes (Appendix F). If the faculty member had knowingly taught veterans in the past, I asked them to complete the second part of the survey, which was comprised entirely of open-ended questions. For example, I asked them to describe a time (without identifying the student) when a veteran had written about his or her military experience, and how they responded. I also asked the faculty member to

describe any strengths or challenges that they thought were specific to student veterans, and if they had any ideas for how the group could be better supported. As I noted above, although participation was voluntary, I had a very high response rate.

In my question construction, I concentrated on Creswell's advice to write clear and unambiguous questions that did not overlap and that participants would feel they understood (387). I also attempted to show respect for both of my survey populations through the wording of my questions—for example, an original draft of my faculty survey contained the question, "What do you think are some key qualities of good academic writing? How do you know?" Feedback on this early draft raised the question of whether the faculty would feel offended or challenged by the second part of that question, as though I was asking them to prove that they understood good academic writing. Since this was certainly not my intent, I removed the second part of the question and replaced it with, "Very briefly, why are they important?" I hoped that this revision would still encourage elaboration, but in a less confrontational way.

I did violate a standard prescription for question construction by including multiple sub-questions in many questions; my intent was to enrich the questions and provide possible avenues for response. For example, on the veteran survey I asked, "Why did you decide to go to college? Do you (or did you) feel like you belong in college? Do you (or did you) have any particular concerns about your likelihood of success?" Obviously, these are multiple questions, and each could produce a lengthy response. However, they are all closely related, and I tried to indicate the depth of the answer I hoped for by the space I left under the question.

DATA ANALYSIS

I analyzed my data consistently with grounded-theory protocols laid out by Kathy Charmaz. The first step was to code the interview transcripts and surveys for key themes. Charmaz states that “qualitative codes take segments of data apart, name them in concise terms, and propose an analytic handle to develop abstract ideas for interpreting each segment of data. [...] Coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data” (45-46). She divides the coding process into two main iterations: initial and focused coding. For the first run—initial coding—Charmaz recommends that the researcher quickly move through the data while remaining open to “all possible theoretical directions indicated by your readings of the data” (46). These initial codes are provisional and can be used to show where there is a need for more data as well as representing the data one already has.

Charmaz also recommends using gerunds to code in order to emphasize action. She also stresses that the researcher remain alert to the potential for *in vivo* codes, or codes that are drawn from the participants’ actual language. An example drawn from my research is the term “counseling,” which participants from across the different service branches used to describe the process of writing reviews of subordinates. This usage of counseling struck me in my coding process because it seemed unique to the military—in civilian life, counseling more often refers to either therapy or job/life planning, not review. Charmaz writes that “such codes anchor your analysis in your research participants’ worlds” (51).

I generated a great many initial codes as I read through the interview transcripts. Some examples from Brian’s interview follow (Table 2), with my initial codes in the left-hand column:

Table 2

Initial Interview Coding

Initial Code	Transcript Data
Pursuing what needs to be done	Brian: I think the biggest thing, the biggest aspect, I learned in the Army is to aggressively pursue what needs to be done. So if I had an issue or trouble with something, I would be able to seek out how to fix it or how to figure out how to do it. So whether it's by finding it myself or finding someone who knows how I would need to write something better or find information on something I need to write about. That's what I would say I drew from the military: I could like buckle down and get it done.
Feeling embarrassed to be older	Brian: You don't feel, like, ashamed, but you're just kind of embarrassed to be going to school with kids. Twenty-seven years old, and it's, some of them are high-schoolers, seventeen and eighteen year olds that are seniors in high school that are doing good in high school so they get, which is great, you know, great deal for them. And it's kind of a little bit hard to relate.

After initial coding, Charmaz recommends the researcher move to focused coding, which “means using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data. Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely” (47). As Blakeslee and Fleischer write, the process of looking for themes in interview transcripts can be somewhat circular and involves reading first to discern patterns and themes, and then reading again (and, perhaps, again and again) to see how strong and significant the patterns are (175). For this stage of analysis, I re-

read my initial codes and transcripts/surveys, looking for which initial codes were most prevalent and seemed to best explain the data. I also looked for instances where I had coded essentially the same thing using different terms and decided on the best term to use, and I looked through earlier data to see if I could apply some of the codes I had developed later in the process. This was a recursive and time-intensive process, but it resulted in a tight list of codes that I was confident represented my data.

For example, Brian was not the only veteran who said that the military trained him to work hard. In my focused coding, I developed a category called “Transitioning to College—Strengths,” with a subcategory of “Pursuing the Mission, Learning to Learn.” I then went back through the transcripts and surveys and highlighted statements that fit this code in yellow, which allowed me to group statements such as these together:

Derek: There’s no way I would have gone to school [without my time in the Air Force]. The military taught me how to study, how to work hard, discipline, all the things that my dad wanted for me.

Joseph: You’re really required to always finish the mission. I mean that’s not only, it’s not only an idea, in the Army it’s one of our warrior ethos: “I will put the mission first.” And when you translate that into the academic world or say a degree, if you can use those skills of putting the mission first in academics, it definitely helps you to get your job done, to think of things like deadlines or turn-in dates or upcoming exams as objectives.

Mike: I wasn’t a good student in high school at all. And I didn’t have the skills to learn how to learn, so I really didn’t learn how to learn until I went into the military. And in the Coast Guard there’s a lot of written tests and a lot of studying and hitting the books. So that’s really where I learned how to learn. If I went to college after high school, I would have just wasted my time and money. I wasn’t disciplined enough.

After I developed my codes, I asked a colleague to read my transcripts and surveys and compare them against my codes. I asked her to evaluate whether my codes seemed true to the data and whether I had missed any significant trends. She agreed that my coding was valid, and

pointed to some additional places where my participants had talked about transferring their military writing knowledge to college that I had missed.

I followed much the same process when I coded the faculty surveys, except I retyped the survey responses and organized them by question on large sheets of paper. Essentially, I created a large grid in which each row represented one faculty member's answers, while each column represented a given question on the survey. This allowed me to view the surveys in two ways: by question and by individual. I coded by question using highlighters and typing possible codes, and I refined the codes similarly to how I did the veteran responses. For example, Question 2 asked faculty to identify key qualities of academic writing (Appendix F). Table 3 provides examples of some coded responses:

Table 3

Initial Survey Coding

Initial Code	Survey Data
Audience awareness	<p>“Interesting—audiences will not care if it’s not.”</p> <p>“[Research and evidence are] important to communicate and convey thoughts to one’s intended audience.”</p> <p>“Good introductions—it is important to draw the reader in.”</p>
Clarity and brevity	<p>“Boil down thoughts to one clear, succinct comment.”</p> <p>“Filter—economy of writing is essential as our society becomes more rapidly paced; the art of good writing is anchored in thrift.”</p> <p>“Clarity of ideas, including clear organization.”</p> <p>“Clarity—direct sentences that convey meaning.”</p>

I also wrote copious research memos. As Glesne and Peshkin suggest, writing memos to oneself as research progresses can not only record impressions from an interview, but can help the researcher develop his thoughts and spur new perspectives (128). Blakeslee and Fleischer echo this understanding, writing that research memos not only function as spaces for the researcher to reflect on the immediate interview or recent findings, but also to speculate, to fine-tune research goals, and, as the researcher re-reads older memos, to uncover patterns that might have gone unnoticed (184). Accordingly, I wrote research memos after each interview, as well as at key stages of the process (distributing surveys, recruiting participants, different stages of

coding) to document the process, record what I was thinking at the time, remind myself to research certain areas more, and speculate.

Some of what I discovered through the coding process—such as that student veterans have a difficult time connecting with civilian peers—was expected. However, even expected results often contained surprising elements. For example, I did not expect age-related embarrassment to show up so strongly as a sub-element of the difficulty connecting with peers. Nor did I anticipate that another key perception veterans would have of civilian peers was that they were unreliable, or that this perception would contribute to a resistance toward collaborative activities such as study groups.

Perhaps the most surprising thing I found was how much the veterans I spoke with understood the writing they had done in the military. Probably like many college faculty, I had held a view that because much of the writing enlisted service-members do in the military is short and formulaic, the soldiers and sailors would approach it uncritically and somewhat automatically—to use Brian’s parlance, “just hand-jam it out.” However, I found that the student veterans with whom I spoke tended to have a sophisticated understanding of audience, purpose, and genre. Again drawing from Brian:

Interviewer: How would you figure out what the guy up above you was looking for [in a counseling report]?

Brian: He would let you know. Or, I mean, you would get a vibe. The military is kind of a subculture of its own. You kind of learn how to communicate without necessarily passing the words or whatever like that, you know what I mean? You learn how to read what they’re going to...Some NCOs, they call them, noncommissioned officers or sergeants, they’ll lay it out for your step for step, “This is what I want from you.” Others won’t.

Basically, some NCOs, they wouldn’t care. They’d just hand-jam it out and get it done. But the idea behind it is to inform the soldier, to go over their career and what they were doing and what they needed to work on. So you would outline...that’s how you want to take a soldier, say, “This is what I see of you. This is what happened. This is what we

need to work on. And this is what will help your career in the Army.” So the idea behind it is to create success in the soldiers. That’s the whole idea of the counseling statements.

I will explore my results in much greater detail in subsequent chapters. However, it may be helpful to present the major codes I settled on in the veteran interviews and surveys (Table 4).

Table 4

Final Themes and Sub-themes

Major Themes:	Sub-themes
Enlisting, Writing, and Learning in the Military	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enlisting out of high school, enlistment reasons. • Writing in the military: logs, counseling reports, reading officer expectations, learning genre conventions. • Learning in the military: training, tests, reading manuals.
Challenges Transitioning to College	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling like experience wasn’t recognized. • Not fitting into traditional placement, FYE, developmental writing. • Making up for lost time between HS and college. • Feeling embarrassed to be going to school with “kids.” • Experiencing social isolation/disconnection from non-military peers.
Applying Strengths to College	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying work ethic, pursuing the mission. • Connecting with veteran community. • Understanding diverse people, applying life experience.

This methodology yielded rich data on student veterans’ transitions to the college writing and learning environment. As subsequent chapters show, the study enriches the understanding of what types of writing enlisted veterans did in the military, as well as their understanding of genre

and audience. It also reveals the ways they experience college writing, including struggles and successes. When possible, I connect the experiences of my participants to other scholarship, and in later chapters, I build on this data to make concrete suggestions for writing teachers and programs. However, this study is consistent with most qualitative research in that it should be viewed primarily as an exploratory study, designed to highlight areas for future research.

CHAPTER 4

WRITING AND LEARNING IN THE MILITARY

Many writing faculty operate from the assumption that student veterans did little or no writing in the military, or that their military experience has little bearing on their current work in writing classes. This is untrue. As my interviews illustrate, enlisted sailors, soldiers, and airmen do, indeed, write during their time in the military, and they are quite aware of the processes whereby they learn the genre characteristics of that writing. However, while some of those genre characteristics transfer quite well to academic writing, the context in which they write differs significantly from college. Additionally, the purposes for which they write are quite different from school. The student veterans I interviewed described military writing as very specific and formulaic, with little room for independent thought. Also, the writing enlisted service members do is oriented toward action and must be concise and quick to comprehend. Nuance is discouraged, and the format is strictly controlled, sometimes down to the details of individual word choice.

The writing veterans do in the military may seem alien to us in the academy. However, we need to understand where veterans are coming from in order to support them as they go forward. In this chapter, I draw from the faculty survey to provide an example of how writing teachers commonly conceive of student veterans' prior writing. I then draw from the veteran interviews and surveys to provide a sense of how veterans actually write in the military. Next, I delve into the learning environment of the military, including how the military establishes a sense of community and some specific teaching and learning practices they incorporate. These examples serve two purposes: firstly, to help interested readers develop a better sense of the

military writing environment, and secondly, to lay the groundwork for some suggestions as to how we can help veterans build on their military writing experience to succeed in the academic context.

FACULTY (MIS)UNDERSTANDINGS

The faculty survey I performed revealed that most writing teachers—at least at my school—have a very uncertain understanding of the writing enlisted veterans do in the military. On the survey, I asked respondents several questions about their understanding of the writing veterans do in the military and how military experience might translate to college. The most common answer to the first question was “I don’t know”; those who elaborated conjectured that veterans wrote very little. Eight out of sixteen respondents indicated that they had little to no knowledge of how student veterans might have written in the military. It is likely this confusion is shared by many faculty members at other colleges.

Out of the eight respondents who indicated that they thought they had some understanding of military writing, most identified basic, report-type writing as the principal genre. One faculty member wrote, “From what I understand, most military writing is fact-based and concise in a report format. Analysis is excess.” Another wrote that “many of my students were more often told to ‘suck it up’ rather than express—in writing or in spoken language. If there was writing, it was to be brief/concise and without elaboration. One student relayed a situation in which he was verbally reprimanded for reporting with too much detail.” One faculty member cited a particular veteran who stated that while in the military, “good writing for him was being concise, clear and detailed, and making the information understandable to his audience.” These responses are consistent with the research on enlisted service-people’s writing;

however, I should note again that only half of my respondents reported that they had any knowledge of these writing patterns.

Such a lack of consistent knowledge should be cause for concern, since, as I pointed out earlier, community colleges are experiencing a massive influx of student veterans. Yet, as Hart and Thompson point out, even though two-year colleges are seeing their veteran populations swell, such schools often have few resources for faculty training (3). It is likely that the writing faculty at other schools are similarly uncertain about the writing histories of veterans. As writing teachers, we have developed strategies to meet individual students where they are, regardless of their past experiences. However, a better knowledge of the general types of writing familiar to student veterans can only help writing teachers facilitate veterans' transition to the academic context.

THE WRITING OF ENLISTED SERVICE-MEMBERS

The veterans I spoke with described the writing they did in the service as extremely codified. Logan described his writing in the Navy as follows:

Logan: It's very formulaic. Everything's pretty much determined what has to be written. You just change the nouns. And there's nothing creative to it. It's the basics of a sentence. It just gets out the information that needs to be said.

Interviewer: So how do you know what the formula is?

Logan: There's a template. So that covers 99 percent of anything you'd ever write.

Following this template was strictly enforced. For example, Logan described a time when his fellow sailors deviated from the proscribed format of ships' logs by switching to present tense:

Logan: When you're writing in the log book, you don't always turn to that template. The template is lots of templates. So you'll just kind of say, "Oh, I'll just look at the last entry from the last guy and replace it with my time and my name." And sometimes a mistake will make it in there, and then it will just perpetually get repeated. And then we'll have to

have like a couple days of that. And then you'll have a formation where your chief or your sergeant will return it back to normal, force it. Sometimes they uh, what was the one? Past tense. We had a problem with past tense in the log book when we were in port. Somehow it turned into present tense at some point. And it kept getting copied for like two weeks. And the whole ship's crew had to be informed that everything had to be past tense. Everything had to end in "-ed." So yeah it comes down the chain like. And then bottom up, we screwed up again.

Until they received a promotion, the principle type of writing the veterans in this group did was logs—short, simple records of activities. As Brian described, “They’re just real monotonous, like time, date, a short sentence that might not even really be a sentence, just a statement that’s not really complete.” This description was echoed by Mike, who said, “We constantly do logs, like when we go on watch. You’ll have a four-hour watch where you’ll be responsible for the engines in the engine room and the machinery running on the boat. So you have to record all that, which is pretty easy and pretty standard.”

Once a soldier or sailor was promoted, though, the type of writing they did changed. Now they were responsible for “counseling,” or evaluating, their subordinates through writing. This writing was much more elaborate and developed, although still proscribed. Brian describes the purpose of counseling reports in the Army this way:

Brian: The idea behind it is to inform the soldier, to go over their career and what they were doing and what they need to work on, whether it's, you know, their military bearing, if they weren't being courteous or saying “Yes, sir” or “No, sergeant.” Or standing at parade rest when they're speaking to higher ranking NCOs or sergeants. Or how they were doing on physical fitness. So you would outline, “This is what I see of you. This is what happened. This is what we need to work on. And this is what will help your career in the army.” So the idea behind it is to create success in the soldiers. That's the whole idea of the counseling statements.

Logan, Brian, Mike, and Alan were all promoted to the level where they wrote counseling reports on their subordinates. Since each soldier's or sailor's strengths and weaknesses would be individual, one might expect that evaluations would be flexible. However, this is not the case: as

my participants described, evaluations had strict genre conventions, and even the words were proscribed.

Logan: [Evaluations] are also pretty formulaic. They actually have a whole book on the types of words you want to use to make somebody look good versus really good or exceptional. You want to talk more specific about a person, like their specific accomplishments, what they did during these exercises or these tests or whatever. And then we have entire...it's like a thesaurus that's specifically for writing evaluations in the military. You go through and say, you can use these words if you feel this about this person. If you feel even better, turn to this page and try and use these words. So yeah it's very, it's kind of like a schematic for fixing a piece of machinery in the military. If this is broken, turn to this page. If this is what's happening, turn to this page. And then pull this circuit card out and put a new one in. It's the same thing with writing.

Brian: Once I made sergeant, you have to do counseling statements monthly for soldiers that are under you. I was a sergeant so I'd have a staff sergeant and then a platoon sergeant [above me]. So sometimes the leadership above us would make an outline, like a very basic outline, like this is what needs to go into your counseling statements. What you did this month, what your team did or what that soldier did that month and then how they performed, their job performance, and then like say future things that are going to happen with the unit or the team or platoon. And then finally what that soldier needs to work on. And then the platoon sergeant and first sergeant would go through all the counseling packets to make sure that they were adequate to standard per se.

The highly formulaic nature of evaluations frustrated Alan. As he put it, there was a very specific and formal type of writing required in his reports, and his superiors would “chew his ass” if he deviated from it. Alan described serving in combat with a team who performed with great courage under fire, and he felt that the genre constraints of his evaluations diminished the accomplishments of his soldiers. He wanted to write more, and he felt as though he was being unfair to his soldiers by boiling down the details of their experiences to the official format, especially when he was commending them for awards. However, as he said, he “learned to play the game.”

Mike noted that he spent a great deal of time and thought writing his own self-evaluations and evaluating his subordinates. Writing evaluations also involved collaboration and information from several other Coast Guard service-members, both above and below him:

Mike: The only challenging writing I ever had was writing awards for people or positive or negative reports or evaluations. To do my own evaluation, it probably takes me about a month. And then to do someone else's evaluation, it takes me probably about two or three weeks. There's pretty much a standard format that they want you to use, and then they give you some paperwork that tells you.... It's on a numbering system like one through seven. One is bad; seven's the best you can do. And they give you a sheet that has criteria through one through seven and how the person documents what they perform is where you put them one through seven. And if they give me nothing at all, there's no way I can really mark them accurately so it's important for them to give me all their information, what they've done in the last six months.

Your supervisor might have a certain writing style that he wants to document it so you kind of know what he's expecting. And kind of when you get to a certain age range, you have your own style and your own way of doing things. And then that evaluation goes up the chain of command. So it goes through four or five other people that all have their own writing styles too. So they kind of add their two cents in there, too.

Logan said that sometimes service-members were promoted and had to write counseling reports and evaluations, but they felt they were not good enough writers to do so. As he put it, "A lot of people in the military can't write. And they'll turn to people who can. If I were higher ranking and I don't like writing, I'd hand it down to my, you know, guy below me to write. Yeah, that happened a lot." Logan noted, however, that he always wrote his own reports and evaluations.

Joseph's experiences with writing in the military differed from the rest of my participants because writing more involved pieces was a part of his mission. Joseph's occupation was a Public Affairs Specialist writer, and he was formally trained to write news stories for the Army.

Joseph: Right away I was taught formal news classes at what's called the Defense Information School. It's at Fort Meade, Maryland. It's where all the branches learn any type of Public Affairs work or Photojournalism, or news coverage that they need to do. It's pretty straightforward, like news writing, editing, how to put together basic paragraphs, how to write a lead, stuff like that, how to conduct an interview. You get assigned in a small group to a single instructor, and that person essentially would go through the real, real minute nuts and bolts of writing. You started out with grammar, and then you went on to writing a lead and how to be active and things like that. So it was almost initially like a retooling of anything I knew about sentences or taking whatever I had previously done and turning it into essentially like a journalese or public information type writing. Then from there the learning process gets kind of intensified. It's a 16-week class, or at least it used to be, and they essentially expect you to write on a news deadline. So you end up going out and writing stories and then coming back in for grades the next

day. And it's pretty tough, like for example, if you had factual error, your entire article would be scrapped. And two or three of those and they actually would either re-class you to a different job in the military or you would get recycled, which is you have to start the whole class all over again.

After his training, Joseph wrote for the 300th Military Police Brigade, serving as a writer and photographer, and eventually becoming a noncommissioned officer in charge of other journalists. He continues to serve as a Public Affairs Specialist in the Army Reserve. Although his writing was (and remains) much more developed than that of the average enlisted soldier, I noticed that the genre conventions for that writing—at least as he described them—were nearly as strict as those for counseling reports, log entries, and the like. Similarly, the repercussions for failing to follow those conventions were high: “re-classing” to a different job or being “recycled.” Finally, Joseph’s writing shared an emphasis on fact and precision with the writing done by the other veterans with whom I spoke.

The veterans I spoke with developed a variety of ways to read their military audiences to determine the genre conventions of their writing. Sometimes the genre conventions were made explicit by their superiors, as when Alan went into too much detail and had his writing rejected by his superiors. As Brian related, “Some NCOs, they call them, noncommissioned officers or sergeants, they’ll lay it out for you step by step: ‘This is what I want from you.’ Others won’t.” Often, enlisted service personnel would receive this explicit audience feedback when they made a mistake, as Logan noted when he described being called together with his fellow sailors and admonished by an officer for shifting log entries to present tense: “It comes down the chain” (quoted earlier in this section).

Although Joseph’s experiences with writing in the military were quite different, due to his occupation, he also received explicit direction from his audience, as can be seen from his description of his journalism training in the preceding paragraphs. Derek was only able to

remember one writing experience in the Air Force. Motivated by recently buying an expensive camera and wanting to take photographs that would make it into print, he sought out the Public Affairs Office on his base and pitched an article about other aircraft maintenance people such as himself. The article and its accompanying photographs ran in the staff newspaper. Derek said, “Looking back at it, it was a terrible article. But it was interesting and it was something that the unit wanted to cover. So they ran with that. They did some editing, I’m certain of it, but looking back it was a terrible article, terrible writing, but that was really my first foray into it.” Derek continued to take pictures for the Public Affairs Office, and although he never wrote another article for them, “all of my colleagues were writers.” As an accomplished writer today, it is likely Derek picked up some productive approaches to writing around the newsroom.

Brian discussed more subtle ways of reading audience expectations. Sometimes, he said, his superior officer would let him know explicitly what was required from his writing. Other times, the cues were more implied:

Brian: It depended on who your leadership was at the time. First sergeants change over. Some first sergeants don’t care; some staff sergeants don’t care. You would get a vibe. The military is kind of a subculture of its own. You kind of learn how to communicate without necessarily passing the words or whatever, you know what I mean? You learn how to read what they’re going to [care about].

An awareness of audience is considered fundamental to successful writing. Certainly, the audience expectations in college differ from those in the military. However, the highly developed audience awareness exhibited by the veterans with whom I spoke suggests one possible avenue to explore in facilitating their transition to higher education. While it is true that the genre conventions of particular types of writing—counseling reports, for example—were explicitly spelled out, the veterans I spoke with were adept at ferreting out how seriously their superiors took those requirements, as well as additional areas to focus on.

When I asked Mike whether he thought he was a better writer now, post-military, than he was just getting out of high school, he answered, “Oh yeah, by 100 percent.” He attributed his improvement to experience writing, much of it gained through his military service. As he noted, “With my writing style, I know I’m a lot better as opposed to if I was right out of high school. I feel more confident, and I’ve had more experience with writing those evaluations and reports and how to get my ideas together.”

The experiences of my interview participants are not unique. For example, Erin Hadlock surveyed and interviewed nine student-veterans on their histories of writing in the military. Hadlock found three genres that cut across service branches—memoranda, evaluations, and operations orders—that were used frequently and familiar to service members. Each of these three genres was relatively short, formally organized, and had strict criteria: as she notes in her discussion of evaluations, “the smallest of mistakes could result in a document’s return” (46). Interestingly, Hadlock found that “it as a common occurrence for the participants in this study to first deny having done any writing in the military, only to follow with a list of the types of writing they did” (50). I found this as well: my participants would gamely agree to an interview, but caution me that they didn’t know what they would talk about, since they had not done any writing in the military. Then they would describe the writing they had actually done in great detail, showing a developed awareness of genre characteristics and audience.

Hadlock also found that the writing her participants did in the military tended to describe or support action—for example, a memorandum was written to change a policy, or an operations order was written to plan an ambush. The strict genre conventions support the action by making the writing easily and quickly understood by those who know the genre conventions. Clarity and direct language are prized. Enlisted service-members also focused more on the content of writing

than the sentence-level details and style (although they followed stylistic conventions, or they would have their writing rejected). As Hadlock's participants described, the enlisted service-members were the acknowledged authorities on the technical content, but they saw their officers as "knowing 'how to write' (many times defined as correcting grammatical mistakes and polishing the wording)" (72). As Hadlock points out, this dichotomy fed into enlisted service-members recognizing "what the officers were doing as writing and what they were doing as something other than writing that was associated with just doing their jobs" (73).

This finding speaks not only to the writing military personnel do, but to their identities as writers, and it helps shed light on why some may experience difficulty with their transition to college writing: not only is the genre much different, but they do not see themselves as having been skilled writers during their time in service. Accordingly, they may see their task as learning college writing after many years of not writing at all, when in reality, as my research suggests, some of the writing approaches they have learned in the military can translate to college quite well.

LEARNING IN THE MILITARY

It is probably obvious at this point that student veterans—especially those who were promoted to supervisory positions—have a richer experience with writing than many faculty assume. However, their ability to fluidly transfer their writing skills to the classroom is complicated by the fact that the writing they did in the military was also highly situated: it was bound up in the larger practices and environment of the armed forces. Lave and Wenger point out that

[e]ven so-called general knowledge only has power in specific circumstances. Generality is often associated with abstract representations, with decontextualization. But abstract

representations are meaningless unless they can be made specific to the situation at hand. Moreover, the formation or acquisition of an abstract principle is itself a specific event in specific circumstances. Knowing a general rule by itself in no way assures that any generality it may carry is enabled in the specific circumstances in which it is relevant. In this sense, any “power of abstraction” is thoroughly situated. (33-34)

Lave and Wenger’s explanation sheds some light on two key facts. First of all, as I noted above, many student veterans do not conceive of themselves as writers because they do not see the connection between the highly situated writing they did in the military and that which they are being asked to do in college. In general, they do not abstract the principles of writing they learned in the military beyond that situation. They know, for example, that they understand how to write an effective counseling report, but they have trouble abstracting the skills of clarity, directness, and evidence to academic writing. This provides an opening for writing teachers: they can help student veterans make the connection between the two contexts. (I give suggestions for how to do this in subsequent chapters.)

Secondly, Lave and Wenger’s points suggest how important it is for us to understand the “specific circumstances” of writing and learning in the military before we can help veterans make that connection. That is the subject of this next section. In it, I provide an overview of veterans’ experiences learning in the military, from the ways the armed forces seek to form a community with common purposes to how they build the competence of their service-members through training. Finally, I connect that community to the writing enlisted service-people do in the military.

Part of the mythos of military service is that it shapes one’s identity. For those service-members who enlist in their late teens, military service comes at a key formative period of late adolescence, often when a young man or woman is struggling to establish an adult identity separate from his or her family. The military can provide a new family, and with it, a new

identity. The Army's official website features the Soldier's Creed, which states, in part, "I am an American Soldier. I am a warrior and a member of a team. I will never accept defeat. I am an expert and I am a professional. I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life" ("Soldier's Creed"). The other service branches have similar statements, including core values that members of the different branches are directed to adhere to (eg., "Airman's Creed," "Being a Marine," "Coast Guard Ethos," "Navy Ethos"). Each branch strives to inculcate these values into its membership and induct service-members into a group identity.

The military has clear induction practices whereby new participants become members of the community, the most significant of which is Basic Training, which Susan and William Doe describe as follows:

At Basic Training, from the moment new enlistees step off the bus, they are immersed in a world that explicitly signals who is who by virtue of military rank, drill instructor hats, and leadership badges associated with military uniforms. Recruits quickly learn about the organizational structure and hierarchy of the military service via organizational charts, written rules and regulations, standard operating procedures, and unit signage. They are taught the ceremonial protocols of the culture such as how to respond verbally to superiors, when and how to salute, when to come to "attention," and other formalities. They are taught the tasks and practices of the profession of arms—how to handle, disassemble and fire weapons; how to operate personal and tactical equipment; how to use radio protocols and the phonetic alphabet; and how to work in teams, squads, and other units of various size and composition. Perhaps most importantly, inductees go through these processes as cohorts, forming bonds of friendship that help them survive the process and learn the one universal axiom of military service: everything is about accomplishing the mission through teamwork while taking care of those on your left and right. (n. pag.)

Doe and Doe go on to examine the development of military literacy over the course of a military career (they use "literacy" in its broad sense, rather than limiting it to reading and writing). One key point in their research—and this is a common thread in veteran-focused research—is that this learning is focused on participation in the military community. All service-people are expected to contribute to the overall enterprise, no matter their rank. Training occurs on the job,

and responsibilities increase with promotion. Doe and Doe write that “learning to take action and then taking responsibility for what happens are ongoing lessons, rather than bounded approaches contained strictly within the induction phase[....] Preparation becomes an ongoing process and is focused on developing an increasingly refined understanding of the work of war” (n. pag.).

In his survey, Alan said that everything was different as a result of his time in the military, and Derek characterized his military service as changing his life. As can be seen from Doe and Doe’s examples, changing one’s life is exactly what the military sets out to do. A major part of this change has to do with forging a communal identity: as a veteran cited by Rumann and Hamrick says, ““You become attached [to the soldiers in your unit]—they truly are your family”” (446). Other researchers, such as Morrow and Hart, likewise emphasize the military’s priority on building a cohesive team. Doe and Doe note that “induction processes and follow-on military training function as forms of specialized literacy learning that leave a lasting imprint, often becoming central to the identity of the people who experience them” (n. pag.). They go on to write that

The U.S. military is first and foremost a training (and learning) organization—arguably, the largest of its kind in the world[....] While military literacies are initially introduced to recruits during the time-honored, formal induction process known as Basic Training, [...] full induction into military literacies actually extends well beyond this initial, formal, and extremely powerful period. It entails ongoing professional development and sustained mentoring in an approach that involves immersion, assessment, and re-immersion in an endless cycle of improvement in which learning is treated as an infinite rather than as a finite set of skills. The military is designed, funded, equipped, and manned to fight wars, but training and practice [...] form the foundation of the military experience. (n. pag.)

Some of this training takes place along the lines of what many non-military would assume, based on the way it has been portrayed in popular media—physical challenges, weapons practice, etc. However, the armed forces also use pedagogical techniques that are technologically advanced, such as the Marine Corps’s Infantry Immersive Trainer, which is an interactive

environment where Marines will patrol streets and buildings that combine physical structures, live actors, and virtual effects such as explosions and flat-screen projected images to immerse trainees in combat situations (Fuentes). The Army has also been updating its approach to training: a recent initiative directed Army trainers to become more learner-centric, engaging trainees in collaborative problem-solving exercises and tailoring instruction to individual learners' needs (Stafford and Thornhill 28).

Largely because of the often-chaotic nature of today's armed conflicts, much of the training in the armed forces encourages critical thinking and problem solving at every level (not just the officers). For example, when writing about the Marine Corps's integration of critical-thinking preparation at all levels of training, Zacharakis and Van Der Werff state that "the goal is to develop a learning organization that is made of educated critical thinkers. All marines are expected to make a contribution to the team, not just with their ability to fire a rifle or follow orders but also through the ability to think, self-regulate their emotions, and take responsibility for their and the team's actions" (95). Hadlock and Doe point out that "the military has put more focus on decision making and agency at the individual and team level than ever before, and responsibility resides less and less exclusively in the senior leader" (79). Similarly, the Army Learning Concept for 2015 emphasizes the need "to develop higher-order thinking skills for all soldiers, ensuring they are prepared for the dynamic, complex, and ambiguous operational environments likely to face them in future conflicts" (Zacharakis and Van Der Werff 11). In short, service in the military now includes an expectation that service-members at all levels will be able to contribute to the welfare and success of the organization with their brains, not just with their brawn. Again, this learning mostly takes place in a team context. As Derek said, "In the military you go through your training programs, [and] whether it's aircraft maintenance school or

it's Special Forces school or noncommissioned officer school, everything is done as a team. Everything is done together. Nothing accomplished is ever done alone or individually.”

The emphasis on forging a cohesive team certainly makes sense. Most military service-members will deploy as teams and carry out their work on the battlefield as teams; it is crucial for them to be able to work well with others on the team. More important is their need to trust one another. Accordingly, the military emphasizes teamwork and community not just on the battlefield, but in the classroom.

Perhaps surprisingly, military training can incorporate a substantial amount of reading and writing. For example, here is how Mike described learning and demonstrating what he knew in the Coast Guard:

Mike: In the Coast Guard there's a lot of written tests and a lot of studying and hitting the books. For the Coast Guard, [for promotions] you get like five or six books for, like, mechanics. And then you have to take a mechanics test. And then you get two or three books about the military uniforms and regulations and history and so forth. And then you have to take a test for that. And then after that, you take what's called a service-wide, where you compete with other people trying to get the same position you're getting. And there might be...one time when I was taking the test, I think there was 500 people that were taking the test for the service-wide, but they were only going to make maybe about 70 people, promote about 70 people. So with that test, you take the test, which is 80% of your grade and then they factor in your years of service, performance, and sea time, and other factors like that.

Interviewer: Is it multiple choice? How's that set up?

Mike: Yeah, it is multiple choice, and there are scenarios. And there's all kinds of things about let's say rebuilding an engine, or if you're a cook, it goes specific to your rate or your job and then another part of the test is specific to the military. So they'll even ask you questions like, “An E5 in the army is what?” And then you'll have three or four multiple-choice answers.

Another example of reading being encouraged in the military is the Marine Corps Commandant's Professional Reading List, which is “a list of required annual reading for all active duty and reserve officer and enlisted Marines” (*Commandant's Professional Reading*

List—Official Site). For enlisted Marines, the list primarily comprises non-fiction books on warfare and memoirs, but also includes selections such as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, and Dave Grossman's *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. The Corps also provides discussion guides for most of the books that encourage connections between key points and the Marine Corps. The general discussion guide, which is to be used when a book does not have a custom discussion guide, provides these overall instructions:

This guide is intended to help Marines think about and discuss the books they read. All answers or responses should be embraced as *relevant*; there is no single right answer. Furthermore, when leaders provide unhelpful criticism of a Marine's idea, this may discourage him or her from reading other books, entertaining fresh ideas, or pushing themselves intellectually. Leaders should remain curious about what their Marines read, and avoid leading them to a particular interpretation. In doing so leaders may develop better insight to their Marines' thought processes, learn a new way of accomplishing a task, or discover a different strategy to consider. A good leader supports continuous conversation. This, in turn, leads to a better sense of history, identity, and purpose.

These guidelines represent clear pedagogical goals to encourage divergent, in-depth thinking and conversation. The overall goal, which comes forth in the penultimate and final sentences, is to strengthen the efficacy and sense of community within the Corps.

The other service branches also encourage in-depth examination of difficult issues through reading, writing, and group conversation. Logan still had several training documents from his time in the Navy, and he brought them to his interview for me to see. The documents were from a "Pride and Professionalism Workshop" from 2008, and they contain training scenarios in which participants were asked to problem-solve communication conflicts. For example, the Trainee Guide asks participants to break up into small groups and discuss the following scenario:

A work center supervisor reprimands an Airman because the Airman did not complete a task the supervisor assigned him. The Airman begins to defend himself, but the supervisor cuts him off with, “I don’t want any excuses! Just get back in there and get to work. And from now on do what I tell you *when* I tell you.” Later, the work center supervisor’s own supervisor approaches her and says, “Sorry for pulling Airman _____ off the job yesterday, but I really needed him.” (*Trainee Guide* 84)

The guide then asks groups to write responses to a series of questions about what specific aspects of communication broke down in the scenario and how the problems might be resolved. After the trainees compose their answers, they are asked to report back to the larger group, which then discusses responses from all the small groups. The instructor guide, which Logan also provided, emphasizes that “there are no absolutely right or wrong answers here. There are a number of problems in this scenario. The important thing is to get the trainees to think about the scenario, communication, and how breakdowns in communication can lead to conflict” (*U.S. Navy Pride and Professionalism* 1.3.10). These instructions underscore how the actual learning environment in the military is much richer than the popular reductive portrayals of drill instructors barking orders and enlisted men and women being instructed to shoot, not think.

In fact, these teaching practices probably seem strikingly familiar to college teachers, as they parallel many established patterns in academia. Logan’s training documents in particular reveal methods similar to those employed in college classes in many disciplines, where students are asked to examine controversial readings or issues in groups, compose short writing-to-learn pieces, and report back to the class. However, nearly everything about the learning context is different. Most importantly, each branch of the military represents a community that has relatively unified goals that are widely disseminated and understood within that branch. The expectations for each service-member are clear, as are the evaluation procedures for promotion and continuing service. In contrast, the academic sphere is disparate in its internal goals and expectations for performance. Evaluation procedures also vary from class to class and between

disciplines. For these reasons, even when classroom activities are similar to the ways veterans were trained in the military, the transition to college can be jarring.

LEARNING THEORY IN THE MILITARY

A useful theoretical frame to help understand the military's teaching and learning philosophy is Lave and Wenger's concept of communities of practice (CoPs). According to their formulation, a CoP is a group of individuals who engage in common practices, and these practices define the group. (For examples, midwives practice midwifery.) These groups contain practitioners who are at different stages of mastery of the practices, which correspond to different identities. For example, new members often fall into the apprentice role, learning the practices of the community from more experienced members, who correspond to journeymen or master practitioners. Gradually, as the apprentices gain skill and knowledge, they move toward full participation, eventually becoming masters themselves and instructing newer members.

Lave and Wenger write that "learning viewed as a situated activity has as its central defining characteristic a process that we call *legitimate peripheral participation*. [...] earners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and [...] the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community" (29, italics added). Legitimacy denotes belonging in a CoP, not as a transient or a dabbler, but as an actual contributing member. Peripheral indicates that the member is not a "full participant" (36)—a master—but it does not equate to "lesser." Lave and Wenger characterize peripherality as positive: "[It] suggests an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement" (37). Peripheral participants do not perform the full range of practices in the community, and they are not accorded the same level of

responsibility or respect as full participants. However, their participation is welcomed and encouraged.

This final sub-concept—participation—bears more examination, especially as it relates to student veterans. Crucially, this participation must not merely entail a reenactment of the community's practices; instead, it represents an actual contribution to the community. In Lave and Wenger's book, the apprentice midwives they use as examples are actually helping babies to be born; the apprentice Navy quartermasters are truly helping to navigate ships. While more experienced members of the CoP help the newer members learn and perform the practices, new entrants to a community do not just observe the more experienced members: legitimate peripherality "crucially involves *participation* as a way of learning—of both absorbing and being absorbed in—the 'culture of practice.' An extended period of legitimate peripherality provides learners with opportunities to make the culture of practice theirs" (Lave and Wenger 95).

In the military, legitimate peripherality is clear: new recruits go through a highly codified basic training program in which they learn key principles of the military community and their specific branch of the service; as they continue their service and progress up the ranks, performing more complex tasks and supervising others, they learn more about the profession and become more crucial participants. The connection between the military and the CoP framework is gaining recognition in the Armed Forces, albeit mostly on the level of officer training. For example, the Army has developed a Warrior Knowledge Network, which is a web-based forum where leaders can anonymously post questions and share information. Major Peter Kilner writes that "it is not an overstatement to say that COPs have the potential to transform the way the Army does business, helping it to become a knowledge-based learning organization that is even more able to educate and train its leaders, develop its doctrine, and inspire commitment from its

people” (21). Kilner compares the online CoP to “an officers’ call at the club” (21), where members can informally share knowledge. One key advantage Kilner identifies is that the CoP has the potential to provide continuity between leaders who rotate through different jobs, so that a leader in a new position can draw from the knowledge of others who have served in a similar capacity before him or her. He writes that “in a sense, COPs are Armywide continuity files that are living, current, and easily transferable” (22).

Currently, the Air Force is studying the Army’s efforts to determine whether they could be adapted to that branch of the service. As Majors Daniels, Grove, and Mundt point out, “One challenge for the aspiring leader is tapping into the implicit knowledge that already exists within his/her organization and expanding that knowledge for the benefit of all” (53). They argue that differences in Air Force leaders’ implicit knowledge can help explain why some leaders are successful and others aren’t; communities of practice can help provide a dynamic repository for this knowledge, a vast improvement to the “on-the-job training” that Daniels, Grove, and Mundt allege is common practice in the Air Force (52).

The Marines and Navy are experimenting with similar applications of the CoP framework. Stephens argues that “they are not currently mandated through Navy or Marine Corps orders, but an overarching online community of practice should be developed in conjunction with each occupational field and military occupational specialty. With formal online COP usage to supplement training, Marines can refresh content, have discussions, and collaborate as they learn. They will have an authoritative, trustworthy home base in which to participate, regardless of their location” (n. pag.). Similarly, the Naval Undersea Warfare Command’s Captain Dan Looney writes that in the Navy, “The primary focus of CoPs is the maintenance and improvement of core technical disciplines. [...] CoPs are focused internally to

provide a forum for people who practice within the same discipline to enable knowledge sharing, develop networks and establish common tools. The CoP will become a mechanism for improving our processes, reducing the costs to paying customers and sustaining our core capability" (quoted in Atwater, n. pag.).

I was unable to locate research on whether the military is explicitly applying the CoP framework to its enlisted service-members. However, as I noted above, the military induction and training methodology certainly represents a community of practice in which new members legitimately participate on the periphery and gradually become full participants. Military writing serves as a microcosm of the larger military CoP and follows a similar pattern. New participants write little, often only log entries and similar short, highly structured artifacts. As enlisted men and women are promoted, their writing expands, now including evaluations of subordinates, incident reports, memos, and the like. Officers write still more. Most of the writing has a specific format which, as Hadlock notes, serves to make the writing quickly and easily understood by other members of the military community. It is important to point out that all formal military writing—regardless of whether it is a log entry produced by a Seaman, a counseling report produced by a Sergeant, or a memorandum produced by an officer—is an important contribution to the military enterprise. It is not an exercise.

The organizational hierarchy and codified nature of many of the tasks serve to clarify one's position in the community, and through it all, each service-member has a clear-cut job to do. They learn their roles and tasks through formal instruction and mentoring relationships, but also through more informal observation and immersion in the community. For example, one of Hinton's research participants described learning Marine-specific patterns of written discourse by first writing down what his Master Sergeant dictated to him word-for-word until he grew

comfortable with the discourse patterns (“The Military”). Hinton’s central contention is that student veterans are not novice writers; however, her point can and should be expanded. It is true that they are not novice writers, and it is also true that they are experts—just not experts at college. Student veterans, especially those who hold advanced rank, are experts in the military. As a service member is promoted, one of their responsibilities is to or evaluate and supervise subordinates; their expert status is recognized by their superiors (who promoted them) and their subordinates. It is only when they leave the military’s CoP that this expert status becomes less visible and, unfortunately, often ignored.

In addition to communities of practice, another theoretical framework that informs the military’s educational and training practices is adult learning theory, or andragogy, which I described in detail in Chapter Two. As Persyn and Polson write, adult learning theory has both influenced and been affected by the military for many years. Persyn and Polson write that “the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force have all integrated adult learning principles and theory to increase their organizations’ effectiveness and address their learners’ educational needs” (6). They provide examples that span literacy training during the Revolutionary War through modern training in critical thinking and problem-solving. As they note, many of the military’s educational practices explicitly draw from adult learning theory, incorporating self-directed learning, experiential education, and real-life situations.

They point out that a recent educational initiative—the Army Learning Concept for 2015, which I mentioned earlier in this chapter—“seeks to enhance the relevance of what students learn by ensuring that the learning occurs when and where it is of most value to them” (12). This goal connects directly with Knowles’s fourth principle of andragogy, “readiness to learn”: the time to teach a new concept to adults, Knowles argues, is when they themselves sense the need to learn.

Additionally, Persyn and Polson argue that at least since the 1940s the military has known that “successful adult education programs must appeal to the needs and interests of students [...] connect in a meaningful way to other aspects of the students’ lives [...] and must encourage students to feel responsible for their own learning” (13). These goals correspond more or less exactly with Knowles’s first, third, and sixth principles of andragogy.

The military’s use of adult learning theory has been noted by others. Urging military educators to adopt adult-learning principles, Carolyn Saunders argues that “we can implement an andragogical approach that is backed up by solid research that found that self-directed learning is the natural mode for adults, that adult students do possess the characteristics assumed in the andragogical model, and that learning does increase when this model is used” (42). Blaise Cornell-d’Echert, Jr., writes that

If one of the new realities of 21st-century warfare is that everyone must think, preparation should offer military personnel of all ranks opportunity to practice thinking. This is all about problem solving. Too much military training (and doctrine-derived education) seeks to eliminate problems by providing learners with proven solutions to follow. It is efficient to train and test performance of military tasks as a measure of individual skill development. However, the reality of military performance is that military personnel receive and conduct missions. These missions are a series of problems that require solutions. Rarely are these missions a series of orchestrated tasks arranged in a logical sequence for careful monitoring by an outside observer. Fundamentally, military personnel are problem solvers. (21)

Like Saunders, Cornell-d’Echert argues that a strong connection to adult learning theory can help the military prepare its service-members to carry out their tasks and reach their potential as learners and service-members. Similarly, Zacharakis and Van Der Werff emphasize how the conscious incorporation of adult-learning principles can help the military build critical-thinking capabilities in its ranks.

To be sure, much military training, especially for enlisted members, still consists of rote learning and skills practice. However, the connection between adult learning theory and the

military is strong, and the military's growing emphasis on encouraging service-members of all ranks to think critically is clear.

While it is highly doubtful that those of us in the academy mean to ignore student veterans' experience, the scholarship on student veterans highlights the fact that we rarely know much about their experiences and the skills they might bring with them from the military. Instead, we see that they have been out of formal schooling for several years and that they are rusty at academic discourse. However, what we miss is the fact that student veterans are likely to have had extensive experience writing, and that their training included pedagogical methods that could provide a useful foundation for college coursework. This lack of knowledge on our part can lead to a reductive view of student veterans—sometimes, as Hart and Thompson allege, a deficit model—which can complicate an already difficult transition to college.

CHAPTER 5

WRITING AND LEARNING IN COLLEGE

In the last chapter, I explored the military as a learning organization, with a focus on how enlisted service-members used (and learned) writing within it. This chapter turns to the academy, examining how we ask incoming students to learn, act, and write as members of the academic community. Even though the student make-up of college is changing, especially at the community-college level (“Students at Community Colleges”), many of our practices remain grounded in the tacit understanding that entering students are traditional in their age and preparation: the stereotypical eighteen-year-old young adults fresh out of high school. These institutional habits, from how we handle placement and first-day activities to assignments and common pedagogical moves in the writing classroom, can be an uncomfortable fit for many non-traditional students. For veterans, who come from an organization that applies andragogical principles and is a finely tuned community of practice in which each member is expected to contribute significantly to the whole, many standard college (and writing classroom) practices can seem mystifying, pointless, and even insulting.

ENTERING COLLEGE AND THE CLASSROOM

With the exception of Joseph, all of my participants enlisted in the military directly out of high school, making high school their most recent sustained experience with academic writing. All participants in this group served for at least five years, meaning that the gap between high school and college was significant. They remembered their high-school English curriculum as routine and, frequently, dull. Several reported that they were disengaged:

Brian: I didn't particularly like English class. I mean I did OK in English class. I think I was just more annoyed, didn't put that much effort into it. I think most of high school might have been maybe like paragraphs. Like where you just have like a topic with a paragraph and then you list what you're talking about for that paragraph. We didn't really go that much into papers, as far as I remember. I might not have listened that much.
[Laughs]

Most veterans I spoke with reported that they did not do well in high school, and that one reason they enlisted in the military was that it provided a way forward that did not involve going to college. As Mike put it, "I wasn't a good student in high school at all. If I went to college after high school, I would have just wasted my time and money. I wasn't disciplined enough." Alan reported that he did not like high school and didn't perform well academically, and that he enlisted in the Army weeks after graduation. Logan wrote that he joined the Navy in part because he was "seeking adventure." He wrote, "I always knew I was going to go to college eventually. It's part of the reason I joined in the first place. However, I was worried that I wasn't cut out for school. I partly joined to avoid school in the near term." He asserted that his experience was probably common in the military: "In general, a lot of people join the military just because they're not interested in school in the first place."

When veterans do decide that they are interested in school and return to it after their time in the service, their age and common college placement practices complicate that return. Nearly all of the experienced student veterans I interviewed raised the issue of time out of school as a challenge. This is a difficulty experienced not only by veterans, but by many nontraditional adult learners who attend the community college. It is common for such students to feel out of place among the traditional-aged students, or to feel embarrassed that students much younger than them seem to be picking up on course concepts faster. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, community college students' average age is 29 ("Students at Community Colleges"). However, the association also notes that recent years have seen an increase in the

enrollment of traditional-aged students, partially due to rapidly rising tuition costs at four-year institutions. Additionally, more high-school students have begun taking classes at community college, which probably adds to the sense some older students feel that they are behind the curve and need to make up for lost time.

In the case of student veterans, their military experience already sets them apart, and age becomes a compounding factor that can serve to increase their difficulty developing a student identity. When I asked Brian if there were any challenges he thought were specific to veterans, he focused on this issue.

Brian: The only thing would be how much time they spent between high school and when they're going back to college. I've always been a good reader, not the best writer, but I can always read and understand what I'm reading. I guess that helped me to kind of flip it into writing. With the classes, you know, with the instruction in the classes, I can flip it into writing it down. But it's just remembering all the little details of sentence structure, paragraph structure, stuff like that.

Interviewer: 'Cause it had been five years, right? Was it five years?

Brian: Seven and a half.

Interviewer: So no wonder it was hard to remember some of that stuff.

Brian: Yeah, and some people, like, some professors expect that you are going to know that stuff. You don't feel ashamed, but you're just kind of embarrassed to be going to school with kids. Twenty-seven years old and it's, some of them are high schoolers, 17 and 18 year olds that are seniors in high school that are doing good in high school so they get it. And it's kind of a little bit hard to relate. There's mixes in some of my classes where it's like it's all high school, annoying. And then there's other ones where there's 40 or 50 year olds in there, but more often than not predominantly younger people are going to school.

Again, this issue is not necessarily tied to veteran status, but it appeared to be a common concern for my participants. For example, Mike's descriptions of trying to remember what he'd covered in high-school classes closely parallel Brian's:

Mike: [In] English class, she was talking about compound sentences and run-ons, and I had no idea what she was talking about. I mean it's been years since I even heard of a

run-on sentence. And I'm like, you might as well be speaking Chinese to me right now. So there the students have an advantage over me, because if they're coming right out of high school, they know the pre-algebra and the math and the English stuff.

Joseph also spoke in detail about the discomfort many veterans experience entering the college classroom after spending extended time in the military:

Joseph: The older you get, while you're in the military, the larger the social separation when you try to go back to school. So I think there is a definite difference in social groups. It's an at-risk group.

Interviewer: OK, so if I'm hearing you right, what you're saying is it can be difficult for somebody coming out of some years in the military to interact with 18-year-olds, 19-year-olds, more traditional-age college students. Is that right?

Joseph: Yes, yes absolutely. And it's really my experience that the older a person gets in the military, they maybe get a little bit more cynical, or like hardened in their ways. In the military we call them lifers. Somebody that puts in twenty years, then retires and goes back to community college, that person has a pretty solidified understanding of how the world works. And so switching into a new college or new environment like that can be really difficult for the learning. It can also be difficult for social interaction, I think.

He elaborated on these topics in his survey: "My largest concern in returning to college was being older than most of the students and a fear of assimilation issues. Things like group work were sometimes a social nightmare because it meant working with people who often wonder why your career track is starting later at college, which generates a hurdle that has to be overcome in most situations before a person can feel comfortable with you."

Although Logan ended up having a good experience in his first-semester writing courses, he found the placement system frustrating. At the time, Logan had to write a sample essay that was scored by computer, and he was placed into a pre-college writing course simultaneously with First-Year Composition. The pre-college course, English 095, was a three-credit course designed to help students succeed at the work in the three-credit FYC course, English 111. Logan considered himself a strong writer who just needed to brush up on his academic writing skills.

Logan: I took the entry test, which I wasn't happy with. A computer graded it. 'Cause I feel like I was a pretty strong writer, but when I got there, I felt stupid. And I wrote...I think it was too short is what it was in the end. And I wrote with a lot of jokes. It was a bunch of jokes in there and I don't think the computer got it.... Once you fed it into the machine, it spit it out and says "Go to 095." I was like, "Oh man, that's not cool." So I went to that, but then being there, it was my first semester back out of twelve years with the military. And it felt like, I was a little embarrassed to be in 095, but it was a great transition 'cause I'd been a decade out of high school. I feel like if I'd gone straight out of high school, I could have skipped 095, but it was important that I had the extra help. And I thought it was pretty adequate.

As we continued to talk, it became apparent that a key part of the experience that bothered Logan was that he felt like no one really understood his experience or took it into account when they placed him in his classes.

Logan: OK, a lot of us didn't take the ACT or the SAT. A lot of us didn't take any college entrance exams. So when I got here, I had to take that little mini exam. And like I said, when I was done with that and I handed it in and she just fed it into that computer...I mean I understand it grading the math, I understand it grading that kind of stuff. But when it came to that paragraph I wrote, that was a short paragraph. I would have liked it if somebody had read it. I would have liked it if there was more of a personal touch to it. And I know that might be hard with every person. I was upset being put in 95, but in the end I did like being there. I think with people coming out of the military, [the college should provide] more of a transition with maybe being able to sit down with somebody and have them talk about, "This is how you wrote. And we understand that you had this huge break in your education when you were serving. And we feel that 095 would be a good fit for you."

Some schools have created robust offices to provide the sort of individualized advice and placement Logan hoped for. Depending on the size of the school, it might be difficult to have placement essays hand-read (as Logan noted). Certainly, though, schools and faculty need to do a better job being sensitive to veterans' experiences, both in the classroom and in the advising office.

Logan's placement experience highlights the fact that despite the genuine desire of many educators to humanize higher-education, it can often operate like a machine. Especially in their general-education curriculum, students can feel as though their individual identities are

homogenized into that of a uniform “first-year college student.” This can be alienating for any entering student, but for incoming student veterans, it can be particularly painful. For example, Alan had to take a First-Year Experience course because, like Logan, he placed into pre-college writing. Much of the course centered on personal discovery and encouraged students to take responsibility for themselves and their life outcomes. While it could be argued that this curriculum is useful for a traditional college student, Alan found it insulting.

Alan had entered college just months after leading troops in combat; he felt that if he hadn’t learned personal responsibility over there, he certainly wasn’t going to learn it in a classroom. A crucial element of the course was journaling, and many of the journal topics asked students to examine their choices and attitudes. Sometimes journal responses were discussed in class. Alan did not want to write about his experiences overseas, and he felt like the teacher and other students would not understand his experiences. He also was concerned that he would fall into a “crazy veteran” stereotype and told me that he has had difficulties with substance abuse and has sought counseling after returning home. None of these were issues he wanted to write about in class, and so he made his journals superficial. However, his teacher told him that he needed to “buy into the class” more or he would receive a poor grade. This exacerbated Alan’s frustration. He told me that he decided to “play the game,” and developed his journals enough to pass the class. Yet he remains angry about the experience.

In public speaking, another class he took during his first year, Alan’s instructor stopped him in the middle of his first speech and corrected his pronunciation of “Iraq.” Again, the course relied heavily on students’ personal experiences as subject matter, an area Alan would have preferred not to discuss. This first speech was grounded in his experiences overseas, and when his instructor corrected his pronunciation and then continued to critique him in front of the class,

Alan felt humiliated and enraged. As he told me, he had just come from Iraq and was pronouncing the country the way its citizens did; the instructor had never been to the country. That night, Alan wrote the instructor an e-mail telling him that he had been hurt and offended by the instructor's critique and that Alan had been speaking from first-hand experience. The next class, the instructor pulled Alan out to the hallway and suggested that Alan needed mental help. Again, Alan successfully mastered his emotions and passed the class, but the memory still inspires hurt and anger.

Joseph also had a frustrating time in his communication class, one of the first courses he took at NCMC. He had served for several years in the Army and was transitioning to the reserves, and had come home to help his mother, who had recently been diagnosed with cancer. On the first day of class, the instructor had students stand in a circle and throw a ball back and forth, telling things about themselves and practicing names. Joseph was turned off by this activity; it seemed inane to him, especially considering the seriousness of what he had done in the Army. The instructor, probably sensing his reservations, began to "pick on" him and accused him of not fully participating in the activity, or thinking he was too good for it. Joseph dropped the course immediately after that class session.

As I detailed in the previous chapter, student veterans come from a community in which they have expert status. Yet many of the practices that are routine—whether we are talking about placement and advising or icebreakers—force students into novice roles. This can be galling for many students, but it is especially difficult for student veterans to accept. Many have been leaders themselves and have held weighty responsibilities during their time in the military. While they know they are not skilled academics, they hold a strong (and understandable) desire to have their maturity and experience count for something in college. Additionally, they may be strong

readers and writers—just not in the genres we test for in placement exams. When colleges do not recognize this, they run the risk of complicating student veterans' transitions to college and, ultimately, their success in higher education.

FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT VETERANS

Of course, the veterans themselves are only part of the equation when it comes to transitioning to college writing. There are also the teachers with whom they will be working. In my survey of writing faculty, fifteen out of sixteen faculty respondents indicated that they had knowingly taught student veterans. The one respondent who indicated that she or he had not taught veterans is probably in error: having taught college writing for twelve years, it is very likely that the faculty member actually did teach veterans, but that they chose not to self-disclose.

Those faculty who knowingly had experience teaching veterans expressed an overwhelmingly positive impression of them. They elaborated in ways that underscored the need to treat student veterans as individuals rather than succumb to a stereotype: as the faculty recounted their impressions, it became clear that the experiences they had had with veterans could not be unified into a simple pattern. This resonates with Valentino's cautions against stereotyping veterans. Despite the heterogeneity of the faculty's experiences, three main themes presented themselves, which I detail below. However, it is important to note that none of these themes represented the responses of more than half of the survey participants, a finding that illustrates the variety of perceptions of veterans held by faculty.

Motivated and Organized

Seven faculty characterized the veterans they had worked with as highly organized and more willing to work hard than the general student population. One teacher wrote that “student veterans are [...] generally more organized and often more advanced in their writing skills. [Their] topic selections appear more serious.” Another wrote that “they are highly motivated. Of the veterans I have or have had in class recently, all have been conscientious students—at whatever skill level they are at.” Yet another faculty member wrote that “veterans are punctual, prepared, and present (attentive) in class. They bring a dedicated discipline and personal responsibility to the classroom.”

Two faculty members also wrote that they felt a need to be more organized in their presentation of assignments and feedback with veterans in the class. One wrote that “they like to have clear-cut guidelines before beginning an assignment. They also like to get feedback on their writing so they can improve.” Another wrote that “I knew I had to be writing on task, highly organized, and give very specific instructions, which yielded concrete, measurable results.” Several faculty members indicated that they drew from their experience with family members who had been in the military to form their impressions of student veterans and decide how to interact with them.

Mature

The second most frequently identified perception of student veterans was that they were more mature than the general student body. Five faculty indicated this. “The veterans are grounded and insightful and eager to learn,” one respondent wrote. “Their respect and maturity helps with the overall tone/atmosphere in the class.” Another wrote that “they are more mature

and appreciative (or maybe just older, and therefore more mature).” Another respondent highlighted the potential for adult learners’ experiences to both help and hinder them in higher education: “They are older, so sometimes more mature with a better work ethic. Sometimes, however, they are ‘needy’ because of previous experiences.” Unfortunately, this respondent did not elaborate on what this neediness might look like.

Emotionally Fragile

Four respondents focused on the emotional health of student veterans. One faculty member wrote, “Overall, my observation of student veterans is that they are working with varying degrees of psychological challenges. Most are respectful and quiet, but have a defensiveness under a thin veneer.” Another wrote that he or she avoided writing assignments that asked students to probe too deeply into areas that might prove traumatic for veterans. One faculty member described student veterans as “like any other student with potentially traumatic experiences. [...] Writing can be a vent or a Pandora’s box, depending on the severity of an individual’s experience. Some have PTSD—some have treatment, some not. This is also true of others in the student body.” Another respondent, also making a connection between the potential for trauma in student veterans and that of other students, wrote that “I wish they could be seen as the great students they are, not shell-shocked. They all don’t have PTSD, but some do. And very few faculty know how to deal with PTSD.”

Although faculty generally had a positive perception of student veterans, in terms of specifics, they were all over the proverbial map. This should serve as a strong caution to anyone, however well meaning, who tries to develop a model to better serve veterans. While some clear threads run through the community, we need to remember that they are a diverse group, and a

“one-size-fits-all” approach will not only be ineffective, but runs the risk of alienating some veterans.

A good example is PTSD. While it is viewed as one of the hallmark injuries of the Iraq/Afghanistan conflict (Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones, and Sulak; Wheeler), not all veterans will suffer from it. In my interview group, only one veteran self-identified as a sufferer (although other veterans I have taught have self-disclosed similar difficulties). Thus, if we limit our approach to incorporating, for example, therapeutic writing such as that advocated by Pennebaker, we may be leaving out a significant number of student veterans.

On the other hand, the maturity and organization reported by the faculty seem to mesh tightly with the self-concept of the students I interviewed. As I discussed earlier in the chapter, placement systems and first-year curricula and activities tended to frustrate the veterans I spoke with, sometimes to the point of insult. Although they may need to brush up on their school skills, student veterans are not typical first-year students. This especially holds true for those who actively served and were called upon to be responsible for themselves and others, sometimes in life-or-death situations. Although maturity and organization are traits that may not be shared by all student veterans, they are traits that are highly encouraged in the military. Veterans who were successful in their military service are not only more likely to have such attitudes and skills, they are likely to also recognize the fact that they have them.

VETERANS AND COLLEGE WRITING

Once veterans enter a college writing class, of course, they have to write. I was especially interested in what patterns might reveal themselves if I looked at the writing requirements of my own college, and on my faculty survey, I asked writing teachers to tell me what they thought was

important in college writing. The participants in the survey had a range of experience teaching college writing, ranging from thirty-nine years to just one year. On average, though, they were an experienced group: nine had taught college writing for ten or more years, and another three had taught for five or more years. In other words, 75% of my respondents had been teaching college writing for five or more years. Looking at these numbers from a community-of-practice standpoint, I would argue that someone who has taught college writing for five or more years should be viewed as experienced in the genre. This argument is bolstered by the rather obvious point that the degrees held by these faculty—they are required to hold at least a Master's in English or a related field—signify that they have been successful college writers themselves. Partially because of its geographical isolation, NCMC has a relatively low turn-over of even part-time faculty, meaning that most of the faculty survey participants have taught for a number of years at NCMC, which implies (although does not guarantee) that they have a sense of the particular “academic dialect” of that institution as well as an understanding of college writing in general.

When I analyzed the survey responses, several clear patterns emerged, which I have listed below in order of frequency. Perhaps surprisingly, many of these mesh well with military writing. Others show that the two communities indeed value some different things in written communication.

Concise and Clear

Eleven faculty respondents argued that a key feature of academic writing is concision, a characteristic also valued by the military. It is likely that the mental picture college faculty have of a concise piece of writing is actually much more developed than what would be counted as

“concise” in the military; however, this response demonstrates that the two learning environments share a key emphasis. Following is a sampling of faculty responses:

- “Concise—waste not the reader’s time.”
- “Filter—economy of writing is essential as our society becomes more rapidly paced. The art of good writing is anchored in thrift.”
- “Clarity—so that the message is conveyed as intended. Organization and effective sentence structure: how to achieve clarity.”
- “Clarity—direct sentences that convey meaning without becoming tangled in an idea about what writing is supposed to be.”

Highly Organized

The second most common characteristic of good academic writing cited by the survey participants was organization—again, a quality that is also valued in military writing. In particular, one respondent noted that “we rely on similarity of form in order to integrate intellectual data quickly.” This is almost an exact match with Hadlock’s contention that the strict genre conventions for military writing were necessary to facilitate the rapid comprehension of information and subsequent action. Nine faculty highlighted organization as a key quality of academic writing. Some of their comments are as follows:

- “On point—purpose and unity to purpose are essential to engagement.”
- “Good quality academic writing contains a strong organizing thesis [...] and a conclusion which circles back to the beginning, giving the reader a sense of expansion, completion, and a way to go forth to explore further.”
- “Organization—be a good host!”

- “Logical flow of ideas. Effective sentence and paragraph structure.”

Strongly Supported

Seven faculty indicated that one of the key components of good academic writing was effective support. Some faculty addressed this in terms of detail and examples; others specifically indicated that academic writing should include research. Some example comments appear below:

- “Supporting details that back up major points—these are important because it explains ideas and research completely.”
- “Detailed examples. Why? To make a piece informative—easier readability—and interesting.”
- “A premise with good research and written evidence to support the contention.”
- “The prose voice is trenchant and commanding with an authority based on descriptive, personal experience and good, solid references.”
- “Ability to incorporate research into essays.”

Error Free

Seven of the faculty also identified grammar and mechanics as central to good academic writing. The term “error” was frequently used, as I mentioned above; however, most faculty respondents also contextualized their discussion of the need for proofreading in terms of audience, noting that readers often are distracted by non-standard usage or form negative opinions of writers based on their grammatical fluency. Below, I provide a sampling of comments:

- “Fluid and error free—distractions prevent readers from caring or hearing the message.”
- “Because of my participation in the National Writing Project, I have spent less time focusing on the mechanics of writing—grammar, sentence structure, and style—during first drafts and emphasizing organizing one’s thoughts. [...However,] roadblocks, such as poor grammar, misspellings, weak sentence structure and organization must be eliminated by the final draft. Otherwise, the audience will never understand the message being delivered to them.”
- “Punctuation and grammar—for community college students in particular. Too many CC students are viewed as not being smart enough to attend a four-year college—knowing how to use ‘proper’ grammar, etc., keeps them from being labeled negatively (reflects professionalism).”
- “Proofreading—this is how they are and will be judged.”

I think it is important to note again how well these four qualities mesh with what we know about military writing, especially for enlisted soldiers, sailors, and airmen. For example, as I noted in the previous chapter, once enlisted service-people are promoted into supervisory positions, they commonly write evaluations of subordinates. These written documents are supposed to be concise, organized, and error free; additionally, the evaluations need to be supported by clear and relevant details. The situations are different, as are the purposes for the writing and stakes associated with the different pieces. However, it is possible to see how writing faculty could help student veterans use their experience with military writing as a starting point for understanding how to succeed at college writing.

As I discussed earlier, the veterans I spoke with described the writing they did in the military as very constrained and formulaic. It makes sense, then, that several would describe the

process of learning to think and write in a more “open” way as difficult. Much of college writing requires students to dig deeper into issues and expand upon their thinking more than they might be used to; I remember that the *Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing*, a textbook I used early in my college teaching career, called it “wallowing in complexity.” The book I currently use, the *Norton Field Guide to Writing*, includes a section called “Writing in Academic Contexts” in which the authors argue that effective academic writing provides evidence that the student has carefully considered the subject and responses to multiple perspectives. *On Course*, the textbook for the first-year experience course that so frustrated Alan, instructs students to “dive deep” when writing their journals: “When you think you have exhausted a topic, write more. Your most valuable thoughts will often take the longest to surface” (5).

These admonitions likely strike those of us who are accustomed to the academic environment as integral to the college experience, which is, after all, focused on examining topics and phenomena in great depth. Most of us probably enjoy that process; it is probably among the key things that drew us to work in academia. However, we would do well to consider how strongly they deviate from the genre conventions of the writing students report doing in the military, where brevity and directness were valued and elaboration—even about soldiers’ courage under fire, as in Alan’s case—was strongly discouraged. Joseph discussed these differences in his interview:

Joseph: I think the biggest thing that I notice is there’s a certain amount of free thought and maybe just kind of in general you’re expected to expound on ideas [in college writing], when maybe in the military you don’t necessarily free associate with your objective as much. You’re essentially just trying to write in an active way to get your objective accomplished or to communicate amongst yourselves, which is important in, for example, an internal communications like a newsletter or something. It’s pretty basic. There’s no Op Ed section, or if there is, it’s pretty stripped down. And you’re not writing fluffy pieces about feelings or new ideas or “what do you think about this?” You’re not critical about things. That doesn’t translate necessarily to the academic world in the greatest way. I could see how it would be difficult to force that creativity immediately

when you first came into a community college. And I think, you know, I'd had that background before, but definitely I could see that being a problem for other vets.

Logan also indicated that the transition to a more creative, elaborate way of thinking and writing had been difficult for him:

Logan: I think a lot of us [veterans] have been told how to do things specifically. I know that doesn't sound like there's much room for creativity, but within the military people can get creative when they're told, "You do it this way." And then they can figure out how to be creative within a little box. I find it harder...I'm taking a [humanities class], a big freewheeling class. Pretty much, "Do a special project at the end of the semester and impress us." And sometimes it's harder for me now to be creative, when it's like you can do whatever you want overall. It's like if you give me a box, I'll figure out how to make a box really interesting.

Not all of the experienced veterans I spoke with brought up this difficulty. However, it came up in my pilot interviews as well, and it seems clear that many veterans would find the academic community's emphasis on creativity, argumentation, and elaboration an abrupt change from the military's writing environment. As I pointed out in the last chapter, some of the writing and discussion activities that are common in training can lay a good base for new student veterans to build upon; however, we do not support their knowledge transfer as well as we might.

PEER INTERACTIONS

One extremely common pedagogical approach in college writing classes is collaborative learning. Tied to social-constructivist and liberatory theories, much current practice and scholarship can trace its history back to Kenneth Bruffee's work defining the rationale for and potential of student collaboration. Part of Bruffee's argument is that "writing of all kinds is internalized social talk made public and social again" (641), and so writing teachers should encourage students to talk about writing and reading "at as many points in both the writing and the reading process as possible" (642). As Bruffee points out, "collaborative learning also

provides a particular kind of social context for conversation, a particular kind of community—a community of status equals: peers” (642). This idea that students are equal peers runs throughout contemporary scholarship, and has been engrained in much of the terminology used to describe collaborative practices (e.g., peer response, peer tutoring, peer critique). Most of us in writing studies agree that empowering students is a good thing; however, the hierarchy presented in most collaborative learning and liberatory scholarship is collapsed to two levels: teacher and student. This is not an accurate representation of the classroom, especially when we consider where student veterans fit into it.

As I noted above, a key understanding of collaborative learning is that the students are equals; however, veterans may not see other students as equal to themselves. As Brian said, non-veteran students “don’t really necessarily understand the big world and the big picture, you know. I understand how the world works and have a grip on what’s appropriate to say or not in front of different people or different groups of people, whereas they might not.” Alan spoke of censoring his writing topics and conversations with non-veteran students for fear that they might not understand or that they might stereotype him as a “crazy vet.” Joseph talked about the difficulties of collaborative writing and how his age and military experience made it hard for him to find common ground with non-military students. These comments should serve to complicate our understanding of student group dynamics and collaborative learning. None of the veterans I spoke with characterized themselves as *better* than students who had not served in the military; however, they all saw themselves as *different*—older, more worldly, better able to judge what’s important, and more willing to follow through on commitments.

All of the veterans I interviewed spoke specifically about the difficulty they had connecting with their non-military peers. For example, in his interview, Alan told me that he

continues to experience social isolation from non-military students. He told me he sometimes self-censored the topics he wrote about because his essays were read by non-military peers, and he was concerned about whether they would understand the military-oriented pieces he wanted to write. He was also concerned that if he was honest in his writing, non-military students might judge him harshly out of misunderstanding. On the positive side, he told me he had an excellent experience in a creative writing class in which “the door was closed” and what was written about was guaranteed to stay in the room. He said that other students were sharing personal and disturbing experiences, and he finally felt like he could “get real” with his writing. His experience in that course led to his participation (on scholarship) in a summer creative-writing conference sponsored by the University of Michigan, where he worked with nationally known authors on his non-fiction. Despite these positive experiences, Alan identified a tendency to feel isolated from non-military peers as veterans’ key challenge upon transitioning to college.

Derek spoke at length about the lack of a team mentality at most colleges, and how different this was from the military.

Derek: I think probably one of the hardest things I experienced when I first got out, this was '05 when there weren't a whole lot of us yet really flooding into college, there was really no sense of team in the coursework. There was a couple of classes where I kind of really clicked with a couple of my classmates. We formed study groups and that. But when you come onto campus, like it's all, like it's number one first. There is no real sense of making sure that your colleagues make it through. It's all about making sure you make it through.

If [veterans] say they're going to show up, like, “Hey, the three of us will meet up for a study group this afternoon,” they'll show up. And that doesn't sound like a big deal, but getting certain people to show up for a study group and everybody actually showing up is a big deal. I don't know how many times with me, like endlessly with my classmates saying, “OK, I'll meet you at 2:00,” and we've got a final the next day. We're counting on each other to get through this stuff together, and they don't show up. And it's not two hours later, it's not three hours later, it's 11:00 that night you hear from them, “Hey, sorry I couldn't make it earlier.” And you're kind of like, “You know what, man? You screwed me.” But you don't say that, so you just swallow it down, and like, all right, that's one more, one more, one more commitment not followed through on.

Joseph explored similar territory in his interview.

Joseph: You know, college writing is kind of an interesting thing in general. One of the things I think was the most difficult personally was, and this may have been a personal social issue, but it may have also been somewhat of a military issue. You do a lot of group activities in college, and you're expected to kind of openly criticize each other, and then also kind of come together for a resolution or a project like that. And while the military really requires you to do that sort of thing, a lot of times, you're basically working on your own and then bringing it back to the group. You're not necessarily collectively doing things, you're not writing the thing together. And I think one of the biggest things, especially when you're trying to learn how to write in a group, is trying to find some type of mutual ground with your peers. And so that to me was one of the most intimidating parts: when you workshop something at the community college or at the university, and I was going to be four or five years older than everybody else. And I have a different set of experiences and at the same time you're trying to find those common grounds on what you're writing and not bruise each other while you're trying to come to a consensus.

In his interview, Logan talked about the irritation he felt at some non-military students who seemed focused on trivial things, and the difficulty he had reconciling that triviality with his knowledge that his military brethren were currently risking their lives.

Logan: Once in a while I get a little aggravated. I remember I fell behind in my math homework, and I was in the library just plugging away. And these two were behind me sitting there. And she was talking—loudly, so I had to hear it—talking about one of the judges on *The Voice*, and how she wanted to be [like the judge]. She's going to write her own music, she's going to be famous and how she admires her, I think it was maybe Christina Aguilera, I don't know, admires that she has this perspective on things. And admires the clothes she wears. And I was just, I was getting frustrated, because it was just like, it was such nonsense. I don't want to badmouth somebody's hobbies or what they like. I'm sure she likes watching *The Voice*. But I couldn't believe how upset I was getting about how stupid the whole conversation was. They went on for an hour about this. And like I said I didn't have a very intense military career, I had a very enjoyable, fun time out there, you know. But I'm just thinking of all the people out there who are risking their lives and stuff so people can be sitting around talking about Christina Aguilera until the ends of the earth, the types of pants she's wearing. It was a little aggravating. And I've had a few more instances like that, but that one specifically stuck in my head.

Although Brian characterized his difficulty relating to traditional college students as centering primarily on age (see above), it is worth noting that he, too, identified peer interaction as difficult. As he said, "It's kind of a little bit hard to relate. [But] I have a lot of patience with

people. So I understand that they don't really necessarily understand the big world and the big picture, you know. I understand how the world works and have a grip on what's appropriate to say or not in front of different people or different groups of people, whereas they might not."

Mike noted that the level of responsibility and preparedness he felt as a college student differed from what he noticed in more traditional-aged students:

Mike: It's pretty challenging for me, I guess, because I'm sitting next to these young adults that are 18, 19, 20 years old or whatever. So it's quite an age range. I guess like some of them... I think it's just the level of responsibility or maturity. A lot of times, you know, like the assignments are due at a certain time. And like one day this girl came to class and she was like, "Hey I don't have a pen or a pencil." She was asking the teacher if she could borrow one. And it just kind of frustrated me. I was like, "What are you even doing here?"

Derek also spoke to the difficulties veterans can experience connecting with peers at higher-tier schools. Again, Derek transferred from NCMC to the University of Michigan, and in his work with the Student Veterans' Association, he interacts with a large number of veterans at all levels of institutions. In addition to a difference between military and non-military experience, he tied this dissonance to socioeconomic:

Derek: The number one challenge is the social transition, 'cause at a lot of schools, top flight and mid-tier schools and the like, they feel like, "I don't fit in here, I don't feel like I belong here." I've heard a couple of times from the vets [at top-tier schools] that they just don't feel like they belong. And it has less to do with their abilities to keep up with the academic rigor. It's all to do with their classmates whose parents are ambassadors and CEOs. And it's kind of rubbed in their faces. There's a lot of that sort of background of being first-generation college students in many cases with blue-collar backgrounds. And a lot of them are kind of for the first time breaking their family into professional types of roles. And so they have a difficult time with transition because of the social component and then also they have lack of understanding of what opportunities are available to them.

While this particular dissonance may be less pronounced at the community-college level due to the greater presence of other students from working-class backgrounds, Derek's point remains worth considering, and the experiences of my interview participants connect strongly with current scholarship.

For example, Wheeler found that veterans may express annoyance at the behaviors of non-veteran peers who do not seem to approach college with the same level of attention and respect as they do. Reasons for this frustration vary: some veterans find their peers ignorant about war and military experiences, while others find the preoccupations of the average college student to be immature, as is exemplified by Logan's frustration with a student's fascination with a TV program (quoted earlier). As Wheeler writes, "The very real differences between a student fresh out of high school and a veteran who served between four and nine years, likely in direct combat, are vast and often problematic for the soldier turned student" (784). They may feel that their civilian peers do not understand their experience, a feeling often confirmed by insensitive questions and comments (Persky and Oliver; Wheeler).

The transition from the military to academic lifestyle is a major one that can be extremely disruptive (Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, and Harris), and veterans can "feel disoriented and suffer losses of identity and work-related friendships [...or feel] deeply alienated from the rest of America" (Lighthall 81). Facilitating ample opportunities to connect with other student veterans appears to be one key way to address these issues and is recommended by a number of researchers (Rumann, Rivera, and Hernandez; Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, and Harris; Wheeler). Common college responses to such research are to create veterans' lounges and sponsor student-veteran associations (*From Soldier to Student II*). However, these interventions do not address challenges within the classroom, where there may be only one or two veterans in a class of 25.

"LEARNING SHOCK" AND THEORETICAL DIFFERENCES

As I noted in the previous chapter, the military can be seen as a community of practice, and, in fact, the military uses the CoP framework to guide many of its training approaches. It also

relies heavily on andragogical principles, which entail a different theoretical approach than do pedagogical principles. One of the reasons student veterans may have a difficult transition to college is because the CoP framework does not work well in undergraduate education and andragogical principles are imperfectly understood and applied in higher education. Certainly, the culture of the military and academy differ, and this can lead to a sort of culture shock for transitioning student veterans. However, they can experience an equally profound shock as they transition from one learning environment to another. In a conversation about this transition, Louise Wetherbee Phelps termed this “learning shock,” a phrase I think encapsulates the disorientation student veterans can experience as they enter college.

As with culture shock, learning shock implies a past experience that is disconnected with the present and, at times, at cross-purposes with it. Frequently, higher-education seems to treat student veterans as though they come from a vacuum as far as learning is concerned—as though the time they spent between high school and college was a caesura during which learning did not happen. As should be evident from the previous chapter, nothing is further from the truth. Success in the military is predicated on an aptitude for learning; however, the learning community and the theoretical underpinnings of the military differ from those that tend to be valued in academia. When student veterans transition poorly from one learning environment to the other, their difficulties should be viewed not in terms of lack, but of disconnect: they do not lack ability or experience learning new skills and information, but the way they are accustomed to do so may not connect well with college.

For example, research on communities of practice in undergraduate education is thin. A rich body of work exists that focuses on supporting communities of practice among faculty and graduate students within disciplines—logical, since those individuals are already members of a

clearly defined disciplinary community with similar interests and goals. (For some examples, see Fox on early-career academics; Crede, Borrego, and McNair on engineering grads; or Valentine on English graduate students in the writing center.) However, research on even advanced undergraduates is sparse. Commonly, scholars who have tackled this issue focus on some sort of capstone project undertaken by juniors or seniors that is specifically designed to prepare them for their disciplinary workplace—for example, a major senior project in an architectural design studio (Morton), a final-year group project meant to simulate an information-technology consultancy (Fearon, McLaughlin, and Eng), or a senior capstone design project in an engineering school in which the students develop and test an actual product (Dannels).

The effectiveness of these communities of practice appears to be mixed. The most common challenge reported is that the students perceive the CoPs as artificial, more closely tied to school than to their disciplines or eventual workplaces. As Dannels writes, “The academic audience emerged as the central audience [. . .and students] focused on academic persons as their most central customers” (22). The scholars I cite above do not argue that the CoP framework will not work in school—on the contrary, all provide suggestions for how to fine-tune the projects to better mesh with the professional world. However, it seems reasonable to extrapolate that if students who are on the verge of graduation have difficulty seeing their schoolwork as directly tied to their disciplinary community of practice, this difficulty would be even more pronounced among students at the beginning of their college careers.

An option is to look at higher education as its own CoP. After all, there are accepted practices, ways of approaching problems, and ways of writing that tend to be valued across many college courses, especially the general-education classes that students would take upon entering school. Incoming student veterans could be seen as legitimate peripheral participants in higher

education (and, specifically, college writing practices)—the CoP framework could then be used to describe their progression to full participants. O’Donnell and Tobbell, who studied adult learners in a British university, try to make this connection between communities of practice and undergraduate education. They write that “success in an education system can be thought of as full participation—that is, individuals adopt and perform the valued practices of that community and in so doing contribute their own experience and modify practice and shift values” (315). As O’Donnell and Tobbell found, this process is difficult, all the more for adult learners.

It is not just that such learners come from diverse backgrounds and have a varied set of educational and social histories; it is also because entry into a CoP by necessity involves a shift in identity. Many of O’Donnell and Tobbell’s participants noted that “their age made them feel different from other students” (325), a perception shared by the student veterans I interviewed. Also, O’Donnell and Tobbell’s participants were in a special transitional program for adult learners—a kind of “catch-up” curriculum—which exacerbated their feelings of otherness. This is another potential parallel to student veterans, who often place into developmental (pre-college) writing courses due to a combination of their time away from formal school and their frequently less-than-stellar high-school performance. (In my sample, three of the six veterans I spoke with placed into developmental writing.) O’Donnell and Tobbell argue that colleges and universities need to bring students into the legitimate periphery of college—especially culturally—engaging students in appropriate courses that ask them to learn and apply the effective and accepted practices of college students.

However, the conspicuous lack of research into communities of practice in undergraduate education suggests that the framework might not really apply. Indeed, Lave and Wenger intentionally steered clear of a focus on schooling in their foundational text. They write that

schooling and the CoP framework are not necessarily incompatible, but that the learning that is expected to happen in school is often too generalized and abstract to mesh well with their theory of learning. As I noted in the previous chapter, Lave and Wenger view learning as highly situated and occurring in a specific context; while they acknowledge that learning happens in schools, they raise questions about the connections between schools and the communities that originate the knowledge/practices that schools purport to teach. In other words, their concerns are similar to those of current scholars who critique our ability to teach academic discourse in writing classes: if discourses are situated, we can only teach an approximation of them when we remove them from their disciplinary context.

Another problem with applying the CoP framework to undergraduate education is that entering students do not want to become full members of the academic community—unless, of course, their career goals are to become academics themselves. The student veterans I interviewed had a variety of career goals, including law enforcement, business, and journalism. Their time in college, while important, was transitory: their goals were centered on becoming prepared to do their eventual jobs. This contrasts sharply with their goals in entering the military. All of the student veterans I interviewed joined the service because they wanted to be service-members. They may have had other goals, such as supporting their family or paying for an eventual college education, but they all viewed the military as a community they wanted to join. This is likely similar to most other student veterans. In terms of the CoP framework, they were motivated to become full participants in the military. While they want to do well in school, it is not because they want to become full participants in the academic CoP, but because doing well in school is a means to an end: landing a career.

In sum, the community-of-practice framework is a powerful tool for understanding how learners acquire the knowledge and practices of a community. However, as the above research demonstrates, the framework is difficult to apply to undergraduate education. This is in sharp contrast from the military, which, as I noted in the preceding chapter, contains branches of service that have relatively stable ranks, practices, and training methods, many of which draw explicitly from the CoP framework. The military also has induction practices to introduce new recruits to the CoP in an intense, structured way that we do not approach with standard student placement and orientation programs. Student veterans who transition directly from the military to college likely find the more diffuse, implied structure of the academic community difficult to grasp—not because they are poor learners, but because the way they are expected to learn and act in college is so different from the military community.

Additionally, as I noted in the last chapter, the military embraces andragogical principles. It is cognizant of the fact that it is teaching and training adult learners. However, few college courses are really designed with adult learners in mind. Instead, they are structured to teach traditional-age students who are characterized (sometimes implicitly) as novices—not only to the subject matter, but to learning. This characterization is obviously erroneous when applied to veterans, who have a great amount of experience learning as adults. But it also diminishes adult students who come from non-military backgrounds. While many adult students—by which I mean students of non-traditional ages and educational trajectories who have had a gap between their high-school and college careers—succeed in spite of this, several studies have identified them as an at-risk population. Difficulties range from affective and cognitive issues to relatively mundane problems with scheduling and institutional organization. In a review of recent literature, McGivney notes that it is usually a combination of such challenges that lead to adult

students choosing not to complete a degree. While many of the reasons adult learners give for non-completion are the same as those given by traditional students, McGivney provides a list of challenges that appear particularly significant for adult learners, including lack of family or partner support, financial problems, difficulties managing study time, and inadequate orientation and advising programs.

Two challenges McGivney raises that seem particularly applicable to the student-veteran population are difficulties integrating into college life and institutional practices that do not acknowledge their experience and outside pressures. In regard to the former, McGivney writes that “a large portion of mature students study at institutions within relatively easy distance of their homes. On the one hand, this means that they remain within their existing social and family networks; on the other hand, it means that they form weaker ties with the life of the education institution and have less interaction with the student community” (41). This pattern is true of the community college student population in general, which is characterized by commuter students. However, as I discuss below, student veterans as a group report difficulties connecting with non-veteran peers; this difficulty may be intensified by the transitory nature of many student veterans’ presence on community college campuses.

Secondly, McGivney writes that “some mature students feel alienated when their existing skills and experience are not taken into account or when their outside commitments are ignored” (41). This resonates with Knowles’s injunctions to base andragogical course design around students’ experiences and felt needs, and his cautions that if this is not done, we run the risk of causing students to feel rejected. McGivney relates the story of a mature student who was frustrated that lectures and courses were rescheduled without notice, and the student’s interpretation that this indicated a disrespect for her time and commitments. According to

McGivney, “Such practices can cause resentment and disillusionment and precipitate early withdrawal” (41). Similar findings are reported by Murtaugh, Burns, and Schuster, who note that their study revealed that retention rates inversely correlated with age, and that the university under study “may not have offered relevant courses at the times and places that are most convenient for older students” (368).

The wording of this finding might cause some readers to bristle and argue that “convenience” should not be a requirement for college classes; however, such arguments fail to take into account the very real pressures experienced by many mature students, including childcare and the need to retain one (or more) jobs to pay adult-sized bills. As Michelle Navarre Cleary writes, “Given their investment in returning to school, adults usually want to make the most of the experience. However, they expect teachers to understand that bosses sometimes demand overtime and that children get sick” (“What WPAs Need to Know,” 122). Libby Bay also found that over 70% of the adult learners in her study reported that their greatest difficulty with school was finding time to do the work (308). Student veterans can have even more time pressures, as many retain some sort of affiliation with the military (such as the Reserves or the National Guard) and are required to attend regular training sessions.

McGivney’s point connects even more strongly with the dissatisfaction with standard placement and first-year curriculum practices I explored earlier in this chapter. Logan expressed frustration that he was placed into developmental writing by a computer that, he felt, did not adequately understand his writer’s voice. Alan was enraged when his teacher corrected his pronunciation of “Iraq” and lectured him on the errors of Alan’s portrayal of the country, even though Alan had returned from Iraq less than six months prior to the class. Joseph dropped his communication class because he felt that the first-day activity was juvenile and that the instructor

heckled him for not adequately buying into it. Although all of these students continued with their education, they also felt the resentment described by McGivney. Knowles argues that for adult learners, “experience is who they are. The implication of this fact for adult education is that in any situation in which the participants’ experiences are ignored or devalued, adults will perceive this as rejecting not only their experience, but rejecting themselves as persons” (66-67). This was certainly the case with the veterans with whom I spoke, and it serves as a major caution to those of us who work with student veterans: If we devalue their experiences (even implicitly), we run the risk of devaluing veterans themselves.

CHAPTER 6

RECOGNIZING STUDENT VETERANS' STRENGTHS

While veterans' experiences with writing and learning both in the military and in college are complex, many college approaches to student veterans oversimplify their experience and ignore their strengths as learners and individuals, approaching them instead from a deficit mindset that is focused on lack. As Hart and Thompson note, such mindsets perpetuate simplistic stereotypes of veterans and minimize the "high sense of initiative, professionalism, and leadership" that many faculty identify as characteristic of the student-veteran community (4). Hart and Thompson argue that while it is important to acknowledge and discuss some of the characteristic challenges of student veterans (such as transition issues and PTSD), "fixation on these issue alone facilitates views of veterans that do more to inhibit learning than to foster it" (12). While Lighthall notes that "student veterans are a highly diverse group—as diverse as America itself" (82), she suggests that, as a general rule, "they are emotionally mature, goal-oriented, mission-driven, experienced leaders" (89). In short, approaching the veteran population from a deficit mindset is not only inaccurate, it can prevent colleges and faculty from building on the very real strengths of student veterans to increase their chances of success in the classroom.

In the interviews I had with student veterans, I asked them to identify any strengths they thought might be characteristic of the student veteran population. Every veteran I spoke with was able to quickly generate a list, and there were clear trends between interviews. In this chapter, I explore three key strengths identified by my interview participants, drawing heavily from their interview transcripts. I also contextualize their observations in current scholarship to demonstrate that the strengths identified by my interview participants are not confined to my research site, but

have also been noticed by other scholars and student veterans. Finally, I draw from research in student success and retention to demonstrate that these strengths are associated with success in college—an association that colleges operating from a deficit mindset are likely to miss.

FIRST STRENGTH: A DRIVE TO COMPLETE THE MISSION

Several veterans I interviewed highlighted the military's emphasis on "completing the mission" as a principle strength of student veterans. In the academic context, "completing the mission" could mean completing an assignment, class, or degree program, a connection between the military and academic worlds several veterans made explicitly. For example, as I wrote in preceding chapters, one of Alan's first classes was speech—the one in which his instructor corrected his pronunciation of "Iraq" and suggested that he needed mental help. Despite his anger at the instructor and his distaste for the course, Alan refused to give up. In our interview, he connected his persistence to his military training. He told me that he saw finishing the course as a contest between himself and his instructor; dropping the class would mean his instructor would win. He told me he would never give up, because in the military, if you gave up, the enemy would win. He argued that other veterans who had been trained for the battlefield would feel similarly to him—they would never give up.

Alan also felt that succeeding at college was a way to prove to his military peers (and himself) that he could thrive outside the Army. He wrote, "Everybody in the platoon told me I couldn't make it outside of the Army, 'in the world.' They claimed I was made for being an infantryman. I almost believed it, but I wanted to prove to myself that I could succeed, even if mildly, as a civilian." To Alan, an Associate's degree represents success, and so he will do what it takes to achieve it.

Joseph characterized the military's emphasis on completing the mission similarly. (Some of these quotes will look familiar, since I used them to illustrate my coding methodology in Chapter Three.)

Joseph: That's something that I think is paramount to what the military forces to you to do. I mean you're really required to always finish the mission. I mean that's not only, it's not only an idea, in the Army it's part of our warrior ethos: "I will put the mission first." And when you translate that into the academic world or say a degree, if you can use those skills of putting the mission first in academics, it definitely helps you to get your job done, to think of things like deadlines or turn-in dates or upcoming exams as objectives. I think that's a definite advantage.

Corinne Hinton notes that motivation and commitment are often explicitly taught in military training courses in addition to being embedded in the general military culture ("Front and Center"; "The Military"). Certainly, Brian wrote that his time in the Army "taught [him] the value of a good work ethic." He elaborated on this in his interview:

Brian: I think the biggest thing I learned in the Army is to aggressively pursue what needs to be done. So if I had an issue or trouble with something [in college], I would be able to seek out how to fix it or how to figure out how to do it. So whether it's by finding it myself, or finding someone who knows how I would need to write something better, or finding information on something I need to write about. That's what I would say I drew from the military: I could buckle down and get it done.

Derek touched on this topic as well. In his interview, he stated that "the military taught me how to study, how to work hard, discipline, all the things my dad wanted for me." Later in the interview, he was discussing one of the challenges he saw among student veterans: that because they may have done poorly in high school, they would doubt themselves in college. However, he disputed this assumption.

Derek: They don't know their abilities. They don't know their capabilities. They don't know what they can accomplish. They come to campus and they think, "Well I didn't do very well in high school in math so therefore I'm bad at math." Or, "I got Cs and Ds in writing in high school so I'm a bad writer." And they don't realize that a lot of this stuff really is just learned, and it's through hard work. And they have that skill, that hard-work skill component. They bring that to the classroom and to their course work.

Mike noted that “overall, I’d say I spend more time on the subjects than the other students do, but I think I have a higher attention to detail as part of my training and maybe personality.” In another portion of his interview, he stated that “I didn’t have the skills to learn how to learn [in high school], so I really didn’t learn how to learn until I went into the military. And in the Coast Guard there’s a lot of written tests and a lot of studying and hitting the books. So that’s really where I learned how to learn. If I went to college after high school, I would have just wasted my time and my money. I wasn’t disciplined enough.” One way Mike developed this discipline and connected it to academics was in preparing for the “service-wide” tests for promotion that are offered in the Coast Guard. (I describe this test in greater detail in Chapter Four.) Mike reported studying for six months for his service-wide tests, primarily reading books and manuals.

This focus on discipline, completing the mission, and veterans’ willingness to work hard have been noted by other researchers. Lighthall argues that student veterans “work tirelessly to achieve their objectives” (89). Wheeler found that the student veterans she spoke with made a direct connection between the work ethic they had developed in the military and their success at college. In her study, two veterans noted that in the military, relaxation always comes after training is completed, so they found it relatively easy to set up rules for themselves of homework first, down-time second. Other veterans told Wheeler that they had learned to manage their time better or deal with stress in the military, or that the “dedication and discipline” they had developed in the military helped them complete their schoolwork (782). Additionally, two veterans stated that “each assignment represented a mission so they approached them the same way they did in the service. First they planned the task, completed it to the best of their abilities, and learned from the outcome” (782).

In Travis Martin's essay about his own transition to college after his military service, he writes that "discipline and determination built into my character were instrumental in helping me make up the gaps formed by disability and insecurity" (28). This resonates with one of the strongest findings in Rumann and Hamrick's study, which is that student veterans are more motivated and focused than the general student population. They write that the student veterans with whom they spoke "described themselves as more mature, with clearer perspectives and increased goal commitment" (442). In addition to attributing this increased motivation and organization to their experience with military culture, some veterans in Rumann and Hamrick's study also noted that their service helped them understand what is important in life, or illustrated for them that without an education, they would likely have a less fulfilling career. While some of their respondents noted that they felt left behind by their non-military peers, many also reported that this provided them with an increased clarity when it came to goals and motivation: they wanted to catch up.

SECOND STRENGTH: AN ENRICHED UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD AND ITS CITIZENS

On his survey, Brian noted that his "military service gave me a greater understanding of how society operates. [It gave me] exposure to people from all over the country—races, religions." Rumann and Hamrick found that most veterans who participated in their research also characterized themselves as "more interested in and more accepting of others" (448), and that they connected that openness to diversity within the armed services and the broad cultural experiences they had during deployment. Logan wrote about something similar:

Logan: Since enlisting I feel more worldly. The Navy got me out of Petoskey and out into the world abroad. I got to live in Hawaii, California, and Cuba, and visited somewhere

around another 30-ish countries. I feel the military gave me firsthand experience of other places and people from all over the country and the world. It has been a wonderful experience in contrast to growing up in homogenous Northern Michigan.

It seems reasonable to think that student veterans could build on this worldliness not only as a source of material in a writing class and as a lens through which to develop more nuanced and in-depth arguments and positions, but also to interact better with the wide variety of students and faculty who populate community colleges.

Mike gave some specific examples of how his military experience had given him material for his writing projects, helping him write authoritatively about current issues and develop his essays beyond the minimum requirements:

Mike: We've had two essays due in our English class. One was what would you carry if you had to go to Afghanistan? What would take with you? And then the other one we did yesterday was about sexual harassment in the military. And both times we were provided a news article. So I kind of had an advantage there over people in my class because none of them have been in the military. Like yesterday I wrote a paper and she wanted about 300 words, and I wrote almost about 500 words. And it was for that sexual harassment in the military but I [knew] so much about the subject in conjunction with the article so that's why it took me longer.

Hart and Thompson found that many of the faculty they surveyed "remarked on the value of the varied cultural experiences and broader world views that veterans tend to bring to class discussions and writing assignments" (4). Their point is similar to Mark Street's observations in the *Chronicle* that veterans provide a helpful counterpoint to the perspectives of more traditional students. Several faculty members I surveyed gave examples of times that veterans wrote about their military experiences; topics included both combat and the more quotidian details of their everyday life abroad. For example, student veterans have presented research papers on the areas they were stationed, used their experiences to support arguments on public policy, and described how the military taught them to make quick decisions or accept personal responsibility. Other students have described running over IEDs, trying to get treatment for PTSD, or dropping

firebombs in Vietnam. According to the survey, some of these writings were shared privately with only the professor, and others were shared with the rest of the class. Faculty related that the general reaction of the other students was respectful and extremely interested. One respondent wrote that “students were generally enthralled by what was offered.” Another wrote, “I think most students meet the shared experiences with genuine curiosity and interest.”

One of the veterans Gann interviewed described a writing course he had taken as being “more geared towards discussion, world views” and stated that because of his military experience, he “was the only one with any kind of knowledge about what was going on in the world or politics” (223). Keast notes that explicitly encouraging student veterans to share their experiences and expertise that they have drawn from their time in service can help them feel more connected to college, and that many veterans have told him that their experiences tend to be “overlooked, undervalued, or unappreciated by civilian society” (n. pag.). As Hinton writes, while student veterans may be novices when it comes to academic writing, “they still retain expertise in many other areas and, as such, have experiences, beliefs, and habits that are valuable in the composition classroom” (“The Military,” n. pag.). She argues that it is incumbent on writing teachers to craft classroom environments and assignments that provide space for veterans to apply this experience.

THIRD STRENGTH: A CONNECTION TO THE LARGER COMMUNITY

As I noted in earlier chapters, the veterans I spoke with often had difficulty connecting with their non-military peers. However, this does not mean they had no desire to connect with anyone. As I noted in Chapter Four, the military is a social environment: most objectives are accomplished in teams. My interviews revealed that student veterans are constantly on the

lookout for other “teammates” to help them accomplish their objectives. Several spoke of how important other individuals had been to their success in college, or to their investment with writing. A number of veterans I interviewed mentioned pivotal experiences with English teachers early in their academic careers, when teachers had taken extra time with them or told them that they had potential as writers. Many also identified other veterans who had mentored them, or even who they had mentored themselves. Some also talked about connections they had made with teachers or advisors on campus. In our interviews, they came off as far from isolated—in fact, they frequently sought out connections with other veterans, faculty, and advisors.

Alan, for instance, told me of a Vietnam veteran he had befriended who had pushed him to go to college, as well as to get help for his PTSD through the VA. Despite Alan’s frustration with some of his college courses, he described excellent experiences in his writing classes at NCMC and felt well supported by his writing teachers. He also had high praise for everyone at Student Services, especially the veteran affairs liaison. He stated that he had not known they existed his first semester or how helpful they would be, but that once he got plugged in, they were immensely helpful in walking him through classes and helping him figure out college.

Alan also said that he thought a smaller college and small classes were vital for veterans’ success, precisely because they provided lots of opportunities for personal connections. He told me of a friend of his—an intelligence officer whom he characterized as very smart—who went to a big school after the service and dropped out because he felt lost in the crowd. In contrast, Alan has felt that the vast majority of his professors have cared about him and known who he is.

Although Alan was looking for ways to connect, he did not find that the NCMC chapter of the Student Veterans of America served his needs. As he put it, he attended a meeting and it seemed as though they were “just talking,” while he wanted action. However, he could see that

such an organization might be helpful for other veterans to make connections. Certainly, researchers such as Rumann and Hamrick have found that student veterans tend to seek out opportunities to spend time with other veterans: “These peers understood the complexities of military or combat experiences, laughter at their jokes, affirmed their service, and knew the sets of challenges that may accompany return to civilian life” (453). And even though Alan did not ultimately seek out a connection with the college’s veterans’ group, one should note the importance he placed on his connection to the Vietnam veteran who encouraged him to go to college.

When Joseph thought back on his time at NCMC, he also identified small classes and personal connections with his professors as keys to his success.

Joseph: [The professors] were great. And they really kind of spring-boarded me back into the university, got me excited about going back to school. So I think that part of it is having small classrooms and having interactions with the students. If you get a veteran and he gets put in a group of 400 people and you break it down to groups of ten or something, it can be really...you’re out there on an island, not only socially, you’re out there like actually academically on an island. I think having a little bit of one-on-one interaction is good for all students. And I think it’s good for anybody that’s trying to assimilate and having maybe an issue with that.

As I noted in Chapter Five, part of Logan’s dissatisfaction with his writing placement experience was that it seemed impersonal to him—he took the test, it was fed into a computer, and he was placed. As he said, “I think with people coming out of the military, more of a transition with maybe being able to sit down with somebody and have them talk about [your writing]” would have helped. He also noted that, in his estimation, student veterans needed to connect with each other more and remind one another that they had shared an important experience in which they could take pride.

Logan: Some of them sometimes need reminding that they did something like pretty cool. Some of them forget that.

Interviewer: What do you mean by that?

Logan: Uh, I don't really want to say there's only two types of people in the military. But generally there are people who enjoyed their service and people who didn't. And some of the people who didn't maybe, you know, suffer from PTSD or other terrible things. Maybe they were wounded or saw somebody get hurt. Some of them just couldn't get into the life-style, the regimen. Some people can't take orders, that kind of thing. But they still need to be reminded that they did something. They wore the uniform, and they're always going to be part of that community, and it's something pretty respectable.

Logan's points parallel those raised by student veterans in Rumann and Hamrick's study, some of whom relayed ambivalence about the nature of their military service. For instance, one veteran felt embarrassed that he had served as a truck driver, and another apologized to a veterans' group that she had "just" served in Kuwait. According to the latter veteran, group members remonstrated her for diminishing her experience, reminding her that she could—and should—take pride in her service.

Derek has devoted a large amount of time and energy to strengthening the community Logan refers to, helping student veterans connect with one another. As I noted earlier, he co-founded Student Veterans of America during his time at the University of Michigan partially because of his own troubles finding other student veterans with whom to connect. Rumann, Rivera, and Hernandez argue that a key resource for veterans who want to make connections is Student Veterans of America (SVA), and point out that the local SVA chapter can "provide pre-professional networking and a familiar point of contact at each student veteran's specific institution" (53). However, they note that community-college SVA chapters are few and far between, and that SVA chapters at four-year schools outnumber those at community colleges four to one (53). Hart and Thompson also strongly recommend that WPAs connect with veterans' on-campus resource centers to train faculty and to build connections between new student veterans and more experienced ones. However, as Valentino cautions, "vet centers alone

are not a panacea,” and some veterans do not have a desire to work with the SVA or other veteran groups or do not feel comfortable there (167). Valentino’s concerns are borne out by my conversations with Alan—although, again, Alan found his connections with the college’s veteran liaison and with his professors extremely helpful.

Understandably, Derek had a lot to say about the value of a tightly knit group of student veterans. In fact, when I spoke to him by phone for his interview, he was on the roof of the building that housed the SVA chapter at George Washington University. He was taking a few classes at Northern Virginia Community College to prepare for a possible foray into graduate school, and he said that the SVA chapter was instrumental in helping him learn math, even though he was not actually attending GWU.

Derek: Basically I’ve spent my past three months here. They’ve taken me in like a family. The community of veterans I’ve experienced since I got out has been overwhelmingly supportive. And it’s the reason that I’ve been successful in my transition out of the military and then also here over the past months and going to school again. Learning math from scratch basically.

[On campuses without a strong veteran community], it was actually a struggle for me in that there wasn’t that team type of dynamic like I’m actually experiencing here at George Washington University, where I’m not even a student here, but the Veterans Club has taken me in. Countless hours they’ve spent with me making sure that I’m able to understand and comprehend what’s going on. And you walk into the Veterans Lounge on campus and they’ve got a big white board up on the right and it is, the thing was set up to be a Veterans Lounge but it is turned into a math lab. They’re dragging each other through these classes. And they’ve been doing these same thing with me. I think that’s one of the advantages that when the community is built, if it’s built right, they can bring a sense of teamwork to the classroom that you may not see otherwise.

As I noted in prior chapters, Derek found that he could count on other student veterans to show up for study groups and to help each other succeed at school. He identified this social support as often crucial to veterans’ success in college—and even, as in Alan’s case, crucial to getting them to even go to school.

Derek: [Student veterans might underestimate their abilities] without someone sitting down and telling them, “Hey you should really take a look at this.” Or “you should take a look at this school or this program or you should take these classes.” Unless someone’s really sitting them down and, like, hammering into their heads, “You’re capable of anything you want to do. It’s just a matter of realizing that,” they don’t understand their potential and capabilities.

Derek ended his interview with a story of meeting a group of veterans as part of a national SVA workshop and identifying a student veteran from Chicago who had, in his estimation, enormous potential, but was signed up for what Derek considered a lower-tier school. The student told Derek his goal was to help other veterans. Derek asked him more questions and found that the student had a 4.0 GPA and a wealth of experience.

Derek: And by the time he got done, I realized this guy’s a candidate for [Northwestern’s Kellogg School of Management]. And I asked him, “Where do you think you’d be better served? If you want to help veterans, where do you think you’re going to come out of and make the most impact: Kellogg or ***?” And you could tell he hadn’t even considered it. We talked a little longer and I’m like, “Look, if I were you, I would withdraw from your classes at *** immediately because you’ve only got so much GI bill. I would study for the GMAT the next 6 months, get a job to pay the bills, and then apply to Kellogg and apply to a couple other schools. Apply to University of Illinois, apply to Michigan, apply to Michigan State, apply to another couple schools, and set yourself some fallback schools. But if you score well on the GMAT, you’ve got good grades, and you’ve been doing a bunch of really interesting things in addition to your Army experience. You’re a great candidate for a lot of these programs. And they’re going to set you up for a pipeline to success that you wouldn’t receive out of other schools.”

Interviewer: What did he do?

Derek: He did that. But that’s because I sat him down and chewed his ass. Like, “What the hell are you doing with your GI bill? You don’t get to do this again. One shot, one opportunity.”

Derek’s story resonates with one shared by Martin, who tells the story of a student veteran, “George,” who came to class unprepared: “When he came to class red-faced and unprepared for discussion one day I assigned two other students [both veterans] to ‘square him away,’ military-speak for helping a fellow soldier get his or her act together. [...] It worked. George once again found himself in a community with all the responsibilities and privileges that

go along with it” (30). Additionally, as a veteran himself, Martin worked with George to get him in touch with veteran and community organizations to support him in his struggles with PTSD and alcohol abuse. Martin does not minimize the struggles some veterans go through, and he does not imply that merely connecting veterans who are familiar with school with those new to it will solve all problems. However, he does make the point that such support often helps.

In her case studies of student veterans, Gann writes that one of her participants (a former Marine) found that, according to him, “college is probably the most selfish environment you could ever encounter” (224); this student found it hard to understand how “there is no socially imposed impetus to help out another student who was struggling academically or socially” (224), and noted how different this was from his experience in the Marines, where community support was ingrained in the culture. This student’s observations parallel Derek’s characterization of the different approaches to peer support between the military and the academy: “In the military you go through your training programs, whether it’s aircraft maintenance school or it’s Special Forces school or noncommissioned officer school, [and] everything is done as a team. Everything is done together. Nothing accomplished is ever done alone or individually. But when you come onto campus, it’s number one first. There is no real sense of making sure that your colleagues make it through. It’s all about making sure you make it through.”

Martin also found that “a proclivity for teamwork and community-building is certainly a strength that results from military service” (30), and he describes a successful mentoring program he set up wherein veterans new to the college environment were paired with more experienced student veterans, either in the veteran organization or in their junior or senior years. The potentials for such mentoring programs are evident in Derek’s portrayal of his conversation with the less experienced veteran who was applying for a lower-tier school, and his more

generalized comments that experienced student veterans can help newer ones realize their true potentials.

CONNECTIONS WITH STUDENT-SUCCESS SCHOLARSHIP

The strengths of student veterans I highlighted above mesh well with current research on student retention and persistence, suggesting that veterans enter college with traits that set them up for success rather than failure. For example, the student veterans in my study characterized themselves as highly motivated and possessing a strong work ethic. They are convinced that they can get tasks completed, and they have a strong sense of discipline. Another way to characterize these traits is to say that student veterans have a strong sense of self-efficacy, and a number of researchers have connected students' sense of self-efficacy to college success.

The link between self-efficacy and student success is primarily indebted to the work of Bean and Eaton, who developed a model for predicting student success that was based on psychological factors such as intent, coping skills, and locus of control (Mertes and Hoover). Bean and Eaton theorized that students with well-developed self-efficacy and an internal locus of control (among other factors) were more likely to be successful at college, a model that has been confirmed through subsequent studies. For example, in a study of Information Systems students, Weng, Cheong, and Cheong found that student self-efficacy and commitment to goals were the top two determinants of whether students decided to stay in college or withdraw. Their findings are similar to those of Close and Solberg, who studied the retention and success of Latino youth. Close and Solberg write that "positive academic outcomes result in large part by the student's level of academic self-efficacy. Defined as one's confidence to successfully execute or perform specific school-related activities, research has consistently found that higher levels of self-

efficacy are associated with higher levels of achievement” (32). Some research has suggested that academic self-efficacy is particularly important to the success of adult non-traditional students; however, many adult students experience anxiety and apprehension upon returning to school, which reduces their sense of self-efficacy (O’Neil and Thompson). The fact that student veterans enter college with a high degree of self-efficacy can confer a distinct advantage.

The field of student retention and success also draws heavily on the work of Vincent Tinto, whose work connects to the present discussion because of his focus on student integration. Tinto’s model for student retention argues that students who are academically and socially well integrated in their college institutions are more likely to succeed (Stuart, Rios-Aguilar, and Deil-Amen). This model has also been found to be robust and predictive in multiple follow-up studies, although the relative influence of social and academic integration has been questioned: for example, some scholars argue that social integration is less important at community colleges (Stuart, Rios-Aguilar, and Deil-Amen). Others argue that the importance of the two factors varies with the age of the student, with academic integration being more important to younger students and social integration gaining importance as students age (Mertes and Hoover). Again, though, both types of integration have been shown through numerous studies to correlate with student success.

Student integration connects to veterans both in terms of strengths and challenges. As I noted earlier in this chapter, one key strength of student veterans is that they seek out connections to supportive college personnel and other veterans. Such connections, especially those with college personnel, can lead to increased academic integration in college—and, in fact, that was what veterans in my sample group reported. Connections with faculty or student-services personnel not only helped them master course material and make sure they were getting

their VA benefits, such connections also helped them feel as though they were a welcome part of the college community. In this, they are similar to other adult students: research suggests that strong connections with instructors can lead to student persistence in college (O’Neil and Thompson). Connections with other veterans, whether informally as in Alan’s case or through the local chapter of the SVA, helped lessen social isolation and increase social integration.

It is important to note that, as I pointed out in Chapter Five, many student veterans are frustrated by civilian students. This can lead to feelings of social alienation and undermine veterans’ successful social integration in college. However, one of the key flaws in student-success models that rely heavily on Tinto’s framework is that “they only attempt to align the individual student more thoroughly with preexisting intellectual and social values of the institution. Nothing is done to change the nature of the institution itself” (Reichert Powel 27). This critique could be levied at much student-veteran research, in which most interventions are designed to help veterans adapt to the institution rather than acknowledging that the institution itself may be the problem. The fact that student veterans get frustrated by their civilian counterparts should perhaps be read as revealing the often unreliable and immature nature of traditional-aged, civilian students (at least in comparison to many student veterans); the fix is not to get student veterans to be more like the civilians, but to get the civilians to be more like the veterans. Also, veterans are adult, non-traditional students, and non-traditional students tend not to feel the need to participate in campus social activities unless they think that doing so will directly help their academic performance (Wyatt). Despite this critique, it is likely that some form of social integration is, if not necessary, at least helpful to student success.

The other main strength identified by my study participants was a greater knowledge of the world. In many ways, this is consistent with other adult, non-traditional students, who tend to

come to college with more life experience than traditional students. Wyatt argues that “prior knowledge and life experience is not only a crucial part of the contributions that nontraditional students bring to the classroom but paramount to the nontraditional students’ successful engagement in the college environment” (14). This connects strongly with the research on adult learning theory that I presented in earlier chapters, especially Knowles’s admonition that “to adults, experience is who they are. The implication of this fact for adult education is that in any situation in which the participants’ experiences are ignored or devalued, adults will perceive this as rejecting not only their experience, but rejecting themselves as persons” (66-67).

Most college personnel would protest that they do not ignore or devalue veterans’ experiences. However, college tends to be structured to serve younger, traditional students, and as a result, colleges and their courses do, in fact, tend to minimize adult learners’ prior knowledge. In the case of veterans, this minimization is particularly unfortunate and represents a largely untapped resource that could enrich many college classes. Luckily, writing faculty are beginning to tap into this resource by encouraging student veterans to draw from their military experiences, as can be seen in the research I presented earlier in the chapter (e.g. Gann; Hinton; Keast). While it is true that many student veterans have been out of formal schooling for some time and that they will likely find many of the practices and structures of college strange, they bring skills to the table that can assist with that transition and, in fact, enrich our colleges and classes.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: MAKING THE CONNECTION

Even though student veterans come to college with many strengths, the ways they are accustomed to learning and writing are, at least at first, disconnected from the ways we expect college students to learn and write. As I noted in Chapter Four, because enlisted veterans come from a learning environment that places a heavy emphasis on developing a group identity, and most learning is done in mutually reliant teams, service members learn to count on one another in the classroom and on the battlefield. The military is a community of practice in which all members contribute to the welfare of the organization in a significant way, and the foundations of this contribution are laid in induction ceremonies such as Basic Training and built upon as service-members receive promotions and take responsibility for the training and support of more junior members. Many of the ways the military trains its members are also consistent with andragogical principles: they acknowledge that they are working with adults, presenting training when it is needed and building on service-members' prior experience. Finally, service-members' jobs and training require them to read and write.

As is shown in Chapter Five, much of the difficulty student veterans experience as they transition to college is due to the differences between the ways the academy approaches learning and what they are used to. Undergraduate education is not a community of practice, and unfortunately, it does not tend to provide opportunities for students to contribute in meaningful ways. Additionally, compared to the military, higher education is a solitary environment. Veterans feel that they cannot rely on other students. They often feel that they share little in common with their civilian classmates and are frustrated by them. They miss the sense of

identity and purpose that they got in the military, as well as the knowledge that they were vital, contributing members of the community, mutually engaged in an important mission. On a practical level, they oftentimes do not see how the skills they gained in the military can transfer to college, and we in higher education reinforce this sense by ignoring their prior experience and placing them in standard first-year college student orientation courses and developmental sections.

I demonstrated in Chapter Six that, in fact, many of the skills and strengths student veterans developed in the military can help them succeed in college. These strengths provide a starting point for us to develop ways to better support student veterans as they connect to college writing. Additionally, the growing awareness of the presence of student veterans has led many schools to make positive changes to better support student veterans, and there are third-party organizations that evaluate how effective those changes are. For example, schools can earn a “military friendly” designation from MilitaryFriendly.com, a national organization run by veterans that evaluates schools based on eleven criteria, of which the most heavily weighted is non-financial support for veterans on campus in areas such as advising and mentoring, veteran-focused clubs, and veteran-specific web resources. Other organizations, such as *Military Times*, release “best for vets” college rankings. The American Council on Education offers a “Toolkit for Veteran-Friendly Institutions,” which is a collection of web resources designed to help colleges improve the support they provide student veterans. These initiatives show that student veterans are gaining visibility, and schools are trying to better serve this population.

Still, based on my research, there is more that could be done. The experiences of my participants highlight weaknesses in academia such as nebulous communities, a lack of recognition of students’ prior experiences, and a tendency to treat incoming adult students as

novices. These findings resonate with other research on student veterans that I have discussed throughout the project, suggesting that many of the experiences of my participants are characteristic of those of other student veterans in different colleges across the country. This chapter will make suggestions for how we can improve.

APPROACHES TO IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, AND LEARNING

First of all, we need to remember that most student veterans will not be long-term members of the academic community in the same way that they were (and, in the case of those who continue to serve, still are) in the military. Their time in college is transitional. This understanding should lead us to be skeptical of models of student success that suggest that the only way students will be successful in college is if they adopt college-student identities and abandon their prior selves. Better models focus on integration of past and present identity. Some scholars who have explored how transition theory can help us understand student veterans' experience are Ackerman, DiRamio, and Garza Matchell; Persky and Oliver; Ryan et al.; and Wheeler. These researchers all apply Schlossberg's Theory of Adult Transitions to student veterans, which, as the "Home Alone?" ASHE report notes, "details four major factors that influence an individual's ability to cope with transition and, ultimately, succeed and flourish" (12). These have become known as the 4 S's—situation, self, support, and strategies—and they provide a useful lens through which to view transition. However, a key point that we need to remember is that we are asking student veterans to become "student-like" rather than abandon their prior identities: we want them to connect to college and their professors (which, as I noted in Chapter Six, they seem ready to do) and perform the student role well enough to succeed.

As I have noted throughout this dissertation, veterans share many things in common with other adult, non-traditional students, and this struggle to incorporate a student identity is a good example. As O'Donnell and Tobbell point out in their discussion of adult returning students,

in transition, the notion of identity is in the foreground because the new and strange practices force reconsideration of practice and therefore shifts in identity trajectories. The nature of the individual trajectory is constructed through the interaction of the past, present, and perhaps future aspirations of the student. [...] Past failures in the education system, combined with non inclusionary practices in the HE institution may be in opposition to aspirations of educational success and serve to generate meanings that shape identity in a certain and not necessarily advantageous way. (315)

This quote is particularly relevant to student veterans. With the exception of Joseph, all of my participants related “past failures in the education system” as well as a general lack of interest in high school. A central challenge to schools and faculty is to demystify educational practices so that veterans (and other non-traditional students) can more clearly see how they can participate productively in higher education.

I described the ASHE “Crisis of Identity” report in detail in Chapter Two. Briefly, though, the study’s authors sketch four general typologies of student veterans: ambivalent, skeptical, emerging, and fulfilled civilian selves. These typologies can be seen as a continuum of student veterans’ self-integration into the college community, with “fulfilled civilian selves” representing an identity in which they draw from their military experiences while integrating fully in the civilian world. As I pointed out in Chapter Two, this is a lot to ask of many veterans, especially if we ask them to do it too quickly. Additionally, many veterans retain some connection to the military, whether as reservists or through participation in veterans’ groups. They may not want to relinquish their military identities.

However, in conversations with student veterans, writing teachers can help them understand that a successful student identity is, to a large extent, a role they are performing. We

must take care not to diminish the significance or importance of that role; however, it is still a role. As Burgess and Ivanič write, identity is

not unitary or fixed but has multiple facets; is subject to tensions and contradictions; and is in a constant state of flux, varying from one time and one space to another. This multifaceted identity is constructed in the interaction between a person, others, and their sociocultural context. It includes the “self” that a person brings to the act of writing, the “self” she constructs through the act of writing, and the way in which the writer is perceived by the reader(s) of the writing. (232)

Several researchers have noted that writers align themselves with communities through writing; as Herrington and Curtis put it, college writers look for people, languages, genres, and practices “with which to shape a self to speak from. [...] Also important, as these students were developing the sense of a kindred group to speak *from*, they were simultaneously envisioning a group they spoke *for*, a group with whom they also shared an identity” (370-371).

In other words, writers perform identities that connect them to their discourse communities—Ivanič’s “discoursal self,” described in detail in Chapter Two. As Ivanič points out, this is a *persona*, a role, that students adopt to show membership. In Goffman’s terms, it is a performance. Scholars such as LeCourt have explored identity performance in terms of working-class students who are concerned about leaving their home identities behind; research such as this can be extrapolated to shed light on the identity performances of student veterans. Donna LeCourt argues that the conception of identity as “always under construction, always being negotiated, and always felt and enacted in relation to other classes, discourses, and power structures” can help students become aware of how they continually construct their class identities (45). Again, we can probably extrapolate this to student veterans—not only because many veterans at the community-college level come from working-class backgrounds, but because they are entering a community that seems to ask them to completely and immediately reshape themselves. We can help them understand that this is not actually the case.

Improving Community Connections

As I noted above, veterans come from a sharply defined community of practice, and we will be unable to replicate such a community in college. However, we can enhance veterans' sense of community in higher education and build on some of their strengths to help them succeed. For example, in Chapter Six, I explored how the student veterans I interviewed readily sought connections with faculty and veteran-support personnel. Most of my participants also sought connections with other student veterans, either informally or through membership in the college's chapter of Student Veterans of America. Derek readily described how helpful veterans' groups had been to his educational journey. As I noted in Chapter Six, when we spoke, he was taking a math class at a local college and being tutored by the veterans' group at George Mason University, even though he was not actually a student at GMU.

Certainly we should try to help student veterans connect with and support each other—in fact, I would argue that connecting veterans is the key strategy that schools should adopt. However, pursuing this strategy alone lets us off the hook to some extent. A strong thread throughout the interviews was a disconnect between student veterans and their non-veteran peers, which frequently manifested itself as frustration. As I explored in Chapter Four, the veterans I interviewed tended to see traditional college students as generally unprepared and somewhat lazy, as well as naive. Other researchers have described similar attitudes held by veterans toward civilian students (Perskey and Oliver; Wheeler). As I discussed above, some of the difficulties student veterans tend to experience working with their civilian peers center on experience and identity. However, other difficulties likely center on how we support collaborative activities in our classes. If we view our students overly simplistically and homogenize them into a group with relatively uniform experience, we will tend to assign

collaborative work with the naive expectation that group interactions will somehow work themselves out naturally. This approach does a disservice to the variety present in all of our students, but it can be especially hard on our veterans. Highly structured expectations for collaborative work can help, since veterans are used to having group tasks with clear objectives.

Unfortunately, there is no easy solution to help veterans integrate into the social milieu of the larger student community. Part of the problem is that the college community really is quite different from the military, as I stated earlier. This difference does not mean that veterans cannot integrate, but only that we should not expect it to happen quickly and easily. Perhaps our best course of action is to focus on supporting veterans academically by helping them connect with faculty and college resource personnel so that they have the academic, financial, and mental-health support to help them succeed in their classes, thereby giving them the time to integrate into the college community at a pace and depth that are comfortable for them.

Integrating Adult Learning Theory

Similarly, improving faculty members' familiarity with adult learning theory would benefit all students, but it is especially important if we want to help student veterans. One reason is that, as I noted above, the military itself embraces adult learning theory, and doing so in college can reduce veterans' learning shock. But it also can suggest ways to understand and support some of the characteristic difficulties veterans experience when they enter college. The field of adult learning theory is broad, but a good place to start is Malcolm Knowles's six principles of andragogy: the need to know, the learners' self-concept, the role of learners' experiences, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation (described in more detail

in Chapter Two). Of these six concepts, I would argue that writing teachers in particular should start with the need to know, the learners' self-concept, and the role of learners' experiences.

The first concept, the need to know, describes how adult learners are unlikely to take the teacher's word that something is important; instead, they want to know the potential benefits and drawbacks associated with learning the material. Knowles recommends that teachers incorporate simulations or scenarios that will let learners discover gaps between where they currently are with the material and where they want to be. To this, I would add that a wise course for writing teachers (and WPAs) would be to examine the curricula of their courses with an eye toward how they can demonstrate the usefulness of what they are teaching. Unfortunately, we too often ask students to trust that a given essay or assignment will pay off several years down the road; this can be especially hard for student veterans who are used to clear objectives. Because they are diligent, motivated students, they will probably do the work no matter what we tell them. However, if we can provide them with clear rationales for our assignments and requirements, we can tap into the well of intrinsic motivation that resides within many student veterans.

Secondly, the learners' self-concept is particularly important when we work with student veterans. For example, remember Alan's anger when his speech instructor questioned his pronunciation of Iraq and suggested that he needed mental help, and how Joseph dropped his course on the first day after he felt insulted by his instructor's inane icebreaker. The veterans in our classes have been accustomed to bearing a great deal of responsibility and, oftentimes, authority over others. They are expert sonar technicians, tank commanders, and aircraft mechanics, and many times they have been all over the world. We do them a great injustice when we treat them like eighteen-year-olds who are just leaving home for the first time. When possible, we should engage their maturity and experience by involving them in directing their

own learning. For example, I suggested above that veterans respond well to direct feedback and clear expectations; when we give them, we can also lay out options for them to address any writing difficulties and work with them to develop their own plan to improve. We are the experts in writing, a fact they will readily acknowledge; however, they are the experts in how they learn, and we need to acknowledge that, as well.

Finally, Knowles urges us to build on learners' experiences with our curriculum, and this seems particularly important with veterans. It also seems very attainable in most writing classes. For example, Mike talked about how he wrote almost twice as much as the requirement in his assignment on sexual harassment in the military, and that "I kind of had an advantage there over people in my class because none of them have been in the military." If student veterans have self-disclosed their veteran status in a course, we can ask if they mind being called on when course topics touch on the military or world events. As I noted above, we can encourage them to journal about their time in the military, or ask them to make connections between what they learned in the military and what they are learning in school. We can talk with them about how some of the habits they learned in service set them up well for college success and support their transfer of those skills. In short, we can demonstrate that their time in the military has value in the academic world.

Building on Strengths

As I argued in the last chapter, colleges would be wise to build on the strengths veterans bring to academia rather than only focusing on the challenges they experience. We can help student veterans make the connections between their military and student identities through writing assignments that ask them to reflect on how some of the practices and approaches to

problem solving they developed in the military might help them in school. Also, assignments that ask them to examine their histories as readers and writers might help them view themselves as already being fluent in some forms of written communication and open the door for a discussion of how academic writing compares to the writing and reading with which they are familiar. Other researchers have found such activities to be helpful in increasing adult learners' senses of student identity (Compton-Lilly; Park), and they are worth trying with student veterans.

A good place to help veterans see how the strengths they developed in the military connect with college is in veteran-focused orientations. While veterans can likely benefit from a college orientation, they do not require many of the messages that are usually sent at general orientations. For example, most student orientations stress student responsibility for learning and emphasize the need to come to class and connect with professors. Veterans come from an environment where they have developed a sense of being responsible not only for themselves, but for their companions—and often this responsibility is life-or-death. They do not need to be lectured on responsibility.

Instead, they need to be presented with a clear sense of the nuts and bolts of college success. The ideal people to deliver this overview are experienced student veterans. Brian suggested that schools put together a “Writing 101” or “Grammar 101” manual that contained some basic grammatical rules and links to helpful writing websites, such as the Purdue OWL. He also thought that “maybe somebody could link [new student veterans] up to a fellow veteran that’s been going to school for a semester or two. They could be like, ‘Hey, this is how the system works. Just pay attention to your rubrics. And if you have questions about them, don’t be afraid to ask your professor.’”

Brian's suggestions connect to Wheeler's research. Wheeler also found that the veterans she spoke with felt closer to other veterans than they did to their non-military peers, and that they sought out connections with other veterans for both academic and personal support. She recommends that colleges should have clear ways for veterans to find each other, such as veterans' clubs and even specific social areas such as veterans' lounges or study areas. She also recommends establishing veteran-to-veteran mentoring programs, partially because she thinks that veterans are more likely to trust other veterans, but because such connections could "help incoming soldiers acclimate to higher education" (790). As I wrote in Chapter Six, Derek related that veterans were willing to "drag each other through" classes if necessary. Colleges should capitalize on this willingness.

Colleges can also remind student veterans in orientations that college completion is, at its heart, another mission. It takes hard work, but it is achievable, and as I noted in the previous chapter, student veterans have a strong sense that they can put in the work that is necessary to complete a mission.

The experiences of my participants also highlight the need for colleges to change how they place and schedule student veterans (and, by extension, other non-traditional students). Because of their time out of school, many veterans perform poorly on standardized tests such as COMPASS and ACCUPLACER. Similarly, because many of them may not have done well in high school, their GPAs may be relatively low, and their SAT and ACT scores might not be very good, either. This would mean that, in all likelihood, they would be placed in developmental coursework, sometimes with mandatory co-requisites such as student-success courses. In large part, such courses are designed to help students who are not just poor writers, but poor learners.

They often have relatively simplistic assignments (paragraphs rather than essays, for instance) and are set up to build students' sense of responsibility and self-efficacy.

Because of their strong work ethic and sense of personal responsibility, such courses are inappropriate for student veterans. Veterans are used to tackling difficult tasks under strict time constraints. Additionally, they are often adept learners and good at time management. None of these lessen veterans' need to brush up on college writing, but they are simply not in the same situation as the majority of students in developmental and student-success courses. What would be much more beneficial would be an abridged "boot-camp" type course, or an accelerated learning program where they are asked to tackle difficult assignments but are provided with additional support. And, as I mentioned above, other non-traditional students would likely benefit from such course structures as well.

Finally, colleges should consider giving student veterans college credit for specific military training. This is recommended by the American Council on Education, which works with the Department of Defense to provide a guide for how to do so ("Military Guide"). Although many colleges do this, a great many do not. Giving credit makes sense on practical and symbolic levels. Practically, if student veterans can demonstrate that they did military coursework or training in an area that corresponds to a college's coursework, they should be able to transfer those credits, similarly to how colleges honor coursework that civilian students completed at other institutions. On a symbolic level, honoring such coursework demonstrates to student veterans that the knowledge they gained in the military has formal value in higher education.

REVISING WRITING CLASSES

In addition to making macro-level changes to our programs and college-wide services, we should explore how to improve veterans' experiences in our writing classes. By far, the most important thing to understand about veterans and writing is that they are not novices: many military service-members have to write and read a lot. As I described in Chapter Four, service-members tend to be immersed in text, albeit of a specialized nature. While the texts they are used to writing—for example, log entries and evaluations—are strictly organized and concise, they are used to carefully selecting words and constructing sentences to get their point across. They are also accustomed to reading their audiences (usually their superior officers) and adapting their writing to meet audience expectations. In fact, they are quite good at this, to the point that Mallory and Downs write that “from the opening moments of class, they are inspecting cues amidst syllabi and instructor demeanor, language, and responses to see where they fit and what is expected and allowed” (63). As other researchers such as Hadlock and Hinton have noted, rather than thinking of students as novice writers, we should conceive of them as writers new to academia.

This understanding has repercussions for us in the classroom. Most importantly, it reinforces the idea that we should work on helping veterans understand the ways they already write well and point out ways that knowledge can translate into the academic context. For example, concision and tight organization are highly valued in many academic disciplines. An understanding of the typical writing student veterans have done in the military can also point out likely areas with which they will have trouble. One of these is developing an essay effectively and stretching beyond the brevity with which they are accustomed. Another is incorporating their own opinions and analysis—“free thought,” as Joseph put it.

Exploring Workplace Writing

An understanding that student veterans are experienced writers in non-academic contexts opens the door to draw from a range of theories to help them make connections between the writing they have done in the past and that which they are asked to do in college. For example, to some extent, we can view the military as a workplace and apply research that addresses workplace and college writing. Susan Katz writes that “out of all the research that has been conducted on writing in the workplace, one of the most important things we have learned is that every discipline, every organization, and every department within an organization has its own conception of what makes ‘good writing’” (“Learning to Write,” 109). Katz notes that each organization has its own model for planning, drafting, and revising, as well as models for what the resultant writing should look like.

This is certainly true of the military. As I noted above, Hadlock found that military service-members were very familiar with several specific genres of writing, such as counseling/evaluation reports. Corrine Hinton found this as well, arguing that the Marines she interviewed had sophisticated understandings of writing processes and genres and therefore should not be viewed as “novices” in first-year writing courses. Hinton writes that “student veterans occupy the same type of liminal space as other adult learners who have acquired expert status in some domain-specific areas but, in starting or returning to college, find themselves in a novice position” (“The Military,” n. pag.). She also notes that when her participants were able to “identify and then translate previous learning and rhetorical experiences from the military into academic writing contexts,” they reported positive academic writing experiences (n. pag.).

Randall Popken’s work with genre and adult learners is also applicable here. Popken studied students who were transitioning from the work world to college after a gap in their

educational journey. Like Hinton, Popken argues that the students in his study consciously and unconsciously draw from the genres they have written and read in their pre-college lives, and that their prior genre experience can help and/or hinder their performance in college writing tasks. One of Popken's participants struggles with how to effectively develop and illustrate his points, tending to view the development required in academic genres as fluff. His work writing required him to get to the point quickly—examples are short notes to co-workers and descriptions of airplane repairs. Popken quotes this student: “In the work world [...] nobody wants to hear your opinion, let alone your support for that opinion” (n. pag.). This sentiment resonates with the interview data I presented that suggests that veterans find the more elaborative world of academic writing difficult—see, for example, Logan's statement (quoted in Chapter Five) that the military has taught him to be creative in a small “box,” and that the “freewheeling” nature of one of his humanities classes is difficult for him.

Near the end of his piece, Popken includes another point that is directly relevant to student veterans:

People often use genres from their past as points of departure when they acquire new genres. For a thirty-year old who has a sizable repertoire of genres gained through years of reading, writing, and living, the genre acquisition process is not the same as it is for an eighteen-year-old who has read and written little. In fact, it seems to me that the acquisition process is often more complicated for adult writers with a large genre repertoire to draw upon, especially if they don't have much conscious control over it. Without realizing it, such students approach academic genres from a different starting point than do traditional-age students. (n. pag.)

Popken suggests that adult returning students are likely to be successful if they can arrive at “a metadiscursive level [enabling] consciously surveying the genres in [their] repertoire and selecting from them those features that will best serve [their] rhetorical needs” (n. pag.). This is echoed by Michael Michaud, who writes in his study of adult students that “frequent engagement with a diverse range of genres of writing that encourage the invention and arrangement of

extended original prose, combined with the development of deep metacognitive awareness about the differences between discursive spheres (like school and work) may go a long way toward helping adult students develop the flexibility and big-picture understanding needed to navigate” their writing challenges in school and work (255). The students Michaud studied also had difficulties developing their papers and coming up with original ideas (as opposed to “assemblage composing” (255), i.e., putting together “documents built from other documents,” a technique that Michaud asserts works well in many professional contexts). The difficulties Popken and Michaud describe seem to connect with some of the troubles student veterans experience with academic writing, and it is likely the interventions recommended in the literature on students transitioning to college from the workplace would also be helpful with student veterans.

Employing Transfer Theory and Threshold Concepts

Popken and Michaud’s emphasis on metadiscourse and metacognition reveal another connection to an area from which we can draw: transfer theory and threshold concepts. Encouraging metacognition and genre analysis are central to what David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon term “high road transfer [which] always involves reflective thought in abstracting from one context and seeking connections with others. [...] High road transfer can bridge between contexts remote from one another, but it requires the effort of deliberate abstraction and connection-making and the ingenuity to make the abstractions and discover the connections” (26-27). Authors such as David Brent advocate for classroom activities that explicitly discuss how writing skills transfer to other contexts (he terms this “cuing for transfer” [413]) and frequent practice analyzing different genres of writing and exploring similarities and differences.

Carroll argues that “a focus on developing metacognitive awareness as well as developing new writing skills is as useful for students who already know ‘how to write’ as it is for less well-prepared writers. Without such awareness, ‘good’ writers may find it especially difficult to change writing strategies that have worked for them in the past” (121). It seems likely that Carroll’s argument would hold true for student veterans, who, as I stated above, have likely developed writing strategies that worked well in the military, but who now need to adapt those strategies to the classroom.

Metacognition and genre analysis also mesh well with the field’s current discussion of threshold concepts. Scholarship on threshold concepts has only emerged in the past decade, originally in the field of economics. In short, threshold concept theorists allege that each field or discipline has certain key concepts that are central; in order to understand and master the field, one must identify and understand these concepts. Jan Meyer and Ray Land write that “in certain disciplines there are ‘conceptual gateways’ or ‘portals’ that lead to a previously inaccessible, and initially perhaps ‘troublesome,’ way of thinking about something. A new way of understanding, interpreting, or viewing something may thus emerge—a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view” (373). They also write that students who engage threshold concepts often vacillate between worldviews in an often uncomfortable process that is ultimately transformative, inhabiting a liminal state for an undefined time as they process the concepts.

The application of threshold concepts to writing studies is quite new. At a 2014 CCCC workshop, led by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, attendees worked with a tentative list of threshold concepts that had been “crowd-sourced” from leading scholars in writing studies. Several of these concepts tie in well with student veterans. For example, one of the

major concepts is that “writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies.” The definition of this concept, written by Tony Scott, reads, in part, that “vocabularies, genres, and language conventions are a part of what create and distinguish social groups, and thus writing always involves cultural and ideological immersion and negotiation.” (I draw these descriptions from workshop handouts.) Another is that “habituated practice can lead to entrenchment”; in the workshop handout, Chris Anson writes that “translation requires consciously breaking with entrenched practices and being rhetorically flexible.” It is likely that these concepts and others like them will be troublesome for many entering college students. However, some may present particular difficulties for student veterans, who come from a community with very different “entrenched practices.” Yet asking veterans to think about what they have written in the past and connect what they’ve learned to the present situation is likely to help.

This recommendation is similar to Hinton’s in her discussion of Marine veterans: She argues that, “especially for the sake of nontraditional learners like student veterans, composition instructors should be prepared to explicitly provide opportunities for veterans to make ‘high road’ connections between their military educational, professional, and rhetorical experiences and those they will acquire as college students” (“The Military,” n. pag.). Hinton also suggests that student veterans should be asked to reflect on how their organizational skills and work ethic might apply to college. This recommendation also connects with my research: As I mentioned in earlier sections, many of the veterans I interviewed discussed the military’s emphasis on completing the mission and said that they’d learned to work harder and be more focused during their time in service. While it is true that student veterans are unlikely to be as familiar or comfortable with academic writing as more traditional college students, it is also highly likely that the veterans are prepared to outwork most, if not all, of the other students in the class. This

work ethic can translate into significant improvement over the course of a semester, which can in turn inspire an increased confidence in one's ability to succeed in college.

Challenging Current Pedagogies

Unfortunately, if we look at the common structure and practices of the writing classroom, we will find many examples of how they may complicate rather than support veterans' transition. For example, Hart and Thompson note (and question) the prevalence of the personal essay, which they found to be used extensively in writing classrooms. They caution that personal writing assignments can force veterans to disclose their veteran status; additionally, they urge writing teachers to consider how they might respond if the veteran writes about a traumatic event. This bears more discussion. Marilyn Valentino notes that not every veteran is a "wounded warrior" (165); however, as Jonathan Shay points out, many combat veterans do indeed return from war with emotional challenges. In *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, Shay writes that "selective suppression of emotion is an essential adaptation to survive lethal settings such as battle[....] Whatever the psychological and physiological machinery that produces this shutdown, it appears to get jammed in the 'on' position for some veterans. [...] More than one has described it as like being wrapped in cotton wool" (39). In addition to PTSD and traumatic brain injury, the "signature injuries" of the current conflicts (Wheeler 776), student veterans may be grappling with substance abuse, anger, depression, and reintegration issues, as well as more mundane (but still potentially disruptive) continued connections to the military, such as reserve training and navigating bureaucracy to get veteran benefits. Some personal writing assignments—such as a standard "describe a significant event"—may force student veterans to disclose their veteran status to the class and may seem to

require them to discuss traumatic events. This puts them in a difficult situation: do they follow the assignment, even though it makes them profoundly uncomfortable, do they contradict the authority figure—the professor—and ask to modify the assignment, or do they choose not to complete it? None of these outcomes are desirable. Even a small modification of the assignment—say, “identify a significant personality trait you have and describe how you developed it”—gives students more flexibility to avoid topics they find uncomfortable or traumatic while still leading to the kind of self-examination that can support transition.

Some scholars point out that writing about traumatic events is often therapeutic, and that there may be room in the writing classroom for personal writing of a therapeutic aspect. Indeed, there is a body of literature that supports this contention. A recent issue of *Composition Forum* focusing on veterans’ issues included an interview with James Pennebaker and explored the place of therapeutic writing in writing classes (Moran). Pennebaker suggests that it might be useful to have student veterans write about things that are bothering them, but “if they get too disturbed, they should stop writing about it” (quoted in Moran). But this advice seems overly facile.

To be sure, Pennebaker and others have demonstrated health benefits to writing about trauma (Pennebaker; Sloan, Feinstein, and Marx); however, it is oftentimes difficult to see how their suggestions would play out in a typical writing course. Writing as therapy seems especially consistent with expressivist pedagogies and their emphasis on the development of the self. However, we need to ask what roles we, as writing teachers, are qualified for. We also must engage with the question of whether the writing class is the best place for a veteran to explore the difficult emotions associated with his war-time experience. As Roger Thompson points out, the composition classroom is already fraught with tensions stemming from class, race, gender, and

power, and “may in fact be an unsafe venue for encouraging writing about war even if instructors are earnest in their desire to help students openly exchange ideas, including those not explicitly about the war” (206). Like the researchers I mentioned previously in this section, Thompson also raises questions about how we should respond. These considerations should make us cautious in the uncritical application of expressivist pedagogies.

Additionally, Critical/Cultural Studies pedagogies, also common in writing classrooms (Fulkerson), may be problematic for the veteran population. Often predicated on debate of moral and cultural dilemmas or resistance of dominant discourses (for example, heterosexist or phallogocentric biases that may be embedded in important social institutions, such as the military), these pedagogies can trigger strong reactions from all students—and, in fact, that is in large part what they are designed to do. However, a veteran may not be ready to question the society, government, or military he recently spent several years serving, often at great personal hardship. Some veterans, such as those described by Shay, may have their emotions on lock-down. Others might have theirs on a hair trigger. Using discussions of war as an example, Valentino writes that “our goal was, and is, to get college students to think critically about global conflicts and our roles in the world” (170), but she also asks whether we as teachers are prepared for the kinds of reactions such topics might provoke from veterans. She suggests we tread carefully, listing all materials and major topics in the syllabus so that veterans can opt out of a class that features topics they do not want to discuss. This is a good idea; however, in a smaller school, it may be impossible for a veteran to find another section that works for her. Again, these examples point to the necessity to consider how our common pedagogies might affect the veterans in our classes.

I am certainly not advocating an anodyne curriculum. We do not do student veterans any favors by insulating them from the critical thinking and analysis that characterize college work.

However, we need to approach the interaction with respect and genuine curiosity. As Morrow and Hart argue, “If professors make the time to interact with student-veterans and attempt to learn more about their previous experiences, they may be able to help veterans to begin to feel comfortable sharing these experiences in the public forum of the class, thus enriching the discussion” (45). Some veterans, like Mike, will welcome the chance to write about military-related topics, and as I noted in the previous chapter, a key strength veterans bring to college is their life experience. If they are comfortable doing so, veterans can greatly enrich class discussions and use their military experience as fodder for essays. Others would prefer to leave that time behind. Similarly, some student veterans will welcome course readings that touch on war, while for others, it may trigger an episode of PTSD. Valentino provides a good general guide when she urges instructors to list potentially triggering readings and films on the syllabus so veterans can make conscious choices about whether to take a given section. However, we should not count on that being enough. Some veterans may elect to stay in a given section despite potentially troubling material because it fits well in their schedule, or they may not anticipate that a reading or film will inspire a difficult reaction. In these ways, student veterans are similar to other students who have had traumatic experiences or have strong emotional connections to certain issues. In the end, the best thing we can do is to practice a sense of attunement to our students, whereby we are sensitive to their reactions to course materials, upfront about why we include certain readings, and willing to modify our courses (within reason) to best teach the students we have.

Getting Specific

As can be seen from their discussion of counseling reports, veterans are also used to evaluating themselves and others, and to receiving and acting upon specific feedback. As writing teachers, we should revise our assignments and feedback to be as clear and specific as possible. It is a balancing act, of course, to craft writing prompts that allow for student discovery while being specific enough so that students know what they are being asked to do. However, several veterans I spoke with expressed frustration with assignments that were too broad. With veterans, we should probably err on the side of more specificity.

Accordingly, we should think about how to craft specific, structured assignments that still allow for some creativity. For example, we might assign arguments that leave the topic open to the student, but that have a set classical structure and formal guidelines for sources and format. Then, we can introduce student veterans to common college writing practices by asking for multiple drafts and providing extremely specific, detailed feedback. As with all our students, we should be respectful and kind; however, student veterans may be more capable than the majority of our students to handle the sort of feedback that requires significant revision, as long as we provide clear suggestions for that revision. In fact, because their military experience included direct, frequent feedback, they would likely respond well if we gave it (Hadlock and Doe; Hinton, “Front and Center”; Morrow and Hart).

Also, as I noted above, veterans tend to have difficulty connecting with their civilian peers. This should cause us to question how we set up collaborative-learning activities such as peer response. In my own classes, student veterans have talked with me privately about the frustration they feel when other group members haven’t shown up prepared, or when their civilian peers pick topics that seem trivial. Unfortunately, as I noted above, I do not have a clear

recommendation for how to make collaborative-learning activities work perfectly. However, my sense is that increasing specificity might help here, too. For example, assigning group roles could build on veterans' habits of organization by putting them in the roles of group facilitators or timekeepers. Additionally, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, veterans are used to having clear objectives for group tasks; writing teachers could clarify what groups need to do, why it is important, and how they will know when they are done. Increasing the clarity of our expectations for assignments is an intervention suggested by other scholars of student veterans (Hadlock and Doe; Mallory and Downs; Morrow and Hart), and like many of these suggestions, such clarity would also be likely to help civilian students as well.

We would do well to remember that veterans come from a team environment. Very little is accomplished individually, whether it be learning or action. Several of my participants described college as being dishearteningly individualistic. Many student veterans likely miss the team-based atmosphere of the military, meaning that we should certainly not do away with collaborative learning at college. However, I suspect that we do not always have clear reasons for why we ask students to work in teams, and even when we do, we don't always articulate those goals to our students. Collaborative learning should not be a default, but a considered strategy that we employ at appropriate times for well thought-out reasons. In sum, we certainly should ask veterans to work with civilian students—the two groups can learn from one another's experiences and draw from each other's strengths. We just need to think harder about when and why we ask them to do so.

Crafting Veteran-Centric Classes

At some schools, the veteran population is large enough to support writing classes that are designed specifically around the needs of student veterans. In his essay “Combat in the Classroom,” Travis Martin describes how he used his own journey as a student veteran to inform the structure of his veteran-focused class:

When I returned home I thought that everything I had learned in uniform was useless, that my college and wartime selves were in no way compatible. I had led squads and been an instructor in the Army. But, for some reason, everything about the college classroom intimidated me. I remember a thousand preconceived notions and slouching in my desk when talk of the on-going wars permeated class discussions freshman year. For every bit of pride I felt, there was an equal amount of insecurity that I associated with my military service. But when given the opportunity to apply my knowledge to the classroom, my past, my experiences, even my pain became sources of great strength. (28)

Martin ends up finding ways to reconcile his two identities—military and college student—and becomes successful not only in academia, pursuing a PhD and crediting his reading and writing as being instrumental to forging connections with others and dealing with his own trauma.

Martin advocates using classroom community as a way to help veterans connect with other students, and develops a mentor system that connects new students with more experienced upperclassmen or leaders in the student veteran association. He also directly mentors his veterans, helping them fill out forms for assistance and providing personal advice.

The class Martin describes is made up entirely of student veterans, and, of course, he is a veteran as well. He is able to draw from his ethos as a service-member as he teaches, and his class of veterans shares significant common experiences. However, other non-veteran writing teachers have tried similar things with classes that are not exclusively made up of veterans. For example, Darren Keast—who is not a veteran—developed a veteran-focused writing class at the City College of San Francisco, an experience he relates in a recent issue of *Composition Forum*. Since the college is open enrollment, Keast was told that he could not limit his class to only

veterans; as a result, he ends up with classes that are populated predominantly by non-veteran students. Although he wishes he could get more veterans to enroll in the section, Keast has found the blend productive, primarily because of the open dialogue between the veterans and civilians. In addition to veteran-focused readings (which he has revised over several iterations of the course in response to feedback from veteran students), Keast finds that inviting student veterans to share their own experiences helps them connect to academic life. As for the civilian students, they have reported appreciating the opportunity to work with veterans, and Keast notes that a popular writing assignment has been one where he asks them to write research essays that blend military issues with the students' intended majors. (For example, a civil engineering student writes about the Army Corps of Engineers; medical students have written about field medicine.)

I spoke with Keast in 2013 about his course. Overall, he was pleased with how it was going. He noted that even though he is not a veteran, his veteran students treat him with respect, which he interpreted as consistent with military culture and respect for authority. He begins the class by sharing his civilian status and inviting his veteran students to fill in the gaps in his knowledge as well as the gaps in his students'. Keast told me the students he's teaching are never asked about ethics, argumentation, and critical thinking while they're in the military, at least in the ways we tend to think of those topics in academia. They do have writing and critical thinking in the military, so a challenge is bridging the gap to college. As to why more veterans do not choose to take his writing class, Keast pointed out that many veterans choose not to self-identify to the larger student body, and that they may just want to move on from their military experience.

Even schools that do not have student-veteran populations large enough to fill entire classes can help veterans help one another to write. For example, Eileen Schell and Ivy Kleinbart

describe successful community writing groups that Syracuse University sponsored to give veterans a place to write outside the formal classroom environment.

AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several strengths, principal of which is its focus on student veterans at the community college. Although there is a growing body of research on student veterans in university settings, there is a dearth of similar research that is situated at the community college, and my hope is that this study addresses that gap. Additionally, the project enriches the field's understanding of the military learning environment and how it does (and doesn't) connect with the traditional structure of the academy. Although my focus was on student veterans, over the course of this study I found myself thinking about how other non-traditional students might feel a similar sense of disconnect as they entered college. As I noted earlier in this chapter, despite the fact that the community college attracts a high percentage of non-traditional students, much of our policies and courses structures are set up for traditional students. It is for these reasons that adult learning theory was particularly helpful. I have not come across much research that uses adult learning theory as a lens through which to view student veterans' transitions to college; I hope more researchers will explore this theoretical connection.

Even though this project fills a gap in veteran-focused research, it has its limitations. Although my goal was not to provide a comprehensive picture of student veterans at the community college, a key limitation of my study was that I only interviewed six veterans in one learning environment. Army veterans were over-represented in my sample, and I was unable to find any Marines or women veterans to participate. The fact that my interview group was all male is a significant weakness. To some extent, interested readers can turn to other research such

as the “Women Warriors” ASHE report for information on the strengths and challenges of women student-veterans, but there is a general need for more scholarship on this group.

Some of the strengths of my participant group include that many of the student veterans I interviewed were first-generation college students and/or came from the working class. Many of the veterans I spoke with, both in my formal interviews and my pilot studies, joined the military, at least in part, as a way to earn a living; as Mike noted in his interview, “My wife got pregnant, so for financial stability I enlisted in the Coast Guard.” They are in college to get a career and continue to earn a living. I would like to see a more in-depth application of scholarship on socioeconomic class and first-generation college students to veterans at the community college. I touched on both of these areas in this study, but they deserve more space than I gave them. Also, since we know that enlisted service members write quite a bit while in the military, an application of workplace-literacy studies would likely yield helpful and interesting results.

Still, I hope that this study has helped shed some light on the experiences of student veterans in the community college. At the time of this writing, we have been militarily involved in the Middle East for nearly a decade and a half, and new conflicts seem to arise almost as soon as we think we will be able to exit the region. It is likely we will continue to see high numbers of student veterans in higher education for many years to come. I agree with Valentino that we have an ethical obligation to learn what we can about student veterans so we can better serve them in the classroom. Hopefully this project contributes to our understanding.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, student veterans should not be seen as suffering from some deficiency, but as disconnected from higher education. Understanding this

should profoundly influence how we approach their transition. If we approach them from a sense of lack, we will ask ourselves how we can fill or fix them; the implicit goal is to make them more like our vision of the ideal college student.

However, if we approach them from a perspective of disconnect, our questions become more mutual. How can we reach them? How can we help them to reach us? How can we begin to speak each other's language, to understand one another? Connection implies movement on both sides. The goal becomes not to change them, but to change together.

The massive influx of student veterans is an opportunity for colleges to examine how many of our practices are built around the erroneous assumption that our students are rank novices, not just inexperienced with coursework, but also with life. This assumption is particularly unjust to veterans, who, as I have shown, arrive at college with highly developed senses of responsibility, a polished work ethic, wide-ranging life experiences, a history of successful learning, and practice writing in a variety of genres. Despite these strengths, many student veterans have a hard transition to college. As we explore ways we can help them connect to higher education, we will also find that there are opportunities for us to change as well.

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APPENDIX A
CONSENT FORM

The goal of this study is to better understand how veterans navigate the challenges of college writing so colleges and faculty can better support student veterans. I want to be sure you understand some key components of the study:

1. Using a combination of a survey and interviews, I will ask you a series of questions that will touch on your history, your experiences in the military, your goals for college and work, and your views about writing. If you would rather not answer a particular question, we can skip it. You do not have to explain why you choose not to answer that question.
2. You are free to stop the interview at any time. There will be no repercussions for ending the interview, and you do not have to explain why you want to end it. If you choose to stop the interview, I will not contact you for follow-up interviews. You are welcome to contact me at a later date if you would like to continue the interviews.
3. If you are a student, I will not discuss what you say with any of your teachers or with any college personnel; I will not even tell your teachers you are participating in the research. I will store your answers under a pseudonym, which I will also use when I write my research report and if/when I publish my results.
4. You may contact me at any time with questions about this research project. My phone number is (231) 348-6631 and my e-mail is <mhara@ncmich.edu>.

If you understand this information and agree to participate in this research, please sign your name on the line below and date it:

Name

Date

Thank you very much for your participation.

APPENDIX B

SURVEY FOR STUDENT VETERANS

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. The questions on this survey are designed to give me a sense of the basics about you, your military service, and your goals for college writing (if you are a new student). Some questions are very basic and only require short answers; others are a bit more open-ended. On the latter, the more information you can give me, the better I will be able to understand your experience.

Please do not worry about grammar, complete sentences, etc. I am just interested in the information. You may skip questions you prefer not to answer.

1. What is your current age?
2. What is your gender?
3. How old were you when you enlisted in the military?
4. Why did you decide to enlist?
5. What branch of the military did you serve in, what was your length of service, and what is your current rank?
6. Are you still in service in some capacity? If so, could you provide details?
7. How do you think your military experience shaped your sense of identity? (In other words, do you see yourself any differently now that you have served in the military? If so, how?)
8. If you are a current college student, what degree do you hope to achieve? If you are a college graduate, what is your degree?
9. Why did you decide to go to college? Do you (or did you) feel like you belong in college? Do you (or did you) have any particular concerns about your likelihood of success?
10. If you are a current student, what classes are you taking the upcoming semester that involve writing (if any)? How do you feel about your chances to write successfully in those classes?

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENT VETERANS

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research. I'd like to ask you a set of questions about your history, your experience in the military and college, and your experiences with writing.

1. Could you describe your academic writing experiences closest to when you enlisted in the military?
2. POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP: For example, what types of things did you write in school, what types of writing did you like (if any), and what did you see as the purposes for school writing?
3. Can you please describe how you used writing in the military? This could include any training or formal education you received as well as the writing you did during your normal duties.
4. POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP: What was valued in that writing? How did you learn what made that writing effective? Why was it important that you followed those criteria?
5. Did you ever draw from your military experience during your time in college, either as a source for ideas or for writing skills? If so, can you describe the experience?
6. Do you think there are any strengths or challenges that are specific to veterans as they learn college writing?
7. POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP: Are there ways colleges or faculty could better support student veterans as a group as they learn college writing?

APPENDIX D

WRITING FACULTY SURVEY

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey! My overall goal is to understand student veterans' experiences with college writing so that colleges and faculty can better support them. I'd like to ask you some questions about your views on college writing and your experiences with student veterans. Your responses are completely anonymous, and no effort will be made to identify who filled out which survey. If you need more room, please feel free to attach an additional sheet of paper.

Your participation is voluntary. If you would like to contact me to speak about this research, please feel free to do so at <xxx> or (xxx) xxx-xxxx. Thank you.

1. What writing courses are you currently teaching?
2. How long have you taught college writing (at any institution)?
3. What do you think are some key qualities of good academic writing? Very briefly, why are they important?
4. Has the knowledge that student veterans may be in your writing classes influenced your choice of writing prompts, your syllabus, or the structure of your class in any way? If so, how?
5. To your knowledge, have you had student veterans in your college writing classes?

If you answered "yes" to #5, please turn the paper over and answer the following questions:

6. What are your overall impressions of student veterans? (Your answer does not need to be limited to the writing context). How have you developed those impressions?
7. Has a student veteran ever written about his or her military experience in your class? If so, could you describe an instance (without identifying the student)? How did other students react? How did you respond to the veteran's writing?
8. What is your understanding of the writing student veterans did during their military service? What do you think might be the main reasons they would write, and what do you think constituted "good writing" in that context?
9. Do you think there are any connections between the writing students did in the military and the writing they do in college? Are there ways their military writing experience might help or hinder them as they learn to write in college?

10. Do you think there are any strengths or challenges that are specific to veterans as they learn college writing? Are there ways colleges or faculty could better support student veterans as a group as they learn college writing?

Thanks again for your willingness to participate in this research.

VITA

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Lemieux-Spiegel, Cheri, and Mark Blaauw-Hara. "Liminality and (In)Visibility: Positioning Community College Teacher-Scholars in Rhetoric and Composition." *Composition, Rhetoric, and Disciplinarity: Traces of the Past, Issues of the Moment, and Prospects for the Future*. Ed. Rita Malenczyk, Susan Miller-Cochran, Elizabeth Wardle, and Kathleen Blake Yancey. Forthcoming.

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