An Autoethnography Of A Non-Traditional Student Veteran A Journey Of Transition To The Present

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to my wife, Laura. Thank you for always being there with your encouragement and positive attitude. I also dedicate this to the men and women who serve or have served in the United States Navy.
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT VETERAN

A JOURNEY OF TRANSITION TO THE PRESENT

by

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THESIS

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Finally, I want to acknowledge two German Shepherd Dogs that have accompanied me through my academic journey, Rex and Rocky. Each saw me through a part of this journey. Rex helped me through my undergraduate studies and a master’s degree, and Rocky tried to hang as long as he could to make sure I completed this stage. They are missed.
ABSTRACT

There is a lack of research on career military student veterans in higher education. I use a layered-account autoethnographic approach (Adams et al., 2011) to recount my experience as a career military student veteran. Having spent 30-years in uniform, I felt that my perspectives could help both student veterans and career military student veterans traverse through the world of higher education while providing staff and faculty a better understanding of how career military veterans see the world. In general, veterans have difficulty trying to keep their military identity separate from their student identity. Military identities are more engrained in veterans who have made the military a career.

Career military personnel's transition is often more challenging due to their age and compromised physical and mental capabilities. My experience with higher education led me through depression, pain, and self-doubt. Education was my gateway to regaining my identity and, to a great extent, my sanity. Education has provided the structure and sense of mission that I longed for after retirement from the military.
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INTRODUCTION

While research on veteran transition exists, I found a research gap between military retiree students and student veterans, especially from a career veteran’s perspective. My personal experiences as both a career military veteran and a student in higher education might provide older career military veterans with an understanding of how their experiences can be used to reenter the civilian world and higher education. Additionally, institutions of higher education can better understand how career military veterans see the world. In general, veterans experience frustrations as they traverse the intricacies and bureaucracy that exists in higher education. One of the many challenges faced by career veterans is placing their military identity away from public view. They are expected to assimilate into the role of a student and forget their military upbringing.

This thesis will explore how a career military veteran navigated through self-doubt, social, cultural, and political events that affected my sense of self and challenged my values. My own experiences with higher education have prompted me to consider the extent to which older veterans attend learning institutions and how they cope with significant life changes and academic challenges.

I became intrigued with veterans like myself. Career military retirees who faced the challenges of transitioning into a world that is entirely different from the one they were leaving, a world where the organization, the discipline, the belief in mission completion, and the refusal to surrender is a way of life. The career veterans who had the responsibility, prestige, and leadership to command thousands of men and women are now reduced to working jobs that offer none of the tenets.
METHODOLOGY

The gap in the literature on career veterans assimilating into higher education prompted me to tell my story. The term veteran is extremely broad. The dictionary defines “veteran” as a person who has served in the military. In its most basic form and the most commonly accepted definition, a veteran is a person who served one enlistment. However, that term encompasses many subcategories, all of which are considered veterans. The terms “disabled veteran,” and “combat veteran,” have entered the vocabularies of politicians, healthcare workers, and therapists to a greater extent. A much less known category is the career veteran – the veteran who made a military career by serving 20-years or more. I wanted to tell my story in a way that connects with available research. Ellis and Bochner (2000) view autoethnography as “autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural description mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). A layered account focuses on the author’s experience and connects it with data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature (Charmaz, 1983). The layered account approach provided me with the opportunity to tell my story and combine it with existing research concerning veterans. My story is merely that, my story, but it allows me to be become a reliable narrator by interlacing it with other voices. It allows me to compare my story with that of others who have similar experiences and perspectives.
Ask anyone to describe a veteran attending college. Most everyone will describe a twenty-something man or woman who completed one enlistment and uses the GI Bill to obtain a college education. Rarely, if ever, does one describe a 60-something-year-old man with torn-up knees, a damaged back, and demons that still haunt him at night and sometimes during the bright of light. A man with experiences that go back to the end of the Vietnam War, the height of the Cold War, Beirut, the Gulf War, Iraq, and Afghanistan. A man who spent 30 years of his life in service to this nation, 27 of those years on destroyers, cruisers, amphibious assault ships, aircraft carriers, and several unpleasant places ashore. Thirty years on steel decks, ladders, lack of sleep, and constant stress would eventually take its toll on body and mind.

I joined the Navy at the age of 17 against objections from my family. I do not come from a close-knit family, and their opinion of the military was less than favorable. My father served in Korea, and perhaps his experiences influenced his feelings towards the military. The military did not have the prestige that it does today, and many felt that the military was for individuals who did not have other options. Those closest to me felt that the military did not compare to other occupations where one was expected to do actual work. Their understanding of the military was limited. I did not go to college after high school because I knew that doing so would waste time and money. The Navy offered me the opportunity to travel and see the world, to push myself beyond my limitations. Most have never endeavored to do the things I have done, but I could do everything they had accomplished. After all of these years, I have finally realized that it was a fool’s errand trying to prove something to people who no longer had any bearing in my life. However, I discovered that resentment could be an excellent motivator.

My way of thinking has changed over the years. How I approached problems, how I learned, and how I interacted with others changed entirely. I had reached the highest enlisted rank in the military and the most elevated position in the chain of command. My career in the
U. S. Navy not only defined me; it was and is a part of who I am. Having to retire was one of the most difficult challenges I ever faced. The transition that followed this storied career was frustrating, disappointing, and depressing. I no longer had the structure, the mission, the camaraderie that I had when I served.

I will be the first to admit that I was ill-prepared to transition into the civilian world. I tried to extend for a couple more years, but it would have required another tour away from family and another tour in the Middle East. I would have gladly gone, but my family had sacrificed for decades, and it was time to make them a priority. It was time to start a new chapter in my life. I tried to prepare myself for the immense change that was about to occur and embrace the change; however, it would turn out to be more difficult than I anticipated.
GI BILL

The Serviceman’s Readjustment Act (GI Bill) helped over seven million World War II veterans receive an education. The Post-9/11 GI Bill extended benefits for honorably discharged veterans, their spouses, and their children (Grossman, 2009). As the United States continues to draw down its forces, veteran college enrollment continues to grow.

As military veterans’ representation on U. S. college campuses continues to increase, veterans are likely to face numerous challenges. Veterans continue to have trouble accessing their Veterans Administration (VA) benefits (Ackerman, DiRamio & Mitchell, 2008). Veterans must often fight with colleges and universities to transfer military training and experience into academic credit. These obstacles contributed to the additional problem where many student veterans use up their eligibility for GI Bill money before graduating and have to use their own funds to finish or leave school. Despite the challenges of juggling schoolwork with jobs and families, veterans attending college under the Post-9/11 GI Bill are finishing at rates slightly higher than their classmates (Marcus, 2017). Despite the notable successes, only one in ten veterans who utilize their GI Bill benefits enrolls in an institution with graduation rates above 70 percent. Of nearly 900,000 veterans using their post-9/11 GI Bill and Yellow Ribbon funds, only 722 undergraduates are enrolled in the country’s top 36 most selective, non-profit colleges (Hill, 2019).

Veterans, by definition, are non-traditional students. According to O’Herrin (2011), the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines “non-traditional” student as a category of students who:

- Do not immediately continue education after high school
- Attend college only part-time
- Are financially independent
- Have children or dependents other than a spouse
- A single parent
- Possess a GED as opposed to a high school diploma (2011).

O’Herrin (2011) further offers additional statistics on the characteristics of recent veteran students. Between 2007-08, active duty and veteran students represented four percent of
all undergraduates enrolled, 43% percent of students with military service attended public two-year institutions, 12% enrolled in private for-profit institutions, women make up 15% of the veteran population. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that between 14 and 19% of those who have deployed have developed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and depression (O’Herrin, 2011).

Veterans are different from most any other university demographic. They bring with them life experiences that can bring challenges and rewards. Generally, a veteran’s experiences, discipline, and work ethic can contribute to their academic success (Flink, 2017). Other elements that label veteran students as non-traditional students is the diversity that veterans bring to campuses. Veterans are typically older; they often come from different cultures, different ethnic backgrounds, and in many cases, other countries. According to the VA (2020), only 15 percent of student veterans are the traditional age of college students. Most are between the ages of 24-40, 47 percent of student veterans have children, and 47.3 percent are married (VA, 2020). Zong and Batalova (2019) of the Migration Policy Institute suggests that the number of veterans born outside the United States stands at approximately 530,000, or 3 percent of the 18.6 million veterans nationwide. These figures do not include the 1.9 million born in the United States to immigrant parents (Zong, Batalova, 2019).
TRANSITION

Veterans transitioning to civilian life find that they face significant lifestyle changes. These changes further complicate an already stressful time in a veteran’s life. Veterans with disabilities face additional challenges. Flink (2017) suggests that disabled veterans find themselves “victims of stereotyping and discrimination due to the stigmatization of invisible disabilities.” Veterans have become the largest population of individuals with disabilities (Flink, 2017). These invisible disabilities include but are not limited to post-traumatic stress disorders, traumatic brain injuries, depression, and anxiety.

Flink (2017) uses Schlossberg’s transition theory to explain how transitions change the assumptions about oneself and those associated changes in behavior and relationships. One individual may perceive a career change positively while another may perceive it negatively. Schlossberg (1981) describes several types of transitions—anticipated and unanticipated transitions, non-events – transitions that are expected but do not occur. Some examples of non-events include divorce, the sudden death of a loved one, or failure to obtain employment—every individual experiences their transition differently (Flink, 2017).

Transition is a process that takes place over time, and every transition begins with the ending of something else. When a career military person transitions into the civilian world, a military career comes to an end. For the career veteran, the end of the military career also marks the end of a lifestyle and identity. Schlossberg’s transition theory suggests that transitions can be anticipated or expected (marriage, or retirement) or unanticipated (loss of a loved one or loss of a job) (Schlossberg, 1981). I would go one step further and contend that the end of a military career can be both anticipated and unanticipated. One might assume that an end to a military career is an anticipated and planned out transition. However, one expects the inevitable but does not fully acknowledge it.

I anticipated retirement. I knew there would come a time when I would have to leave an organization where I had grown. However, that anticipation was in the back of my mind. I had
tried to ignore it, but before I knew it, I received my papers to transfer to the retired list. I fell into the category of men and women who were unprepared for retirement. The other type of individuals who meticulously planned every step of their transition often derived the same results. Many of my brethren started preparing, networking, and planning. Yet, a good percentage found themselves in my exact situation. They also found that seeking and finding employment was not something one could plan.

I have never viewed my age as a disability, nor have I experienced ageism at any institution of higher learning. However, imagine that in addition to dealing with advanced age, having an invisible disability further compounded by age? Advanced age has, in many ways, provided me with certain wisdom and calm. Yet, I can count on one hand the number of nights I have had a night of uninterrupted sleep. Age has made me come to the reality that the consequences derived from years on steel decks, climbing ladders, extreme weather, sleep deprivation, and often reckless behavior, all in the interest of getting the mission completed, are now staring me in the face.

I was 49 when I retired from active duty. Employers were less than eager to hire older veterans. A study by the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics at Syracuse University (2013) showed that Gulf War veterans had a 19 percent unemployment rate, while Gulf War veterans between the ages of 50 – 64 had a 20.4 unemployment rate (National Center for Veterans, 2013). The Center for a New American Security (CNAS) found that 80 percent of the 69 companies interviewed stated that they had experienced issues with hiring veterans (Hall, 2014). An article published in the Atlantic (2013) describes the typical veteran as under 35 and suggests the most did not have resumes that hiring managers understood. “A 25-year old Iraq war veteran may have significant leadership and technical experience, but he may not have a two- or four-year college degree, two or more years of nonmilitary work experience, or references from past employers” (Quinton, 2013).

The reasons that have prompted many employers to resist hiring veterans are many. According to Maclean and Kleykamp (2014), veterans are a stigmatized group since the Vietnam War, and now, through wars with Iraq and Afghanistan. Maclean and Kleykamp have
hypothesized that members of the public assume that combat veterans have more behavioral and mental health problems than those not exposed to combat (Maclean and Kleykamp, 2014). Brogan (2020) suggests that one of the reasons for the difficulty experienced by veterans seeking employment is “that hiring managers do not understand veterans, as the number of people who personally know a veteran is shrinking.” Further, Brogan states that veteran status is also affected by race/ethnicity and gender (Brogan, 2020).

I had references from Admirals, Captains, Commanders, and peers, but unfortunately, they did not carry the same relevance that they did in the Navy. My fitness reports were impeccable with a rating of 5.0 on a 5.0 scale and ranked the number one Master Chief at every command. A letter of recommendation from a two or three-star Admiral is considered a golden ticket in the Navy and not easy to obtain. Yet, those accolades were of little significance to civilian employers. While age discrimination is illegal, older job seekers still have difficulty finding suitable employment. Anecdotal evidence suggests that individuals over 40 find that getting hired is challenging. From a personal perspective, and after applying for many jobs, I noticed that employers were resistant to hiring older individuals, especially veterans, even with a college degree. Going further, career military vets often do not have a network in cities where they choose to retire. The articles I have read do not address nepotism, favoritism, and perhaps racism that drive the hiring process. While all of these actions are illegal, one has to accept the possibility that they exist.

I was one of many who fell for the myth that my leadership skills, project management skills, and the various positions I held in the Navy would have prospective employers knocking my door down, yet nothing could have been further from the truth. Finding meaningful employment was difficult. All I had was my experience and stellar track record with years of leadership, technical, strategic experience, and corporate knowledge. However, the fact that I did not possess a college degree coupled with a lagging economy and scarce veteran employment opportunities were only a few of the challenges that presented themselves as I navigated through my transition. Minnis (2014), focusing on the Army, suggests that the challenges faced by service
members entering the civilian workforce were the jobs they performed while on active duty (Minnis, 2014). However, this applies to any branch of the military. In my situation, as the Command Master Chief, I was part of the command leadership triad onboard an aircraft carrier. The command triad includes the Commanding Officer, Executive Officer, and Command Master Chief. As the Senior Enlisted Leader for up to 5000 Navy and Marine Corps personnel, I supervised and managed over 4000 personnel in various shipboard departments ensuring maximum efficiency and unit cohesion through process improvement methods. I was the Commanding Officer's principal advisor on matters relating to personnel, morale, and operational readiness and equipment. I prioritized training requirements and implemented courses of action to ensure optimum effectiveness. I acted as the primary liaison between executive leadership and personnel. How does one equate the responsibility of being an enlisted Soldier, Sailor, Airman, or Marine into civilian terms? While this information looked great on paper, it did not appear to have the desired effect on potential employers.

Minnis (2014) also discusses the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), that the services instituted to assist service members’ transitions to civilian life. In 1990, Congress established a program to assist transitioning service members due to the mandated reduction in forces. TAP is a program designed to teach military service members how to seek employment. Service members are provided the opportunity to attend this workshop 90 days before separating from the service (Minnis, p. 7). The reality was that this program was nothing more than a check in the block for Congress. The three-day workshop consisted of short discussions about translating military skills and training into civilian jobs, financial planning, VA benefits, dressing for success, and government civilian employment information. I had several issues with the TAP program, and I voiced those issues to the chain of command. Many of these issues stemmed from the instructors who had been hired to teach these workshops. Frankly, a lot of people made a significant amount of money contracting their workshops to the military. While I am not suggesting that the workshops were of no value, they did not address important aspects of resume writing, interview prep, and reliable advice on job searching. These workshops were more tailored towards the young
Sailor who had completed one enlistment. Initially, senior enlisted personnel and junior officers were neglected entirely.

Additionally, it was not unheard of for individuals attending TAP to be recalled to the command because their presence was required onboard the ship. Some separating members never had the opportunity to participate in this workshop. It was an ongoing battle with department heads and division officers who always felt they could not do without these individuals. These disagreements often got heated, but, in most cases, I was able to get these individuals to the class. These department heads did not understand that they would permanently lose these individuals within a few weeks or months. Oddly, many who attended the class often opted to remain on active duty for many reasons. Many of the Sailors attending these workshops faced the reality that they would no longer have a steady income or medical coverage, which was especially important to young married members.

My last tour of duty lasted long enough for me to lose my network back in San Diego. I applied for several jobs. I reached out to old friends, people I had served with throughout the years, and even tried the Veterans Administration (VA) employment service. I had several interviews, and in some cases, I was called back for a second interview, but usually, that was where it ended. Job hunting was a humbling experience. I found that many of the companies who were touting themselves as “veteran-friendly employers,” in my experience, were only looking for young, one enlistment veterans or career officers. One interview stands out in my mind. It was a panel interview. After the interview, one of the interviewers, a former Naval officer, followed me outside. He asked if he could offer some advice, and of course, I responded in the affirmative. I recall his exact words, “Don’t be Superman. You don’t have to solve all of the problems.” This statement confused me. The Navy trained me to identify problems and take corrective measures. He also mentioned that I was too formal and did not appear to be relaxed. He ended his critique by stating that employers do not want someone to come in and fix things; they want someone to do the job they were hired to do. I thanked him for his advice and left, knowing that this interview was a bust. I went through the interview in my mind to try and figure out where in the interview,
I stated or inferred that I would fix something. In my mind, I had responded to the questions appropriately. I filed the exchange in the recesses of my mind and moved on. I was offended by the thought that responding to an issue made one less employable.

This transition period proved to be detrimental to my self-esteem and mental health. I felt that I needed to find a job quickly. After six months of searching, I was ready to apply for the most menial employment to feel better about myself. I eventually took a job with a non-profit organization. From the beginning, I knew that I did not like or want the job. It provided extra income and kept me busy, and I thought that perhaps, this job would give some sense of accomplishment and structure. The situation did just that, but it did not provide any satisfaction. I left the job after a year. I would have left sooner, but I felt a sense of obligation. I never quit during my Navy career, and that sense of responsibility had followed me into the civilian world. I applied online with USAJOBS, a government position clearinghouse. I had the maximum veteran preference points, but oddly enough, most of the open positions were for physicians, scientists, and engineers. Many positions were explicitly targeted towards junior enlisted veterans.

In most cases, my qualifications fit the positions' requirements, but accepting those positions would have required me to relocate and often relocate overseas. I had satisfied my desire to travel while in the Navy, and all I wanted was to come home from work and spend time with family. I reached out to other veterans who were experiencing the same difficulty in finding employment. We all had one thing in common; we were senior enlisted veterans without an established network. Many had returned from deployment or had been geographical bachelors in other states. We all had found that companies who touted themselves as “veteran-friendly” were not veteran retiree friendly. This informal group provided some form of sanity, giving each comfort in knowing that we were not alone. It was that “buddy check” that we all need. We shared leads and networking opportunities with each other, but unfortunately, most leads were dead ends.
As the weeks passed by, the consequences of my depression were becoming difficult to ignore. I would sit for hours, letting my mind drift in different directions, replaying the scenarios where I felt that I could have exercised better judgment, and revisiting old regrets. I would try and determine what was causing my depression. I would ask myself if perhaps I was feeling sorry for myself, or was it the fact that after 30-years of chaos, my mind was catching up to me? I tried to self-diagnose and view what I was going through objectively, but I would have headaches from holding back the emotions that were screaming to come out. I knew that this behavior was unsustainable, unhealthy, and I needed help. These issues were starting to affect my marriage. I was fortunate because my wife also served for 30-years and deployed several times during our marriage. She had a better understanding of what I was going through more than most.

However, the stigma attached to mental health care, the appearance of weakness, precluded me from seeking help. I had dealt with Sailors who could have benefited from mental health assistance but most resisted because of the stigma attached to seeking such help. The military is infamous for viewing such support as a sign of weakness or, worse, just another way of malingering. Flink (2017) describes two types of stigma. Public and self-stigma. Public stigma refers to the stigmatization of mental health issues and public reactions and stereotypes of those issues. These public reactions often cause individuals with mental health issues to avoid being perceived in such a manner and often forego much-needed treatment. Self-stigma, on the other hand, occurs when individuals begin believing those stereotypes. Individuals with mental illnesses feel shame that demoralizes and decreases self-esteem and self-efficacy. Veterans believe they are strong, and having depression often leads to feeling weak and inadequate (Flink, 2017).

My anxiety and depression had risen to levels that suffocated me. Not only did I feel defeated, but I had lost my sense of self. I did not particularly appreciate leaving the house, I did not like crowds, and I had difficulty concentrating. To this day, sleep continues to elude me. The
pain in my knees and my back, coupled with the constant anxiety, allow me to sleep about four hours a night if I am lucky.

The only solace I managed to get was riding my Harley and my German Shepherd. Riding forced me to concentrate on the road, the cars around me, and kept me focused. It was the only thing that kept my mind from exploding. However, I had, on more than one occasion, considered drifting into oncoming traffic. I felt embarrassed, alone, and defeated. I would sit for hours and think about how it might feel, not dealing with chaotic thoughts that consumed me. Of course, I also thought about the fallout that my wife and family would have to deal with if I chose to take the easy way out.

The VA prescribed anti-depressants, which only served to cloud my head, diminish my sex drive, and only camouflage the way I felt. I tried cannabis, and it made my situation slightly better, and I did start getting more sleep. My primary doctor at the VA set me up with a therapist. I remember the therapist asking me why I came off the anti-depressants. After I explained that they clouded my head and diminished my sex drive, her response was, “then how do you expect to get better.” I explained that feeling the way I did from taking the pills did not make me feel better. Her attitude was condescending and dismissive. After about 15 minutes of listening to her tell me everything I was doing wrong, I got up and walked out. She came up behind me, telling me to return. I quietly told her to stay the (expletive) away from me. I never returned.

The Veterans Administration Healthcare system had been overwhelmed, and as a result, the quality of healthcare had suffered. I consider myself extremely fortunate in that I had the means to seek help from outside sources. I can only imagine what experiencing a similar situation could potentially do to other veterans with other, more severe disabilities. The suicide rates had been rising at an alarming rate. Many veterans recounted stories of poor or non-existent veteran healthcare, long waiting periods, and a lack of qualified medical personnel. Maguen et al. (2015) contend that suicide rates among Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) active duty, and veterans continued to be a growing health concern with the rising suicide rates. They “found that among veterans screening positive for depression or PTSD and endorsing
hopelessness, 75% endorsed having suicidal thoughts, with nearly 13% endorsing a suicidal plan, and 4% endorsing thought and a plan.” Additionally, they found that while many veterans were reluctant to seek care, delaying care caused symptoms and psychosocial functioning to worsen, increasing suicidality potential (Maguen et al., 2015).

Interestingly, Fanning and Pietrzak (2013) conducted a study of 1,962 male veterans aged 60 or older and found that 94 veterans endorsed some level of suicidal ideation, both combat and non-combat veterans. Of the 94 veterans, 43 had reported they had attempted suicide at some point in their lives (2013). Older veterans and retirees possess different issues that have gone neglected. For example, a retired military member who served 30 years, will in most cases, retire between 48 and 50 years of age. Older, non-retiree veterans may not begin to experience issues until they reach their “golden years.” When asked what a veteran suicide victim looks like, I submit that the average person would not include the individual who retired from the military.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (2019) National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report provides critical results for the years 2008 to 2017 that indicates a steep rise in veteran suicides. Their results found that veteran suicides exceeded 6000 each year. In 2017 the suicide rates for veterans were 1.5 times the rate for non-veteran adults. Of particular interest, the report also indicated that for each year, from 2005 to 2017, veterans with recent veterans’ healthcare use had higher suicide rates than other veterans.

After that experience with the VA therapist, I went out into the civilian community and met with another therapist. She came recommended by a friend of mine who assured me that she had experience with military personnel. I decided to pay for a couple of sessions and see if she could help. I was willing to try anything after having suicidal thoughts. It turned out that she helped considerably. She did not prescribe medication but use a more holistic approach. She did recommend supplements and natural remedies, and though she did not recommend cannabis, she did suggest doses and strength and the use of edibles instead of smoking. I used cannabis for several months as I continued with her, and I was able to reconcile some of the issues I was having.
She suggested finding something that would provide me structure and purpose, such as returning to school.

I considered my therapist’s suggestion, understanding that returning to school would require me to step outside of what had become my comfort zone. Returning to school would mean that I would have to interact with people and learn how to function in a traditional classroom. The last time I had set foot in a traditional classroom was when I was in high school. My age and lack of traditional school experience were a concern for me. I wondered how many career military student veterans would even consider returning to a college campus. However, even with these concerns looming over me, I realized that I had to do something to return to my usual self. I figured that not only would this be an excellent alternative to sitting at home thinking and reliving my military experiences, but it would also provide me a college degree that might make my employment search easier.
ANTICIPATED WRITING ISSUES

The issues surrounding student veterans regarding their writing abilities can significantly influence their rate of success. These factors can present additional barriers for many veteran students. For example, students who join the military from different countries still face English language and writing issues. Writing can pose a significant challenge for these veterans. Grammar is not taught in first-year composition courses, even though doing so could alleviate undue stress on non-native and native English speakers. These issues include a lack of understanding of student veteran writers. Hart and Thompson (2016) reported an institutional approach to course development of First-Year Writing (FYW) courses as veteran enrollments increased. The recommendations resulted from a grant that funded a two-year study of student veterans and part of a 2010 Conference on College Composition and Communications (CCCC). To mitigate some of the challenges experienced by student veterans, some institutions have instituted veteran-friendly courses, veteran only writing classes, and veteran-focused classes. While many institutions reported positive results, they also presented significant challenges, both pragmatic and ethical (2016). However, the assumption exists that their definition of a veteran does not include career veterans and may be more tailored towards the stereotypical veteran.

Veterans often take advantage of off-duty education opportunities offered at every military base within the United States and overseas locations. These off-duty education opportunities often miss the target when it comes to writing. Some of these universities offer online courses, while others may teach on the base or onboard ships; however, due to hectic operational schedules, deployments, and training workup cycles, these classes are often watered down. While empirical evidence regarding the success or lack of success in writing programs at these academic institutions, I can only go by my own experience. Additionally, I am not suggesting that these courses are of no value. I am merely pointing out the reality that these universities face when teaching military personnel. These first-year writing courses offered through these educational opportunities may not be as robust as one might find in a traditional college or university.
Student veterans have been applying to and getting accepted to universities and colleges across the country. Cate et al. (2017) suggest that as little as .01% of veterans between the ages of 50-65 take advantage of their veteran educational benefits. Table 1 illustrates the results of a 2017 study, which included 853,114 veterans and active-duty members.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>PERCENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 19</td>
<td>260,819</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-21</td>
<td>88,086</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-24</td>
<td>155,008</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>138,668</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>68,565</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>44,872</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>49,905</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>11,614</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 9/11 GI Bill gives career military personnel the option to transfer their GI Bill benefits to their children or spouse. Retirees prefer to transfer their benefits to their children or spouses. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, VA Annual Benefits Report FY. 2018, 584,858 veterans and service members used the 9/11 GI Bill, 29,745 transferred their eligibility to a spouse, 89,857 transferred their eligibility to a child. An additional 3,609 of those beneficiaries fell under the Fry Scholarship. The Fry Scholarships are provided to spouses and children of active-duty members who died in the line of duty on or after September 11, 2001 (p.13). I believe that these options have significantly diminished the enrollment of older veterans. In my situation, I had no dependents to transfer my benefits to, and my spouse, also a military retiree, had her own GI Bill benefit.
EDUCATION BEGINS

I was committed to doing anything that would help me move on with my life. The fact that I had even considered taking the easy way out and planning the best method to do it scared me. I had never considered taking such a drastic measure to solve a problem. I was scared enough that I was willing to do whatever it took.

Killam and Deggies-White (2018) discuss the variety of academic-related challenges as veterans enter higher education. Among those challenges are struggles with course material, different teaching styles, and adjusting from a regimented life to a significantly less restrained. Colleges and universities implement a significantly different approach to teaching and learning. Veterans are also disadvantaged by the absence of conformity (p.85).

I found that I was going to have to learn how to learn again. For 30 years, my learning centered around military-style training. One sat on bleachers, a classroom, or the Hangar Deck and listened while the instructor explained how to accomplish a task, operate a piece of equipment, or fire a specific weapon. We could immediately put that training into effect by performing the task, operating the equipment, or firing a weapon. Rarely did any of the training require any abstract thought. Military training is simple and effective. Training is conducted so that the “lowest and slowest” understand, and in most cases, the training is intuitive. The training focused on three elements: tell, show, perform. Repetition was the cornerstone of learning in the military. We would perform a task until it became instinct, and the muscle memory took over. For example, firefighting and damage control training is one of the most critical aspects of shipboard life. Every crewmember must know how to fight a shipboard fire, plug a hole, or secure a leaking pipe. During the first day of initial training, crew members learn basic firefighting that encompasses fire types, the best extinguishing agents for specific fires, and fire hose handling. The second and subsequent days are spent demonstrating and performing, and repeating each task until it becomes ingrained in the students’ minds. The training becomes second nature, intuitive, and effective.
Apple and Ellis (2015) suggest that learner efficacy is the belief a learner has in his or her own ability to learn. In short, a learner’s ability to learn depends on that learner’s self-confidence; their levels of self-image impacted learners’ performances in constructing knowledge in different environments as learners” (p. 21). My inability to obtain employment, which I felt was commensurate with my knowledge and experience, coupled with a lackluster performance during the placement exams at the junior college, made me question the once high opinion of myself. My self-image had taken some real hits, and I was no longer the confident, decisive, senior enlisted leader that could comfortably respond to any crisis or situation.

Learner efficacy affected my self-confidence, but it is also affected by the way a person learns. Proulx (2006) suggests that their own experiences shape the construal of knowledge, or the process of how individuals perceive, comprehend, and interpret the world around them as learners. Therefore, knowledge is dependent on the learner. Proulx concludes that, according to Piaget, when an individual is confronted by information or experience that contradicts prior knowledge, the learner is motivated to change and adapt prior knowledge to return to equilibrium (p. 19).

I had been away from traditional schooling for three decades. I did not believe I could remember the difference between a fraction, a noun, or a verb. If it did not have to do with refueling, firefighting and damage control, underway replenishment evolutions, or security, it had not been critical during my career. Proulx (2006) further suggests that constructivism, radical or otherwise, is in the heads of persons who construct what one knows based on their own experience. In other words, within constructivism, knowledge is interpreted based on the learner's own lived experiences (p. 20). My learning came in the form of repetition, muscle memory, and tactile learning. One cannot learn how to fight a shipboard fire by primarily sitting in a classroom, nor can one learn how to refuel or launch a helicopter off a swaying deck by listening to an instructor standing in front of a whiteboard. The learner must get his or her hands on the equipment necessary to accomplish these tasks. Redundancy and repetition were tried and true methods of training new and more seasoned Sailors.
I was uncomfortable with the potential of entering the world of academia. I felt unprepared for the type of learning I would encounter. I knew that I would have to learn how to learn. I would have to acclimate to the methods used by professors and instructors. I would have to accept that I would be sitting in a classroom for several hours a day – a difficult task since I was accustomed to being outside in the fresh air. I also realized that I would have to deal with the claustrophobia that often set in when I found myself in situations where the environment was crowded and noisy. Proulx (2015) refers to these events as perturbations. Perturbations are experiences where one encounters events that do not match or fit in with the learner’s experiences. Piagetian theory states that these perturbations result in disequilibria, resulting in the learner’s adaptation and eventual assimilation to return to equilibrium (p. 8).

There were several things I would have to accomplish if I were to be successful. Learning is a process. I decided to approach learning as I would any other task. I had to become organized and remove as many obstacles as I could before entering the classroom. I decided to visit the community college I would be attending on a Sunday afternoon. I loaded up my German Shepherd and headed to the college. We walked every inch of the campus several times. I wanted to get comfortable with the location of every building. I used this practice while on active duty to find shipboard spaces that were not often visited. I looked for the closest Damage Control Lockers and the nearest fire stations. I mapped out several egress points and routes to and from these spaces until I was comfortable walking the entire ship without feeling lost. Completing this simple task gave me absolute confidence and shored up my equilibrium.

When it came to course work, I wrote everything down in my “wheel book.” In the Navy, a “wheel book” is a small, green journal that came in various sizes. While in the Navy, the wheel book was my lifeline. Everything I did, anyone I spoke to, any pending tasks, any future requirements, inspection results, and important notes were kept in that wheel book. I used that book for the entirety of my career. I recall that the Supply Officer had purchased Palm Pilots and Blackberries for the command structure; mine never made it out of the box. I found it too
complicated and too fragile for some of the work that I did. I used the same process in college. My wheel book contained class notes, assignment deadlines, office hours, and other information.
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

I had my entire GI Bill available, and I was also eligible for the Vocational Rehabilitation Program (VOC REHAB). I decided to use my VOC REHAB benefits and return to school. The process for obtaining the VOC REHAB benefit was intense. I was required to take several tests to check my aptitude and determine the best career path. Once I completed the required criteria, I met with a civilian career counselor. We went through an in-depth interview. She explained that I had to find a vocation that suited my aptitude and accommodate my disabilities. I had enjoyed training my Sailors, and I felt that I had valuable teaching or training skills. She suggested that I do some research on job availabilities and forecasts for teachers and then decide if I was interested enough to commit to teaching. I had a stack of questionnaires that I had to complete. We went over my responses to the questions and the research I had accumulated during our next meeting. She approved my education plan and suggested that I contact the local Troops to Teachers (TTT) program coordinator. The Department of Defense and Education founded the TTT program to help veterans transition into teaching careers after completing their military service. Since the program began in 1993, TTT has helped thousands of veterans start successful teaching careers. TTT members are encouraged to teach in low-income school districts and pursue teaching in math, science, special education, and other high-need areas. The program also offered a stipend or bonus of $5,000 to $10,000, depending on the student body demographics (Troops to Teachers, 2020). The objective was to get teachers into schools where at least 20 percent of the student population was below the poverty level. I was shocked to learn that almost any school in any school district met that criteria.

I had accrued some college credits during my time in the Navy. I received about 36 semester hours from completing the Senior Enlisted Academy and various other training schools I had attended during my career. I decided that it would be best if I started at the local community college. I enrolled at Southwestern College in Chula Vista, CA. My anxiety grew as I prepared to return to school. I was sensitive to noise, and I did not care for crowds. The therapist had referred
to it as hypervigilance. I was continually scanning the area where I was and hated having people behind me. Since the college was only a few blocks from my house, I felt more comfortable knowing I could be home in a few minutes. I registered for three classes in my first semester. I had not done well on the math placement test, which required me to take an Introductory Algebra class, an English 101, and a History class.

I arranged my schedule so that my classes were early or in the evening to avoid the crowds, and I had discovered that the classes were usually smaller. I quickly found that returning to college provided me with the structure and mission-oriented environment I had become accustomed to. Looking back, returning to school gave me purpose. I was expected to be at the assigned place at a specific time. I viewed each assignment as the mission. I was always early for classes, and I did not stop until I completed the “mission.” Having to prepare for class, study, and complete homework assignments provided me with direction. The tenacity that I learned in the Navy served me well in the world of academia. I would spend hours in my office, at the library, or the writing center.

Some days, I would only see my wife for only a couple of hours. My German Shepherd Dog (GSD), Rex, kept me company in the office. It seemed to me that he understood what I was doing, and he also understood when I had to step away for a few minutes. He would come up and nudge my elbow with his massive head, letting me know it was time to do something else. Rex was my salvation as I tried to figure out Algebraic problems or wrote a History Research paper. I had always owned GSDs because they are loyal and protective. Rex was no different. At 90 pounds, a shiny black and red coat, he was a smart, stunning boy who quickly formed a bond with me. Like all the other GSDs I owned throughout the years, Rex made me appreciate what a difference an animal companion can make in the lives of veterans who suffer from combat and service-related issues. Stern et al.(2013) state that approximately more than half a million American veterans suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a mental health condition that is triggered by reexperiencing a traumatic event or events. Common symptoms of PTSD include avoidance of social activities, a sense of estrangement from family and friends, as
well as self-harm. These symptoms lead to limited interactions with people, family members, and coworkers. Stern et al. further suggest that association with a companion animal can reduce loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Furthermore, they have found that dogs, with their affectionate nature, are good companions for veterans with PTSD (Stern et al., 2013).

I do not consider myself a smart individual, but a couple of things kept me going. First was the personal pride that I possessed. I could not allow myself to quit or do poorly on an assignment. Not only did I feel that I was competing with myself, but I was competing with every other student in the classroom. Second, I thought that I had something to prove.

There were many times where I was so overwhelmed that everything seemed impossible, but it was during those times that I excelled. When I walked into their classrooms, the professors' reactions varied from surprise to an initial “why me?” I had to work twice as hard, and assignments often took me longer than they should have. Killam and Degges-White (2017) address some of the acidic environmental challenges faced by veterans. These struggles include trouble with course material, unfamiliarity with teaching styles, and adjusting from a regimented life to a less restrained one. The military requires conformity and structure. Killam and Degges-White suggest that veterans may be disadvantaged by the lack of conformity across academic courses, which in some cases results in difficulty adjusting to academic requirements (Killam, & Degges-White, 2017).

However, I quickly established myself as the student who was on time, participated, and could have intelligent conversations. I finished my core classes with a 3.0 average and transferred to San Diego State.
SAN DIEGO STATE

San Diego State was considerably farther, about 25 miles from my house. I was concerned about having to deal with crowds and large classes. Fortunately, veterans had priority registration to arrange my courses as I had done at the community college. I completed my general education requirements in two semesters at the community college and transferred to San Diego State University (SDSU). SDSU was about 25 miles from my house but still closer than the other universities I had applied to. I had applied to the University of California, San Diego, and the University of San Diego. Although all of them admitted me, I chose SDSU. It is a great state school, and the cost was significantly lower than the other schools. Other schools were expensive, and many veterans were forced to take out student loans to finish their degrees.

I used the same process that I used when I entered community college. I loaded up my dog on a Sunday morning and drove out to the campus. We walked around the entire campus and became familiar with each of the buildings. SDSU has a beautiful campus, which served to keep me focused on the surroundings rather than the number of people that attended the university. I found that SDSU had a more extensive, older student population. Unfortunately, most of my classmates were young and recent high school graduates.

Meiners (2019) discusses organization assimilation. Organization assimilation is the process where integration into an organization takes place; “A key assumption of the assimilation approach is that as the psychological distance between the newcomer and others in the organization is reduced, the newcomer should feel more of a part of the organization and better identify with its core values and mission” (p. 48). However, adjustment to college is a complex process of social adaptation. For many veterans, this process is exacerbated because many are simply trying to assimilate into society. Adapting to a college or university environment can often delay or derail this adaptation. If we consider the career veteran who has a significant age difference, the situation becomes much more complicated.
Universities have attempted to mitigate the academic challenges experienced by veterans. They have tried to provide support and connections by encouraging healthy social relationships for veterans. Killam and Degges-White (2018) state that about 60% of universities have some form of veterans’ center (p. 84). According to Flink (2017), veteran services offices act as one-stop shops that fill in for a chain of command and support networks. He suggests that student veterans benefit from connections with other student veterans (p. 7). This may be true for younger veterans, but, in my experience, I did not fit in. Many of the veterans I came across were young, much like many Sailors I had led.

I tried to make myself available to them, but many were leery of interacting with me. I did have a few who reached out for advice with their disability claims and dealing with the VA, but little else. To them, I was a Master Chief, and therefore, any informal relationship other than professional would be inappropriate. The rank structure is a difficult concept to grasp for those who have not served, but it is an integral part of military life and not easy to erase. We are conditioned to recognize rank, and we are trained to respond to each rank differently, and while we have all shared many of the same issues and experiences, they did not share the experiences I had endured. Junior enlisted and perhaps junior officers do not interact with senior enlisted personnel regularly, and in many cases, interacting with a senior was often viewed as a potential discipline issue. In the Navy, a Master Chief wields power and authority and can make or break a career, and most young Sailors believe that when one must see the Chief, it will be a bad day. While the primary purpose of rank is to give authority by lawful means, it also psychologically accomplishes the same task. The fact that higher ranks are difficult to achieve, earning one of these promotions comes with a certain prestige. For example, a junior enlisted member is legally required to obey the orders of a Master Chief; many Sailors would be extra-willing to try to please the Master Chief simply because of his/her status.

SDSU has an active Student Veteran Center and several veterans’ programs available to student veterans. They were quick to respond to veteran needs, advising, and counseling. However, the programs were tailored towards younger veterans, and this made me feel somewhat
isolated. Even with the veteran resources offered, navigating through the myriad of check-ins, paperwork, registration, and advising was difficult. Veteran work-study individuals staffed the Veterans Center, and they did their best to assist veterans. However, they did not always provide all the information. I often found myself having to make several trips to the registrar’s office, the financial aid office, and the Veterans Center. It was frustrating and time-consuming.

I wondered if it was my lack of understanding or inexperience on the part of the work-study personnel. The first semester was overwhelming. Campus life was not something to which I was accustomed. According to the SDSU Analytic Studies & Institutional Research (ASIRS) Enrollment summary, the student body population during the Fall 2020 semester was 34,512 (ASIRS, 2020). Unlike the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), SDSU is not a commuter school. The student population is comprised of foreign exchange students, students from out of state, and students who came in from other cities. I considered SDSU to be a typical university; Greek life, dormitories, and something going on every day. I pretty much kept my head down and pushed forward. My age and experience precluded me from participating in many of the events that occurred on campus. Since many of my classes were in the evening, I would often come across students milling about in the quad area, fraternity and sororities initiating new pledges, or behaving as I suspected college students would. Except for the occasional beer at the Student Union with some classmates, I kept to myself and concentrated on getting through my classes.

Most of my professors were outstanding. I always felt that they appreciated having an older student in the class. Unlike many of my classmates, I did not hesitate to ask questions or comment on a topic. Group work proved to be difficult for me. Although I was comfortable with teamwork in the Navy, this was an entirely different scenario. I often found myself doing most of the project with the help of one other engaged student. The positive side of group work was that I started feeling more comfortable around people. I began to understand that they were different from the military personnel with whom I once dealt. I keep in touch with many of them, and it is always nice to know where their journeys led them. I graduated from SDSU with a Bachelor of Arts in
English and a California Teaching Credential with a 3.78 GPA. I was one of the oldest undergraduate students at the university.

Graduating from SDSU was not the end of my journey as a student and learner. It was only the beginning. It is essential to discuss the many stops that have led me to the place I find myself today. Each of these stops was essential, not only my long road to recovery, but each also contributed to my understanding of how to learn.

After graduation, I taught high school English at a local charter school. I had applied at two of the school districts in San Diego to find that teachers were being laid off or preparing for layoffs. The recession had started, and San Diego took a big hit. Sub-prime loans had plagued an already stressed real estate market. People were losing their homes, filing for bankruptcy, and were, therefore, not paying property taxes, which funded the school districts. It was all a matter of timing, and in this case, the timing was not on my side. Sweetwater High School District, one of the country's largest districts, started laying off hundreds of teachers, as did the other school districts in San Diego County. I reached out to several people I had worked with during my student teaching and was fortunate enough to find a position for a 12th grade English and Humanities teacher. It had taken me five years after I retired to get to this point. I could have never guessed that it would take a person with my experience this long to find meaningful employment.

The charter school was an exciting place to work. It put the pedagogic theories I had worked with during my credentialing to the test. The cohort that I belonged to during credentialing focused on Linked Learning. Stanford University Graduate School of Education (2016) states that Linked Learning is defined as,

Linked learning joins together rigorous academics, a challenging career or profession-themed curriculum, and an opportunity for students to apply classroom learning through work-based experiences or other real-world involvement in their communities. Additionally, Linked Learning incorporates a dual commitment to challenge prevailing patterns of stratification through universal access to a rigorous, standards-based curriculum and to graduate all students fully prepared for college, career, and civic engagement. This dual commitment to equal access and gap-closing implicates a fourth critical dimension of the Linked Learning approach: comprehensive and integrated
student supports that meet all students where they are, scaffold their engagement with a standards-based curriculum, and address their learning and personal youth development needs. (Stanford University, 2016)

In simple terms, linked learning is a method by which student curricula consist of integrating academics with technical education and work-based learning. Linked learning also considers the relevancy of academic programs to the reality of students’ lives, many from underserved communities, and affords students of all levels and abilities with the best possible chances for success in college and later, in their chosen careers.

I was eager to implement many of the theories, frameworks, and concepts into the classroom. Up until now, everything I had learned about Linked Learning was in a college classroom.

The charter school had seven goals: master core academic content, think critically, solve complex problems, work collaboratively, communicate effectively, learn how to learn, and develop academic mindsets. They relied on pedagogic methods that differed slightly from what Linked Learning schools were doing. I think it is essential to understand that Linked Learning was a new concept when I was undergoing credentialing. The idea was still undergoing significant changes and struggling for acceptance. At the time, Linked Learning relied on educators throughout the different disciplines collaborating their syllabi. For example, I collaborated with the History teacher and adjusted my curriculum to coincide with her History classes. We had some success with this, and we found that students were able to retain more information and make it relevant to the other courses.

Additionally, the charter school used project-based learning as its primary pedagogical method. According to Kokotsaki, Menzies, & Wiggins (2016), “Project-based learning (PBL) is a student-centered form of instruction based on three constructivist principles: learning is context-
specific, learners are involved actively in the learning process, and they achieve their goals through social interactions and the sharing of knowledge and understanding” (Kokotsaki et al., 2016). The students enjoyed working on projects that helped them retain information, abstract concepts, and critical thinking. As a Humanities and English teacher, PBL posed some challenges. However, the students were able to connect their learning to creative and meaningful projects. The projects that the students worked on and used to synthesize their knowledge and demonstrate their understanding was precisely the type of teaching and learning to which I was accustomed. I found this method of teaching to be extremely satisfying. It was more in line with the way I trained my Sailors. This method of teaching also helped me engage more with my students. Rather than dictate what project they would do; the entire class had an input. Much like a division within a department, they were placed in groups. Each group would agree on a project and present their project proposal to the class. The class would then select one project upon which they all agreed.

This experience significantly informed my pedagogy. Not only was my approach to teaching affected by this experience, but more importantly, the way I learned. Apple and Ellis (2015) suggest that teaching focuses on designing instruction, facilitating, and improving the ability to share knowledge with learners. They imply that insufficient research is focused on learning and the act of constructing knowledge. In other words, learning as an act is not considered comparable to teaching. They contend that just as we learn to understand, we can also learn how to learn better and improve our performance as learners (p. 21). I am not sure if I was in a unique position to experience being both the teacher and the learner, but as a first-year teacher, I had to grasp both roles rapidly.

I did have a few issues getting accustomed to some of the established conventions of the school. Teachers were addressed by their first names, which I felt could be a double-edged sword. While I understood that addressing teachers by their first names might empower the students somehow, I also thought that we might be giving these students a false sense of how the world
operated. I’ve always thought that respect was something that never went out of fashion and showing the appropriate respect to elders and superiors is essential. The students were otherwise polite and thoughtful, and I did not mind students addressing me by my first name, but I was concerned about how that would affect them after they left school. I kept these concerns to myself and enjoyed having the autonomy to create my lesson plans and teach how I wanted to teach. It was a good experience, and the only reason I left was the pay was significantly lower than at public schools, which was already down.

In the end, my experience teaching provided me with a better understanding of teaching and learning. It helped establish my identity as a learner by improving my self-efficacy and my responsibility for my education. Additionally, my knowledge levels and learning skills improved. I was able to build the social skills required for effective team learning.

The long-lasting effects of the recession finally struck me on a more personal level. Due to budget constraints, several of us did not have our contracts renewed. School districts were still suffering from the loss of revenue, and while they were hiring, there was an overabundance of English teachers, many with much more experience and education. The hiring emphasis was on mathematics and science teachers. Many classmates with whom I had gone through the certification process were experiencing the same problems. Several went into different professions after being unsuccessful at finding teaching positions, some moved to different cities, and several never taught in a classroom again.
After I left the charter school, I applied with the Social Security Administration’s Office of Disability Adjudication and Review (ODAR). I accepted a position as a Senior Legal Assistant and Case Technician. The job was perfect. I processed complex cases, scheduled hearing dockets, and provided legal and technical support to three Administrative Law Judges. I had my own small office and did not have to deal with too many people, but I did have the opportunity to assist claimants in need. The job was rewarding, and I excelled at getting cases adjudicated. I received numerous awards and commendations.

I worked at ODAR for three years. During those three years, I decided to pursue a master’s degree in Organizational Leadership (MAOL) at Brandman University. I attended classes at night, and it kept me sufficiently busy. All I focused on was work and schoolwork. The classes were different from what I encountered at SDSU. Smaller classes provided additional time to discuss the topics in more detail, and they were more challenging. I had to change my way of thinking about academics. SDSU is a great school; unfortunately, like most undergraduate programs, the goal is to graduate as many students as possible. This is not to say that the quality of education was not top tier, but the speed at which most classes were taught left little time to digest and master any subject. The courses at Brandman were tailored towards working adults, which made the lessons more interesting. The curriculum was relevant, as was the coursework.

Additionally, group work was significantly different because most group members were engaged. Professors at Brandman were always available, and as a result, the students were able to establish close relationships with some of the professors. Many of them were teaching what many were doing in the private sector. Professors were able to provide a real-world experience to many of us who were yet to experience the private sector or were attempting to navigate the intricacies of these new challenges. The MAOL program aimed to explore leadership styles to focus on areas such as education and human resources. Active-duty personnel attended Brandman because they could use their tuition assistance funds to pay for the school without touching their GI Bill. These
individuals had life experience and were not afraid to share those experiences. Those experiences are often connected to the topic and made synthesizing the context uncomplicated. Brandman was also attractive to veterans using their GI Bill because they provided senior enlisted and officers credit for military training. Many enjoyed the 8-week terms, which allowed them continuous enrollment. Ultimately, I found Brandman to be a positive experience, and it also provided me the desire to become a lifelong learner.
LEAVING SAN DIEGO

In 2015, my wife and I decided that we needed a change of scenery and made plans to move someplace where we could have enough money to travel and enjoy ourselves. San Diego is a beautiful place, but it is prohibitively expensive. Even though my wife and I are retired military and have a comfortable life, we would have to continue working for many years if we chose to stay in San Diego. We wanted a place where we could live comfortably without either of us having to work. We considered San Antonio, where I could have transferred directly to another ODAR, or El Paso, to be close to family. However, I would have to move to a Social Security Field Office and learn a new position.

Ultimately, we chose El Paso, and I went to work for the Social Security field office. It was the worst possible decision. The field office sees thousands of people a month. Most clients are polite and courteous, but we still had too many that were not. Dealing with people who disrespected, insulted, and threatened employees were commonplace. A clear indication of the mistreatment that employees often received was the panic buttons installed at each workstation and two armed federal police officers in the lobby. I was witness to some extreme situations. Clients were spitting on workers or reaching through the windows in attempts to hit or scratch employees. It became increasingly difficult for me to maintain my composure. I noticed that many of the symptoms I had before going to school started to return. I became hypervigilant, irritated, and I could feel the depression becoming more evident. I eventually resigned from my position and left the Social Security Administration.
BACK TO SCHOOL

After leaving the Social Security Administration, I applied to be a substitute teacher at one school district. I liked the fact that I could work when I chose and where I chose. Even though I had been outside of the classroom for a few years, I felt comfortable going back. The first job I selected was at a local high school teaching freshman English classes. School had been in session for about a week, and the students were still trying to get acclimated to the high school experience. I was there for a week with the same classes before the assistant principal asked if I would be interested in a long-term substitute position with the same class. I would be teaching four classes a day, each with about thirty students.

I had been looking forward to doing some work around the house and enjoying semi-retirement. However, this presented an opportunity for me to figure out if I wanted to teach full time, so I accepted the long-term substitute job invitation. The students were typical freshman but were pleasant enough. The most challenging part was figuring out how the department was working their syllabus. The teacher that I was substituting for had only provided a couple of days’ worth of assignments but not enough to go through to another week. The other teachers were extremely busy and did not have time to deal with substitutes, and the department head was difficult to find. I managed to put together enough information to get through the next two weeks and the permanent teacher's return. I enjoyed my time with the students, and I was sad to leave them. I had built quite a rapport with many of them, especially some of the special needs students. I became acquainted with the Navy Junior ROTC instructors, which provided some positive networking opportunities and friendships. As much as I enjoyed substitute teaching, I was uncertain that I wanted to continue. The classes belonged to other teachers, and the students realize that the substitute will, in all likelihood, not be there the next day, which often hindered progress.

After one year of substitute teaching, I decided to apply for another master’s program. I was fortunate enough to have educational benefits under the Hazlewood Act. The Hazlewood Act (Texas Veterans Commission, 2020) is a State of Texas benefit that provides
qualified Veterans, spouses, and dependent children with an education benefit of up to 150 hours of tuition exemption, including most fee charges, at public institutions of higher education in Texas (2020).

I applied and was accepted to the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) Rhetoric and Writing Studies Program. I had no idea what rhetoric and writing studies was about except what was offered on the website catalog, but it sounded interesting. I needed to find something to keep my mind engaged. I was both excited and curious about how this new journey would pan out. It would be a new experience for me as a graduate student at a traditional university.

My first step was to register and check-in with the Military Student Success Center (MSSC). As expected, there were several items on the checklist that I had to accomplish and were not mentioned on the website. I ended up making more than one trip to the center to ensure I could register for the required classes. The professionalism of the MSSC staff overshadowed those minor inconveniences. Once I figured out which documents I needed, registration was simple.

Additionally, I applied for a position as a Teaching Assistant (TA). Working as a TA has been both enjoyable and rewarding. I had the opportunity to work at the University Writing Center (UWC), where I met students from all walks of life. The satisfaction that I received from working with and helping these students, many from different countries, gave me purpose. Many of these students would stop me on campus to thank me for their grade or return to the UWC and drop off a thank you card motivated me immensely.

As an instructor for Rhetoric Writing Studies (RWS) 1301, I have continued to hone my pedagogy. The arguments posed regarding writing have been varied. At the UWC, the main focus seemed to be on the mechanics, proofreading, and offering suggestions on the material's organization and perhaps the text's clarity. Discussions in the classroom ranged from making content the primary focus with the mechanics an afterthought or whether non-native speakers should be held to a different standard than native speakers? Are teachers responsible for teaching “standard English,” or are they responsible for the students’ right to their own language as advocated by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). To further
compound the confusion, we read Sheils’ “Why Johnny Can’t Write.” As an RWS 1301 instructor, I think Johnny still has difficulty writing. Living in a border town presents unique challenges, and I realize that professors and instructors across all disciplines are well aware of these challenges. I know that I faced challenges with my writing as an undergraduate student. These challenges presented themselves not because I am a non-native speaker but because I wrote differently. What I was accustomed to was Navy (military) writing. Our writing was technical and filled with Navy jargon, and our audience was limited. For example, every six months, supervisors must provide mid-term and annual Fitness Reports or Performance Evaluations. In its infinite wisdom, the Navy limited the total number of characters and space used when writing these Fitness Reports. It forced supervisors to remove the “fluff” and directly point out each individual's strengths and weaknesses. The audience, in some cases, were selection boards comprised of either senior officers or Master Chiefs. The transition from unlimited space and characters to a finite amount was devastating to many purple journalism writers.

I see writing as a practice, and I am forced to practice writing every day. I keep in mind that my writing directly affects my ethos, and I try and demonstrate that to my students every single class, assignment, and lecture. It is my opinion that one’s writing ability is essential and can directly affect different opportunities.
CONCLUSION

When I started this journey, I struggled with my thesis topic. Several studies have addressed the challenges veterans face as they transition from the front lines into the world of higher education. I found significant research on young, one enlistment veterans who served one enlistment and moved on. I found research on those that left the military physically and mentally compromised and overcame those challenges. However, I found little or no research about veterans who spent a lifetime in service to this country, suffered from compromised physical and mental challenges, a lack of education, and employment commensurate with their experience and knowledge—someone like me.

I wondered if perhaps I was an anomaly. A very small percentage of career military personnel use educational benefits for themselves; instead, they transfer those benefits to their children or spouses. I have concluded that perhaps I am part of a very small group of veterans and that returning to school was about education and survival. Education has given me a purpose and has prompted me to move forward. It is unlikely that I will return to the full-time workforce; however, the desire to learn continues to motivate me and keeps my mind occupied.

This autoethnography gives voice to the career veteran—those who made the military a career and placed their respective service's needs first. The Navy is unlike other service branches in that Sailors do not have the luxury of being onshore where off duty education is readily available or accessible. Extended periods at sea, coupled with limited internet capabilities, were challenges that individuals faced while seeking to enhance their education. All military branches encourage their members to engage in off duty education. They have created methods to track service schools and training and any off-duty education obtained by members. During my time, it was called the Sailor-Marine American Council on Education Registry Transcript (SMART), now the Joint Service Transcript (JST). The JST provides recommended college credit for military occupational experience and training. The awarding of credits rests solely on the institution, and as a result, credits vary from school to school.
It is clear that as long as the GI Bill is, in effect, veterans will continue to apply to higher learning institutions. The majority of institutions are doing their best to accommodate student veterans. However, faculty and staff must remain mindful that not all disabilities are visible and that not all veterans are the same. Career veterans may be an extremely small demographic, but it bears additional research. Wars will eventually come to an end and our veterans will once again fade into obscurity, but many of the invisible disabilities will never go away. While career student veterans may be a small demographic, understanding and being mindful of the challenges faced by these career veterans can only help all veterans.
REFERENCES


VITA

Ruben Paquian is a graduate of the U. S. Navy Senior Enlisted Academy, Newport, Rhode Island, San Diego State University, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English, and Brandman University where he earned a Master's in Organizational Leadership. He is currently a graduate student at the University of Texas-El Paso, completing a Master's Degree in Rhetoric and Writing Studies.

Ruben served in the United States Navy for 30 years. He is a veteran of the Invasion of Grenada rescue efforts, the bombing of Libya, Operation Desert Storm, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom. He is authorized to wear several awards and medals, including the Meritorious Service Medal with Gold Star, Navy and Marine Corps Navy Commendation Medal with four Gold Stars, and the Navy and Marine Corps Navy Achievement Medal with four Gold Stars. He is both Surface and Air, Warfare qualified.

After completion of his Bachelor of Arts, he obtained his California Teaching Credential and taught high school English and Humanities in San Diego, California. After two years of teaching, Ruben accepted a position with the Social Security Administration, Office of Disability Adjudication and Review, where he spent four years as a Senior Legal Assistant to three Administration Law judges.

Ruben returned to El Paso, Texas, and continued working for the Social Security Administration until he decided to return to school and obtain his Master's Degree in Rhetoric and Writing Studies. During his time at the University of Texas-El Paso, he has worked as a Writing Consultant at the University Writing enter and Teaching Assistant, where he has taught first-year composition courses.

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