

FROM MILITARY TO ACADEMY

*The Writing and Learning
Transitions of Student-Veterans*

MARK BLAAUW-HARA

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Logan

© 2021 by University Press of Colorado

Published by Utah State University Press
An imprint of University Press of Colorado
245 Century Circle, Suite 202
Louisville, Colorado 80027

All rights reserved
Manufactured in the United States of America



The University Press of Colorado is a proud member of
the Association of University Presses.

The University Press of Colorado is a cooperative publishing enterprise supported, in part, by Adams State University, Colorado State University, Fort Lewis College, Metropolitan State University of Denver, Regis University, University of Colorado, University of Northern Colorado, University of Wyoming, Utah State University, and Western Colorado University.

∞ This paper meets the requirements of the ANSI/NISO Z39.48–1992 (Permanence of Paper)

ISBN: 978-1-64642-133-6 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-64642-134-3 (ebook)
<https://doi.org/10.7330/9781646421343>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Blaauw-Hara, Mark, author.

Title: From military to academy : the writing and learning transitions of student-veterans / by Mark Blaauw-Hara.

Description: Logan : Utah State University Press, [2021] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021021091 (print) | LCCN 2021021092 (ebook) | ISBN 9781646421336 (paperback) | ISBN 9781646421343 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Veterans—Education (Higher)—United States. | College-student veterans—United States. | English language—Rhetoric—Study and teaching (Higher) | Academic writing—Study and teaching (Higher)

Classification: LCC UB357 .B525 2021 (print) | LCC UB357 (ebook) | DDC 378.1/9826970973—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021021091>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021021092>

The University Press of Colorado gratefully acknowledges the support of North Central Michigan College toward the publication of this book.

Cover photographs: © Pankratov Yuriy/Shutterstock (top), © matabum/Shutterstock (bottom)

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction and Methodology	3
1. Community and Identity	20
2. Strengths of the Veteran Mindset	41
3. Writing in the Military	55
4. Key Threshold Concepts for Student-Veterans	75
5. Supporting Student-Veterans	95
<i>Appendix A: Student-Veteran Survey</i>	109
<i>Appendix B: Writing Faculty Survey</i>	113
<i>References</i>	115
<i>About the Author</i>	123
<i>Index</i>	125

FROM MILITARY TO ACADEMY

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Higher education is experiencing an almost unprecedented influx of student-veterans. A report from the US Department of Education found that in 2007–2008, about 657,000 veterans and 215,000 reservists or active-duty service members were undergraduates (Radford 2011). By 2013, these numbers had increased to over 1 million student-veterans; 73 percent of these students were male, and many had families (US Department of Veterans Affairs 2014). Additionally, 62 percent of them were first-generation college students, and only 15 percent were of what are thought of as traditional college ages (US Department of Veterans Affairs 2014). By 2020, over 5 million post-9/11 service members had transitioned out of the military (American Council on Education 2015), many of whom will likely use their GI Bill benefits to go to college. A 2012 American Council on Education report stated that “institutions have not faced such a significant influx of veteran students on campus since World War II” (McBain et al. 2012, 5).

In many ways, student-veterans are ideal college students. I have taught writing at a small community college with a significant student-veteran population for around twenty years, and 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 reliably do their homework. My anecdotal observations are supported by scholarship; for example, Stone (2017) notes that “military members acquired time management skills, confidence in themselves during challenging circumstances, cognitive flexibility when solving problems or evaluating information, and openness to diversity” (382). Other researchers have pointed out that student-veterans have been trained to be leaders and mutually reliant team members (Morrow and Hart 2014). 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 2013, 15). 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 2014; Schell and Kleinbart 2014; Stone 2017). In a commentary in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Mark Street (2014) describes the enriched perspectives veterans have brought to his visual arts classes, noting that they provide a valuable counterpoint to the views of 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” (para. 10). The American Council on Education (2011) 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. In a *Chronicle* cover story, Libby Sander (2012) 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, colleges frequently have systems that are disorienting for veterans. Rumann, Rivera, and Hernandez (2011) 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” (McBain et al. 2012, 8). Advising and faculty training to work with veterans tends to vary widely (Persky and Oliver 2010; Wheeler 2012), and frequently training programs for how to address veteran-specific issues are inadequate (McBain et al. 2012). Veterans are post-traditional students, and many college orientation programs are designed with more traditional students in mind. As Holly Wheeler (2012) 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. In a meta-analysis of over sixty publications centering on student-veterans and college, Evans, Pellegrino, and Hoggan (2015) were able to find “no overarching frameworks to help administrators make decisions about appropriate support structures they can design for veterans. Even more surprising was the lack of empirical studies pertaining to the efficacy of existing institutional supports” (57).

Another problem, as Hart and Thompson (2013) have discovered, is that much training for college personnel operates on the assumption of deficits, focusing primarily on the ways student-veterans may be behind academically or the length of time they have been away from formal schooling. Despite the good intentions of the trainers, such training sessions do not recognize the diversity of the student-veteran community or the ways in which their military experiences may support college success. 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). Faculty frequently characterized student-veterans as “mature, serious students who seek frank, direct guidance as they develop as writers” (4). Lighthall (2012) points out that student-veterans “are emotionally mature, goal-oriented, mission-driven, experienced leaders . . . They are the kind of role models we need on our campuses” (89). Of course, as Vaccaro (2015) points out, “one size fits all” conceptions of the needs and strengths of student-veterans are not only ineffective, they are also frustrating to student-veterans themselves. Still, as I try to do in this study, it is possible to identify likely characteristics of the student-veteran population as a whole and use those characteristics to at least begin shaping productive interventions.

STUDENT-VETERANS AND COLLEGE WRITING

In addition to studies that address student-veterans’ college transition in a general sense, there is a growing body of research that focuses specifically

on how they experience college writing. The most complete study is one I mentioned earlier: Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson's (2013) "*An Ethical Obligation*": *Promising Practices for Student-Veterans in College Writing Classrooms*. 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. 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 (2014), features chapters by some of the foremost writers on student-veterans and academic writing. Taken together, they provide wide-ranging multiple perspectives on veterans' transition to the academy that are profoundly useful to writing faculty. Additionally, several journals, such as *Composition Forum*, have released special issues focused on veterans' experiences, and veteran-focused articles have appeared in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, *College Composition and Communication*, and a number of other journals. Importantly, the *Journal of Veterans Studies* was formed in 2016, representing a publication venue for cross-disciplinary research on veterans' experiences.

This growing body of research has served to enrich the portrayal of student-veterans. 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 (2013) 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. 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 2) shows that service members at all levels are encouraged to think critically and solve problems, most frequently in teams. As Doe and Doe (2013) point out, all branches of the military put a heavy emphasis on training and learning, since they need to transform recruits from all walks of life and levels of prior knowledge into sailors, soldiers, airmen, or marines. 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 are a complex group. It is true that most of them have been away from traditional schooling for a period of years, and they will likely be rusty at “student-ing” practices such as sitting in a classroom, taking notes, and reading textbooks. Also, some may have joined the military, at least in part, because they did not enjoy formal K-12 schooling and wanted a break, or because they may not have considered themselves “college material” at age eighteen. As I noted earlier, many of them struggle with accessing their veteran benefits, deciding on an academic path, dealing with possible PTSD and the psychological aftereffects of war, and discerning how to reintegrate into civilian society. However, in many ways, student-veterans are better prepared to succeed in college than some of their civilian peers. We can help them build on these strengths by better understanding the military and how it functions as a learning organization, and by better understanding the types of writing and learning student-veterans did while they were in the military. 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.

My primary goal in this book 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. In this book, I provide an overview of how theories of community membership and identity construction provide context for understanding how service members see themselves in the military and college, drawing from scholarship on communities of practice, threshold concepts, student retention and success, and more. I also supply specific suggestions for writing faculty to help student-veterans recognize and build on the strengths they have developed during their military service.

RESEARCH SITE

North Central Michigan College (NCMC) is a small community college located near the tip of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula. It enrolls between 2,500–3,000 students, of whom around 100 have self-identified as military veterans. The college’s annual budget hovers near \$15 million, and it employs around 100 full-time faculty, staff, and administrators as well as about 200 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. Around half of NCMC's students usually declare the intent to earn occupational degrees; the other half expect to transfer to a university or pursue liberal arts degrees.

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 much of the past decade (Military Friendly 2018). The college has a dedicated student-veteran advisor, and NCMC also connects student-veterans with other veteran services in the area, such as employment representatives and county veteran service officers.

The college also has an active chapter of the Student Veterans of America (SVA), although its numbers tend to be small. NCMC holds 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.

I worked at NCMC for two decades. My status as a faculty member and writing program administrator (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. 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 was kept in a password-encrypted file.

METHODOLOGY AND STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Because of the relatively unexplored nature of this area of study, I adopted a qualitative approach. As Creswell (2012) 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. Stake (1995) 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 (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 (2009) 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 across the cases and offset potential criticism that the cases are unique (60–62). Since I hoped to identify such trends, I decided to study multiple student-veterans.

The specific description for the type of case studies I did is “collective instrumental case studies,” which is drawn from Robert Stake. Stake (1995) 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 (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” (Stake 1998, 89). In Stake’s (1995) 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” (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.

For my analysis of the case studies, I chose to adapt a constructivist grounded-theory methodology most clearly articulated by Kathy Charmaz (2006), 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 (2012) notes that grounded theorists remain open to developing their research methodology as they progress through the study, always remaining responsive to their data (which they code as they go) and their participants (431–432). 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.

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 (1998) *Writing and Identity: The Discoursal Construction of Identity in Academic Writing*, which was based on case studies of eight adult post-traditional students who were over twenty-five, native speakers of English, and “had experienced some sort of difficulty with academic writing” (111). Ivanič found her participants either through mutual contacts or because she had been their writing tutor. Ivanič analyzed one academic essay from each participant and interviewed them about the choices they made in 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 (2002) conducted case studies for *Writing Games*, her book on academic writing and identity. 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 also were to portray the experiences of a small number of participants as individuals and then attempt to draw conclusions from those 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 2000; Hinton 2013; Popken 1996; Prior 1998; Rumann and Hamrick 2010). Data collection varied among these studies: single or multiple interviews, observation notes, examination of pieces of writing, participant self-reflections, and so on. In sum, case-study research is used in the field as a flexible, reliable methodology that can generate solid data, especially if the area under study is relatively new.

For my formal study, over the course of 2014–2016 I recruited nine student-veterans who agreed to tell me about their experiences writing and learning in the military and college. I used a combination of snowball sampling (in which participants suggested other possible participants drawn from their social networks) and volunteer sampling, in which I asked writing instructors, my school's veterans' academic advisor, and the local chapter of Student Veterans of America to share a call for study volunteers. Admittedly, these methods do not produce a statistically random sampling, and so this study should be viewed as exploratory. However, as the participant list demonstrates, I was able to interview a mix of male and female students who were veterans of all service branches. The pseudonyms, service histories, and brief descriptions of my participants follow. The ages listed, as well as their progress toward their degrees, were at the time of their interviews.

- Brian is a twenty-seven-year-old male army veteran. He enlisted at age nineteen and served for seven and a half years. When he left the service, his rank was SGT (E5)—sergeant, E5 pay grade. He is an advanced college undergraduate.
- Amy is a twenty-six-year-old female marine veteran. She enlisted after a year of college at age nineteen and served for five years, leaving with a rank of SGT (E5). She is close to graduation.

- John is a twenty-eight-year-old male marine veteran. He enlisted at age eighteen and served for eight years, leaving as a SGT (E5). He is about a year into his undergraduate degree.
- Logan is a thirty-one-year-old male navy veteran. He enlisted at age eighteen and served for ten and a half years, leaving 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 thirty-two-year-old male army veteran. He enlisted at age twenty-one 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.
- Ryanne is a thirty-three-year-old female navy veteran. She enlisted at age seventeen and served for four years. When she left, her rank was 2nd class petty officer (E5). She is about midway through her associate's degree.
- Derek is a thirty-three-year-old male air force veteran. He enlisted at age eighteen 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 forty-five-year-old male veteran of the army and coast guard. He enlisted in the army at age seventeen 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 twenty-one and served for twenty-four years, ultimately retiring with a rank of E6. This is his first semester of college.
- Alan is a twenty-five-year-old male army veteran. He enlisted at age seventeen 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 and a short survey before the interview, both of which appear in appendix A. Although my supervising institution's institutional review board (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. After asking demographic and background questions, 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 had decided to go to college and whether they had any concerns about the likelihood of their success.

My interviews were semi-structured and informal, and 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 1998, 56–57). Blakeslee and Fleischer (2010) 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 appendix A, I generated a short list of primary and follow-up questions for my interviews; however, I stressed to my participants that I was very 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 (2006) 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.

Stake (1998) suggests that the researcher avoid taking copious notes during the interview, instead focusing on listening and asking clarifying questions. Accordingly, I took minimal notes, instead electing to digitally record each interview and have them transcribed. Stake (1998) also recommends that the researcher 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.

DATA ANALYSIS

I analyzed my data consistently with grounded-theory protocols laid out by Kathy Charmaz (2006). The first step was to code the interview transcripts and surveys for key themes. 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. I generated a great many initial codes as I read through the interview transcripts. Some examples from Brian’s interview are in table 0.1, with my initial codes in the left-hand column.

After developing initial codes, I moved to focused coding, where I identified themes between codes. As Blakeslee and Fleischer (2010)

Table 0.1. Initial interview coding

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 [the school experience], which is great, you know, great deal for them. And it's kind of a little bit hard to relate.

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 reread 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 which was 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 in yellow statements that fit this code, which allowed me to group statements such as these together:

DEREK: There's no way I would have gone to school [had it not been for 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 also wrote copious research memos. As Glesne and Peshkin (1992) suggest, writing memos to oneself as research progresses can not only record impressions from an interview, it can help the researcher develop his thoughts and spur new perspectives (128). Blakeslee and Fleischer (2010) echo this understanding, writing that research memos function not only as spaces for the researcher to reflect on the immediate interview or recent findings, but also as opportunities to speculate, to fine-tune research goals and, as the researcher rereads 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 is that they are 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 understood about writing from their experience 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 service members 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 you 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 table 0.2.

This methodology yielded rich data on student-veterans' transitions to the college writing and learning environment. As subsequent chapters show, the study enriches the perception of what types of writing enlisted veterans did in the military, as well as their individual understanding of genre and audience. It also reveals the ways they experience college writing and college in general, including struggles and successes. Additionally, it sheds light on how the military functions as a learning community and how it shapes the identities of service members. 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.

Because it is limited by its small numbers of participants and by its being conducted at a single research site, 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, the perspectives and suggestions I present here are nonetheless valuable, and there is ample precedent in writing studies for this sort of qualitative case-study research that involves a relatively limited number of participants. For example, such research has yielded intriguing results that have advanced the field's understanding of writers' identity (Casanave

Table 0.2. Final themes and sub-themes

Enlisting, writing, and learning in the military	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	Feeling like experience wasn't recognized Not fitting into traditional placement, first-year experience (FYE), developmental writing Making up for lost time between high school and college Feeling embarrassed to be going to school with "kids" Experiencing social isolation/disconnection from nonmilitary peers
Applying strengths to college	Applying work ethic, pursuing the mission Connecting with veteran community Understanding diverse people, applying life experience

2002; Ivanič 1998; Prior 1998) and students' transition to college and academic discourse (Herrington and Curtis 2000; Hinton 2013, 2014; Rumann and Hamrick 2010).

A NOTE ON GENDER AND RACE

Although I attempted to recruit more women veterans, I was able to find only two who were willing to participate. Partially, this is reflective of the demographics of the military: in 2019, women made up only 10 percent of the veteran population, although that number is expected to grow (Dever 2019). However, because of the small number of women in my study, I was unable to make any generalizations about gender differences. This is, however, a growing area of research. For example, Heineman (2017) describes ways community colleges can help support women veterans in their transitions to school, and Diramio et al. (2015) explore gender differences in how (and when) student-veterans ask for help in college. Albright et al. (2019) address women veterans' access of health services at colleges, finding a need to provide veteran outreach that differs from colleges' usual methods of outreach to female students. The American Society of Higher Education also notes differences between female and male student-veterans (ASHE 2011b). In my study, I asked both of my women participants if they felt as though their gender played a role in their military experience or their transition to college. Both noted that they felt quite comfortable as women in the military and that they did not see gender as relevant in their college transition. However, research has made it clear that this is not always the case (e.g., Baechtold and De Sawal 2009; Cheney et al. 2013; Huynh-Hohnbaum et al. 2003; Trobaugh 2018).

Race was also an unexplored area in my study. According to the most recent US Census, 92.4 percent of the residents of Emmet County—where NCMC is located—identify as white (US Census, n.d.). The next-highest ethnic group, at 3.8 percent, is American Indian and Alaskan Native. The NCMC student body has similar racial characteristics, and I felt it would be quite difficult to explore issues of race at this research site. I did not ask my participants to disclose their racial identity, and none of them discussed racial issues in their interviews. Other scholarship has explored how race impacts student-veterans' experiences with higher education (Bryan and Bryan 2015; Elliott 2014; Jenner 2017); however, like the question of gender, the impact race has on student-veterans' experiences in higher education is an emerging area of research and merits more study.

THIS BOOK'S ORGANIZATION

Chapters 1–4 present and analyze my findings from four different perspectives. They are designed to be able to be read nonsequentially, and the reader will get a better understanding of different aspects of student-veterans' transitions from each chapter. I integrate relevant scholarship throughout each chapter, and I end each with several actionable suggestions. However, the best understanding of student-veterans' transitions will be gained from treating each of these chapters as ways to focus a larger subject into manageable chunks; reading them all will give the most complete perspective.

In chapter 1, I focus on the learning communities of the military and college, with my primary theoretical lenses being communities of practice and andragogy. As Hinton (2013) and Hadlock (2012) argue, while student-veterans may be new to academic writing, they are not novice writers. Nor are they unskilled learners. 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.

In chapter 2, I focus on key dispositional strengths student-veterans bring with them from the military. As I noted earlier, Hart and Thompson (2013) argue that many colleges approach student-veterans from a perspective assuming deficits, focusing on what such students

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.

In chapter 3, I explore a common type of military writing with which student-veterans are most familiar: evaluations, or counseling reports. Every service member is evaluated by his or her superior officer several times during service, and these evaluations are regarded within the military as very important in helping individuals grow into better embodiments of the ideals within their service branches. I present evaluation forms and guidelines for writing them drawn from the US Marines, US Air Force, US Navy, and US Army, and I analyze the writing the forms require. I also present interview data from my student-veteran participants and introduce survey data from writing faculty.

Chapter 4 adopts a threshold concept lens to view student-veterans' experiences with college writing in particular. The focus here is on writing and writing classrooms, and readers who want immediate suggestions for how to make writing classes more "veteran-friendly" (Hart and Thompson 2016) could gain ideas from chapters 3 and 4 they could put into practice next week. (Of course, I think a much more complete understanding can be acquired by reading the whole book, but my point here is that it need not be read in order.) Threshold concepts, most clearly articulated by Meyer and Land (2005), represent key (albeit challenging) ideas within a discipline that students must understand if they are to move forward in that discipline. In writing studies, Adler-Kassner and Wardle's (2015) *Naming What We Know* most fully explores the field's current understanding of threshold concepts, and I identify several concepts from their book that I think connect most strongly to student-veterans. As in the previous chapters, I also provide suggestions for how faculty can use these threshold concepts to support student-veterans in writing classes.

Finally, in chapter 5, I provide overarching suggestions that draw from my case studies and scholarship presented in chapters 1–4. These suggestions are meant to coalesce the findings from the preceding chapters into a manageable list of big takeaways. Most of these focus on the writing classroom, but since the writing classroom is a smaller habitat within the larger ecosystem of the college, several suggestions also address changes to colleges on the macro level.