



**Educational Justice Journal**

## **Reclaiming Identity and Belonging: The Impact of Veteran-Specific Transitions Courses in Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores how a veteran-specific transitions course supports student veterans' academic adjustment, career reentry, and identity development. Using narrative inquiry and grounded in Veteran Critical Theory and adult learning frameworks, the research draws on interviews with student participants and course facilitators. Findings highlight the power of structured support, peer connection, and reflective practice in promoting belonging and self-directed learning. The study offers implications for designing culturally responsive curricula and institutional practices that affirm veterans' lived experiences and disrupt deficit-based narratives in higher education.

**Keywords:** Student veterans, Veteran Critical Theory, adult learning, higher education reintegration

## **Introduction**

Student veterans often face complex and multifaceted challenges when transitioning into higher education, including difficulties with academic adjustment, career reentry, and social reintegration. Traditional college support structures frequently fail to address the cultural, psychological, and institutional barriers specific to veterans, leading to feelings of isolation and diminished persistence. Despite the expansion of veteran services, few studies explore how tailored curricular interventions, especially transitions courses designed with veteran needs in mind, can promote success. There remains a critical gap in understanding how such courses contribute to student veterans' sense of belonging, self-directed learning, and identity transformation within the higher education landscape.

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how a transitions course designed specifically for student veterans supports their academic adjustment, career reentry, and social reintegration into college life. Grounded in Veteran Critical Theory and adult learning frameworks, the study examines the perspectives of student veterans and course facilitators to understand how targeted instruction, reflective practices, and peer connection influence student outcomes. This study seeks to contribute insights into how culturally responsive curriculum and intentional community-building strategies can challenge deficit-based narratives and promote veteran success in higher education.

Three research questions guided this study:

- How do student veterans describe the impact of a veteran-specific transitions course on their academic, social, and career adjustment to college life?
- What instructional strategies and course design elements do veterans and facilitators identify as most effective in supporting self-directed learning and reintegration?

- In what ways does participation in the transitions course foster a sense of belonging and disrupt deficit narratives among student veterans?

## **Literature Review**

Veterans navigating the transition from military service to higher education occupy a unique and often misunderstood space within the academic landscape. While federal programs such as the GI Bill have increased access to postsecondary education for veterans, access alone does not ensure success. Veterans frequently encounter cultural, psychological, and structural barriers that complicate their academic journeys, ranging from traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress to feelings of isolation and misalignment with traditional student identities. This literature review examines existing scholarship on the experiences of student veterans in higher education, highlighting how frameworks such as Veteran Critical Theory and adult learning theory help reframe their challenges through a more asset-based, system-aware lens. It also explores the roles of institutional support, built environments, and inclusive pedagogical practices in fostering belonging, persistence, and holistic success for student veterans.

## **Veteran Critical Theory**

Veteran Critical Theory (VCT) emerged as a response to the growing need for a framework that critically examines the experiences of veterans, particularly student veterans, within higher education and broader societal systems. Built on the foundations of critical theory, VCT challenges dominant narratives that often portray veterans through deficit-based lenses by viewing them as broken, wounded, or dependent on institutional support (Phillips & Lincoln,

2017). Instead, VCT seeks to foreground veterans' perspectives, question systemic barriers, and advocate for structural changes that better serve this population.

Critical theory, as Schwandt (2007) describes, moves beyond describing social phenomena by questioning the "givenness" (p. 52) of societal norms and structures, emphasizing praxis, and employing internal critique to expose contradictions within existing systems. These principles are central to VCT, which applies a similar lens to interrogate how institutional policies, cultural narratives, and higher education practices impact veterans. By focusing on systems rather than individuals, VCT redirects critique from perceived veteran deficits to the institutional and societal forces shaping their experiences (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017).

Phillips and Lincoln (2017) propose eleven tenets of VCT, many of which parallel other emancipatory theories such as critical race theory and feminist theory but are uniquely adapted to the veteran population. Among these tenets are the recognition of veterans as a diverse and intersectional group, the privileging of veterans' own narratives and counter-narratives, and the call for veterans to be active participants in shaping policies and practices that affect them. This emphasis on lived experience and defining moments aligns with broader social justice scholarship that centers professionals' narrative turning points as critical sites of identity formation and meaning-making (marbley et al., 2015). As Zhou et al. (2022) argue, this approach aligns with the broader goals of critical theory by privileging marginalized voices and using those narratives to disrupt dominant assumptions about veterans' needs.

The application of VCT has extended beyond traditional educational contexts to explore issues such as social support dynamics and identity negotiation. For instance, Zhou et al. (2022) used VCT to analyze online veteran communities, demonstrating how veterans both seek and provide support while resisting civilian-constructed assumptions about their identities. Similarly,

Robinson and Hager (2025) highlight how VCT can illuminate structural inequities in higher education by examining how veteran identities are shaped by both military culture and institutional policies.

Ultimately, VCT provides a framework not only for understanding veterans' experiences but also for advocating for systemic change. Its holistic and contextual approach makes it especially valuable in educational research, where understanding the interplay between veteran identities, institutional practices, and social narratives is critical for creating more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

### **Adult Learning Theory**

Adult Learning Theory (ALT), often referred to as andragogy, provides a foundation for understanding how adults learn, develop, and apply knowledge within real-life and professional contexts. Knowles et al. (2025), describe adult learning as a distinct process shaped by adults' self-directedness, prior experiences, and readiness to engage in learning that has immediate relevance. Unlike pedagogy, which assumes a dependent learner, ALT is built on the assumption that adults are autonomous, problem-centered, and motivated by internal factors such as personal growth and professional advancement.

ALT is not a single theory but a framework that integrates multiple perspectives. Knowles et al. (2025) identify six core assumptions of adult learners: the need to know, self-concept, prior experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation. These assumptions are particularly relevant in professional settings, where adults expect learning to be purposeful, collaborative, and directly applicable to their work. Bierema et al. (2025) expand on this by emphasizing the social and contextual nature of adult learning, noting that adults construct

meaning not only through individual reflection but also through interactions within their professional and organizational environments. Taylor and Kroth (2009) argue that adult learning often moves beyond skill acquisition to become transformational, as learners critically examine their assumptions and reframe their perspectives. This transformative potential aligns closely with frameworks such as Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory, which builds on ALT by highlighting how adults can shift their frames of reference through critical reflection and dialogue. Similarly, experiential learning models (Kolb, 1984) complement ALT by illustrating how adults cycle between concrete experiences, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation to integrate new knowledge into practice.

Collectively, these adult learning frameworks underscore the importance of designing learning experiences that respect adults' autonomy, leverage their prior experiences, and encourage critical reflection. In professional development contexts, such as training for teachers or veterans transitioning into higher education, ALT provides a lens for creating learning environments that are relevant, participatory, and oriented toward real-world application. By situating adult learning within authentic contexts, educators and trainers can help learners not only acquire new skills but also evolve in their professional and personal identities.

### **Veterans in Higher Education**

Veterans are increasingly turning to higher education as a pathway for career advancement and reintegration into civilian life, with the Post-9/11 GI Bill serving as a primary motivator for enrollment. The GI Bill provides financial support for tuition, housing, and educational expenses, making higher education an attractive and accessible option for service members transitioning out of the military (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.). Many of

these students are non-traditional in age, often first-generation college students, and bring to their academic pursuits a strong work ethic, leadership skills, and life experience that enrich campus communities (Bani & Haji, 2017). Veterans report seeking higher education not only to secure stable employment but also to redefine their identities and establish a renewed sense of purpose in civilian society (Radford, 2009).

Despite these strengths, veterans face a range of challenges that differentiate their experiences from those of traditional college students. Administrative and structural barriers are among the first hurdles they encounter, as navigating military transcripts, transferring credit, and completing GI Bill paperwork often result in delays or even the denial of earned academic credit (Mayou, 2016; Radford et al., 2024). The transition from military to civilian academic life can also be disorienting, requiring significant adjustments to new cultural norms, campus social dynamics, and less structured daily routines (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Holliday (2025) highlights how service members often endure “non-combat-related injuries” (p. 122) resulting from internal conflict, ineffective leadership, or institutional failures wounds that frequently remain invisible yet deeply affect identity and personal purpose. This shift is compounded by mental and physical health concerns, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) has emerged as a significant barrier. Military-related TBIs, often sustained through blast exposure or repeated head trauma, commonly result in long-term cognitive impairments, including memory loss, diminished attention, slowed processing speed, and executive dysfunction (Terrio et al., 2009) These lingering symptoms, sometimes referred to as “cognitive fatigue syndrome,” can impair academic performance, reduce study efficiency, and increase the likelihood of dropping or failing course (Horsfall et al., 2024). Veterans often report feeling isolated from younger peers, struggling to relate to traditional students, and facing stigma

tied to their military service (Radford, 2009). These factors contribute to an increased need for institutional policies and practices that are responsive to veterans' unique circumstances.

Support structures play a critical role in veterans' academic and personal success. Veterans Resource Centers (VRCs) have emerged as one of the most impactful institutional supports, providing targeted assistance with benefits navigation, peer mentoring, and campus integration. Recent studies demonstrate that veterans who utilize these centers report greater academic satisfaction, higher retention rates, and improved psychosocial adjustment (Barnak et al., 2021). Peer networks, including chapters of Student Veterans of America, provide community, advocacy, and an affirming space where veterans can share experiences and resist feelings of isolation. Equally important are institutional policies that recognize and award academic credit for military training and experience, which can significantly reduce time to degree completion and financial burden (Mayou, 2016; Radford et al., 2024). Also important is for universities to be transparent about their support for veterans. For example, Robinson & Stojanovic (2020) conducted a study of fifty-two university websites and found that only five of them provided data about number of veterans in their student population. Although not required, student veterans could benefit from this data when making decisions about pursuing higher education at flagship universities. Without providing such information, if it exists, college administrators lose the chance to highlight support systems that could make their institutions more attractive to this population.

Despite these challenges, research indicates that student veterans often achieve academic outcomes equal to or exceeding those of their non-veteran peers. Data from the Student Veterans of America (2024) indicate that veterans often maintain higher grade point averages, averaging approximately 0.4 points above the general student population. Beyond measurable academic

outcomes, veterans often describe education as central to their personal transformation, offering structure, purpose, and a means of reconstructing identity after military service. Institutions that intentionally create veteran-friendly environments, through inclusive policies, specialized staff, and dedicated spaces, play a crucial role in ensuring that higher education serves as a bridge to both career advancement and personal reintegration (Radford, 2009).

## **Methods**

To explore how veterans experienced and made meaning of their participation in a higher education transitions course, this study employed a narrative inquiry design. Narrative inquiry centers on the stories individuals tell about their lives, recognizing narrative as both a method and a way of knowing (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This approach allowed for an in-depth examination of how veterans navigated the complex process of transitioning from military to academic and civilian life. The study focused on the narratives of veterans who enrolled in a semester-long transitions course, as well as those of the instructors and course designers who facilitated the experience. By attending closely to the structure, content, and context of participants' stories, the research illuminated how identity, belonging, and purpose were constructed and reconstructed over time. The transitions course served as the shared context for the narratives, while each participant's perspective offered unique insight into the broader experience of reintegration.

## **Participants and Data Collection**

This study draws exclusively on interview transcripts to understand how student veterans and course facilitators experienced a higher education transitions course. Qualitative interviews are

particularly well-suited for exploring individual meaning-making and identity construction in context-rich settings (Seidman, 2019; Josselson, 2013). Students enrolled in the course were invited by the instructor to complete a brief informational survey explaining the study's purpose and goals. The survey included a question asking whether participants were open to participating in a follow-up interview. Those who expressed interest provided their contact information and were later contacted to arrange individual interviews. While all seven students enrolled in the course were eligible, four opted to participate in the interview portion of the study.

In addition to student participants, interviews were also conducted with the faculty who designed and facilitated the course. These educator interviews provided important contextual and pedagogical perspectives that enriched the student narratives. All interviews were semi-structured and guided by open-ended prompts designed to elicit participants' reflections on learning, identity, and transition (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

### **Data Analysis & Trustworthiness**

Data analysis was guided by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) which centers on understanding experience through stories lived and told. We approached the interview transcripts not as discrete data points to be coded and categorized, but as rich narrative accounts situated within social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Each transcript was read multiple times to understand the unfolding of experience across three key narrative dimensions: temporality (p. 19), sociality (p. 20), and place (p. 21), which reflect how participants' experiences are shaped by time, personal and social conditions, and physical settings (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Observational notes taken during the interviews were reviewed alongside the transcripts to enhance contextual understanding. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their identities, and

member checking was used to validate the interpretation of their stories and ensure trustworthiness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Rather than breaking stories into fragments, we engaged in holistic analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 130), exploring how each participant's experience unfolded and intersected with larger institutional and societal narratives. Narratives were considered individually and then in relation to one another, allowing us to identify shared resonances and divergences across participants. To support triangulation, we also drew upon the course syllabus and anonymous course evaluations to contextualize and corroborate narrative accounts (St. Clair, 2023). Particular attention was given to how course objectives aligned with participants' experiences, reinforcing the study's aim of exploring how the course supported academic adjustment and reintegration.

## **Findings**

This study explored the lived experiences of student veterans and course facilitators participating in a transitions course designed to support academic reintegration, career clarity, and personal development. Five interrelated themes emerged from the interview data: (1) Reframing Identity Through Structured Support, (2) The Power of Peer Connection, (3) Purposeful Reflection as a Tool for Growth, (4) Navigating Civilian and Academic Transitions, and (5) Affirming Military Experience in Academic Contexts.

### **Reframing Identity Through Structured Support**

Across participants, the structured nature of the transitions course provided a safe and predictable space for veterans to explore and reshape their post-military identities. One student remarked,

“The course helped me find my bearings. It wasn’t just about academics. it gave me a sense of who I was becoming. This theme reflects the importance of intentional design in facilitating self-discovery among student veterans. The course structure like regular check-ins, organized content, and goal-setting activities offered not only practical guidance but also emotional reassurance. As another participant explained, “Having a routine again, with expectations and deadlines, made me feel normal again. Like I was getting back to myself.” For many, this shift was foundational to rebuilding confidence and reclaiming autonomy in an unfamiliar academic environment.

### **The Power of Peer Connection**

Beyond structured content, students consistently pointed to the role of camaraderie and peer connection as a vital component of their transition. One veteran shared, “I didn’t feel like I had to explain myself. Everyone got it. That alone made me want to show up every week.” This sense of shared understanding fostered psychological safety, reducing feelings of isolation common among student veterans on civilian campuses. Another participant emphasized the emotional and motivational impact of this community: “It was the first time I’d been around other veterans in a long time. That connection was healing in ways I didn’t expect.” These peer relationships served as informal support networks that extended beyond the classroom, reinforcing persistence and belonging.

### **Purposeful Reflection as a Tool for Growth**

Feelings of alienation and being “othered” in the college environment were common across transcripts. However, the veterans-only course emerged as a critical space of safety and shared

understanding. Participants described feeling “seen” and “not alone” for the first time since their transition. “Being in a class with other vets, people who get it, made all the difference. I didn’t have to explain every little thing.” Another student noted, “The professor made space for us to just talk... like, talk for real. That mattered.” Being in a space with their peers was very meaningful for participants.

### **Navigating Civilian and Academic Transitions**

While the course offered significant support, students still grappled with the complexity of civilian reintegration. Some described feeling “out of sync” with their younger peers and overwhelmed by unstructured academic norms. One participant shared, “No one tells you how different civilian life is. It’s not just culture shock; it’s identity shock.” This sense of division was particularly strong for those juggling full-time jobs or family responsibilities. As one student explained, “The hardest part wasn’t the homework; it was adjusting to a world that doesn’t revolve around teamwork and chain of command. These experiences reveal the enduring influence of military training on veterans’ expectations and highlight the need for tailored support during transition.

### **Affirming Military Experience in Academic Contexts**

Finally, students and facilitators emphasized the importance of validating veterans’ prior knowledge and experiences. Several students appreciated the moments when their military skills were not only recognized but reframed as assets. “For once, my background wasn’t a barrier. It was a strength. That changed everything,” one veteran stated. Faculty intentionally incorporated opportunities for veterans to draw on their lived expertise, aligning with principles of adult

learning theory. As one facilitator reflected, “We made sure to position their experience as knowledge, not baggage. This reframing reinforced students’ confidence and shifted the classroom dynamic from deficit to empowerment.

## **Discussion**

This study examined how a veteran-specific transitions course supported student veterans' academic adjustment, social reintegration, and career development through narrative inquiry. The findings offer insight into the critical role intentional, culturally responsive curriculum design can play in shaping veterans’ reintegration journeys. Five themes emerged; Reframing Identity Through Structured Support, The Power of Peer Connection, Purposeful Reflection as a Tool for Growth, Navigating Civilian and Academic Transitions, and Affirming Military Experience in Academic Contexts, which together highlight the layered complexity of veteran transitions and the need for higher education institutions to engage in deliberate, veteran-centered practices.

Grounded in VCT, the findings challenge the common deficit-based narratives that often depict veterans as academically underprepared or emotionally fragile. Instead, the narratives shared in this study revealed resilience, self-awareness, and a strong desire for personal growth. The course structure and facilitation affirmed veterans' strengths, validated their lived experiences, and offered space to reimagine their post-military identities. As VCT posits, systems, not individuals, must evolve to accommodate the realities of marginalized populations (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). This study affirms that one such evolution can occur within the classroom through purposeful curricular design and relational pedagogy.

ALT also provided a valuable lens for interpreting these findings. The transitions course honored participants' autonomy, experience, and readiness for learning, all key tenets of andragogy (Knowles et al., 2025). Veterans appreciated the practical and reflective activities that linked course content to their real-life challenges and aspirations. The course's emphasis on reflection and peer learning allowed students to engage in the kind of meaning-making central to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991; Taylor & Kroth, 2009). These adult learners were not passive recipients of information but co-constructors of knowledge, drawing on their military background to enrich discussions and deepen their understanding of academic and civilian life. The importance of peer connection and cultural familiarity cannot be overstated. Participants emphasized the psychological safety that emerged from being in a learning space with other veterans, a finding consistent with literature on peer support in VRCs and veteran cohorts (Barmak et al., 2021; Radford, 2009). Additionally, facilitators played a pivotal role in reinforcing these outcomes by embracing a facilitative, not authoritative, teaching style and validating military experiences as educational assets rather than liabilities. Still, the findings reveal continued tension as veterans straddle two cultural worlds. Despite the course's supportive design, participants experienced persistent challenges in adjusting to civilian norms and expectations, both in academia and in daily life. This reinforces the idea that while interventions like the transitions course can provide scaffolding, broader institutional and cultural shifts are necessary to fully support veteran learners.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study suggest several practical implications for higher education institutions seeking to better support student veterans. First, institutions should prioritize culturally

responsive curriculum by designing transitions courses that reflect veterans' lived experiences. These courses should intentionally incorporate reflective practice, peer dialogue, and opportunities to apply prior military skills in real-world academic and career contexts. Rather than encouraging assimilation into traditional student norms, such courses should affirm veteran identities and create space for meaning-making and personal transformation. Second, instructional design should account for veterans' strong preference for learning among peers. Offering cohort-based models, whether within transitions courses or broader academic programs, can foster community, reduce feelings of isolation, and promote persistence. Faculty development also emerges as a critical priority. Instructors working with veteran populations should be equipped with training in Veteran Critical Theory, trauma-informed pedagogy, and adult learning principles to create inclusive, empowering learning environments. In addition, institutions should develop policies that recognize and validate military learning, such as awarding academic credit for prior service, waiving redundant coursework, or providing structured opportunities for veterans to demonstrate experiential knowledge. Such practices can reduce time to degree completion and reinforce a sense of belonging. Finally, the success of veteran transitions programming depends on cross-functional collaboration. Academic affairs, student affairs, and veteran service offices must work in concert to ensure wraparound support that aligns curricular, social, and administrative efforts. Together, these strategies form a comprehensive approach to fostering holistic veteran success in higher education.

### **Future Research**

The findings of this study illuminate several avenues for future research to deepen understanding of student veterans' transitions into higher education. First, longitudinal studies are needed to

track the long-term impacts of veteran-specific transitions courses on academic persistence, career development, and identity transformation. While this study captured rich narrative insights during or shortly after course participation, future research should explore how these experiences continue to shape veterans' trajectories years later. Additionally, comparative studies across institutions and regions could shed light on how differences in institutional culture, resources, and policy implementation affect veterans' reintegration and sense of belonging. Such studies could also examine how transitions programs differ at community colleges, four-year universities, and minority-serving institutions, offering more nuanced understandings of contextual influences.

Intersectional research is also critical. Future studies should examine how race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status intersect with veteran identity to shape academic experiences. For example, how might Black women veterans experience reintegration differently than white male veterans, and how can curricula and support structures be adapted accordingly? Further inquiry is warranted into faculty perspectives and practices. While this study included input from course facilitators, broader research into faculty attitudes, preparedness, and instructional strategies when working with veterans could inform more effective professional development and pedagogical design.

Finally, action-oriented research could test the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as cohort models, credit-for-experience policies, or reflective writing curricula, on student veteran outcomes. These studies could help move the field from theory to practice, generating evidence-based recommendations for institutional change.

This study demonstrates the transformative potential of veteran-centered transitions courses in higher education. By centering the lived experiences of student veterans and highlighting the power of structured support, peer connection, and reflective learning, we contribute to a growing body of literature that challenges deficit-based narratives and advocates for culturally responsive pedagogy. Grounded in Veteran Critical Theory and adult learning principles, our findings call for institutions to rethink how they serve this resilient yet often underserved population. As colleges and universities seek to create more inclusive and supportive environments, this research offers both a blueprint and a call to action.

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