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A Wellness Approach to Investigating Student Veterans' Career Goals

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Abstract

A qualitative methodology was utilized to assess the wellness factors student Veterans (N = 10) perceived as influential to their decision to separate from the military and choice of intended career path. Participants included prior enlisted student Veterans pursuing undergraduate degrees at a mid-sized Midwestern university. Interview transcripts were coded according to the Indivisible Self Model of Wellness (IS-Wel; Myers & Sweeney, 2004) and analyzed phenomenologically. Participants referenced Control and Self-Worth as motivators for separation from military service; Work and Thinking were the main themes regarding choice of future profession. Additional themes emerged in reference to how Veterans' priorities changed during their time in service. The IS-Wel serves as an innovative approach for facilitating student Veteran career development.

KEYWORDS: *Career counseling, student Veterans, wellness*

Military service, which is a long-term career choice for some, involves much more than traditional work activities. On active duty, service members are considered Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, or Airmen 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year (Coll, Weiss, & Yarvis,

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2011). Much more than a job, military service members are held to strict standards set forth in the Uniform Code of Military Justice (1950) at all times. As a result of the all-encompassing nature of military involvement, many service members have chosen to leave active duty for reasons not directly related to their primary work responsibilities (Stewart & Moser, 2005). Most Veterans have left the service prior to retirement age for various reasons including long work hours, low pay, long and/or frequent deployments, unpredictable schedules, foreign assignments, and dissatisfaction with the military lifestyle (Stewart & Moser, 2005; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [DVA], 2010). Approximately half of all enlisted separations from active duty were voluntary, and most occurred after one or two enlistment terms (i.e., 4-12 years of service; U.S. Department of Defense [DoD], 2015). Many Veterans have been able to transfer the skills developed in their military careers directly to civilian jobs (e.g., information technology specialists or medical technicians, etc.). However, other Veterans enter higher education in pursuit of a new post-military career.

Student Veterans

With the Post-9/11 GI Bill, Veterans are increasingly choosing to attend college before starting a new career, with more than one million military students receiving education benefits each year (DVA, 2015). Traditional non-military undergraduate college students tend to choose their academic majors largely due to intrinsic interest, anticipated income, contributions to society, prestige, and influence from parents (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Workman, 2015). Furthermore, student Veterans are a unique population due to their life experiences and military identity and are more likely than non-veteran students to be older, first generation, transfer students, distance learners, have a disability, and attend school part-time (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2010). Therefore, factors that influence the major selections of non-military students may not generalize to undergraduate student Veterans and student Veterans' career decision-making values and priorities are not well-understood (Ghosh & Fouad 2016). As such, college career counselors and academic advisors may not be prepared to help undergraduate Veterans pursue a career they will find satisfying.

Wellness-based Career Counseling

Wellness, defined as practices and interventions that promote well-being and optimal functioning (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005), has gained popularity in various settings, including the military, over the last several decades. Both the Army and Air Force have adopted comprehensive fitness programs to improve warfighting readiness and resilience throughout those forces (Cornum, Matthews, & Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Fowler, 2011). Comprehensive Soldier Fitness and Comprehensive Airman Fitness were based on wellness principles, encompassing several "domains" (e.g., *Mental/Emotional, Spiritual, Social, and Physical*) adapted from the Penn Resiliency Program (Gilham, Jaycox, Reivich, & Seligman, 1990). Due to a limited research base for these adaptations, their effectiveness has been called into question (Bastounis, Callaghan, Banerjee, & Michail, 2016). Nevertheless, wellness has been conceptualized as an important paradigm for strengths-based assessment and interventions across counseling settings, with the wellness research base steadily growing (Myers & Sweeney, 2008). Due to the holistic nature of the wellness paradigm, it is uniquely suited to conceptualize the

motivations of service members for separating from active military duty given the all-encompassing nature of military involvement.

Career counseling that emphasizes a holistic approach provides clients with the tools to plan their lives in conjunction with their careers (Smith, Myers, & Hensley, 2002). Wellness-based career counseling has been demonstrated to promote overall wellness (Berríos-Allison, 2011), and to help individuals understand environmental and work factors related to professional quality of life and career burnout (Lawson & Myers, 2011). Wellness-based career counseling may help Veterans and service members understand which wellness-related factors may be missing from their military lifestyle so that they can be effectively integrated into a new career path (Rouse, Riley, & Barnes, 2016).

The IS-Wel

The Indivisible Self Model of Wellness (IS-Wel; Myers & Sweeney, 2004) is supported by a multitude of existing research (Foster, Steen, O’Ryan, & Nelson, 2016; Heath, 2014; Myers & Sweeney, 2008). In accordance with the IS-Wel model, wellness is conceptualized as: one first-order overall wellness factor, five second-order wellness factors (i.e., *Coping Self*, *Social Self*, *Essential Self*, *Physical Self*, and *Creative Self*), and 17 third-order factors which occur within local, institutional, global, and chronometrical contexts (Myers & Sweeney, 2008). Each of the third-order factors is organized within one of the second-order factors, and they are grouped according to the closeness of relationships among the third-order factors (Myers & Sweeney, 2004).

Within the *Coping Self* (*Leisure, Self-Worth, Realistic Beliefs, Stress Management*), the focus is on the ability to cope with life events and to overcome challenges (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). The *Social Self* (*Love, Friendship*) involves interpersonal relationships that can enhance quality of life (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). The *Essential Self* (*Spirituality, Self-Care, Cultural Identity, Gender Identity*) is useful in helping individuals make meaning of their views of self and others (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Within the *Physical Self* (*Nutrition, Exercise*), the importance of an appropriate combination of exercise and nutrition to overall health and well-being are emphasized (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Finally, the *Creative Self* (*Emotions, Control, Work, Humor, Thinking*) encompasses emotional experiences and their relation to thoughts and actions (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). The IS-Wel has been used as a conceptual framework to inform university wellness initiatives promoting student wellness in a variety of domains (Wolf, Thompson, & Smith-Adcock, 2012).

There is little research surrounding the factors leading Veterans to separate from active service and relation to their choice of academic major in college. In the present study, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What wellness factors lead Veterans to separate from the military and choose new careers?
2. What are Veterans’ primary considerations when determining a new career path?
3. How does military service influence Veterans’ perceptions of important career factors?

Methods

Participants

Participants were student Veterans ($N = 10$) at a mid-sized metropolitan Midwestern university ranging in age from 23-39 years (see Table 1). The study was approved by an institutional review board (IRB).

Table 1. *Participant Demographics*

Total Participants	$n=10$
Gender	$n=$
Female	5
Male	5
Race/Ethnicity	$n=$
White	5
Latino	2
Black or African American	1
Asian	1
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1
Age	$n=$
23-29 years	8
30-39 years	2
Year in College	$n=$
Senior	4
Junior	4
Sophomore	1
First-year	1
Branch	$n=$
Air Force	5
Army	3
Navy	1
Marine Corps	1
Years in Service	$n=$
4-8 years	6
9-14 years	3
15-19 years	1
Deployments Served	$n=$
0	5
1	3
2-5	2
VA Benefit Eligibility	$n=$
GI Bill	9
VA Disability Compensation	4
Military Career Field	$n=$
Combat	2
Information Technology	2
Intelligence	3
Logistics	1
Medical	2

Recruitment

The lead researcher consulted with the university's Office of Military and Veteran Services (OMVS) to determine optimal methods for reaching the largest number of student Veterans. The OMVS is an organization that military students may utilize for a variety of services (e.g., GI Bill information and certification, academic and career development services, student Veteran organization support) and has the primary function of keeping student Veterans engaged with the university. The OMVS also maintains a listserv of all military students currently enrolled at the university that is used for outreach and engagement.

The lead investigator emailed a demographic and eligibility questionnaire to all currently enrolled student Veterans on the university's OMVS listserv ($N = 440$). The results of the questionnaires were stored in the university's Qualtrics software suite (Version 3.17, 2017) and maintained on a secure server. Of the student Veterans who participated in the questionnaire ($n = 46$), 38 indicated they would be willing to participate in an interview. A purposeful sampling strategy was used to capture participant perspectives that represented diverse academic majors, branches of service, races/ethnicities, and equal representation of women and men. Criteria for participation included (a) status as non-retired Veterans of the U.S. military and (b) enrollment in undergraduate coursework as a degree-seeking student from the university where the study took place. The first author contacted 25 participants who met all criteria and best fit the sampling strategy via email to schedule the interview, offering a \$10 gift card as incentive. A total of 10 student Veterans who indicated they were willing to participate met the qualifications and completed interviews.

Instruments

Demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire was comprised of 27 items concerning demographics, specific information about military service and separation (e.g., branch, component, years served, number of deployments, etc.), and academic information (e.g., major, expected graduation year, etc.). Three items were open-ended questions about the decision to separate from active service, reasons for choice of academic major, and intended career field. Questionnaire results were used to identify interested and eligible participants for the interview, and to describe the participants who completed the study.

Interview protocol. The interview protocol, developed by the first and second authors, contained eight questions with four follow-up questions based largely on the constructs of wellness outlined in the IS-Wel model (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Interview questions were designed to obtain information about individual wellness factors influencing separation from active service and choice of new career paths and academic majors. Questions pertained to career goals before and after military service, reasons for separating from the military and attending college, and expected satisfaction from anticipated career path. Follow-up questions asked participants to elaborate on previous answers (e.g., What were your career goals before you joined the military? Follow-up: What attracted you to these goals?) Alternately, these additional probes rephrased a question to facilitate participants in recalling relevant information (e.g., How did your military service affect your career goals? Follow-up: Regarding your career, what is important to you now that was not important before you joined the military?). Follow-up

questions were asked only if participants' initial responses did not adequately address the question.

Participant Interviews

Eligible participants who completed the initial emailed questionnaire were contacted via email by the lead investigator to schedule the semi-structured interview. All interviews took place in the in-house counseling clinic in the Department of Counseling, which was the home department of the first, second, and third authors. Prior to the interview, participants were provided verbal information regarding the study, as well as a written consent form. Participation was voluntary, and participant identity was kept confidential by the use of numerical identifiers. Participants were reminded that they could discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes. Participants received a \$10 gift card after participation.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim in F5 Transcription Pro (Version 3.2; dr. dresing & pehl GmbH, 2016) software and uploaded into NVivo for Mac (Version 10; QSR International, 2014). A phenomenological approach (Kvale, 1983) was used to qualitatively analyze participant responses to questions from the semi-structured interview protocol developed by the first and second authors. The first two interview transcripts were independently coded by the first and second authors using the process of *horizontalization*, in which important quotes were identified in order to gain an understanding of student Veterans' experiences. Groupings of similar comments were created, which eventually formed overall themes (Moustakas, 1994).

The first and second investigators used the IS-Wel model as a theoretical framework for coding, specifically the operational definitions for each of the 17 third-order factors as defined by Myers and Sweeney (2008). Multiple coding and an audit trail enabled the authors to discuss and debate differences in coding procedure, and to develop consensus among multiple perspectives (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013; Sweeney, Greenwood, Williams, Wykes, & Rose, 2012).

Results

The primary themes emerging from the data were grouped related to the 17 third-order factors of the IS-Wel Model (Myers & Sweeney, 2004), and organized relative to the research questions. Select participant quotes will be used to support each theme.

Research question #1: What wellness factors lead Veterans to separate from the military and choose new careers?

Control. The most common factor cited as a reason why participants separated from the military was Control, which was defined as "belief that one can usually achieve the goals one sets for oneself; having a sense of planfulness in life; being able to be assertive in expressing one's needs" (Myers & Sweeney, 2008, p. 485). The type of control that participants referenced

differed among individuals. For example, 30% of participants cited a lack of control over their work duties as the primary reason they separated from active duty. As one participant explained:

I was working as a paramedic in an urgent care... and I got moved up to education and training, and I was very unhappy with that. It was taking me out of a patient care setting, which is what I love and what I had been doing with my life. Obviously, I had no say in it.

Forty percent of participants referenced lack of control over assignment locations. Among those, 75% indicated leaving active service to prevent separation from family, with one participant citing a lack of deployment opportunities as a source of regret. This participant noted:

I wanted to be one of those guys that, you know, does that cool stuff, you know? But I never got my opportunity to do that... I wouldn't stop asking if there were any deployments... Like once a month I had a standing appointment the first of every month like, "Hey Staff Sergeant, you got any hot fills I can fill?" "No! Get out of my office!" ...But I was trying. It just never worked.

Another 20% of participants reported that they would have preferred to remain in the service for 20 years, but were forced to separate after a medical evaluation board determined they were no longer medically fit to serve. An additional 20% of participants indicated that they separated due to inability to complete school on active duty (i.e., they lacked sufficient control over their duty schedules).

Self-Worth. Self-Worth was defined as, "accepting who and what one is, positive qualities along with imperfections; valuing oneself as a unique individual" (Myers & Sweeney, 2008, p. 485). Thirty percent of participants indicated that their self-efficacy had increased as a result of military service, and one reason they separated was to accomplish other goals. It should be noted that another 40% of participants mentioned developing their self-worth in the military, but did not reference it as reason for separating. As one participant explained:

I think it helped me realize that I was capable of doing something that challenged me, and being successful at it, and doing something technical, too. But with all that said, I'm an electrical engineering major and I'm applying to medical school... That is one desire that pushes me towards medicine is: what's harder than electrical engineering? Medicine.

Another student Veteran explained how multicultural experiences changed his expectations for himself as:

It's affected it (career goals) in a positive way in the fact that I came back, I was more - not at first - but I was more confident [from] just being around every other culture you can think of. Obviously, being stationed all around in Iraq, Kuwait, and Korea, you kind of get to see a whole different world in a whole different spectrum. Um, then it gave me like a boost of like, "Hey, when you go back to school-" it didn't happen at first, but eventually it kind of clicked like, "You can either go back to that life, or else you can work your ass off in school and hopefully that will turn into a better future for yourself."

Research question #2: What are veterans' primary considerations when determining a new career path?

Work. Work, defined as, "being satisfied with one's work; having adequate financial security; feeling that one's skills are used appropriately; the ability to cope with workplace stress" (Myers & Sweeney, 2008, p. 485), was the most frequently referenced theme in regard to the second research question. "Being satisfied with one's work" and "having adequate financial security" emerged as most relevant to participants in this study. All participants cited future job satisfaction as a motivating factor for choosing an academic major, and 40% of participants also referenced adequate financial security in an intended occupation after graduation as a motivating factor. One student Veteran explained the ways owning a comic book store would be satisfying:

You get to see people's faces light up when they find that one book or that one superhero that makes sense to them, like the Unbeatable Squirrel Girl. She's super weird but she's super cool. And helping somebody find that for the first time... That type of stuff makes it all worthwhile.

Another participant described how financial security would help him manage stress in his future occupation:

Going back to college, I knew [an engineering degree] was either going to help me get into the industry that I wanted to or it was going to pay well enough where I could just kind of get into the industry on my own money. You know? Just kind of make it a hobby instead of a profession.

Thinking. Thinking was defined as, "being mentally active, open-minded; having the ability to be creative and experimental; having a sense of curiosity, a need to know and to learn; the ability to solve problems" (Myers & Sweeney, 2008, p. 485). Seventy percent of respondents referenced Thinking as a motivating factor for their choice of academic major. Most respondents described a desire for a challenge in their future careers as motivation to succeed and overcome challenges. One student Veteran described his desire to overcome obstacles:

I thought stocks kind of looked fun. They just - something about it looked intense, fun, competition - you know, trying to be the alpha in there. Very competitive.

Another participant described his desire to change gears completely from his military occupation and seek something entirely new:

Not that I got tired of the military; I miss it all the time. Um, but I was like, "I want to try something different," kind of thing. It wasn't like I was mad or hated what I was doing; I loved what I was doing, even with all of the stress. I just, you know, it was the gamble, like I want to try something else.

Research question #3: How does military service influence veterans' perceptions of important career factors?

Leisure. Leisure was mentioned by 70% of participants as currently important, and/or as an important aspect of their future. Leisure was defined as, "activities done in one's free time; satisfaction with one's leisure activities; having at least one activity in which 'I lose myself and

time stands still’” (Myers & Sweeney, 2008, p. 485). One participant described how leisure is different after separating from the service:

Leisure activities - I can do more things without worrying about consequences - not saying that I’m going to do anything bad, but you know. You kind of have to be more mindful of what you’re doing at all times in the military.

Another student Veteran described how his leisure priorities have changed since separating:

I gotta find out some ways to decompress, blow off some steam. Be it going to the gym, going shooting, going fishing, just spending time with family. Some way to just kind of shut your mind down for a bit... I mean school’s real - it’s hard but it’s intellectually hard. I miss just physical labor where you can shut your mind off and listen to some music and lift heavy things and put them down. I enjoyed that quite a bit. So that was a big part of it, and mainly I was just looking for things where I could stop thinking. And having found those, that’s helped tremendously.

Stress Management. Stress Management was referenced by 50% of participants as being currently important, while it was not important to them before they joined the military. Stress Management was defined as a “general perception of one’s own self-management or self-regulation; seeing change as an opportunity for growth; ongoing self-monitoring and assessment of one’s coping resources” (Myers & Sweeney, 2008, p. 485). As one participant described:

Being able to have a healthy lifestyle, a healthy balanced lifestyle. Not just the six-pack abs, but the whole deal, and being able to enjoy it.

Another participant described how her military responsibilities changed her perspective on stress management:

[At] my last assignment I was pretty overwhelmed with lots of responsibilities and additional duties, and I was kind of getting real stressed out. And, you know, I decided - I spent a lot of time- not to make it sound selfish, but I spent a lot of time putting a lot of other people and things before me, and I decided I wanted to do something for me.

Cultural Identity. Sixty percent of participants referenced Cultural Identity, defined as “satisfaction with one’s cultural identity; feeling supported in one’s cultural identity; transcendence of one’s cultural identity” (Myers & Sweeney, 2008, p. 485) as becoming important to them through their military service. Most participants referenced how military culture fostered a public service mindset, so the authors included “public servant” as a culture that fit the operational definition for this concept. One participant described his developed sense of cultural identity in the military:

As a supervisor in the military, I had a lot of direct impact on the people that work for me, but you know, working in the community here, especially working with offenders, you know, those are people that really need some help and guidance and, you know, I feel like I could have a direct impact on their lives... So, serving my community that I grew up in and helping people that really, really need it.

Friendship. Seventy percent of participants reported that friendship had become an increasingly important career factor since before they joined the military. According to the IS-Wel model, Friendship is defined as, “social relationships that involve a connection with others individually or in a community, but that do not have a marital, sexual, or familial commitment; having friends in whom one can trust and who can provide emotional, material, or informational support when needed” (Myers & Sweeney, 2008, p. 485). Sixty percent of participants indicated that developing friendships became more difficult after leaving the military. Related to the factor cultural identity in reference to serving others, participants were hopeful to develop meaningful community in their future workplaces, though they acknowledged how difficult it will likely be. One participant described the transition from military to civilian work life relative to friendship:

There’s no brotherhood or family aspect to it. You know if you got done with work in the military, “Hey what are you guys doing for dinner?” “All right, we’ll go grab some food and beers and we’ll hang out.” “Oh, hey, come on over, my wife is making food.” Um, whatever it may be. Saturdays you spend with the guys because, you know, half of us are probably single too... Camaraderie was probably the biggest one and it probably still is for me.

Other Important Findings

The only other significant themes that were not explicitly discussed in this section were Love and Emotions, referenced by 90% and 80% of participants, respectively. With the exception of the 30% who mentioned family reasons as motivation to separate from the military, all other references to both Love and Emotions indicated that strong family connections and the ability to perceive and express one’s own emotions were support factors during this time of transition and, therefore, did not address any of the research questions.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify which wellness factors, from a Veteran’s perspective, led to the decision to leave the military, and whether Veterans’ intended future career decisions were informed by those factors. Of the 17 third-order factors included in the IS-Wel model, 15 were mentioned at least once. Nutrition and Gender Identity were not mentioned. Additionally, Exercise, Positive Humor, Realistic Beliefs, Self-Care, and Spirituality were mentioned only by one or two individuals, and were not dominant in participant responses.

Second-order factors associated with the physical self were not significant, and only one second-order factor, Cultural Identity, emerged as salient under the Essential Self. One possible explanation is that since participants were specifically questioned about military service and future careers, they may not have considered factors associated with the Physical Self or Essential Self to be related to the topic. Future research could investigate the perceived significance of individual wellness factors on student Veterans’ lives.

Overall, Veterans separated from active military service because of perceived lack of control in their lives, as well as a perception that leaving the service would allow for increased autonomy to pursue new vocational opportunities. Veterans in this sample seemed to choose their

new career paths based on a desire to engage in work activities they would find meaningful, as well as a general desire to try something new. Veterans also reported that both leisure activities and community service became important to them because of their military service. These factors are related to one another and can be used to inform academic and career counseling practices for individuals who intend to separate from the military and student Veterans. Interventions for these populations could focus on these wellness factors to increase engagement, involvement, and success in academic and career transitions.

Participants in this sample largely left the service because they were unable to exert Control in certain areas of their lives. Several participants indicated that they did not have an intended post-military career path at the time of their separation, indicating that Control was a driving factor. This factor appeared to be developmental for these participants; compromising control upon joining the military was not perceived as problematic, but reclaiming this control in post-military work seemed to be prioritized.

The other themes surrounding separation from the military were developmental as well. Several participants reportedly separated from service due to a desire to remain with their families and indicated that they had married a partner and/or had children while in the service. This developmental stage likely led to Love emerging as an important factor for participants in this sample. Similarly, when Self-Worth was referenced as a factor leading to separation from the military, participants mentioned that they felt capable of handling more responsibility because of what they had already accomplished in the military. This supports the notion that the military environment exerts profound effects on Veterans, leading to changing life priorities (Rausch, 2014).

Work and Thinking are organized under the same second-order factor, the Creative Self, which may indicate that as Veterans start new careers, they hope to exert creativity through their work. Similar to the findings of Duffy and Sedlacek (2007), the participants' reports of finding satisfying work and financial security are similar to non-military students' reports of valuing intrinsic interest and high salary. Notably, several participants reported not having an intrinsic interest in the field of their majors before they served in the military, with work values developing over the course of their military service.

Work and Thinking are related to the participants' responses regarding the first research question (Control and Self-Worth) in several ways. First, Control is also part of the Creative Self, indicating that factors leading to separation from the military are related to factors driving choice of post-military career. From a wellness perspective, the negative effects of low wellness scores in one area can be mitigated by wellness gains in other related areas (Myers & Sweeney, 2008), indicating that Veterans may be using their choice of a new intended career path to address wellness-related concerns they had while serving in the military. Second, Thinking (Creative Self) is related to Self-Worth (Coping Self) in that participants indicated that they were curious to find out how much more they would be able to accomplish in their new careers having successfully completed several formidable accomplishments while serving in the military.

Friendship, Leisure, and Stress-Management emerged as coping mechanisms for difficult situations. Most participants mentioned that their military jobs were stressful, but having served,

they perceive themselves to be more capable of dealing with life and workplace stress. Generally, participants prioritized healthy coping behaviors to maintain future job satisfaction, which they were not able to do while in the military. This is related to the concept of career-sustaining behaviors and professional quality of life, both of which have been shown to be positively correlated with high levels of wellness (Lawson & Myers, 2011).

With Cultural Identity, participants seemed to develop a desire for public service due to military service. Service members develop an identity as military members and may find themselves in an “identity crisis” as they transition to civilian life (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). In academia, emphasizing public service may help Veterans manage their own expectations of success relative to military cultural identity (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Practical Application

The data from this study may be useful for university Veteran’s offices and student Veteran organizations as they develop programming to engage and retain student Veterans at the university. It may also be useful to campus career counselors as they facilitate student Veterans in identifying potential career fields they may find fulfilling, particularly related to public or human service. In a military setting, career counselors could use wellness information to explore career options that will address some of the holistic concerns that contributed to the decision to separate from service. Academic advisors and career counselors could also integrate wellness data into existing academic and career counseling assessment data to address student Veteran transitions holistically to improve counseling effectiveness.

The data from this study could also be useful to military policymakers as they face ongoing difficulty retaining qualified military members in critically-manned occupations (Weiss, 2017). As an institution, the U.S. Military is known to dictate much of its service members lives, including occupation, work duties, duty station assignments, deployment schedules, and so forth (Stewart & Moser, 2005). Though the military continues to use enlistment bonuses to incentivize active duty retention (Weiss, 2017), participants did not mention low pay as a reason for separating. Military leaders at all levels could use wellness data to better inform interventions aimed at addressing retention and morale in individual military units.

The IS-Wel is an appropriate paradigm from which a clinical counselor can conceptualize a student Veteran’s holistic needs. As such, the Five-Factor Wellness Inventory, (5F-Wel; Myers & Sweeney, 2005), which is the formal assessment based on the IS-Wel, may provide useful/additional data for clinical counselors concerning wellness in military members. In the university setting, a wellness model may assist clinical counselors in conceptualizing and addressing the transition difficulties experienced by many student Veterans (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). For example, a student Veteran whose assessment results indicate she or he is struggling with Cultural Identity may benefit from becoming active in a student Veteran organization, spending more time volunteering, or finding a new major that helps develop a strong sense of identity.

Limitations

Due to the nature of qualitative research, the findings are not easily generalizable, especially with a small sample size ($N = 10$). However, in phenomenological inquiry, saturation can be achieved in as few as 6-12 interviews, especially with a relatively homogenous population (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Additionally, the location of the university where the research took place may have been a factor in the data obtained. A large military base near the university with a substantial military intelligence mission may have contributed to an overrepresentation of student Veterans from certain military career fields. It should be noted, however, that the university where this study took place was ranked as a top four-year institution for Veterans by the *Military Times* (Altman, 2016), and several participants indicated that they moved to the area and attended the university because of that ranking. Future research could investigate whether certain military specialties are more likely to pursue college degrees after separation from active military service.

Finally, the first author of this study is a prior enlisted student Veteran who served six years on active duty and completed one combat deployment in the U.S. Air Force. The meaning and themes extracted from interview transcripts may have been interpreted in ways that non-veterans would not. This potential conflict was partially mitigated by using the second author, who has no record of military service, for independent coding of transcripts. Any discrepancies between coded transcripts were discussed until a consensus was reached between authors, and the first author then reviewed previous coding to ensure all transcripts were coded consistently throughout the study. The purposive sampling strategy also partially addressed this potential conflict by intentionally seeking diverse perspectives that did not closely reflect the first author's experiences.

Directions for Future Research

Future research might utilize the 5F-Wel to compare Veterans' wellness scores pre- and post-separation to assess the degree to which Veterans are able to address their wellness concerns by changing careers. Additionally, future researchers may determine whether the 5F-Wel can be used to predict and support retention rates in select military career fields. Other investigators may also focus on whether wellness interventions are effective in ameliorating some of the difficulties that student Veterans have during the transition from military to student life. Lastly, since the participants did not significantly address the *Physical Self* or the *Essential Self*, future research could investigate whether student Veterans' wellness scores reflect a general lack of attention to those factors.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings from this study indicate that a wellness paradigm offered an innovative approach to evaluate the career development of student Veterans. In the present study, the IS-Wel effectively captured the variety of work and personal needs of the student Veterans which were not being met during their military service. Using a wellness paradigm to address academic and career counseling concerns is one way to capture a depth of information that

traditional career counseling models may not address. Current military career counseling leaves some Veterans wanting, though some are not aware of exactly how their needs are not being met (Morgan, 2017). As knowledge and awareness of evidence-based wellness models spread, holistic career counseling will become more ubiquitous, and one hopes that more Veterans will feel successful as they transition to civilian careers.

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