

## ABSTRACT

### Crossing the Finish Line: A Narrative Case Study in Understanding the Persistence of Non-Traditional Students with PTSD

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The retention of students is paramount to the success of higher education institutions. If a university cannot retain its student population, they run the risk of suffering financial loss. As the number of non-traditional students entering higher education increases, it is essential to understand how to retain this population of students. Research in this area indicates that non-traditional students require different retention plans than their traditional counterparts. This study added to the knowledge of student persistence to graduation in a university setting by focusing on why non-traditional students with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) persist to graduation. The demographics of college students have shifted from traditional first-year students to non-traditional students (Adams, 2013). Many of these non-traditional students are veterans who struggle with their transition into a university setting.

This qualitative narrative case study relied on semi-structured interviews and reflections of four participants to give insight into the lived experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD who persisted to graduation at a private university in San Antonio,

TX. The primary research question was: What experiences did non-traditional students who have PTSD deem beneficial to their persistence for degree completion? Data were analyzed using an a priori theoretical framework guided by Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention. I conducted an analysis for each participant and provided a detailed description of the data. From this, I performed a within case analysis, then followed with a thematic analysis to highlight and identify the emergent themes from the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study yielded three main themes grounded in the environmental factors contributing to student persistence. Self-efficacy, positive coping approaches, and attributions contributed to students' persistence in and out of the university environment. This study challenges university leadership and student success offices to create specific and proactive retention plans and provide opportunities for the non-traditional student population to succeed.

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Crossing the Finish Line: A Narrative Case Study in Understanding the Persistence of  
Non-traditional Students with PTSD

by

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A Dissertation

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A&P: Airframe and PowerPlant

GPA: Grade Point Average

PTSD: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

SVO: Student Veteran Organization

VA: Veterans Affairs

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## DEDICATION

To my family, especially Granny and Sherry.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Background and Needs Assessment

#### *Introduction*

Almost 70% of non-traditional students drop out before graduation (Deming et al., 2013; New, 2014). Across the nation, the number of students graduating from high school hit its peak in 2011 (Adams, 2013), and the number of non-traditional students entering college increased. Horn and Carrol (1994) define a non-traditional student as:

a student who delayed enrollment into postsecondary education attended part-time, was financially independent, worked full-time while enrolled, had dependents other than a spouse, was a single parent, or did not obtain a standard high school diploma. (p. 3)

As the population of non-traditional students begins to increase (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009), non-traditional student retention should become a high priority. The challenges that non-traditional students face can seem insurmountable. By meeting the needs of non-traditional students, universities can help them transition into an environment that supports and aids them in their persistence to graduation (Bohl et al., 2017).

Students with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have even more specific needs when it comes to being successful in a university setting. Many of these students who fall under the veteran classification often find it difficult to return to society (Kirchner et al., 2014). Providing specific support services to these students is critical to improving retention (Kirchner, 2015). Student veterans with PTSD struggle with the transition into the civilian world. PTSD, as defined in this study, is:

1. Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence
2. Intrusion symptoms associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred
3. Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred
4. Negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning, or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred
5. Marked alterations in arousal and reactivity associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning, or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred
6. Duration of the disturbance (Criteria 2,3,4,5) is more than one month.
7. The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other essential functioning areas.
8. The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., medication, alcohol) or another medical condition. (APA, 2013a)

As a result of these specific needs, non-traditional students with PTSD require a different support system than traditional first-year students.

The retention of non-traditional students with PTSD is critical because universities cannot survive without substantial retention numbers. This narrative case study highlights the need for more specific retention plans created by student success offices and trained faculty that assist non-traditional students with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in being successful in the classroom.

### *Statement of the Problem*

The focus of this study is the non-traditional student population at The University with PTSD. The retention of non-traditional students has been a matter of contention in higher education institutions for years (Bean, 1980; Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001; Noel et al., 1985; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Tinto, 1975). Despite universities having student success offices, some universities fail to isolate the needs that reflect their student population's demographic, which leads to low retention rates. Students with a history of trauma or PTSD are at an even higher risk for personal and academic challenges when entering a higher education institution (Baker et al., 2016; Boyraz & Kuhl, 2015). Student

veterans with PTSD struggle with the transition into the civilian world. Students who struggle with this transition can find themselves in a higher education environment that does not understand how to support them (DiRamio et al., 2008). The attrition of non-traditional students with PTSD has negatively impacted The University. Student success and retention contribute to the health of The University. The available literature supports that a possible cause of this problem is that students who do not feel supported often leave college before graduation (Noel et al., 1985; Mooney et al., 1981; Bean, 1980). This qualitative narrative case study investigated the prominent student demographic of The University and related the findings to non-traditional students' success with PTSD.

Higher education institutions fail to make non-traditional students a priority, even though they make up a large portion of the student population (Kazis et al., 2007). Although retention models exist for universities, understanding the needs of non-traditional students with PTSD is a particular consideration when adopting a model. Moreover, non-traditional students must find a balance among family, work, and school, and, as the definition stated, most non-traditional students are not full-time students. Full-time employment and financial independence mean that non-traditional students are eligible for considerably less financial aid, which puts an additional burden on them. If a non-traditional student transfers from one college to another, some of their courses might not transfer, and this means that students are repeating the same classes and paying for them each time.

Furthermore, the literature supports that leaving school is often a complex decision that students face. Perception and insight regarding a student's decision to leave college based on the environmental factors of self-efficacy, coping process, and

attributions (locus of control) contribute to understanding non-traditional student retention. While the efforts made by student success offices have been instrumental in how students persist, there is little research that offers a reliable, proactive program that assists veteran students with their reintegration efforts (Kukla et al., 2015). This research contributed to the literature on non-traditional student retention.

### *Literature Review*

The following literature review examined retention theories, focusing on Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention. I divided this literature review into three significant sections. The first section, Student Persistence, reviews Tinto's (1986) Retention Theory and Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention. I discussed student success and its history within institutions across the nation and their need to retain students. The second section examined non-traditional students in higher education, the change in student populations, and the needs and challenges of non-traditional students. The third section explored the meaning, essence, and experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD and examined how those experiences impacted their persistence to graduation. Knowledge and awareness regarding the needs of non-traditional students with PTSD enable educational leadership to evolve their retention plans and develop a proactive approach that addresses the specific needs of non-traditional students with PTSD.

The growth of an institution is dependent on its ability to retain its students. Retention plans are a necessity in the improvement of retention rates. As the number of non-traditional entering universities continues to grow, universities must pay attention to the specific needs of this population in order to ensure retention through graduation.



(Forbus et al., 2011). Detailed retention plans assist an institution in improving the assessment of individual needs (Gregory, 2013). Utilizing a student's history can inform retention strategies which are essential in understanding retention trends (Gall et al., 2007). Higher education institutions can then use these trends to make informed decisions regarding retention. The implementation of changes to a university-wide retention model can help leadership understand and shape trends. These trends will allow for the maximization of student retention that satisfies a broader population of students.

### *Student Persistence*

One variable of student success is the retention of non-traditional students with PTSD persisting to graduation. Fredman (2018) suggests that non-traditional students drop out of college for two main reasons: personal obligations and perceived social obstacles. The student's leading causes of attrition varied, family dependency issues, financial responsibility or hardships, difficulties with social integration, or a lack of college readiness. The retention strategies utilized by higher education institutions to retain students until graduation should encompass both the non-academic and academic needs of students (Hurd, 2000; Ramirez, 1997; Tinto, 1997). By creating a multi-faceted approach to retention, the non-traditional student population becomes a part of any university's retention plan.

*Tinto's retention theory (1993).* Granted, retention efforts by universities should consider the specific needs of the student population. By identifying the type of help students need, universities should see an improvement in retention numbers. Tinto (1993) and Bean and Eaton (2000) suggest that a student's academic performance directly correlates to a university's ability to retain that student through to graduation. Many

universities modeled their retention programs on their hypothesis because these theories considered the specific needs of a diverse student population while focusing on matriculation from one grade to the next,

Tinto (1993) argued that social and academic integration is essential in students acclimating to their institution. Academic integration is when students perform well in their classes, have relevant class experiences, find value in what they are learning, and are satisfied with their choice in majors (Tinto, 1993). Social integration is when students feel a sense of belonging, including a social and intellectual connection with their classmates (Tinto, 1993). Social and academic integration impact how well a student performs in a college environment (Kuh & Love, 2000) and how likely they are to persist to graduation. Additionally, Tinto's theory (1993) highlighted the inability to negotiate rites of passage as a reason for student departure. When students do not feel belonging and struggle to integrate into the college social and academic environment, they have a higher chance of missing classes and dropping out (Tinto, 1973, 1975). Students who participated in the college society and added the beliefs and values of faculty and other students became more committed to their new values.

*Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention.* Furthermore, Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001) played a critical role in retention theory and research. Their Psychological Theory of Retention highlighted self-efficacy, coping (approach-avoidance), and attribution (locus of control) as critical environmental factors that helped students persist to graduation and helped institutions understand student retention. Bean and Eaton's (2000) core argument was that a student's departure from college was deliberate and based on students' environmental factors while in

school. After doing additional research, Bean (2001) stated that students developed attitudes based on their experiences while attending college. These attitudes reflected how well students adapted to a college environment and their ability to persist to graduation. Bean and Eaton (2001) showed that their prior life experiences helped shape their feelings and attitudes regarding their current college experience when students enter college.

Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001) argued that different environmental factors contribute to positive self-efficacy, reduced stress, increased confidence, internal attribution, and motivation. These environmental factors related to the individual's thought processes and created the infrastructure for the decision to persist to graduation. In addition to those factors mentioned by Bean and Eaton, components of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1986), coping (Lazarus, 1966), and attributions (Rotter, 1966; Weiner, 1985) are factors that are most predictive of student success.

Self-efficacy is when people produce outcomes on more than ability alone (Bandura, 1986). Bandura's (1986) seminal research stated that people who believe in their capabilities will have desired outcomes, and the application of self-efficacy is useful throughout a variety of avenues, including the retention of college students (Lent et al., 1987; Pajares, 1996; Solberg et al., 1993). The core principle of self-efficacy is that a person can successfully produce outcomes when their capacity to make choices aligns with their thought process (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, self-efficacy's value lies within a student's ability to examine their thoughts and, by increasing a student's positive self-efficacy, they are more likely to set and achieve goals (Bandura, 1997).

Coping processes are also a part of Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention. Unlike Lazarus's (1966) and Tinto's (1987) coping models outlining how situations of adapting, avoiding stressors, or rewards denote college success, Bean and Eaton's model demonstrated that healthy coping processes could reduce stress and increase confidence in school environments. These approach or avoidance behaviors indicated if a student could adapt and adjust to the college environment (Lazarus, 1966). While Lazarus's work appears in various retention integration models like Tinto (1987), Bean and Eaton (2000) used this coping model to demonstrate that healthy coping processes in the school environment reduced stress and increased confidence. Students who used successful coping strategies could mentally and emotionally integrate effectively in the college environment (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001).

When students attempted to reduce the amount of stress they encountered, they invoked approach behaviors like asking questions, assessing situations, and confronting stressors. These approach behaviors allowed them to attain information about what threatened them (Bean & Eaton, 2000) and gave them the tools they needed to make informed decisions. Conversely, students who displayed avoidance behaviors become passive when dealing with their stressors. These students had a propensity for moving away from or avoiding stressful feelings and situations. Avoidance can also actively manifest within students by skipping class, not completing work, and not asking for help (Bean & Eaton, 2000).

Finally, the last section of Bean and Eaton's theory was attribution (locus of control). Attributions are actions caused by people or things. Weiner's (1985) view supported this definition because he noticed that people would repeat a behavior based on

the influence of a situation's outcome, also called an attribution of reinforcement. When a student viewed the effects of an event as external, luck, chance, or powerful forces, they were not usually motivated to increase or decrease their behaviors based on the situation's outcome (Rotter, 1982). Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) model also noted that locus of control was the most deciding factor in whether a student would persist to graduation. Rotter's (1954, 1966, 1982) theory assumed that behavior depended on the perceived or expected outcome of an event or situation. Essentially, learning occurs when a student has an attribution of reinforcement (Rotter, 1966).

Although locus of control and self-efficacy are similar, it is essential to highlight their differences. Bandura (1977) stated that when students believe they can complete a task, they do so because they can produce successful outcomes. However, what affected the result of people's behaviors was their locus of control. If someone thinks and believes that they can complete a task but fail to connect the successful completion of that task to their actions, they are not likely to repeat that task. If a person relates the successful completion of a task to their attribution, they are more likely to repeat that action. Rotter (1954, 1966, 1982) theorized that students who believed they controlled the outcomes of situations and would improve their environment, anticipate environmental cues, and resist outside negative influences.

In the final analysis of retention literature, there are many reasons students do not persist to graduation. These theoretical models highlighted, described, and classified these reasons. While Tinto (1993) argued that a student's ability to acclimate to their environment is essential to their persistence to graduation, Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention examined the environmental factors

of self-efficacy, coping process, and attributions (locus of control) and their effect on a student's ability and willingness to persist to graduation. These environmental factors coexist with an individual's background and the institution they attend. This coexistence determines if a student belongs at the college in which they enroll. Noting that college environment interaction presents itself in many ways, student self-assessment could aid in emotions of connection and improved feelings about the institution. The institutional fit and student connection to their environment could decide if a student will persist to graduation.

### *Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education*

As a result of the research and theories regarding retention, each institution has different programs related to traditional student and non-traditional student success, each requiring separate institutional policies and actions (Brock, 2010). Institutions examine the student population and assess the process of assisting non-traditional students by outlining a framework that explains how programs specific to this type of students' needs can be effective (Bergerson, 2009). Many programs like Advanced Via Individual Determination (AVID), Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA), and Trio have merit when aiding non-traditional students in their persistence to graduation (WWC, 2010). Programs like Bridge and Career Pathways help non-traditional adult students relate what they are learning to a real-world context (Torraco & Hamilton, 2013).

Regardless of the challenges non-traditional students face, those who decide to enroll in higher education institutions need guidance, support, and understanding from the people in their academic and personal lives. The issues they face and the

responsibilities they hold can impact whether they will be successful in college. Because non-traditional students typically balance busy work schedules, dependents, and schoolwork, they can struggle with time management (Kazis et al., 2007). Without proper support, they will never progress to graduation. Universities need both student success services and faculty that understand how to make this population of students successful. Non-traditional students struggle to stay enrolled in college because of the challenges they may face. Giving these students the proper tools to become better students and persist to graduation helps them become more productive members of the workplace (Kazis et al., 2007).

*Changing landscape of higher education demographics.* The number of non-traditional students entering higher education institutions has increased over the past few years (NCES, 2015). Because of this increase in numbers, college campuses have experienced a shift in populations regarding ethnicity and age. The student demographic is varied (Dill & Henley, 1998; Spitzer, 2000) and no longer merely first-year, traditional students (Anderson, 2019). Sometimes recognized as adult learners, the population of non-traditional students in higher education institutions is more than 70% (“Characteristics,” 2017; Sheehy, 2013). The shift in non-traditional students attending college, which is expected to increase 14% by 2024 (NCES, 2016) and makes up 78% of for-profit institutions (Arbeit & Horn, 2017), indicates a need for change in how universities retain their current population.

According to Horn and Carroll (1994), the non-traditional student will not enroll in higher education directly after high school as most begin working or start families. They must learn how to balance various responsibilities ranging from childcare or care of

dependents and a full work schedule (Erisman & Steele, 2015). The additional desire for academic success compounds the weight of these responsibilities. Balancing multiple life roles leads non-traditional students to struggle in an academic arena (Kelly, 2013).

Despite research into the retention rates of non-traditional students, little is known as to why this portion of the student population has higher attrition rates than their traditional counterparts despite both groups dealing with handling stress and finding a functional school/life balance (Bean & Metzner, 1985). While the factors of balance and stress impact students' attrition rates, some non-traditional students do not struggle to persist to graduation.

*Additional challenges.* As Bidwell (2014) and other higher education leaders have found, non-traditional students have a myriad of life factors that they must balance with intangible stressors that make the rigors of higher education difficult to maintain. Time management becomes a consequential struggle for non-traditional students as they attempt to balance work, school, and personal lives (Ross-Gordon, 2011, Woods & Frogge, 2017). Because as few as 18% of non-traditional students enrolled in college are unemployed (Ross-Gordon, 2011), returning to school can directly conflict with work responsibilities. Additionally, many non-traditional students have families making dependent care on top of work responsibilities, some of the more significant factors in whether there is a delay or inhibition in returning to school or furthering their education at all (Erisman & Steele, 2015). Under those circumstances, non-traditional students struggle with these responsibilities while in school, and some non-traditional students struggle with the issue of returning to school. These work stressors and caring for a family sometimes delay the initial step of returning to school (Erisman & Steele, 2015).



The varying factors that non-traditional students face often occur due to the gap in learning or lack of familial support (Bidwell, 2014). Since many non-traditional students experience a considerable gap between when they last attended school and start as a new non-traditional student, lost skills in the areas of class expectations, note-taking, and time management for homework can be additional stymieing factors to a non-traditional student's success (Higgins, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011). In addition to lost educational skills, many non-traditional students have missing foundational skills generally learned in the K–12 school setting, which they have to know to succeed in college (Erisman & Steele, 2015). Adult learners are typically first-generation students (Perna, 2016). This first-generation status means that familial support might not exist because no one in their families has experienced anything in the higher education arena. And, where traditional students may look to older relatives for assistance and support, advice from families of non-traditional students could fall on deaf ears heightening the belief that higher education is an insurmountable goal (Perna, 2016). Non-traditional students' challenges can make them feel alone without a proper support system (Perna, 2016).

*Needs of non-traditional students.* As discussed, being a non-traditional student means facing many challenges that traditional students do not typically deal with. To mitigate this issue and reduce drop-out rates for all students adjusting to the rigors of higher education (Bigger, 2005; Oudenhoven, 2002), many colleges and universities require students to take entry-level courses to teach students time management skills and well as other necessary foundational academic skills that will encourage student success (Keup, 2012). However, even when non-traditional students attend these classes, the chance remains that feelings of inadequacy and an inability to understand what is

required may mean students that struggle to ask for help. Despite being in a setting designed to provide assistance to students in need, they were still unprepared for the transition into college and quit before graduation (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Non-traditional students who fail to participate in these classes that help close their educational gap are less likely to be prepared to transition into college and are less likely to persist to graduation (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Consequently, universities that offer a variety of courses that appeal to students tend to have more success in retaining their non-traditional students (Berling, 2013). Non-traditional students seek options that ensure their transition into a college environment is easy. Having the opportunity to find courses that fit their specific needs helps non-traditional students feel more in control of their schedules and lives. The increased use of online programs has been beneficial to non-traditional students. Online programs allow many students to go through their degree programs quicker and with fewer interruptions to their schedule as class assignments can be done around their already scheduled lives (Woods & Frogge, 2017). It also allows traditional and non-traditional students who do not live on or near a college campus the flexibility to attend programs otherwise inaccessible while remaining close to their current homes (Berling, 2013).

Under those circumstances, the way non-traditional students learn is also very different than their traditional student counterparts. Universities need to have classes that help facilitate the ways that non-traditional students learn. Pedagogy is not an appropriate platform for adult learners to receive and interpret instruction (Ishler, 2003); faculty must engage in andragogy. Faculty should have a classroom environment that connects to how

and why non-traditional students learn. The personal connection created to the lesson material and their lives allows students to see the relevance of what they learn to what they know and how it applies to their professional lives (Donnelly-Smith, 2011). Non-traditional students draw from life experiences and have more self-awareness than traditional students (Knowles, 1998). Students who draw from life experiences become more invested in the material and are more willing to learn and retain the material (Knowles, 1998). Non-traditional students who become more involved in the material through discussions and apply it to their lives (Vandenberg, 2012) find value in their experiences (Knowles, 1998).

Additionally, non-traditional students who connect with their professors are more likely to succeed (Erisman & Steele, 2015). Students who feel connected to their instructors are more motivated to be successful. They also feel more accountable for their actions in and out of the classroom (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993). Studies indicate that students who have positive interactions in the classroom with their instructors tend to have high self-efficacy, high motivation, and improved perception, leading to higher retention rates (Burt et al., 2013). These reasons are strong motivators for non-traditional students to remain engaged and be successful in college.

Non-traditional students have a myriad of external factors working against them in terms of success. Their motivation lies with their need to better their career and earn more money (Chao, 2009). They need to motivate themselves and their children to do better and not be in the same financial situation. Even with strong reasons to remain motivated, many non-traditional students enter college with an ill-developed sense of self and almost no internal motivation (Chao, 2009). Past experiences in school can create

feelings of not being successful. These negative past experiences can then become barriers, and the faculty should provide an environment that fosters more intrinsic motivation (Chao, 2009). Non-traditional students need to break the cycle of not being successful (Strang, 2014). Improved motivation can often break with the slightest setback because of past experiences. A structured learning environment with helpful feedback and relevant learning objectives mitigates setbacks (Lawrence, 2000). This structured environment fosters a system of trust and success.

### *PTSD and its Impact on Student Persistence*

The challenges that veteran non-traditional students face, when coupled with PTSD, can often exacerbate the transition into a college environment (Kataoka et al., 2012; Levin, 1998; Tinto, 1988) and can ultimately lead a student to quit school before graduation. When students are not supported in their transition, they are more likely to not persist during this difficult change (Tinto, 1988). Students who learn how to navigate their new environment have a better understanding of their social and emotional well-being and take into consideration their individual needs before entering college (Dick et al., 2016). While PTSD and trauma are not the only issues military and veteran students face, this research will focus solely on how PTSD affects veteran non-traditional students.

*PTSD in college students.* Students who are diagnosed with PTSD can struggle with their mental and physical health (Hutchinson & Banks-Williams, 2006; MacLean & Elder, 2007; Ren et al., 1999) if they do not seek out the proper support and treatment. When these students transition into college, they often do not find the appropriate support to help them navigate their new environment (Danish & Antonides, 2009; MacLean &

Elder). According to Hofman et al. (2016), students who have PTSD can lack the emotional intelligence needed to navigate the college terrain due to the direct correlation between a student's emotional intelligence and how well the college environment socially supports the student. Understanding how to deal with one's emotions in various situations is emotional intelligence. In a study done by Hofman et al. (2016), researchers measured emotional intelligence by testing how students regulate their feelings regarding social support coupled with a checklist for PTSD. The results of this study found that emotional intelligence is mediated and supported by social support.

Services for college students regarding mental health have been in place for many years, and these services have changed to become more proactive in meeting the changing needs of students (Kraft, 2009, 2011). These changes occurred because university leadership began to see that students were not persisting to graduation due to the emotional problems they faced (Kraft, 2009, 2011). Specific veteran resource centers allow for a more targeted approach to the growing needs of students. For many years, student success office personnel attempted to improve mental health and veteran resources (Kettmann et al., 2007; Kraft, 2009). While varied organizations exist on university campuses, veteran support organizations struggle to find footing and support despite the increase in student numbers (Kirchner, 2015). Providing services that promote persistence to graduation is imperative.

Varying factors determine whether a student will be successful in college. The elements of academic readiness, support (academic and personal), self-direction, and regulation of learning and emotions play a vital role in student success (Spitzer, 2000). Therefore, as a result, universities across the nation began to focus their attention on

mental health (Kraft, 2009). With the introduction of the GI bill in 1944, more veterans were enrolling in school, which required universities to offer additional support for mental health needs. Services like counseling, medication management, and faculty and staff support became the norm for universities. This introduction caused an uptick of veterans to enroll in college. These students required additional support for mental health needs—services like counseling, medication management, and faculty and staff support (Kraft, 2011).

*Managing change.* Managing the ability to adapt to a new environment can be a difficult and often devastating transition. As a professor of psychology, Howard McClusky (1970) wrote about understanding how adults adapt to change and the various challenges they face. One of these challenges was increased pressure. This pressure can be internal or external. The internal pressure adults face can be from their internal attributions like mindset. The external pressures adults face can be from family or work (McClusky, 1970). Because adults tend to have more responsibilities, they struggle to adapt to increasing social demands and maintain autonomy (McClusky, 1970). As non-traditional students transition into college, the increased pressure they face due to the additional demands of college can make them unable to adapt to their new environment (Madsen et al., 2003).

Suppose we use McClusky's Theory of Margin (1970) to understand a student's ability to manage change and adapt. In that case, we can posit that the concepts of load, power, and margin are contributing factors to a student's success in college. Load is intangible thoughts or functions that require energy. Power is positive and creates happiness for people. Power balances load and determines how much power and load a

person has (Madsen et al., 2003). Some students struggle to make a smooth transition into college because their power and load do not align, creating a low margin, which, in turn, causes them to not be successful in a college environment (Madsen et al., 2003; Vaez & Laflamme, 2008). One of the biggest challenges students face is managing their load (Madsen et al., 2003). To effectively manage their load, students need to accept that their transition into a higher education institution requires a balance in their power and load (McClusky, 1970; McNabb & Sepic, 1995).

Experiencing extreme stress can lead students to practice avoidance behaviors that negatively impact their ability to be successful and impact their health (Dembo & Seli, 2016; Friedlander et al., 2007). Unfortunately, some students never fully adjust to the transition into college and continue to have high-stress levels, which affects their ability to persist to graduation (Belch, 2011). The pressures of work and lack of childcare can manifest into stress and lead students to leave school or become terminated from their program (Tinto, 1993; Tillman, 2002).

Transitioning into college life is difficult for both traditional and non-traditional students (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Crede & Niehorster, 2011) because being smart is only one small factor of what makes someone successful. Students must also cope with the myriad changes happening during this time of life (Crede & Niehorster, 2011), manage their learning process (Bembenutty, 2011), and understand their stressor limits (Vaez & Laflamme, 2008). Compounding the regular difficulties of transitioning into college life during this time impacts a student's ability to be successful. Students who believe they are less capable than their classmates tend to think that they will not be successful (Dembo & Seli, 2016), which then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

*Readjustment issue of student veterans into college.* Student veterans encounter various challenges. Sometimes, they are first-generation students who lack family support (Kim & Cole, 2013). A student veteran is a student who is active-duty, reserve, has National Guard status, retired from the military, or completed their military service, and attends a higher education institution (Brown & Gross, 2011). Student veterans entering higher education institutions experience pressure from varying stressors that can impact their ability to graduate. Student veterans face challenges that include differing academic structures and unknown social situations (Belch, 2011). Although all students face challenges adjusting to unknown academic structures and social situations (Belch, 2011), veteran students can additionally struggle with their reintegration into civilian life as well as the higher education environment. The lack of structure found when no longer actively enlisted in the military (DiRamio et al., 2008; Radford, 2009) compounds their struggle to reintegrate into civilian life.

Counterintuitively, some student veterans attempt to integrate into campus culture to avoid discomfort. The relationships forged with fellow students are not always helpful, and many people do not understand the struggles veterans face. The Pew Research Center (2011) indicated that 84% of veterans (post 9/11) state that the public does not empathize with the struggles that student veterans face. Student veterans can find it challenging to connect with civilian students. Some veteran students even desire to keep their military commitment anonymous, which can be difficult when faculty specifically ask for reflections on military experience should the topic be pertinent to a class discussion (DiRamio et al., 2008). Some students might consider specific college campuses' political climate a reason not to identify their military status or become alienated during



events and lectures (DiRamio et al., 2008; Herrmann et al., 2008). According to Bauman (2009), students deployed during their college enrollment often struggle to transition back into college life once their deployment is over because they are no longer with their original cohort and feel a need to gain new friendships and levels of trust. Additionally, deployment while actively enrolled in school can mean veterans return older than their classmates, invoking additional feelings of isolation. Heightened feelings of isolation can create an increased sense of worthlessness for veterans transitioning back into the civilian world (Kukla et al., 2015).

Kirchner (2015) stated that the number of services available to veterans should reflect the number of student veterans enrolled in college. The endeavors of connecting to classmates, participating in discussions, and integrating into college culture highlight the challenges student veterans encounter when they enter college (Kirchner, 2015). Many veteran organizations on college campuses work to close the empathy gap is to connect new student veterans with veterans further along in their educational journey (Kirchner, 2015). By connecting with other veterans early in the educational process, new veterans may find outlets to discuss shared experiences and traumas, increasing a sense of belonging and providing contextual semblances of normalcy to support integration into civilian life.

In addition to other veteran students, supportive faculty play an instrumental role in a veteran's successful transition into a successful college career (Kircher, 2015). By training faculty to understand and support the unique needs of veteran students they can more readily prove a 'safe' classroom environment for veterans (Schnoelbelen, 2013). A safe classroom environment allows faculty to facilitate positive student veterans'

experiences (Kirchner, 2015). Persky and Oliver (2010) conducted research investigating the importance of faculty trained to handle veteran student issues and found that informed and sensitive faculty were preferred by veteran students.

### *Synthesis of Literature*

This literature review highlighted not only the experiences and challenges that non-traditional students with PTSD face, but it also revealed the characteristics of veteran non-traditional students with PTSD. Additionally, this literature review examined the seminal work of Tinto (1977, 1986) and his theories regarding retention. It discussed Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention to guide this study's framework by reviewing environmental factors and their impact on student retention.

These studies showed how important faculty understanding, peer acceptance, and familial support are in retaining non-traditional students. For all students starting college, being unprepared reduces the chances of graduating, but for non-traditional students, support and preparedness become an essential part of success. But there may be other areas where universities can offer support and assistance to generate positive results for non-traditional and veteran students. The increase of non-traditional students with PTSD warrants more research into supporting this demographic of students (Forbus et al., 2011).

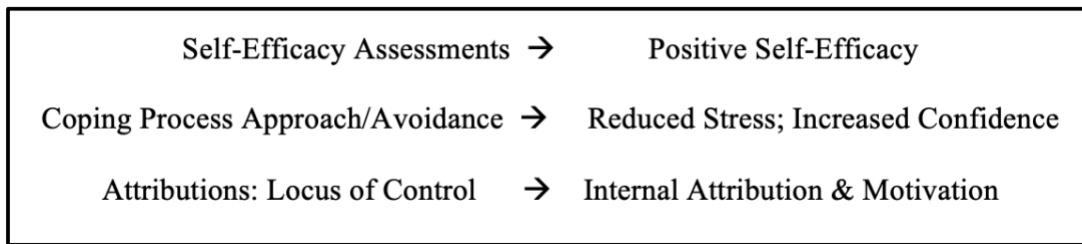
The development of retention plans that reflect an institution's population should be the leadership team's focus. Academic leadership, faculty, and staff should be aware of warning signs indicating whether a student will make it to graduation, so a conscious effort to meet student specific needs must be made to increase retention. Knowledge of

retention theories helps gain a deeper understanding of students' inability to persist to graduation. These theories are rooted in having a holistic understanding of all the aspects of student lives both on and off a university campus. These theories provided a foundation for the theoretical framework utilized in this study. These theories also offer a deeper understanding of one reason why students may drop out of college. The foundation of these theories can also help develop purposeful retention plans for non-traditional students with PTSD. Chapter Three outlines and summarizes the methodology for this study, which included semi-structured interviews with non-traditional students with PTSD who have persisted to graduation.

### *Theoretical Framework*

I grounded this study in an a priori theoretical framework that focuses on Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention to understand the reasons why non-traditional students persist to graduation. Bean and Eaton (2000) discuss how persistence to graduation is a psychologically motivated behavior. For this research, I examined three psychological processes that impact academic persistence for students: self-efficacy, coping behaviors, and attributions (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001). The students' experiences highlight the environmental factors that play a role in a student's decision to persist to graduation. Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) model shows that persistence is linked to a student's behaviors, normative values, intentions, and attitudes factors embedded within institutional and environmental contexts (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001). This study examined the arrows, seen in Figure 1.1, and what these participants said helped them move toward persistence.

Bean and Eaton (2000) examined a student’s persistence to graduation as a retention theory focused on environmental factors, psychological processes, and psychological outcomes. This research identified how non-traditional students with PTSD leveraged their personal and academic relationships to become the cause of their positive college experiences and persist to graduation. The environmental factors represent the experiences students have while enrolled in college: faculty encounters/relationships, therapy, self-management, and familial and peer support. The arrows represent what experiences helped move them along the continuum toward their persistence to graduation.



*Figure 1.1.* Student’s behavior, normative values, intentions, and attitudes factors embedded within institutional and environmental contexts (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001).

*Conclusion: Purpose of the Study*

This narrative case study aimed to understand the relationship among non-traditional students with PTSD and their persistence to graduation (academic success). It developed an effective non-traditional student retention program at The University. This narrative case study vocalized the college experiences of each non-traditional student participant. Methods of inquiry included collecting archival demographical data, narrative case study reflection of data, and semi-structured interviews that highlighted the non-traditional students’ lived college experiences and personal lives.

The proposed research had implications for higher education institutions with a large non-traditional student population and student academic success research. The number of non-traditional students who also have PTSD continues to increase (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019). The academic success of these students is necessary for the financial well-being and the health of the higher education institution. The contribution of this literature assisted in how universities create student success offices and safe classroom environments. This research reviewed how PTSD impacts a non-traditional student's academic success and how more robust student success programs can aid in persistence to graduation.

The maintenance and growth of students' retention rates should be a goal of all leaders in higher education institutions. I utilized varied criteria when distinguishing between traditional and non-traditional students. University leaders have different values of standards when calculating retention that is specific to the institution. Having strong retention rates does not just mean that the university is retaining students; it is a direct reflection on the health of various programs within the school and the institution itself. The following chapter details the research design and methodology utilized for this study.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Methodology

#### *Introduction: Research Questions*

This chapter highlights the qualitative methodological approach utilized for this research. In light of the conclusions presented in Chapter One, the literature concluded that non-traditional students with PTSD face many obstacles that often prevent them from being academically successful. Additionally, the increased population of non-traditional students significantly impacted retention numbers and how leadership should evaluate this population of students. Furthermore, retention theories highlighted factors that aided a student in their persistence to graduation. The current problem of practice focused on non-traditional students with PTSD and the beneficial environmental factors that led them to persist to graduation.

This study investigated the experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD who attended The University and persisted to graduation and explored their perceptions regarding what made them successful. I collected the participants' perspectives using semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Additionally, qualitative research highlights the lens through which people can interpret, understand, and make meaning of their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Utilizing qualitative research allows the participants to tell their stories from their perspectives. Each experience highlighted the journey of success that each student faced. These stories of success provided detailed accounts of retention strategies that aid in creating more robust student success programs. Qualitative research can be an inductive process, and

observations in the field are built by gathering data that builds towards theories and concepts. By asking relevant questions about the participants' experiences, I gained insight into the individual student experience.

The primary and subsequent research questions for this study are based on Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention. The primary research question in this narrative case study asked: What experiences did non-traditional students who have PTSD deem as beneficial to their persistence for degree completion? The sub research questions of this narrative case study focused specifically on the environmental factors of Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention and asked:

1. How have traits of self-efficacy been beneficial to the persistence of non-traditional students who have PTSD?
2. How have coping approaches been beneficial to the persistence of non-traditional students who have PTSD?
3. How have attributions (locus of control) been beneficial to the persistence of non-traditional students who have PTSD?

#### *Researcher Perspective and Positionality*

I am a mixed-race woman who falls into one or more categories under the non-traditional student definition. My father raised me in a middle-class family. My upbringing did not reflect the importance of higher education but centered around hard work and perseverance. My dad instilled in me early to finish work and never quit even when things were difficult. My father always encouraged my quest for knowledge and funded my reading hobby. I was a hard worker. During high school, I worked part-time while maintaining good grades. After high school, I attended and graduated from a trade school. A local doctor's office quickly employed me, but I knew that I would never make

a living wage with that job. When I heard of a local university hiring for an entry-level position, I applied for and received a job. After a few months of working in higher education, I decided to apply to college since the university had a program where employees would receive a discount on tuition. I became fascinated with learning at a higher level and wanted to become a part of it. The process of applying to college was unfamiliar to me because I did not understand financial aid, buying books, registering for classes, or balancing school and work. Thankfully, I received help from one of my colleagues. I attended college part-time and worked upwards of three jobs while earning my bachelor's degree. I quickly joined a master's program and completed my degree in under two years. While I knew the odds were stacked against me, I persevered through multiple jobs, homelessness, and uncertainty, and I graduated.

I started my master's program, not knowing what I would do after I finished. After changing jobs, I quickly realized that I wanted to continue my work in higher education. I became an instructor at The University after completing my master's degree and worked at The University for six years as an instructor. I have also had various roles at The University, such as an Evening Academic Supervisor and the Associate Dean for Student Success. While in these roles, I witnessed successful students and students who failed to persist to graduation. I wanted to understand why some students were successful and why some were not. I tried to understand the participants' experiences in a university setting with a history of PTSD. I also attempted to understand how a targeted student success office can aid in the persistence to graduation for the non-traditional student population.



As a graduate student and an instructor, I believe that every student should have access to higher education. Even though non-traditional students with PTSD have unique challenges, they should have every opportunity to be successful. I am interested in this topic because the retention of students is the heartbeat of higher education institutions. I viewed this case study research through a constructivist worldview, and I acknowledged my relationships with the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The goal of this research was to rely on the views and experiences of the participants. The constructivist worldview aligned with this research because the participants' views are based on this worldview (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018). The participants' views were vital in understanding why the retention of non-traditional students with PTSD is so low. Qualitative inquiry requires rapport and confidence within the researcher (Glesne, 2011). The lived experiences allowed the participants to feel more comfortable when conducting semi-structured interviews and telling their stories. My positionality is exclusive to my experiences with the participants (Chiseri-Strater, 1996; Takacs, 2003) and helped me understand the participants' lived experiences while attending The University. I strived to find the connection among non-traditional students with PTSD and why they persisted in graduation despite the odds stacked against them. This narrative case study aimed to use the participants' views to make meaning of their situation (Creswell, 2009) and find common themes to help understand why they persisted to graduation. This research's findings informed how to develop student success offices and support programs that benefit non-traditional students with PTSD. Although I was close to the participants, I formed no biases, and I remained cognizant of my positionality for the duration of this research (Moser, 2008).

### *Theoretical Framework Application*

The framework utilized for this study was Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention. The rationale behind using this theory was to examine the environmental factors of self-efficacy, coping processes, and attributions (locus of control) in connection to why students persist to graduation. In this study, Bean and Eaton's (2000) retention theory's environmental factors provided a foundation for understanding the non-traditional students' experiences with PTSD who persisted to graduation.

Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) framework helped shape the primary and secondary research questions. The primary research question sought to understand what experiences were beneficial to non-traditional students with PTSD while enrolled in college. This question aided in understanding how non-traditional students with PTSD perceived and utilized beneficial experiences in their persistence to graduation. The secondary research questions provided a comprehensive understanding of the specific components of a student's experiences. The primary and secondary research questions provided a holistic view of students' experiences related to self-efficacy, coping process, and attributions (locus of control) while maintaining the lens of Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention as it relates to environmental factors.

Self-efficacy is the connection of personal and environmental factors that determines a student's ability to produce outcomes (Bandura, 1986). Motivation is synonymous with self-efficacy in how students motivate themselves to persist to graduation. Coping processes indicate a student's ability to adjust to the college learning environment (Lazarus, 1966). Bean and Eaton (2000) used the coping process model to

demonstrate how healthy processes lead to higher education success. Attribution theory helps explain the causal events surrounding a student's ability or inability to persist to graduation (McLeod, 2012).

Bean and Eaton's (2001) framework informed the data collection process significantly. This research utilized semi-structured interview questions to center the focus of the study. The interview processes focused on determining the beneficial experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD. I categorized data into the significant themes of self-efficacy, coping processes, and attributions (locus of control)—the sub-categorized to highlight and reflect the experiences that students deemed beneficial to their persistence to graduation.

Influencing the collection of data in this study was Bean and Eaton's (2001) emphasis on the psychological processes that indicated a student's persistence to graduation. The psychological process of self-efficacy, coping approaches, and attributions were critical indicators of a student's persistence. Because each student's intention to persist is individual, I utilized semi-structured interviews to guide me through the students' lived experiences. The semi-structured interview approach supported participants who may have had trouble articulating their lived experiences and provided them ample opportunity to reflect on any other factors that contributed to their persistence.

In conclusion, Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention was the lens and anchor throughout this research process. This framework focused on the environmental factors contributing to a non-traditional student with PTSD and their persistence to graduation. Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) theory

grounded the primary and subsequent research questions, data collection methods, and data analysis used in this study.

### *Research Design and Rationale*

In an endeavor to understand the experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD, I chose a narrative case study as the qualitative method of inquiry. Furthermore, I chose a narrative case study because I have “clearly identifiable cases with boundaries...that provide an in-depth understanding of the case” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 100). Life experiences anchor case study research by developing a sense of a problem that exists within real-life (Yin, 2017). I examined the reasons and experiences of why non-traditional students with PTSD persisted to graduation. Yin (2017) stated that “case studies are preferred when the relevant behaviors...cannot be manipulated and...the desire is to study some contemporary event or set of events” (p. 12). Creswell and Poth (2018) indicated that case studies are comprehensive analyses of a bounded system.

Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2018) wrote that qualitative studies are more than analyzing data; qualitative studies explore cases in a real-life context. Qualitative data involves how the participants interpret their experiences. The college experience of non-traditional students with PTSD was the fundamental piece in this study. This qualitative research did not seek to generalize experiences but to provide evidence based on individuals’ contexts and explorations (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Moreover, the rationale behind using a narrative case study research design is to share the participants’ experiences and relate to how universities can understand retention through the lens of Bean and Eaton’s (2000) theory of retention. Qualitative research design highlights people and how they interact with each other and their environment

(Brantlinger et al., 2005; Lichtman, 2013; Nastasi & Schensul, 2005) while articulating the connection and meanings within specific processes (Sale et al., 2002). This narrative case study consisted of non-traditional students with PTSD who persisted until graduation. Participants differed with respect to race, gender, age (within the non-traditional definition), and socioeconomic status to provide various perspectives. Since this narrative case study's participants were the non-traditional students who attended this university, I explored what experiences were beneficial to their success for degree completion and how this persistence connected to self-efficacy, coping, and attributions (locus of control). I hoped to discover a connection within a random purposeful sample and explain how new and improved student success programs could assist them better.

The qualitative methodology is in line with this research because it contributed to this research's relevance and significance. A gap in the literature exists for non-traditional students who have PTSD and why they do not persist to graduation. Therefore, qualitative research is the most efficient and practical approach to answering the questions proposed by me.

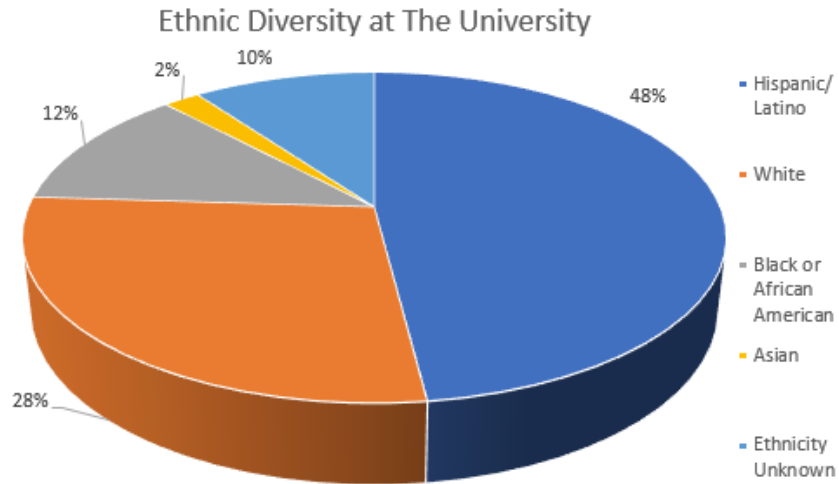
This study focused on the beneficial experiences, coping approaches, self-efficacy, and attributions of non-traditional students with PTSD who persisted to graduation and attended The University. The qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to discover and understand the participants' lived experiences in their personal and college lives. This research study and the findings allowed The University to explore various ways to retain students each term to persist to graduation.

### *Site Selection and Participant Sampling*

This study's context resided in the shared locations, common events, and similar social conditions of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, the shared location site was The University in San Antonio, TX. The University is a small, private, non-profit university that serves students from Bexar, Bandera, Atascosa, Comal, Frio, and Guadalupe Counties. San Antonio, TX demographics in 2020 were predominately White (80%), followed by Hispanic (64%). The veteran population from 2014–2018 was 103,935 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The University has a high military (current and veteran) student population who are considered non-traditional students.

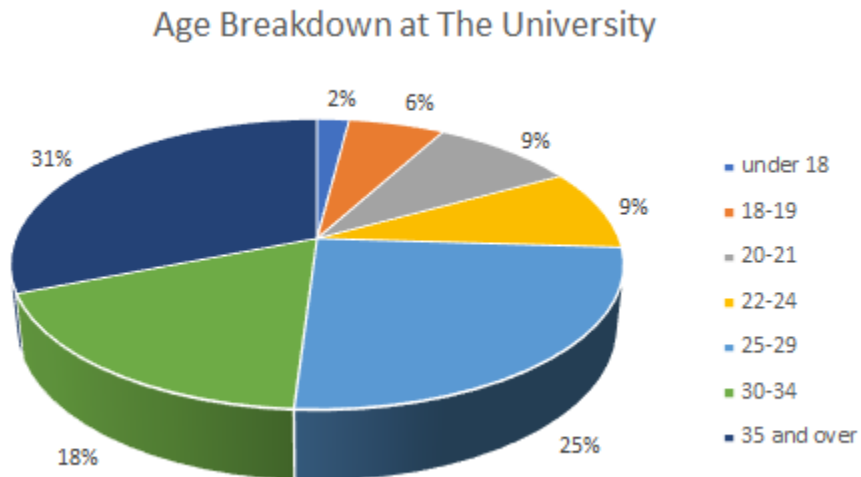
#### *Site*

The University has four primary areas of study and offers bachelor's and master's degrees in information technology, business, nursing, and aviation. While The University has a diverse population, its high Hispanic population is reflective of the large Hispanic population in San Antonio, TX. The ethnic analysis of The University, highlighted in Figure 2.1, is Hispanic (48%), White (27%), Black or African American (12%) (College Factual, 2020). Figure 2.1 represents the demographics of The University that is mirrored with the demographics of the participants. Coupled with non-traditional students' definition, Figure 2.2 showed that most of The University's student population resided within the non-traditional student age range.



*Figure 2.1* Ethnic diversity at The University.

Coupled with non-traditional students' definition, Figure 2.2 showed that most of The University's student population resided within the non-traditional student age range.



*Figure 2.2* Age breakdown at The University.

### *Participants*

In January and February of the 2021 academic year, I collected archival data and conducted semi-structured interviews in April–June of 2021. Participants provided the consent forms they received before the collection of their data. The consent and confidentiality forms indicated that the participants agreed to interviews for research purposes and evaluation. I chose the participants through purposeful sampling because they gave the most insight into the specific phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Purposeful sampling allowed me to specify The University populations' different characteristics (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

This research ascertained, interpreted, and detailed the beneficial experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD through semi-structured interviews. I selected and emailed 300 participants for this study. Four agreed to participate in the research, which aligned with Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendation for the number of participants to provide saturation,  $n=4$ . Participants from this purposeful sample experienced the same events (Guest et al., 2006) and attended The University in San Antonio, TX and persisted to graduation and met the qualifying criteria of (a) delayed enrollment into postsecondary education (b) financially dependent (c) worked at least part-time while enrolled (d) had dependents other than a spouse (e) had a PTSD diagnosis. I utilized purposeful sampling to characterize the group that met the requirements (Glesne, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I used the registrar's office to provide the demographical data and contact information and a qualifying questionnaire to identify students who met the criteria for this research. Participants of this study were non-traditional students with PTSD who persisted to graduation.



I collected participant demographics, and the four students who participated in this study had graduated from The University. The participants had different ethnic backgrounds (listed in Table 2.1). I informed them that I would not provide compensation for their participation in this study. As seen in Table 2.1, male participants outnumbered female participants. The participants' ethnic breakdown highlighted a majority Hispanic population, which reflects The University's ethnic demographics. All the participants were employed full-time. The participants' ages ranged from 40 to 60 years old. These demographics reflected the characteristics of non-traditional students noted in the Chapter One literature review.

Table 2.1

*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Employment Status
1	Female	40	Hispanic	Unemployed
2	Male	42	White	Full-time
3	Male	50	White	Full-time
4	Male	43	Hispanic	Full-time

*Data Collection Procedures*

Once I obtained approval from the IRB, I searched the archival data for qualifying participants. I invited the participants by email, and I asked each participant where they were most comfortable meeting. I offered a choice of the participants' homes, coffee shops, libraries, or restaurants. Phone conversations and emails were a preliminary option to (re)establish rapport with participants and agree on a meeting site. The participants understood my agility because I offered various dates and times that accommodated their

busy schedules. I conducted interviews where the participants and I were comfortable and safe (Glesne, 2011). The environment allowed for the rapport to be reestablished (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), which, in turn, aid in efficient and effective data collection (Glogowska et al., 2011). I used Otter software to document the in-person interviews and TapeACall to document the interview over the phone. I confirmed that the participants signed the consent forms before the interviews began (Roberts, 2010). For the data storage, I used Google One Drive so I could access them from all devices. All devices and the Google OneDrive account were password-protected to ensure confidentiality. I transferred anything typed on a Word document and transferred notes to a PDF with an additional security measure. I stored the copies of archival records in a safe with a combination. I recorded and transcribed the data from a phone call and in-person interviews. I used field notes to describe body language and observe participants' overall behavior in the in-person interviews.

I conducted in-person semi-structured interviews with three participants and a phone call interview with one participant in this study (See Appendix A for interview protocol). The interview questions were based on the predetermined environmental factors of self-efficacy, coping approaches, and attributions that theorized student persistence (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001). The participants created a context that described their academic success concerning self-efficacy, coping ability, and attributions. The participants answered the interview questions based on their college experience concerning self-efficacy, coping ability, and attributions. All of the interview questions were consistent, allowing for further explanation by participants as provided. I did not

consider structured interviews for this study to maintain the integrity of the participants' stories.

The transcripts of the interviews were the primary source of data collection. I continuously collected data throughout the interview process. I used the information provided over phone calls, consent forms, and additional notes for this study. I collected the non-verbal data that the in-person participants provided in the field notes—the supporting documents allowed for the explanation of individual attitudes and beliefs (Shenton, 2004).

#### *Data Analysis Procedures*

Data analysis is a vital part of the qualitative research process and allows for the discovery of emergent themes during the interview process (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). Although the qualitative data analysis varies greatly, the method should reflect the purpose of the study (McMillan, 2009). The purpose of this study is to discover the reasons why non-traditional students with PTSD are successful and examine their experiences through the lens of Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention, specifically, environmental factors. Data analysis entails that the data collected is cohesively and logically understood and viewed. The analysis should reflect emerging themes, commonalities, and relationships that the research interpreted (Glesne, 2011).

All the interview questions were congruent to the central focus, problem, primary research question, and sub-questions. I ensured that the descriptions I provided reflected the case and its setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I designed the interview questions to map the environmental factors affecting a student's persistence to graduation. Questions

regarding self-efficacy, coping processes, and attributions allow the participants to provide detailed accounts of their college careers. These perceptions helped frame reference points of success in relation to self-efficacy, coping process, and attributions. In preparing the data, I organized the face-to-face and over the phone participant files and materials. I assembled the data and organized it into similar units (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). I analyzed the data through the interpretational analysis of Bean and Eaton’s (2000, 2001) environmental factors (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2

*Codes*

Self-Efficacy	Coping Approaches	Attributions
Faculty persuasion Performance expectations and accomplishments	Therapy Medication, Self-management	Internal-attitude, mindset, effort External- family, situation

I identified themes and patterns that explained and described the participants’ experiences regarding their self-efficacy, coping process, and attributions. I prepared files by names and emergent themes (Glesne, 2011). I reviewed all transcripts several times before breaking them into parts and categorizing emergent themes based on student perceptions regarding self-efficacy, coping processes, and attributions (Creswell et al., 2007). I created a detailed analysis that compared themes and drew inferences from the participant responses.

Data analysis is a thorough and ongoing process that enabled me to explain, reflect, and interpret the data (Moustakas, 1994). Table 2.3 highlights the process from

Creswell and Poth (2018). I read all the transcripts to gain an understanding of the experiences of the participants.

The purpose of this research was to examine the beneficial experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD to discover what environmental factors aided them in their persistence to graduation. This research involved semi-structured interviews. I taped the interviews using Otter and TapeACall and stored them in Google OneDrive. Open-ended questions allowed participants to share their insight and perspective regarding The University. I assured the participants that their identities would remain anonymous, and their responses would remain confidential. I also avoided asking leading questions that would tamper with outcomes.

Table 2.3

*Analysis for Case Study*

Data Analysis and Representation	Case Study
Data organization	Create and organize files for data
Reading, memoing	Read through text, make margin notes, form initial codes
Describing the data into codes and themes	Describe the case and its context
Classifying the data into codes and themes	Use categorical aggregation to establish themes or patterns

Note: The wording in this table is quoted from Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 187).

*Trustworthiness and Authenticity*

While conducting qualitative research, the researcher must be mindful and address any validity threats (Matteson & Lincoln, 2009). Various techniques exist to ensure the reliability and validity of data collection and analysis collected through semi-structured interviews, field notes, and observations. Validity in qualitative research is

how the study results accurately represent the participants' lived experiences of the phenomena (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I used credible approaches to establish the reliability of the data.

Throughout the research process, I encouraged the participants to ask questions. I allowed the participants to review the recordings and transcripts from their interview sessions. I also provided a comprehensive report of this study's findings. For transferability, it was essential to provide specific details and information about the participants, site, methods, and role as a researcher in this study. These particular details provided a context in which researchers can make informed decisions regarding duplicating this study in their setting.

Additionally, dependability helped establish this research as repeatable. To ensure dependability in this study, I used an external third party to confirm the results supported by the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I transcribed the participants' interviews and reviewed them by a third party to ensure reliability and dependability. Lastly, I did not exert any bias over creating interview questions by creating them before selecting the participants. I allowed the participants to choose the interview sites. I also had a peer review of this study's data and research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### *Ethical Considerations*

I gave ethical considerations when conducting research. I took every assurance of the participants' well-being when conducting research. I anticipated ethical considerations throughout the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) due to the PTSD diagnosis of the participants. Before I began the study, I reviewed the code of

ethics and ensured I understood and deployed them in my research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I applied to the IRB at Baylor University and retained approval regarding this research. I am also CITI certified to work with human subjects in my study. I restricted my personal bias regarding mental health issues. I was careful not to report unbiased or uninfluenced findings. Open communication with stakeholders throughout the research was essential in monitoring the research's progress and any potential concerns for its participants.

The University has a population that contains marginalized participants based on their medical history. I treated the participants with respect and dignity. Because mental health issues often carry a negative social stigma, I ensured that my bias did not influence the program's outcome or how I reported the findings—the mollification of specific questions adhered to guidelines and ethical standards. I advised participants to inform me if they became uncomfortable during the interview process because I did not want to cause additional stress. I understood how the university's core values, mission statement, and purpose statement build The University's culture. I was cognizant of the potential negative impact the research could have if I did not closely monitor the research process.

#### *Limitations and Delimitations*

Limitations are factors that work outside of the researcher's control, and several limitations impacted this study. First, the bias of the interview data could affect responses (Patton, 2015). I am a female college instructor and a non-traditional student, so I utilized reliability by transcribing the data verbatim to account for any bias. Despite the potential bias, I was cognizant of the personal connection to this study and the participants. My

background experiences added to the interview process as an additional layer of trust and rapport with the participants. Additionally, because this research was specific to non-traditional students with PTSD, it might not apply to different student populations.

A second limitation of this study was time due to the accelerated program I attended. I collected data during the Spring and Summer of 2021. Although I did not consider the participants' school schedules, I had to work around conflicting work schedules because many participants were employed full-time. Although reflective of the demographic at The University, the population sampled did not represent the entire population of the school. I did not consider traditional first-year students for this study. The participant size, as in many case studies, was small and targeted. I did not measure other impacts like ethnicity, income level, and dependents participants' number. The outcome of this research may not transfer to or reflect the population of another university.

The delimitations set by me unfolded in three ways. First, I specifically chose to concentrate on non-traditional students with PTSD who persisted to graduation because of the gap in the literature that exists for this specific population of students. Secondly, I kept the sample size of the study ( $n=4$ ) to a manageable size due to the limitations of this study. Lastly, I utilized narratives to thoroughly examine the beneficial experiences of the participants while enrolled in a university setting. Utilizing Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention allowed me to examine the environmental factors that influenced each participant's ability to persist to graduation.



### *Conclusion*

The purpose of this research was to examine the beneficial experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD to discover what environmental factors aided in their persistence to graduation. This chapter outlined how I conducted this study. The participants' lived experiences described in this study assisted in filling a gap in the literature that exists for non-traditional students with PTSD. I used NVivo to help code and analyze the data gathered through voice recordings and transcripts from interviews.

Using a single narrative case method study was the most appropriate research design for this study because this research examined the participants' experiences within a bounded system. Exploring why these students were successful helped build better systems to aid students in persisting to graduation. The issue of non-traditional students' persistence to graduation remains at the core of retention. This research addressed the non-traditional students' needs with PTSD and provided students with assistance in completing their programs.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Results and Implications

#### *Introduction*

As mentioned in previous chapters, this study examined the experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD who persisted to graduation and examined these experiences through the framework of Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention with a focus on environmental factors. When conducting a single-case study, Yin (2014) states that the information derived from the participants will reveal certain aspects of the case.

This study utilized a narrative case study design to understand the experiences of non-traditional students with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and their persistence to graduation (academic success). This chapter provides the results of the data collected from observations in the field and participant semi-structured interviews. The design of this study allowed the participants to share their academic and personal experiences that aided them in their persistence to graduation. This study provides insight into why some non-traditional students with PTSD persisted to graduation. Using individual semi-structured interviews and field notes I answered the primary research question in this narrative case study: What experiences did non-traditional students who have PTSD deem as beneficial to their persistence for degree completion? The sub research questions of this narrative case study focused specifically on the environmental factors of Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention and asked:

1. How have traits of self-efficacy been beneficial to the persistence of non-traditional students who have PTSD?
2. How have coping approaches been beneficial to the persistence of non-traditional students who have PTSD?
3. How have attributions (locus of control) been beneficial to the persistence of non-traditional students who have PTSD?

Before asking each participant about their attributions, I explained that attributions were actions that a person or thing caused. I explained that there are internal and external attributions that can contribute to a person's success.

This chapter discusses the study participants, their reflections of their academic and personal lives while enrolled in school, and the findings derived from the interviews and the field observations as the participants answered the research questions. The case analysis is based on the environmental factors of Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention. The presentation of these findings unfolds in three steps. First, I present each participant's responses. Throughout, I examine the experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD who persisted to graduation. I examine each case through Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention. Second, I identify the emergent themes across the cases that answer the central and sub-central research questions. Finally, I discuss the implications for higher education by presenting individual retention plans for non-traditional students with PTSD.

#### *Case Description and Within Case Analysis*

This section overviews the case and participants within this study. I utilized purposive sampling to select participants who were non-traditional students with PTSD and attended The University. I identified each of the participants (Table 3.1) in this

chapter, which served to inform this case study to examine how self-efficacy, positive coping approaches and attributions enable students to persist to graduation.

Table 3.1

*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Graduation Year	Field of Study
1	Female	48	Hispanic	2019	BS Business Administration
2	Male	42	White	2015	AS Airframe and Powerplant
3	Male	50	White	2018	AS Airframe and Powerplant
4	Male	43	Hispanic	2020	AS Airframe and Powerplant

Participants completed a qualifying questionnaire (see Appendix) and participated in individual semi-structured interviews during the Spring of 2021. Each participant is a graduate of The University and identified as being a non-traditional student with PTSD. The gender of the participants included one woman and three men. At the time of the interviews, one participant was not employed. I analyzed each section using Bean and Eaton’s (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention, focusing on environmental factors. I examine each participant’s experiences concerning the persistence of graduation.

*Participant 1*

This interview took place over the phone. Participant 1 did not have access to a computer as she was at her mother’s estate handling the details of following her mother’s

death. Participant 1 was a first-generation college student and attended The University for the bachelor's degree program. She obtained her Bachelor of Science in Business Administration in 2019. Although unemployed, she attended Western University for her master's degree. Her mother recently passed away, so she spends most of her time closing out the paperwork of her mother's affairs and finishing homework for school.

Participant 1 and I had two conversations regarding her experiences while enrolled in The University. She began the second conversation with her reflection on the qualifying questionnaire. I decided to add this section first because it provided a foundation for her strength and resilience that she used to persist at The University. After our initial phone call, she called back and wanted to provide the following information and how it helped her and provided the additional support she needed. She stated that “my medications helped me maintain my focus on school. I was doing psychotherapy treatment with my psychiatrist. I was participating in research for her therapist's cognitive behavior therapy study while I was enrolled in school.” Since I was not very familiar with this type of study, I asked her to elaborate on the program and the process. She simultaneously participated in her cognitive behavior therapy while attending The University. However, she did not attend the cognitive behavior therapy program for the entire duration of her program. She stated,

I was doing a 16-week program through the VA. I was working and going to therapy and attending school. They only select a few patients per year, but I was able to squeeze in. My psychologist told me that a lot of people end up dropping out of the program. Many people start, but they leave because it's very, very challenging and demanding. Like, I was basically forced to face my trauma head-on. In the program, I had to write down my experiences about the trauma that actually occurred, and it was really, really hard. During the program, I was having nightmares. I had road rage, headaches, and mood swings because it was like it had all happened yesterday. That is why people were quitting. They could not handle it. In this program, we talked about our thoughts versus our emotions. We

also talked about our trigger points and stuck points. All of this was wrapped up in a 16-week program. I wanted to quit, but it seemed like it helped.

Participant 1 continued to discuss how she would use the writing she did in the program and the time spent with her psychiatrist helped her confront many of the traumas she was hiding from.

Her initial reactions to being enrolled in school after such a long time out of school were not that unfamiliar with what many other students say. She mentions that she was skeptical about going back and had mixed feelings of “nervousness and excitement.” She did not know what to expect from her program or school experience overall. The only thing that she was certain of was that she “just wanted to be successful.” She stated, “my primary goal was to graduate” even if she knew nothing else. With that mindset, she moved forward through her academic career with the goal to be successful.

Throughout Participant 1’s interview, she repeatedly acknowledged how two instructors were instrumental to her graduating. She stated that Dr. V was “always encouraging me to stay positive and look on the bright side of things. If I ever needed someone to talk to, he was always there for me. If he ever wasn’t available, he would set up a time to meet with me.” She felt like she had a strong support system with Dr. V. He constantly challenged her to change her mindset regarding obstacles. She thought about quitting school, but Dr. V was always there to push her.

Dr. T was another instructor that helped Participant 1 through her program. She stated that “Dr. T always provided words of encouragement and she would even pray with me.” Dr. T would always “check up on” her, which would make a big difference in her day. One interaction stood out to Participant 1 when she was having a tough time:

Dr. T. just sat with me in the break room and talked to me. We would just sit and talk. Dr. T wouldn't even try to give me advice. I think she would just try to be a sounding board if I needed to vent or express whatever it was that I was going through. I was able to just share my feelings.

Participant 1 spoke about the importance of having instructors who cared about their students. In turn, it made her want to “help others throughout” her program.

Participant 1 stated that her family life was also an essential part of her success. She had a supportive husband. While she did not have any children, she had pets who, she said “were like her kids.” Her mother was supportive but became very ill and was “in and out of the hospital.” One of the biggest challenges she faced was the fact that her mother lived in Austin, a town 80 miles north of San Antonio where Participant 1 resided. It was a challenge for her to make it to class and participate in all the activities she committed to. She found herself “up and down the road, coming back and forth from Austin to San Antonio. It was stressing me out and I started to get really depressed.” However, Participant 1 describes herself as an “overcomer.” I asked her to expand on what she meant by that. She stated:

a lot of people that are diagnosed with PTSD struggle to accomplish even the little things in life. So, everyday struggles are one thing, but being able to finish a four-year program at a college level is just an amazing accomplishment for me. Even with the struggles I was facing and even though I thought about quitting, I would tell myself that I was not a quitter. I am setting the example for my siblings and my relatives. I wanted to be that example. I'm a stronger and better person for overcoming.

Participant 1 mentioned that her PTSD diagnosis was not mentioned in her extended family. She was not even sure if anyone knew about her diagnosis because it was not something her family spoke about.

*Self-efficacy.* Participant 1 spoke about her faith when it came to self-efficacy. The work that she completed at The University challenged her, but she understood how and why she needed to complete the work. Many of the extracurricular activities that she was involved in impacted her because she is a Christian. She stated that the faith-based events that she participated in helped “make a big difference. They helped remind me that I have to keep God first and everything else will fall into place.” She spoke about her need to “find herself as a student.” She spent the beginning of her college career uncertain as to how she would manage a new environment. However, she knew that no matter how uncertain she was, she considered herself an overcomer and would figure out a way to be successful.

*Coping approaches.* Participant 1 took her time answering this question. After a brief pause, she said that she had to “rely on her medication.” She did not want to rely on taking pills, but she knew that if she was going to be successful, she “didn’t have a choice.” However, her support was more than just medication. Her family encouraged her throughout the way. She would speak to her husband about things she could not talk to anyone else about. She referenced back to the two instructors, Dr. V and Dr. T, and how they helped her when the days at school were particularly difficult to deal with. She stated that “having another person at school and at home to listen and encourage her was enough to help me along the way.” Her emphasis on external support was palpable throughout our discussion. She relied on her relationships with her instructors as well as the support she received from her family. As she struggled through to find balance, the external support she received enabled her to persist through difficult days.



*Attributions and summary.* Participant 1 explained that her external attribution was her VA money. She stated that “she never once worried about how she was going to pay for school. A lot of students quit because they couldn’t afford it.” Another attribution she mentioned was her instructor support. Her internal attribution was her discipline. She said that she “really had to buckle down and discipline me. I had to prioritize and ensure that I made number one, number one. I knew what my goal was, but I didn’t always know how I was going to get there.” She also mentioned that her motivation is what kept her going. She used prayer and looked at almost everything with a positive mindset.

Participant 1 was the perfect example of what strength and perseverance look like in the face of adversity. Although she was apprehensive about beginning school later in life, she knew what her goal was even if she was unsure how to accomplish it. Her experience as a student involved in the school provided rich insights on how to balance school and life. Her strength lies within her faith and motivation to keep going. That strength drove her to maintain a 4.0 GPA and perfect attendance throughout her entire program.

### *Participant 2*

This semi-structured interview took place in person in an empty classroom. He graduated from The University in 2015 through the Airframe and PowerPlant (A&P) Associates Program. He later graduated in 2018 with his BS in Aviation Management through the online program at The University. He is currently employed full-time in the aviation field as a lead instructor.

We sat down in an empty classroom while the sound of airplanes taking off and landing filled the air. I asked him questions solely about his persistence through his A&P

associate's program. We started off talking about some of his initial reactions to the program. I wanted to get a sense of how he perceived the program and certain aspects of the program. When he retired from the military, he began school quickly after. He stated that:

Initially, it was a lot of frustration. One, I just got out of the military, and I was used to a very strict environment. That's how it is in the military. Everything is lined out ... looking back, a lot of it was adjustment back into the civilian world.

As stated in the literature review, many veterans struggle with the readjustment into the civilian world, which can be challenging (Madsen et al., 2003). The challenge to adjust to a new environment often directly impacts a student's ability to be successful. While they adjust to a new load (McClusky, 1970), students often fail to develop enough power to maintain their load.

He continued to speak about his issues during his integration back into the civilian world and as a student. He was used to an environment that provided structure in his day. Being a student, he now had a considerable amount of autonomy in how he conducted himself and his activities. He began to talk about where the root of some of his problems stemmed. He struggled with a proper diagnosis from Veteran's Affairs (VA) because they "dropped the ball." Finally, the doctors told him about "the lesions on his brain from a plane crash, which the doctors discovered is why he had a very short temper and a really short fuse." He realized that his short fuse made him struggle with how the civilian students were not held accountable for their actions. He struggled with the mindset of the civilian world. Participant 2 spoke about one of the first interactions with his peers that made him believe he might fail in college. One of his instructors helped him realize how angry he was and taught him to come down out of a negative headspace. He said that

“Mr. H. pulled me off to the side and grabbed me by the shoulders. He told me to take a deep breath and just calm down. It was a lot of love.” While Participant 2 appreciated the support that Mr. H. provided, Participant 2 knew that the program lacked the structure to complete the syllabus requirements. His transition into a college environment was not only about the lack of structure with the people, but with the curriculum.

Participant 2 spoke about the support he received from his instructors. He knew that Mr. H. was a caring guy because of the way he helped him navigate his way through some of his anger. As Participant 2 navigated his way through the program, his relationship with Mr. H., who became his mentor, began to allow him to trust. I asked him if any other instructors stood out to him. He, too, told me about Dr. T. He took a Psychology course with her that made a significant impact on his transition into the civilian world. He appreciated the way that she covered the curriculum and cultivated a safe environment for her students. It was not about getting through what was on the syllabus; it was about having conversations that allowed students to reflect on themselves and their situations; past and present. He stated, “the first couple of days, she just talked to us. It was random stuff, and we did not do any work. As far as we knew, we were just chatting and telling war stories and laughing and joking.” Participant 2 paused and caught his breath. He looked at me, but not directly so, and sighed. He then told me, “it was the best course I have ever been in.” As tears formed in his eyes he said, “she helped me deal with...she helped me recognize the demons, for lack of a better phrase, and helped me deal with them. She made me be a much more beneficial person, not only to myself, but others. She made me a better person.” He spoke about his time in her class and how most of the students in the classroom were combat veterans. He mentioned that every student

in that class was comfortable speaking with Dr. T. and many of them benefitted from the conversations that took place in the classroom. He stated that the worst part of his program was that his Psychology class was in his last term. Talking with someone about their struggles and fears would have been helpful at the beginning of their program not only for military and civilians alike.

Participant 2 also expanded on how his relationship with his wife helped him persist, more specifically, get the help he needed to be successful. She threatened to leave him, and that was the reality check he needed to make a change. As he struggled with his adjustment back into the civilian world, he became more and more agitated and angry with the world around him. He worked hard to get through the day without wanting to scream and yell. Once he got the help he needed, he realized that it was okay to have frustration and anger, but there was a proper way to channel and direct it. Through counseling, he learned how to manage and channel his anger and frustration into something different and more productive.

*Self-efficacy.* Despite the challenges he faced in the classroom, Participant 2 held a 4.0 GPA and a perfect attendance record. He knew that he wanted to be successful, but he was unsure how he would get there, especially dealing with his adjustment into the civilian world.

His initial frustrations with the program were a reflection of his struggle to adjust and lack of structure. As he approached the end of his program, he said that things took a turn for the worse when dealing with some of the curricula and how some instructors delivered content. His Capstone instructor, Mr. C., was not very helpful during instruction, and he felt like he was not adequately prepared for the final test that gives

students their licensure. He stated that “I had to figure out how to get the answers I needed. The first Capstone was hard. The second Capstone was near impossible. I didn’t know what to expect because clear expectations were never set. I didn’t know what my goal was.” He felt like Mr. C. tried to keep the class confused by speaking in circles. He decided that he needed to ask more specific questions to make sure that he made it through. In an effort to maintain his GPA, he spent his time watching videos and reading manuals that would help him pass the test.

During his last few months in school, the process of not feeling heard and his wife’s deployment triggered his anxiety. With his wife deployed, and he was left to raise three kids alone. He suffered a severe anxiety episode during class when Mr. C. triggered him during a discussion. He said he does not remember much, but his classmate “just came across two desks and knocked me down. Apparently, I was going after Mr. C. about to have a violent episode. Luckily, I was stopped.” Participant 2 said that Mr. C. never stopped to get to know his students or build a relationship with them. Not making a relationship with his students greatly impacted how students viewed Mr. C.’s course and their ability to be successful.

*Coping approaches.* Participant 2 spoke about the coping mechanisms he employed at the beginning of this program. He stated that “at the beginning of school, I drank a lot. That was my coping mechanism. Because, at that point, I did not care. And as bad as it is, my wife really didn’t say too much because that is how I used to get through the day.” He knew that his wife did not like it when he drank, but neither of them came to realize that he needed help and different ways to process change.

Participant 2 spoke about the different strategies he learned on how to cope with his anger and stress. He would use creative outlets to release some of his anger. He spent much of his time in his shed tinkering on things that would keep him calm and his mind occupied. He would sometimes sit and be with the silence. He learned some breathing exercises from another instructor, Mr. W. He stated, “Mr. W. taught me how to slow myself down. I had to remember how to close my eyes and breathe.” Eventually, he learned how to recognize the signs and symptoms of an episode coming. He would just shut everything out and breathe.

*Attributions and summary.* Participant 2 said that he has an internal attribution of always finishing what he starts. He stated, “despite everything, I have to finish what I start. I have that desire in me.” That internal attribution contributed to his persistence. His external attributions were his instructors and his wife. They were the reason he persisted to graduation. He wanted to elaborate on the essential role his wife played in his persistence to graduation. He sat back in his seat and looked off to the side, and began talking about his family. He stated:

I struggled to admit I had a problem because I am a good old, third-generation military member. Men don't cry. Men don't have problems. Men don't have feelings. That is how it was. It took me so long to realize that I actually had a problem. My wife helped me understand that something was wrong.

Before he admitted he had a problem, he spent much of his time internalizing his thoughts and feelings. However, once he realized that he needed help, he went to a psychologist, and things started to get better.

Besides his wife and the support from his instructors, Participant 2 spoke about the support from his classmates. When his wife was deployed, he became solely

responsible for the care of their children. Because he lived so far away from campus, he often struggled to pick them up from school on time. If he was ever late, the school would place his children in after school care which would cost \$40 dollars per child. Somehow his classmates became aware of his situation and when class ended for the day, they would all sit in their vehicles and wait for him so he could leave first, miss the initial traffic rush, and pick his children up on time. He mentioned that it “took him a week to figure out what was going on” but finally he realized that they were all waiting for him.

Participant 2 had a story of strength and perseverance. Recognizing his emotional limitations and getting the help he needed to overcome the challenges he faced with the transition into a civilian environment helped him be successful and persist. His external attributions played an essential role in helping him realize that he did struggle with PTSD and emotional intelligence. His external attributions also enabled him to focus on grades, studying, and earning his certifications. He used his wife’s support to help guide him through the tough days, but he also learned about his resilience and his ability to overcome, adapt, and persist. However, his foundation of self-regulation helped him recognize that he would need additional help to manage his emotions to navigate the less structured civilian world.

### *Participant 3*

This interview took place in person in the instructor workroom where Participant 3 works. He graduated from The University through the Airframe and PowerPlant (A&P) Associates Program. He currently attends The University while he works on his Bachelor’s in Aviation Management. He is currently employed full-time in the aviation field as an instructor.

We sat down in the instructor workroom. I sat across from him while he sat at his desk, while he enjoyed the last bit of his lunch. Since it was lunchtime, the hum of other conversations filled the air as we sat in the corner of the room, prepared to have a conversation. I asked him questions solely about his persistence through its A&P associate's program. Participant 3 was the only participant in the study who attended The University at night. Students who attend an evening program lack the interaction with the majority of university personnel as their courses began at 5:30 pm CT. We began the conversation about his initial reactions to the program. He reflected on his initial feelings about his program and stated, "they (admissions) should have told me, up front, what the program was going to be like so I could make the determination if I wanted to stay or go." He felt like they were not upfront about the layout of the program. He expected a more "hands-on" experience instead of a gradual increase of the hands-on experience. He talked about how high his expectations were and that if he were given "all of the information he needed to make an informed decision about joining the program." He stated that he believed that the instruction in the program was inferior in its design but did not plan on giving up once he started. He said, "I was a different breed because I was older, and failure was not an option. I didn't come here to fail."

Participant 3 spoke about some of the instructors he had that stood out. He said that Mr. C. and Mr. A. always took the time to interact with the students beyond instruction. This was important because of the lack of interaction with most of the university. Participant 3 was a night student and did not have much interaction with the whole administration. He mentioned that it was a "different breed" of students who took night classes because they all had worked all day and came to school at night. Mr. C used



to tell me that “there are only three things that are important, faith, family, and God. I think he wanted to remind us of the things that really matter in the long run.” Participant 3 used this advice to help him navigate through his program when things became tough. Despite not spending much time connecting to the different people within the university, he had strong connections to these instructors that helped him persist through his program.

Another benefit that Participant 3 mentioned about his success was studying and preparing for the Friday tests. He would study the books and curriculum ahead of time and take notes in class. If a test had study material from a specific book, he would purchase the book and then study the helpful sections. Oftentimes, his instructors would use him as an example of what a model student should look like. He was often the only student who would ace a test because he set aside time to study the material. He would “come for additional training when preparing exams or testing for his licensing.” He made sure that he prepared thoroughly, even if it meant extra work.

*Self-efficacy.* Participant 3 elaborated on him “being from a different breed.” He was never afraid to ask questions that others might consider stupid. He reflected on his time in the military and how that helped him not be afraid to ask questions. He said that “there was a lot of camaraderie,” and that is what made him want to try. However, there was a lot of hazing that happened during his time in the military. Sometimes, he would hesitate to ask questions because of the trauma he faced in the military. At the beginning of his program, he would toggle between his need to inquire and his scars from asking questions during his military time. He made a promise to himself that he would not let the bad experiences in the military impact how he navigated through his program.

As he moved through his program, Participant 3 helped others become more confident in their roles as students. He spoke about how we live in a society that “is not used to failing.” However, when he was growing up, he played sports and was used to failing, which was his fault. He developed a philosophy where he did not blame others for his success or failure, and he worked to instill that same philosophy in his classmates. Today, he uses that philosophy to teach his students to be more self-directed.

Participant 3 spoke about his transition into a civilian environment while being an older student. Even though he did not want his classmates to be afraid of asking questions, he would become frustrated if someone did not think before they spoke. He reflected on his feelings regarding society and accountability. He wanted to convey the message that he was responsible for his actions and he never wanted to place his successes or failures on anyone other than himself.

*Coping approaches.* I asked Participant 3 about some of the coping strategies he employed to persist to graduation. He stated that “I learned how to self-manage. I had to learn how to manage myself.” He realized that he could not rely on other people because he was not used to people “outside the military.” He was only familiar with how people in the military operated, so it took some readjustment to learn that not everyone operated the same way the military does.

Participant 3 talked about lowering his expectations as a coping approach. He learned to “not be as upset when the expectations weren’t met.” Once again, he responded to many situations as if he was still in the military. He reflected on asking for different information from his instructors. Frequently, he would ask for something on a

Monday and not receive feedback until Friday. He struggled to get out of the mindset that everything moved similar to military time. He stated:

that mindset was a hard thing to get out of because we were production-oriented in the military. I have learned to pull back my expectations of people who have no military background. If I asked for something and it was not done in time, I had to learn how to stop being so upset.

He learned how to figure out which instructor or peer had a military background and adjust his expectations. Although this was a learning process, he changed his mindset and realized that not everyone came from the same background and that was okay.

*Attributions and summary.* Participant 3 stated that “internally, I believe I am not going to fail.” When he would get home from school at the end of the week, he would use his free time to study. He, once again, mentioned mindset and how failure was not an option. He said that even if he was failing, he knew that it would be his fault and no one else’s.

An external attribution to Participant 3’s success was the incredible support from his wife. His wife began nursing school at the same time that he began his coursework in aviation. She would support him when she knew that he had to concentrate on his studies. When he would study, she would often print out a paper test for him to take so he could test his knowledge. He said that “we have always been supportive of one another, and that is one attribute.” He also mentioned that he was “old school, and I blame myself for failure.” Participant 3 had a passion for being successful. He uses that passion and drive to teach the students he works with today.

Participant 3 struggled with a shift in his mindset. Although he never states that he struggled with his transition into the civilian world from the military world, his

statements indicate that his expectations needed to shift to a civilian mindset. Similar to Participant 1 and Participant 2, Participant 3 had the mentality of finishing what he started. His persistence through his program is palpable in the way he speaks about teaching his current students. Hard work and determination played a crucial role in Participant 3's success.

#### *Participant 4*

This interview took place in an empty classroom. Participant 4 graduated from The University in 2020 through the Dual Associates Airframe and PowerPlant (A&P) Program. He is currently employed full-time in the aviation field as an instructor. He was very relaxed as we have spoken many times before about his goals and his life. I told him about my research and non-traditional students with PTSD and shared some of my experiences as a non-traditional student. I thanked him for his participation.

We started the conversation by talking about his initial reactions to the program. I worked with him when he first started school, but I wanted to understand how he navigated through his time at The University. He wanted to talk about his mindset into beginning his program and stated that:

honestly, for me, it was a full-time job. I retired from the Marines within six months of starting the program. Going through school was actually not very difficult. The timelines did not faze me. I was looking forward to getting back into school, so I sat in front of the class to absorb it all.

As a former teacher, Participant 4 understood certain aspects of the classroom. He knew that he would be learning theory and how to apply it to what he needed to know to be successful when he graduated. Even with his prior experience, he never developed the mindset of "I already know that." He was always willing to learn and receptive to the learning experience.

He expected to get introduced into the aviation field and meet all the requirements to obtain his A&P license. He understood that he needed to know more than the curriculum; he needed to pass the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) exam successfully. There were two choices when entering school, “to get two associates and possibly get your A&P or just go through and get an associate’s degree.” However, he knew that “a lot of aviation companies were looking for the extra step.” Participant 4 spoke about his expectations at the end of the program: “to graduate and go take my test for Airframe and get my Airframe license.” He set out to accomplish those goals and was successful.

Participant 4 spoke about his beneficial experiences in his program. He talked about his instructor, Mr. H., and how he appreciated Mr. H.’s philosophy on life. He stated that “I totally agree with some stuff he said. He was constantly trying to teach us character.” Even though he singled out Mr. H., Participant 4 spoke about how all his instructors played a vital role in his success. He said that “they all brought something to the table. They all have their best parts” and helped him be a great teacher. Participant 4 also spoke about his daughter and how he needed to be a positive role model. He said that he “wanted to set an example and show her that no matter what age you are, you can further your education.” He described his drive to be successful and how he wanted to impact his daughter’s success. He stated:

I barely made it out of high school, and then I went into the military for 20 years. And then I came back and said that I wanted to further my education. She would see me sitting at the table on Saturdays studying and studying. I think that, hopefully, set a good example for my daughter.

He worked hard to show his daughter what was possible within his student role no matter the circumstances.

*Self-efficacy.* Participant 4 described the experience he gained in the military as his trait of self-efficacy. He shared that the military taught him to be punctual and give “100% every day, whether I wanted to or not.” He would go home and relax, but he learned how to balance work and personal time. He described it as:

Being on time and being accountable. I hate letting people down, and I hate being late. I hate it if people feel like I failed them on some part. These things were a part of me being a great student: being punctual, making good grades, and asking questions.

These experiences and this mindset helped him persist through some of the more challenging days. He knew that success was not just being successful in the classroom and about persisting, but about the values he instilled in his daughter.

Being a good role model for his daughter was not just about being a good student; it was about being a good person overall and establishing habits that would allow her to be successful. He taught her how to clean up after herself and take pride in everything that she did. He told her to “always put forth your best effort and just don’t give up, even if you fall.” Even though he was not always successful, he never let his failures keep him down. He continued to get back up and try and keep moving.

*Coping approaches.* Participant 4 briefly touched on some of his coping approaches as he navigated his way through his story. I asked him to elaborate on some of his experiences. He mentioned that he had good and bad coping approaches. He said that he “would sometimes drink” to get through the week. At the time, he was in marriage counseling and individual counseling to “figure out what made him tick.” He later channeled the drinking into keeping himself organized and cleaning his house. He would spend his time alone in his garage when he became stressed. He knew that he could not

control everything, but he could control what he cleaned and kept organized. He shared that “one of my counselors said I take care of everybody else, but I can’t continue to pour from an empty cup.” He learned how to take time for himself and breathe and do the things he enjoyed.

*Attributions and summary.* Participant 4 spoke about his internal attributions. He shared that he was “not striving for perfection, but always trying to do the best that I can because I hate to feel like I let people down.” He did not want anyone to view him as a failure, so he accomplished what he needed so no one would see him as a failure.

His external and internal attribution connect. He described the underpinnings of his external attributions by sharing:

When I was a student here, I was dealing with my daughter and custody and the lawyer and everything. On top of that, her mom was dying of cancer and all of this other stuff going on. But even though all that, my biggest factor was still my daughter. I had to be successful to show her that no matter with all this external stuff going on, you can still work hard and be successful. You have to learn how to put things aside even for a little bit because if this is what you are working towards, if those things get you, then you are going to start failing.

He mentioned that he would set aside time to work on school things to shift his focus back to his personal life. He talked about having goals and keeping them because he knew what he wanted to accomplish.

Participant 4’s experiences and circumstances helped shape him into an excellent student and an exemplary instructor. During his time at school, he was very involved in as much as his schedule would allow. He was the president of the Student Veteran Organization (SVO), and he was the class leader. Because he was older than most of the students in his cohort, he wanted to “pad his resume.” He wanted to have an advantage over the younger students who had not honed their skills.

He used the custody of his daughter as a source of strength and perseverance. He knew that he wanted to set an example, and he was unrelenting in his journey to show her that anything is possible if a person works hard enough. He used this drive to maintain a high GPA and graduate at the top of his class and teach future generations of aviation mechanics.

### *Summary of Within Case Analysis*

Each participant presented as a part of this study highlights the theoretical framework of Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention. The within case analysis provided insight into the personal and academic experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD who attended The University. Through the analysis of each participant, I answered the primary research question in this narrative case study: What experiences did non-traditional students who have PTSD deem as beneficial to their persistence for degree completion? The sub research questions of this narrative case study focused specifically on the environmental factors of Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention:

1. How have traits of self-efficacy been beneficial to the persistence of non-traditional students who have PTSD?
2. How have coping approaches been beneficial to the persistence of non-traditional students who have PTSD?
3. How have attributions (locus of control) been beneficial to the persistence of non-traditional students who have PTSD?

Consistent with the theoretical framework, participants described their persistence experiences through their self-efficacy, coping approaches, and attributions (Bean & Eaton, 2000). The participants share their experiences through their initial reactions to their program and their transition into a civilian setting (Kirchner, 2015). The participants



reinforced Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) notion that supportive environmental factors help students persist to graduation.

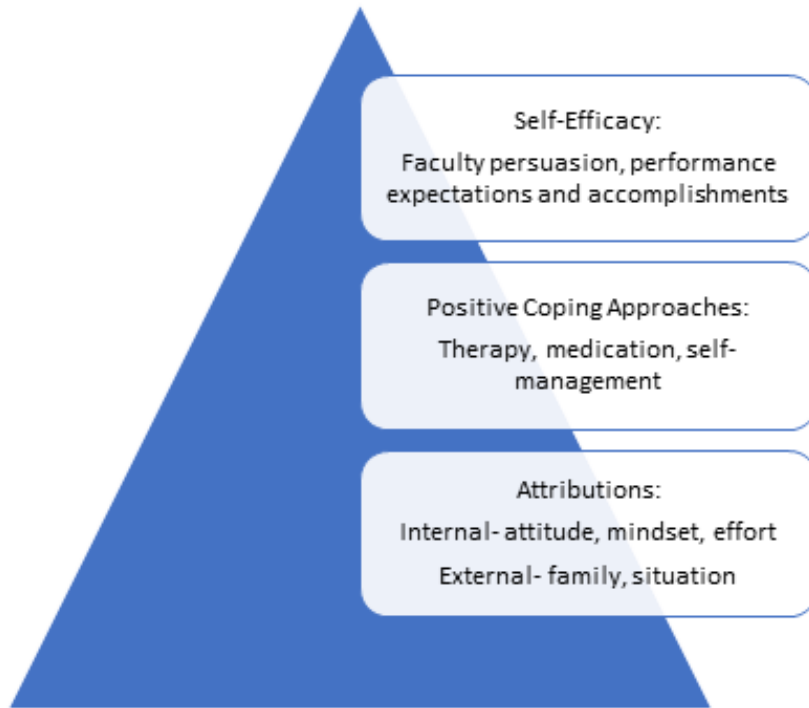
Additionally, the data further support the theoretical framework guiding this study by underscoring the literature and research that positive environmental factors create an infrastructure for the decision to persist to graduation (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001; Bandura, 1977, 1986; Lazarus, 1966; Rotter, 1966; Weiner, 1985). Upon conclusion of the within case analysis, I conducted a thematic analysis to provide insight into emergent themes. The following section reviews the emergent themes in relation to the experiences of the participants.

### *Thematic Analysis and Emergent Themes*

Utilizing within case analysis, I reviewed the data through Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) theoretical framework. The framework allowed me to categorize the data based on the participants' experiences through their persistence to graduation. I conducted a thematic analysis that yielded themes that addressed the following sub research questions:

1. How have traits of self-efficacy been beneficial to the persistence of non-traditional students who have PTSD?
2. How have coping approaches been beneficial to the persistence of non-traditional students who have PTSD?
3. How have attributions (locus of control) been beneficial to the persistence of non-traditional students who have PTSD?

By answering these three questions, I highlight the beneficial experiences and the environmental factors that contributed to the participants' persistence to graduation as follows: self-efficacy, positive coping approaches, and attributions (see Figure 4.1).



*Figure 4.1* Emergent themes within the case.

The themes used to answer the sub-central research questions, when examined together, provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD in relation to the primary research question of this study: What experiences did non-traditional students who have PTSD deem as beneficial to their persistence for degree completion?

### *Self-efficacy*

Bandura (1986) indicated that people who believe in their ability and capability had desired outcomes in any situation. Participants described situations where faculty support was “beneficial to their success.” Though the experiences are different with each participant, the underpinnings of how faculty increased their self-efficacy was palpable through their persistence descriptions. Participants described instances when specific

faculty would go out of their way to provide additional emotional or academic support. The experiences and interactions that each participant had with various faculty members increased their self-efficacy by believing in their capability. First, I discuss how faculty increased the participants' feelings of self-efficacy. Then I discuss how performance expectations and accomplishments maintained or increased the participants' feelings of self-efficacy.

Every participant identified faculty as contributing to their persistence. The participants spoke about how their interactions with faculty assuaged their fears associated with being non-traditional students and their transition into a college environment. Kazis et al. (2007) stated that students would never progress to graduation without proper faculty support. The participants spoke about the support that the faculty provided with extra one-on-one time, additional tutoring, or simply someone to talk to about their feelings. The participants discussed the role many faculty members had in creating an environment where they could be successful in and out of the classroom. During the interviews, every participant mentioned faculty as a source of their success 16 times.

Additionally, Bean and Metzner (1985) assert that students who participate in their classes are more likely to persist to graduation. All of the participants took an active role in their success by asking relevant questions while in the classroom and relying on the experience of their instructors to help them navigate through their transition. Participant 2 shared, "Dr. T. helped me transition from military to civilian. She helped me recognize my demons and helped me deal with them." As Donnelly-Smith (2011) stated,

faculty who connect real-life experiences with coursework have better success in the classroom.

Every participant stated that one or more faculty members made personal connections. The faculty took the time to care about the participants “just through the encouragement they provided.” Erisman and Steele (2015) indicated that students who connect to their instructors are more motivated to be successful because they want to make their instructors proud. Participant 1 stated that “Dr. T. sat down and spoke with me because I was about to quit the program. I had a lot going on, but she convinced me to stay.” Performance expectations increase self-efficacy. Burt et al. (2013) indicated that students who have positive interactions with their instructors in and out of the classroom tend to have high self-efficacy.

Perna (2016) indicated that students whose families do not support them might not be successful in their persistence to graduation. Multiple participants stated that they experienced “strong spousal support.” Participant 1 was a first-generation student, so she struggled with receiving support from her extended family; however, her husband was very supportive with her return to school. She stated, “I was able to talk to my husband about things that I never was able to share with my mother.” Participant 3 spoke about how his wife would have him take mock tests on the weekend, preparing for any upcoming exams. The support that each participant received from their spouses increased their positive self-efficacy in that they could set and achieve goals (Bandura, 1977).

Faculty persuasion, performance expectations, and accomplishments lead to positive self-efficacy. Bean and Eaton (2000) discovered that positive self-efficacy leads to persistence to graduation. Participants described their feelings of belonging and

support and how these feelings increased their desire to persist to graduation despite their struggle to transition into a college environment. In this section, faculty and spousal support are the primary ways that participants felt validated in their decision to return to school and persist to graduation. The following section discusses participants' positive coping approaches to understand themselves in an academic and civilian environment. I will also discuss how those positive coping approaches aided in their persistence to graduation.

### *Coping Approaches*

Findings from this study incorporate the works of Lazarus (1966), Tinto (1987), and Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001), which indicate that if a student could adapt to their college environment, they could reduce stress and increase confidence. All four of the participants discussed how positive coping approaches aided them in their persistence to graduation. Participants described the importance of healthy coping approaches that allowed them to deal with the stressors of change in the college environment. It is important to recognize that the following experiences only highlight the healthy coping approaches that each participant employed.

All four of the participants spoke about how their college experience improved once they learned positive coping approaches. Participants mentioned that positive coping approaches provided them the tools they needed to manage their PTSD in a new and sometimes stressful environment throughout their college careers. The positive coping approaches aided them in managing their emotions through times when they lacked emotional intelligence (Hoffman et al., 2016) during difficult or foreign situations. All four of the participants spoke about how they could use their positive coping

approaches to navigate through the significant adjustments of a new environment. For example, Participant 1 spoke about her struggle to adjust to college. She described her experience as challenging until she learned how to manage some of the thoughts and feelings associated with her PTSD. Kataoka et al. (2012) mention that students' transition into college exacerbates the challenges students face. Participant 1 stated that she had "insomnia, anxiety, and PTSD." However, she managed her symptoms with medication. She said, "I really, really don't like to rely on medication, but when I am at that point, I really didn't have a choice. I had to take my medication." Taking medication coupled with her familial support and therapy gave her the self-assurance that everything "was going to be okay." Participant 1 employed multiple positive coping approaches to ensure that she did not allow her feelings of being overwhelmed to navigate her away from success.

The transition into college can exacerbate PTSD symptoms (Tinto, 1988; Levin, 1998), and all participants identified their need to find positive coping approaches to deal with the transition. Multiple participants indicated that they originally had inadequate coping approaches that hindered their adjustment into the academic arena. Participant 4 indicated that he "would sometimes drink because that was my fallback. Eventually, I went to counseling and took the time to figure out what made me tick." His self-direction and self-reflection provided him with the opportunity to notice that his negative coping approaches were not beneficial and could be detrimental to his persistence (Spitzer, 2000), which empowered him to seek alternative means of coping with stress.

Chao (2009) indicated that students who have an ill sense of self are not likely to succeed in college. Oftentimes, students with PTSD can struggle to maintain their self-

management (Hutchinson & Banks-Williams, 2006; MacLean & Elder, 2007; Ren et al., 1999). All four of the participants struggled with feelings of insecurity and their ability to be successful. However, they employed their ability to self-manage, which enabled them to overcome those feelings. Participant 2 spoke of his “ability for figuring out a way to shut everything out and just breathe” when a situation was overwhelming. Participant 3 talked about how he would not let “things get to him.” The participants learned how to navigate their emotions (Hoffman et al., 2016) and began to understand how to regulate their feelings.

Positive coping approaches lead to students who have a greater chance of adapting to their college environment (Lazarus, 1966; Tinto, 1987). Bean and Eaton (2001) indicate that positive coping approaches lead to persistence to graduation. Participants described their positive coping approaches as beneficial to their success. In this section, medication, therapy, and self-management are the primary ways students coped with their changing environmental stressors. In the next section, I will discuss how internal and external attributions aided their persistence to graduation.

### *Attributions*

In alignment with Weiner’s (1985) view, all participants indicated that their internal and external attributions contributed to their persistence to graduation. The participants described and identified their internal and external attributions in several ways. All four of the participants referenced their mindset when asked about their internal attributions. All four of the participants also referenced their families when asked about their external attributions.

*Internal attributions.* The participants described their mindset as the primary contributor to their persistence. Rotter (1982) mentioned that students who focus on the outcome of a situation have increased attributions. Each participant indicated that they believed that dropping out of school was not an option regardless of how stressed they became. Each participant recognized that they were responsible for their successes and failure and utilized internal attributions to overcome situations that were new and uncomfortable. Participant 1 spoke about her self-discipline. She mentioned that she “had to ensure that I made school number one.” She knew that she had other important things in her life, but she needed to put school higher on her list of essential items. Participant 3 spoke about how he would say to himself, “I am not going to fail.” Rotter (1954, 1966, 1982) stated that students who believed they could control their situation and their reaction to it and its outcomes would improve their environment. The participants used their mindset to control what they could within their environment, which was themselves.

Half of the participants indicated that their effort was a contributor to their persistence. Bandura (1977) suggested that students who relate their success to themselves are more likely to repeat that action. Participant 2 and Participant 3 indicated that they required extra effort when it came to comprehending specific material. Participant 3 stated that when he knew he had to work to get ahead so he would “order books online and go over the material that was going to be on the test.” When he was the only student who would pass, he knew that it was because of his effort to be proactive in his learning. Participant 2 spoke about his experience in his Capstone course. He had an instructor who was not helpful, but he was a 4.0 student who wanted to succeed. He would “ask questions to figure things out” when no other student was willing to. Even



though Participant 2 did not have a positive experience with his Capstone instructor, his desire to succeed overcame the negative instructor experience he endured. Participant 3 made sure that he knew the material for his FAA exam.

*External attributions.* All four of the participants indicated family as being a contributor to their persistence. Rotter (1954, 1966, 1982) theorized about environmental factors that contributed to people's behavior and the connection to success. The participants described their family as positive outside influences in their persistence to graduation. Students who have supportive family are more likely to succeed despite the challenge to adjust to a new environment. Two of the participants indicated that they wanted their children to learn positive habits that would set them up for success. They stated that "they wanted their kids to see that they could overcome anything because they saw me do hard things." Participant 2 provided an example of how he wanted his kids to learn to be responsible for their successes. He stated that "I hope my kids are responsible and realize they are accountable for everything they do." Participant 2's example is important because he is cultivating strong attributions to his children. Participant 4 talked about how he wanted his daughter to echo the positive behavior he was displaying when it came to being a successful student. He said that "setting an example for my daughter" was the number one reason he came to school. For Participant 4, he used his behavior to contribute to not only his success but also his daughter's.

This section explored the notion that internal and external attributions are critical to a student's persistence. Positive environmental factors indicate how far a student will persist in their program and enable them to feel support in times of doubt. Participants repeatedly indicated that fostering a positive mindset and connection to their family

allowed them to be successful. Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) model supports this research's findings in that the participants in this study utilized internal and external attributions as contributors to their persistence to graduation.

### *Discussion*

The focus of this study was to understand the reasons why non-traditional students with PTSD persist to graduation. This study examined the environmental factors that contribute to the persistence to graduation. In Chapter One, I discussed the rationale for this study and its contribution to the literature on the retention of non-traditional students. I overviewed the existing literature related to non-traditional students with PTSD and their challenges when entering a college environment. I also reviewed the struggles that veteran students face when they transition into a college environment. More specifically, I identified how non-traditional veteran students with PTSD struggle in a higher education arena. Through the literature review, I highlighted the lack of research related to non-traditional students with PTSD. I also introduced the theoretical framework of Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001). In Chapter Two, I detailed the methodology used in this qualitative research study. I reviewed the steps utilized in data collection and analysis in conjunction with my validation strategies, ethical considerations, limitations, and delimitations. In Chapter Three, I introduced the findings of this research that answered the primary research question in this narrative case study: What experiences did non-traditional students who have PTSD deem as beneficial to their persistence for degree completion? The sub research questions of this narrative case study focused specifically on the environmental factors of Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention and asked:

1. How have traits of self-efficacy been beneficial to the persistence of non-traditional students who have PTSD?
2. How have coping approaches been beneficial to the persistence of non-traditional students who have PTSD?
3. How have attributions (locus of control) been beneficial to the persistence of non-traditional students who have PTSD?

For this narrative case study, I utilized within case and thematic analyses to provide insight into the lived experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD and why they persisted to graduation. I conducted a within case analysis and answered the sub research questions which focused on understanding the environmental factors that impacted or contributed to graduation persistence. The within case analysis revealed that the participants employed positive environmental factors during their college careers. The data reinforced that positive environmental factors contribute to the persistence to graduation for non-traditional students with PTSD (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001).

Additionally, the data indicated that positive environmental factors are essential both on and off-campus, and with the right support and mindset, people can produce outcomes of success (Bandura, 1986) connected to their persistence. The data further highlighted Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention by linking the participants' behavior, values, and attitudes to their persistence.

The thematic analysis yielded three emergent themes: self-efficacy, positive coping approaches, and attributions. These themes answered the sub questions that focused on identifying why non-traditional students with PTSD persist to graduation. Positive self-efficacy, positive coping approaches, and attributions provide the foundation for understanding why some non-traditional students with PTSD persist to graduation. Throughout this section, I address the primary research question: What experiences did

non-traditional students who have PTSD deem as beneficial to their persistence for degree completion?

This study identified specific experiences that contributed to the persistence of graduation for the participants. The emergent themes of this study speak to how non-traditional students with PTSD utilize positive environmental factors to aid them in their persistence to graduation. Self-efficacy, positive coping approaches, and attributions align with the literature on the persistence and retention of non-traditional college students with PTSD (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001; Bandura, 1977, 1986).

Non-traditional students with PTSD frequently require support to persist through college (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001; Kirchner, 2015; Tinto, 1993). Participants in this study discussed examples of self-efficacy, coping, and attributions in both their personal and academic environments. The role of supportive faculty was paramount to the success of the participants. Erisman and Steele (2015) emphasized the importance of faculty connection for non-traditional students. Bean and Metzner (1985) and Tinto (1993) further support this notion by stating that students who connect with their faculty are more motivated to succeed in and out of the classroom.

This study also highlighted the importance of having a supportive family. The participants described how their family influenced their decisions to enroll in and persist in school. For most of the participants, being a positive role model for their children motivated them and affected their overall attitude toward college (Chao, 2009). In this study, attributions fell into two categories: internal and external. Existing literature on internal and external attributions indicates that it plays a monumental role in a student's ability to persist to graduation. While the external attributions were significant, the

internal attributions highlight the importance of mindset and a desire to be successful in new endeavors.

This study sought to understand the experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD and found that self-efficacy, positive coping approaches, and attributions were present across the participants. This study also highlighted those participants who had positive mindsets when confronting unfamiliar tasks had the foundation of persistence in themselves. Additionally, students who had a robust support system had the propensity to persist. The most significant contribution to this study is the insight into the lived experiences of non-traditional students who live with PTSD and how they transitioned into college life. While other studies focus on the experiences of non-traditional students, this study helped fill a significant gap, as it focused on non—traditional students with PTSD.

### *Implications*

As shared in the previous section, this study contributes to the body of knowledge regarding the persistence of non-traditional students. This study differs in that it focuses on the persistence of non-traditional students with PTSD. In Chapter One, I presented the rationale for this study which included the need for higher education institutions to retain their non-traditional student population. I discussed how the health of a higher education institution is directly related to its ability to retain its students. I discussed the need for higher education institutions to develop retention plans that reflect their demographics. In this section, I overview how the results of this study applied to future retention plans on the campuses of higher education institutions could improve retention numbers. After

proposing my recommendation for retention plans, I recommend several areas for additional research.

This study contributes to the body of research supporting non-traditional students who experience positive environmental factors persist to graduation (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001; Lazarus, 1966; Tinto, 1987; Weiner, 1985). As such, university leadership and student success offices must find ways to create retention plans to support students in self-efficacy, positive coping approaches, and learning positive internal attributions (Bandura, 1977; Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001; Rotter 1954, 1966, 1982).

The need for self-efficacy, positive coping approaches, and positive internal attributions are essential for all students to learn; however, many non-traditional students with PTSD struggle to adapt to a new environment (Madsen et al., 2003). A significant amount of research is associated with non-traditional student persistence; however, very little research focuses on non-traditional students with PTSD (Hoffman et al., 2016; Kirchner, 2015). Three themes emerged as part of this study: self-efficacy, positive coping approaches, and attributions. These themes answer what experiences are beneficial and lead to persistence for non-traditional students with PTSD. Each theme provides insight into how university leadership and student success offices can support self-efficacy, positive coping approaches, and positive internal attributions.

Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001), Tinto (1987), and Lazarus (1966) highlight the importance of positive environmental factors as an influential part of student persistence. This study provided examples of how non-traditional students with PTSD utilized positive environmental factors to persist to graduation. Bean and Metzner (1985) and

Bean and Eaton (2001) discovered that students who do not have a proper support system struggle to persist to graduation and risk quitting school.

All of the participants reported that faculty support was tantamount to familial support. This report aligns with Tinto's (1973, 1975, 1993) theory that if students who had faculty support became committed to values of persistence. This study showed that students who have faculty support in and out of the classroom were more likely to persist to graduation. Faculty who participated in andragogy (Ishler, 2003) enabled the participants to connect the classroom experience to their learning process. In addition, faculty who capitalized on the participants' personal experiences (Knowles, 1998) gave them control in the academic environment. Faculty members should be aware of the struggles and challenges that non-traditional students with PTSD face when transitioning into the college environment.

Positive coping approaches are an essential component of persistence for non-traditional students with PTSD. Bean and Eaton (2001) theorized that students who invoked positive coping approaches, like confronting stressors, allowed them to use tools to overcome difficult situations. Specifically, participants identified therapy, medication, and self-management as the primary ways they navigated through difficult situations. This finding is consistent with various persistence studies. University leadership and student success offices need to consider how they support non-traditional students with PTSD in the college environment by providing them with opportunities to learn skills that will aid in their persistence (Higgins, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011). The findings in this study support the need for more focused student success offices that serve the non-traditional student population (Bergerson, 2009). It is essential to understand that this

study highlighted students who participated in therapy outside of the academic arena. As such, veteran resource centers can allay the struggle of student veterans by providing them additional support (Kettmann et al., 2007; Kraft, 2009).

Attributions were a key component in the persistence of non-traditional students with PTSD. Attributions are directly related to how students view their ability to be successful (Bandura, 1977). Specifically, the participants in this study identified their internal attributions as the foundation for their persistence to graduation. Each participant had the mindset of persistence and was responsible for their success or failure (Rotter, 1954, 1966, 1982). This mindset was connected to their military past but was palpable in their intentions of being successful. Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) model indicated that attributions were the most deciding factor in a student's ability to persist to graduation. Thus, attributions were the foundation for the participants' self-efficacy and positive coping approaches. Educational leadership can provide a more structured learning environment (Lawrence, 2000), fostering trust and success with non-traditional students.

Additional research should consider a closer look into students' load like finances, the number of dependents, and prior education, to understand additional factors that impact non-traditional student persistence. A more detailed understanding of students could yield more detailed results, which enable university leadership and student success to create more proactive retention plans. Finally, this study highlighted the experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD. A look at non-traditional students without PTSD may yield a more comprehensive understanding of how university leadership and student success offices can support the growing population of non-traditional students.



### *Summary and Conclusion*

This study brought a greater understanding of the beneficial experiences that contributed to the persistence of non-traditional students with PTSD. As the population of college students shifts from first-year to non-traditional (Adams, 2013; Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009), university leadership needs to consider proactive retention strategies for this unique population of students. Higher education institutions need to create a practical and effective framework where the persistence of the non-traditional student population becomes a priority (Bergerson, 2009). A student's beneficial experiences contribute to retention (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001; Tinto, 1993). Research indicates that positive environmental factors contribute to the persistence of students (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001).

Additionally, non-traditional students face specific challenges when entering a higher education arena (Kazis et al., 2007). Non-traditional students with PTSD face even more specific challenges when transitioning into the college environment (Kataoka et al., 2012). This study focused on the beneficial experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD to aid in the creation of better support services for this population of students during their transition into higher education.

I utilized a qualitative narrative case study to explore the beneficial experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD. Through semi-structured interviews, I provided data supporting the impact of positive environmental factors on a student's persistence to graduation. I analyzed data using an a priori framework grounded in Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention. First, I conducted a within case analysis followed by a thematic analysis. The thematic analysis identified three emergent themes from the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Self-efficacy, positive

coping approaches, and attributions contributed to the persistence of the participants. Together these themes answered the central research question guiding this study: What experiences did non-traditional students who have PTSD deem as beneficial to their persistence for degree completion?

This study allowed university leadership and student success offices to gain a better understanding of the beneficial experiences that non-traditional students with PTSD have. The beneficial experiences of these students indicate the importance of facilitating positive faculty encounters during the transition into a higher education institution. Finally, university leadership and student success offices in higher education institutions must create specific and proactive retention plans to meet the diverse needs of non-traditional students with PTSD. The next section provides informed recommendations for how university leadership and student success offices can begin with implementing the findings of this study.

### *Informed Recommendations*

Bean and Metzner (1985) indicated that many students struggle with their transition into college. Tinto (1988) and Levin (1998) emphasized that student veterans face an even greater struggle when transitioning into a college environment. This study provided greater awareness of non-traditional students' beneficial experiences with PTSD during their entrance into the academic arena. Three emergent themes highlighted in this study: self-efficacy, positive coping approaches, and attributions contribute to the persistence of non-traditional students with PTSD. As such, I offer the following recommendations for creating more proactive and specific retention plans so that non-traditional students with PTSD have a greater chance to persist to graduation.

First, universities must have a specialized student success office staff that knows what it takes to meet the needs of non-traditional students with PTSD who are transitioning into the academic arena. Examining the students' backgrounds as they enter college engages a proactive approach to their needs (Dick et al., 2016). This process allows the student success office to create individual retention plans based on the students' needs. This process also enables student success offices to develop supportive relationships that aid in navigating the needs of non-traditional students with PTSD (Kraft, 2009, 2011), creating a socially supported college environment.

Second, creating a veteran resource center would allow student veterans to develop connections with peers who share similar past and current experiences. Madsen et al. (2003) found that one of the most prominent challenges veterans face is managing change. Often, students who struggle with the transition into the college environment do not persist to graduation. Creating a veteran resource center where student veterans interact with their successful peers can foster self-direction and the regulation of learning (Spitzer, 2000). Additionally, a veteran resource center could equip students with additional support like counseling, medication management, and faculty support (Kraft). The study participants described their positive coping approaches in connection with their medication management, therapy, and supportive faculty. While student resource centers have opportunities for all students, veteran resource centers focus on the intentional support of non-traditional students with PTSD.

Finally, the student success office should consider creating individual retention plans that focus on non-traditional students as this population continues to grow. Specific retention plans create opportunities for non-traditional students to be a part of a proactive

approach in their persistence to graduation. Every student has individualized needs that do not fit into a formulated plan. Student success offices must create retention plans based on the individual needs of their students so that they have every opportunity to persist to graduation.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Distribution of Findings

#### *Executive Summary*

This chapter overviews the purpose of this study, including data collection and analysis, a summary of key findings, and informed recommendations. Furthermore, this chapter discusses a plan for distributing the findings to two specific audiences: university leadership and the director of student success. Finally, this chapter illustrates a plan for sharing the findings with the participants.

The number of students graduating from high school and entering college decreased (Adams, 2013) while non-traditional students entering college increased. The definition of a non-traditional student, as defined by this study, is:

a student delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, attended part-time, was financially independent, worked full-time while enrolled, had dependents other than a spouse, was a single parent, or did not obtain a standard high school diploma. (Horn & Carrol, 1994, p. 3)

The retention of non-traditional students should be a high priority due to the increase in population (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009). While retention plans exist, many non-traditional students face specific challenges regarding their persistence to graduation (Bohl et al., 2017).

Many non-traditional students are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to their veteran classification. PTSD, as defined in this study, is:

1. Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence
2. Intrusion symptoms associated with the traumatic event(s) begin after the traumatic event(s).

3. Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred.
4. Negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning, or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred
5. Marked alterations in arousal and reactivity associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred.
6. The duration of the disturbance (Criteria 2,3,4,5) is more than one month.
7. The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other essential functioning areas.
8. The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., medication, alcohol) or another medical condition. (APA, 2013a)

These students often struggle in a university setting (Kirchner et al., 2014). Specific support services and proactive retention plans are necessary to improve retention (Kircher, 2015). Appropriately, non-traditional students with PTSD require different retention plans than traditional first-year students.

This study focused on the beneficial experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD who attended The University in San Antonio, TX. The focus on the beneficial experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD provides insight on how to better support this specific student population during their transition into a higher education arena.

#### *Overview of Data Collection and Analysis Procedures*

This narrative case study utilized semi-structured interviews to interpret and understand the beneficial experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD and answer the central research question: What experiences did non-traditional students who have PTSD deem as beneficial to their persistence for degree completion? Data collection and analysis used an a priori framework influenced by Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001).

Participants identified as non-traditional students with a PTSD diagnosis who attended and graduated from The University. I collected the archival data in January and February

of 2021 and conducted the semi-structured interviews in April-June of 2021, utilizing a purposeful sample of students. Three of the four participants identified as men, and one participant identified as a woman. Three of the four participants were employed.

Each participant completed a qualifying questionnaire and signed a consent form. The participants participated in semi-structured interviews that varied in length. One of the participants could not meet in person or have access to the Zoom platform, so I recorded the interview using TapeACall. The other three participants were in-person interviews, and I utilized Otter to record the interviews. I uploaded the interview transcripts into NVivo and printed a hard copy. After each interview, I thanked the participants for their time and indicated when they would have access to read the study in its entirety. First, I analyzed the data utilizing Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) Psychological Model of College Student Retention to understand the participants' individual experiences when they enrolled in The University. I then analyzed the results to understand the specific experience of each participant. After conducting the within case analysis, I identified emergent themes that answered the central and sub-central research questions.

### *Summary of Key Findings*

Three key themes emerged as a result of this study: self-efficacy, positive coping approaches, and attributions (see Figure 4.1). Together, these themes answer what experiences non-traditional students who have PTSD deem beneficial to their persistence for degree completion. Each participant told incredible stories and provided rich descriptions of their transition into college. The stories of the participants' beneficial experiences, along with the three emergent themes from this study, aligned with positive

environmental factors (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001) that aided students in their persistence to graduation. In the following paragraphs, I review the key findings.

Bean and Eaton (2001) examined a student's persistence to graduation, focusing on environmental factors to determine outcomes. The participants in this study indicated similar environmental factors as reasons for their persistence to graduation. Participants shared that faculty members played a vital role in their transition into college. Faculty that provides an environment that fosters motivation is paramount to a student's success (Chao, 2009). Participants also discussed their performance expectations and prior accomplishments as part of their beneficial experiences.

The second emergent theme was positive coping approaches. All of the participants discussed the various ways they used positive coping approaches to deal with challenging days. They also described using positive coping approaches to mitigate some of the stress associated with transitioning into a civilian environment. The participants mentioned therapy, medication, and self-management as crucial means for their ability to deal with their transition into college (Kirchner, 2015; Madsen et al., 2003).

The final theme identified in this study was internal and external attributions. Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001), Rotter (1954, 1966, 1982), and Weiner (1985) theorized that attributions were the most deciding factor in whether a student would persist to graduation. The participants described their attitudes and behaviors across their mindset, effort, and familial perception.

### *Informed Recommendations*

Bean and Metzner (1985) indicated that many students struggle with their transition into college. Tinto (1988) and Levin (1998) emphasized that student veterans



face an even greater struggle when transitioning into a college environment. This study provided greater awareness of non-traditional students' beneficial experiences with PTSD during their entrance into the academic arena. Three emergent themes highlighted in this study: self-efficacy, positive coping approaches, and attributions contribute to the persistence of non-traditional students with PTSD. As such, I offer the following recommendations for creating more proactive and specific retention plans so that non-traditional students with PTSD have a greater chance to persist to graduation.

First, universities must have a specialized student success office staff that knows what it takes to meet the needs of non-traditional students with PTSD who are transitioning into the academic arena. Examining the students' backgrounds as they enter college engages a proactive approach to their needs (Dick et al., 2016). This process allows the student success office to create individual retention plans based on the students' needs. This process also enables student success offices to develop supportive relationships that aid in navigating the needs of non-traditional students with PTSD (Kraft, 2009, 2011), creating a socially supported college environment.

Second, creating a veteran resource center would allow student veterans to develop connections with peers who share similar past and current experiences. Madsen et al. (2003) found that one of the most prominent challenges veterans face is managing change. Oftentimes, students who struggle with the transition into the college environment do not persist to graduation. Creating a veteran resource center where student veterans interact with their successful peers can foster self-direction and the regulation of learning (Spitzer, 2000). Additionally, a veteran resource center could equip students with additional support like counseling, medication management, and faculty

support (Kraft). The study participants described their positive coping approaches in connection with their medication management, therapy, and supportive faculty. While student resource centers have opportunities for all students, veteran resource centers focus on the intentional support of non-traditional students with PTSD.

Finally, the student success office should consider creating individual retention plans that focus on non-traditional students as this population continues to grow. Specific retention plans create opportunities for non-traditional students to be a part of a proactive approach in their persistence to graduation. Every student has individualized needs that do not fit into a formulated plan. Student success offices must create retention plans based on the individual needs of their students so that they have every opportunity to persist to graduation.

#### *Findings Distribution Proposal*

The findings of this study target university leadership, student success (retention) offices, and faculty as these stakeholders hold the position to integrate the findings of this study into their admission entrance requirements, retention processes, and classroom. Faculty members play a vital role in the beneficial experiences of non-traditional students (Chao, 2009); hence, their understanding and employment of these findings support the persistence of non-traditional students. By creating an environment where students feel supported in their transition into an academic arena, faculty contributes to their persistence of graduation.

The student success offices can create and implement specific retention plans. The student success office is dedicated to the assurance that students persist to graduation. The student success office is designed to support students on and off-campus through

tutoring, on-campus activities, daycare, rideshare, orientation, attendance, and academics. Because of the relationship that the student success office fosters, their offices are essential to support the findings of this study. In addition to the student success office, I will share the results of this study with university leadership because they can approve programs where non-traditional students with PTSD feel supported in their persistence to graduation. Their understanding of the beneficial experiences of non-traditional students with PTSD is essential to increasing retention numbers.

I will share this study with faculty, the student success office, and university leadership. Because The University is not a large institution, the distribution of the findings can occur in one presentation. I will prepare a professional presentation for the key stakeholders and introduce my audience to the findings of this study. I will also discuss how to implement the individual retention plans for the incoming cohorts of students. I will contact the Associate Provost and request to be included in the weekly leadership meeting. The presentation should not last more than 30 minutes, of which time for discussion is included. I will prepare a professional presentation and ensure each member of the meeting has a copy of the findings and the individual retention plan examples. After the presentation, I will ask to meet with the student success office for continued work on individual retention plans.

Finally, the participants in this study will receive a packet containing the findings of this study. The packet will include a brief introduction, purpose, summary of findings, and a special thank you from me. In addition, a packet will be made available for any faculty member that was unable to attend the weekly meeting and listen to the report out of the findings.

### *Conclusion*

Non-traditional students with PTSD make up a considerable part of the university population (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009; Kirchner et al., 2014). This large population remains somewhat of a mystery to university leadership as they navigate ways to improve their retention numbers. This study recorded and interpreted the beneficial experiences that contributed to graduation persistence for non-traditional students with PTSD who attended The University in San Antonio, TX. Additionally, the findings of this study highlight that self-efficacy, positive coping approaches, and attributions are paramount to student success and persistence. This research provides an understanding of the challenges that non-traditional students with PTSD face as they transition into an academic arena. As the population of non-traditional students continues to increase, higher education institutions must consider individual retention plans to meet their specific needs.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### IRB Approval Letter

#### IRB Approval

#### **IRBNet Board Action**

JT

Jessica Trevino <no-reply@irbnet.org>

Thu 3/4/2021 4:33 PM

To: Pratt, Sarah; Dillard, Randi

Please note that Baylor University Institutional Review Board has taken the following action on IRBNet:

Project Title: [1699048-1] PTSD and Academic Success: A Narrative Case Study in Understanding the Retention of Non-Traditional Students  
Principal Investigator: Randi Dillard

Submission Type: New Project  
Date Submitted: February 6, 2021

Action: EXEMPT  
Effective Date: March 4, 2021  
Review Type: Exempt Review

Should you have any questions you may contact Jessica Trevino at [jessica\\_l\\_trevino@baylor.edu](mailto:jessica_l_trevino@baylor.edu).

Thank you,  
The IRBNet Support Team

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Protocol

#### Interview Protocol

1. Participant to complete consent form before interview.
2. Review student files for accuracy.
3. Review consent forms in detail; secure signatures
4. Secure ID number or initials
5. Conduct interview.
6. Remind participant about data next steps:
  - a. Recording information from cellphone formulated into narrative form in written transcripts
7. Thank you

#### Interview Script

“I am Randi Dillard, a doctoral candidate from Baylor University and I am conducting research on non-traditional students with PTSD. I have been a non-traditional student my entire college career. I want to thank you for agreeing to be interviewed and participate in this important research. As I mentioned before, I will be recording this interview with my phone for transcription later. I will not use your real name or any other material that would identify you in the transcription or reporting the research. Do you have any questions about the study or the interview?”

1. You were enrolled in (degree program) - describe your experience as a student in this program.

#### Follow-up

- Reflections on your initial reactions of program
- Reflections on your expectations for the program
- General information about the program
- Which classes or instructors stood out?

2. What aspects of your experiences as a student have been the most important to you?

#### Follow-up

- In your academic life
- In your adult life
- In your family life
- Struggles & achievements

3. Describe yourself as a student – how you define yourself?

#### Follow-up

- Related to your program
- Within the university
- In relationship to your other identities
- Compared to other students in the same program

- Struggles & achievements
4. Describe yourself as a participator within the university?  
Follow-up
- Related to your program
  - In what ways....
  - As compared to others
  - In relationship to your other identities
  - Struggles & achievements
5. What aspects of your experiences as a student have been the most important to you?
6. What experiences did you consider to be the most beneficial to your success?
- in-school
  - out of school
7. What type of coping approaches did you use to be successful?
- Adjustment
  - Self-management
8. Which attributions contributed to your success?
- Situational- institutional factors, economic factors
  - Dispositional- intelligence, personality
9. What else should I know about your experience?



## APPENDIX C

### Qualifying Questionnaire

To the participant: This questionnaire is intended to collect qualifying data about your participation in this research study.

1. Did you graduate from The University?
2. While you were enrolled at The University were you (check all that apply)
  - financially dependent
  - worked at least part-time while enrolled
  - had dependents other than a spouse
3. Are you a Veteran?
4. Have you been diagnosed with PTSD?

## APPENDIX D

### Informed Consent Form

#### **Edd Learning and Organizational Change**

##### Consent Form for Research

PROTOCOL TITLE: PTSD and Academic Success: A Narrative Case Study in  
Understanding the Retention of Non-Traditional Students  
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Randi Dillard

SUPPORTED BY: Baylor University

**Purpose of the research: To discover the reasons why non-traditional students with PTSD are successful. We are asking you to take part in this study because you fit the criteria of the participant needed to this research.**

##### **Study activities:**

If you choose to be in the study you will:

- Fill out questionnaire about your qualifiers for participating in the study
- Interview you about your experiences during your time as a student

##### **Risks and Benefits:** No foreseeable risks

To the best of our knowledge, there are no risks to you for taking part in this study. Others may benefit in the future from the information that is learned in this study.

**Confidentiality:** A risk of taking part in this study is the possibility of a loss of confidentiality. Loss of confidentiality includes having your personal information shared with someone who is not on the study team and was not supposed to see or know about your information. The researcher plans to protect your confidentiality.

Authorized staff of Baylor University may review the study records for purposes such as quality control or safety.

**Questions or concerns about this research study:** You can call the researcher(s) with any concerns or questions about the research.

Primary Investigator: Randi Dillard |randi\_dillard1@baylor.edu | [REDACTED]

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Sarah Pratt | sarah\_pratt@baylor.edu | [REDACTED]

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), you may contact the Baylor University IRB through the Office of the Vice Provost for Research at 254-710-3708 or irb@baylor.edu.

Taking part in this study is your choice. You are free not to take part or to stop at any time for any reason. No matter what you decide, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are entitled. If you decide to withdraw from this study, the information that you have already provided will be kept confidential. Information already collected about you cannot be deleted.

By continuing with the research and completing the study activities, you are providing your consent. Please sign and date below in acknowledgement of your participation.

\_\_\_\_\_

Name

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

## APPENDIX E

### Email Request Letter

Dear Respondent,

I am a doctoral student at Baylor University, and I am conducting a study examining non-traditional students with PTSD and their persistence to graduation. The results of this study will hopefully provide better student success services for non-traditional students with PTSD.

I am interested in your experiences while you were enrolled at The University. I have a series of interview questions that I would like to ask you. These questions focus on your experiences as a non-traditional student with PTSD. These questions ask you to reflect on your program, your perceptions of your instructors, and what experiences were the most beneficial to your success.

I want to stress that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and I will make all efforts to protect your identity and information. If this sounds like something that you would like to participate in, please fill out the questionnaire.

If you would like to participate in this study and qualify based on your responses from the questionnaire, please review, sign, and return the enclosed consent form along with a copy of this letter. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions regarding this study.

I look forward to learning about your experiences as a student at The University. Your participation in this study will be much appreciated.

Sincerely,  
Randi M. Dillard  
Baylor University

## APPENDIX F

### Information Request Email

Dear Registrar,

My name is Randi Dillard, and I am a current instructor at The University. I have worked with here for over five years.

I am excited to begin my research, and I am delighted to share my proposal with you. I am conducting research as a part of my problem of practice dissertation in the Leadership and Organizational Change Department at Baylor University. My research study focuses on non-traditional students with PTSD. The study specifically focuses on veteran students who have persisted to graduation. The study title is: Crossing the Finish Line: A Narrative Case Study in Understanding the Persistence of Non-traditional Students with PTSD.

Participants in this study will be asked to describe their experiences and perceptions about The University as they relate to self-efficacy, coping approaches, and locus of control. Participation in this study is voluntary and anonymous. Participants will be required to: (a) complete a research questionnaire to determine eligibility, (b) complete an informed consent form and agree to all terms and conditions of the study, (c) participate in a confidential 60-90-minute face-to-face interview with me.

All precautions will be taken to keep all information shared by participants confidential. Participant names will never be connected to their comments, and all published information will be aggregated across many participants so that no one will be able to link information back to an individual participant. There are no foreseen risks to any participants, and all participants will have the opportunity to decline participation at any time during the study without penalty or fear of retribution.

I am requesting access to the records of students who have persisted to graduation to begin my preliminary eligibility research questionnaire. I have attached the Letter of Collaboration/Cooperation granted to me from The University.

I look forward to working with you throughout this process and answering any questions you may have regarding the study as a whole or any specific parts.

I can be reached at [REDACTED] com or by phone at [REDACTED]

In Partnership,  
Randi Dillard

## APPENDIX F

### Letter of Collaboration

#### Letter of Collaboration

Date: 01/21/2021

**Re: Letter of Cooperation For Hallmark University**

Dear Baylor IRB,

This letter confirms that I, as an authorized representative of [REDACTED] University, allow the Baylor University Principal Investigator and Randi Dillard access to conduct study related activities at the listed site(s), as discussed with the Principal Investigator and briefly outlined below, and which may commence when the Principal Investigator provides documentation of IRB approval for the proposed project.

- **Study Title:** PTSD and Academic Success: A Narrative Case Study in Understanding the Retention of Non-Traditional Students
- **Study Activities Occurring at this Site:** Interviews will not occur at [REDACTED] University unless requested by a student.
- **Site(s) Support:** Access to email addresses of alumni
- **Other:** N/A
- **Anticipated End Date:** June 1, 2022

I understand that any activities involving compliance with Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), or other applicable regulations at this site must be addressed prior to granting permission to the Baylor University researcher to collect or receive data from the site. I am authorized to make this determination on my organization's behalf.

We understand that [REDACTED] University's participation will only take place during the study's active IRB approval period. All study related activities must cease if IRB approval expires or is suspended. If we have any concerns related to this project, we will contact the Principal Investigator who can provide the information about the IRB approval. For concerns regarding IRB

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