



Military-to-Civilian Readiness: The Past, Present, and Future of the Transition Process

Written by the MITRE Corporation*

Abstract

Changes that occur in the course of a person's life, known as life transitions, often present challenges. Service members who are transitioning from active duty in the military typically face a combination of such changes, which could include residential moves, new jobs or periods of unemployment, changes in household structure, and other transitions. The U.S. government has a long history of supporting those who have served in the United States Armed Services by providing them with comprehensive benefits, incidental medical care, and transition support. Recent legislative changes continue this pattern of support. In this paper, we show how this transition process is a normative experience for all veterans, using qualitative evidence from previous studies, interviews, focus groups, and expert observation to provide an overview of the current state of the transition process for members of the military and support options available within the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and other partners. Ensuring that veterans themselves and organizations providing support to veterans recognize this transition as normative helps create a seamless process. We describe existing gaps in this process and changes currently in progress to remedy several gaps. Finally, we lay out a research agenda that would help address knowledge gaps and support future improvements to transition programs provided to service members and veterans.

Introduction

Changes that occur during a person's life, such as changes in marital status, employment status, geographic location, or household composition, are sometimes referred to as transitional life events, or life transitions. Life transitions can be disruptive and challenging to manage,^{1,2} especially when these transitions are experienced simultaneously, such as a divorce that leads to a residential move.³ Some changes are considered normative (i.e., expected, unsurprising), such as completing high school around the age of 18 or retiring around the age of 65.⁴ When life transitions are unexpected (e.g., occur at a different time than expected) or lead to an unwanted situation, these events are considered non-normative. Though normative life transitions can be stressful, they do not create the additional burden that often accompanies non-normative transitions. Any life transition, however, requires time for the person affected to process and manage them and to settle into a new routine.

In this paper, we use data gathered from human-centered design studies and strategic assessments that were completed under the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). We

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combine this with existing program information, information on recent legislative changes, and existing research gathered via a literature review focused on readiness for the shift to civilian life to describe the current transition experience and underscore gaps in the existing process. The literature review involved an extensive search of peer-reviewed journals, scientific sources, and scholarly articles, with an emphasis on sources that cover the military-to-civilian transition, integration and reintegration into civilian social structures, transition stress, community reintegration and support structures, identity and military culture, engagement of service members (SMs) and veterans, and user-oriented design. Many of the studies reviewed took a qualitative data-gathering approach that involved interviewing small sets of recently transitioned SMs and veterans to gather direct information about experiences and insights into areas for further research with expanded populations. In addition to explorations of transition within the United States, the literature review included research and studies conducted with transitioning members of the Canadian military and peacekeeping forces, as the Life After Service Survey (LASS) program⁵ provides valuable insight on the transition process generally. The review particularly emphasized literature pertaining to SMs and veterans who serve or have served post-9/11, as these veterans became civilians relatively recently, and their experiences allow a timely look at the transition process. The paper concludes with a call for future research to help fill identified gaps.

Veteran Identity and Variation

When SMs become veterans, the transition from military to civilian life often brings about a significant shift in the individual's identity.^{6,7,8,9,10,11} This identity transition is accompanied by other changes, such as moving, returning to school, or finding a new job. As a result, veterans can suffer from an accumulation of changes, which adds stress. Although these identity shifts are non-normative for civilians who never served in the military, they are not particularly out of the ordinary, and are even normative, for veterans, all of whom went through this transitional phase to become veterans. Specifically, 27% of veterans state that they struggled with re-entry into civilian life; this number jumps to 44% when the focus is on post-9/11 veterans.¹²

The identity shift for veterans is a known issue. Serving as a deployed Soldier is a vastly different role than being a veteran, a parent, a spouse, and/or someone's child living at home.^{13,14,10,11} The change has been referred to as prompting "reverse culture shock"^{8,10,15} and compared to experiencing a "cross-cultural transition."^{10,16} Indeed, one of the primary goals of boot camp is to "socialize recruits by stripping them of their civilian identity and replacing it with a military identity,"⁷ which has its own shared caretaking community.^{17,9,18, 19} The institutions and individuals involved understand that this shift in identity from civilian to SM takes time. A military identity "promotes self-sacrifice, discipline, obedience to legitimate authority, and belief in a merit-based rewards system,"²⁰ which is in stark contrast to an American civilian identity that fosters individualism and liberty-based civic values.¹⁷ Additionally, some veterans miss the strict structure of military life,²¹ or struggle with the lack of structure that permeates other civilians' lives.^{17,22} The shift from SM to civilian has historically not been allotted the same (longer) time frame as the shift from civilian to SM (i.e., boot camp). This relatively quick shift in structure and identity can lead to health issues such as weight gain and increases in alcohol or nicotine use.⁶ In recent years the Government Accountability Office has noted concerns with this transition.^{23,24}

Given this identity switch and its potential associated issues, many veterans find support and resilience in talking with other veterans.^{7,25} Naturally, social support from family and friends can also be helpful, lowering anxiety and stress and increasing coping strategies.^{21,26,27,28,29} After all, the veteran's immediate family often also experiences a transition from a military identity, potentially presenting challenges to marriages and family structures.

The military-to-civilian transition experience varies considerably from veteran to veteran; therefore, no "gold standard" support program fits every veteran.^{28,30} In some cases, rank makes a difference. On average, commissioned officers find the transition easier than enlisted personnel. In other cases, a veteran's level of education may also become a factor: college graduates struggle less with the return to civilian life than high school graduates. These findings could point to an intersection of rank and education, as officers typically have a college degree. It is also important to note that some enlisted SMs take full advantage of their educational benefits while serving. Finally, veterans whose deployment experience was emotionally or physically damaging have greater problems with transition than those who did not suffer serious injuries or experience especially difficult circumstances.

In understanding veterans' unique circumstances, it is important to bear in mind that studies should use a broad definition of "family." A recent interview study emphasized that "family" might mean different things to different veterans, and the concept should not be limited to an opposite-sex spouse and possibly children.³¹ Interestingly, being married, on average, made re-entry harder compared to the experience of unmarried veterans, dropping the chances of an easy re-entry to below 50%.¹² Thus, as veterans as a group become more diverse³² and as deployments become longer and more frequent,^{6,12,33} the ability to understand each veteran's unique situation is important in determining that veteran's transition needs.

The Transition Experience as Normative

Though the pathway toward, during, and beyond transition varies depending on the individual veteran, all veterans experience this transition. In other words, it is a normative part of the lives of those who served in the military. Still, "all soldiers (active duty, reservists, and veterans) agreed that they needed a period of readjustment to transition back into life in the U.S.,"⁷ and at least half reported having trouble with the transition.³⁴ Barring substantial complicating factors, a year after separation has been suggested as a reasonable length of time for the transition back to civilian life.¹⁷ Combining this with a year prior to the moment of separation, the full transition process should be considered as 365 days pre- and 365 days post-transition. Many veterans underscore that they find it most valuable to connect with other veterans during this time, as these peers understand what they are experiencing.⁷

Understandably and justifiably, a solid body of research exists on veterans who return home with serious health issues stemming from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury (TBI).^{21,35} However, many veterans do not incur severe physical or emotional problems as a result of their military service, but nonetheless struggle with various aspects of the process of civilian reintegration.⁹ By normalizing the transition process, and relatedly normalizing potential difficulties during the process, government agencies can expect veterans to access benefits and can offer "support" to veterans as needed rather than view assistance as "help," which often does not sit well with veterans.⁶ This process can, therefore, be compared to boot camp: agencies

simply expect that SMs need time to adjust to the culture shift when they enter the military, and boot camp exists to provide this time as well as relevant teaching and resources. Similarly, the post-transition time span can be viewed as an expected culture shift.

Common Transition Challenges

Some transition challenges are common among veterans. One example was brought out by veterans discussing how they received a great deal of respect as members of the military but not as civilians: as civilians, they suddenly felt somewhat anonymous, which led to lowered self-esteem and feelings of self-worth.⁷ Similarly, the loss of the structure that was omnipresent in the military can lead to frustration and anger.³⁶ Another example is unlearning *emotion constriction*: SMs learn to suppress emotions as a survival technique, and this can become a habit that is hard to alter once they reintegrate into civilian life when friends and family members expect the veteran to experience and display emotional reactions.²¹

For many (though not all) veterans, reintegrating into civilian life means readjusting to family life, finding or resuming civilian employment, managing personal and/or family finances, and navigating available benefits, all of which can present challenges.¹² Beyond the identity shift already discussed, the dynamics of returning home to family members can be problematic, due to the emotional shift needed to resume intimate relationships,³⁷ feelings of isolation from the family unit after a longer absence,^{12,28,37} and the sudden overload caused by a differently structured life.^{21,28}

Additionally, a veteran's reintegration into civilian life could alter the family's financial status.^{31,38,39,40,41} A 2015 survey revealed that 40% of veterans found their employment transition especially difficult.⁴² Nearly one-fifth of veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq reported difficulty with holding a job,^{13,21} and 53% of post-9/11 veterans face a period of unemployment that, on average, lasts 22 weeks[†].³⁸ Veterans, who obviously did not need to search for jobs while in the military, can face particularly difficult times adjusting to the civilian job market.⁴³ Additionally, veterans who relocate to a new area upon reintegration (which is currently the case for 40% of veterans) have a harder time building social capital,⁶ which puts them at a disadvantage in finding housing, jobs, and socio-emotional support.

History of Veteran Benefits

Congress first established a full system of benefits for SMs and veterans as we now know it after World War I. (The U.S. provided support for SMs and veterans prior to this time via the community generally, pensions, and housing, though this support differed from the current system as it shifted and was not as organized and comprehensive.[‡]) The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known today as the "original GI Bill," provided school tuition and stipends, unemployment funding, home loan guarantees, and medical care for veterans.⁴⁴ The end of the Korean War and Vietnam War saw shifts in the amount of funding for education and other supports in 1952 and 1966, respectively. Another series of changes occurred in 1985 with

[†] This excludes veterans who choose to retire altogether rather than to seek employment.

[‡] https://www.va.gov/about_va/vahistory.asp

the Montgomery GI Bill, which “bundled” benefits pertaining to education, health insurance, and homeownership until the early 1990s. Around the same timeframe, in 1990, the Department of Defense (DoD) Transition Assistance Program (TAP) was signed into law (PL 101-510).

In 1991, Congress moved to a more holistic approach, which included transition assistance counseling, with the Fiscal Year 1991 National Defense Authorization Act.⁴⁶ The holistic approach was embodied by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) TAP, established as the outcome of a partnership among the DoD, the VA, and the Department of Labor (DOL). (Later, the Department of Education (ED), Small Business Administration (SBA), Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) joined this partnership as well.) Some parts of the program were mandatory, while others were optional. Between 1991 and 2011 most transitioning SMs attended TAP sessions, which gave them access to counseling (about benefits and planning generally) and employment assistance (e.g., job training). The original plan was to have SMs attend TAP within the 180 days immediately preceding separation, but now SMs are eligible to begin TAP as early as two years prior to retiring or one year prior to separation.[§]

Recent Legislative Changes

In 2011, Congress passed the Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) to Hire Heroes Act of 2011, which made the previously optional sessions of TAP, centering on employment and benefits usage, mandatory for SMs prior to separation. Additionally, TAP was redesigned to be modular and outcome-focused. The program now takes the entire Military Life Cycle (MLC), from enlistment to separation, into account so that military careers can better align with post-separation civilian career plans.^{44,45}

Governance for TAP was codified in 2014 (and revised in 2016) by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) among interagency partners, formally outlining the partners’ roles in program delivery. With the implementation of the MOU, TAP was redesigned to provide comprehensive transition benefits and counseling about available services, expanded information, and increased support for transitioning SMs. In the years following execution of the MOU, the interagency partners, along with other federal partners, have continued to expand support for transitioning service members and their families.⁴⁴

In 2018, the Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) was signed into law.^{44,46} This law changes the TAP to offer increased counseling resources to separating SMs who identify as struggling with the military-to-civilian transition. In the same year, the President signed Executive Order (EO) 13822,⁴⁷ which prompted VA, DoD, and DHS to work together to give veterans seamless access to benefits and resources. Some changes focused specifically on resources related to mental health care and suicide prevention, and on tailoring resources to areas of interest to particular groups of veterans.

Another relevant recent change in legislation, specific to educational benefits, was the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act, also referred to as the “Forever G.I. Bill,” which Congress passed in 2017. This update to G.I. Bill benefits removed the previous requirement that

[§] <https://www.benefits.va.gov/TAP/docs/mct-report-2018.pdf>

the benefits expired after fifteen years. It also restored benefits (e.g., class credits, housing stipends) to veterans whose educational pursuits had been halted by school closures. The Forever G.I. Bill also created some levels of differentiation in support for veterans: for example, more money available to Purple Heart recipients than to other veterans, more money and time allowed for veterans studying subjects that fall under the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) umbrella, and support for the Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) program,** which offers computer skills coursework to veterans.

Data: Overview of Included Studies

To evaluate strengths and gaps in the current transition process as well as to formulate a research agenda for future work, we gathered data from studies commissioned by VBA to inform and support its work. They include:

- Human-centered design studies on the veteran experience with using VBA education and career counseling services post-transition, including a mapping of the veteran transition journey;
- Resources describing historical, current, and future trends in veteran transition;
- A Strategic Assessment Executive Summary: a strategic assessment of the military-to-civilian transition ecosystem to understand the broader environment and the drivers shaping the transition landscape, with a focus on how to mature and evolve the VA TAP;
- A detailed overview of the TAP, including information about current and planned updates to the program; and
- Information on the interagency statement of intent for the TAP and recent legislative changes to the NDAA, which constitutes a guide for further delivery of services to transitioning veterans.

The following sections draw from the collective findings in these studies. These sections also include research findings from other relevant studies.

Current Transition Support Process

The current transition process is supported by several federal partners that bring a range of expertise to the interagency TAP. Additionally, community partners provide support at various times. Table 1 lists these entities.

Table 1: Entities Supporting Veterans throughout Transition

Entities Supporting Service Members and Their Families Before, During, and After Transition
<p><i>Interagency and Federal Partners</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) • Department of Defense (DoD)

** https://benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/fgib/VetTec_Veteran.asp

Entities Supporting Service Members and Their Families Before, During, and After Transition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of Labor (DOL) • Department of Education (ED) • Department of Homeland Security (DHS)/U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) • Office of Personnel Management (OPM) • Small Business Administration (SBA) <p><i>Community Partners</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military Service Organizations (MSOs) • Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) • Veteran peer groups • Community organizations

A study that conducted interviews with U.S. Veterans who had recently transitioned to civilian status showed that those who received assistance through any programs, whether from a veteran peer or a veteran-specific support system, reported that this helped them in dealing with practical issues, such as accessing benefits, and provided emotional support. Additionally, veterans who embraced an “ambassador” role (e.g., explaining the military experience to civilians) found this role to be effective in easing their own transition to civilian status. The study also found that veterans who were able to see the transition process through the lens of a time-bound adjustment process (e.g., a 90-day period) had greater patience with the transition.¹⁷

Another study²⁸ compared the transition of active-component members of the military to that of National Guard/Reservist (NG/R) SMs and showed that the dispersed nature of NG/R SMs did not allow for the support and resources provided by direct unit support. These findings further underscores the benefits of unit support and peer support. To combat this problem of geographic dispersion and promote peer support, NG members who attended in-person reintegration training benefited from learned knowledge related to managing anger, curbing alcohol use, and managing financial status. The study showing these outcomes also pointed to the benefits of including family members in training and resources related to the transition process, as well as the need to differentiate among various types of needs, as opposed to a “one-size-fits-all” approach.²⁸

Gaps in the Current Transition Process

Examination of the transition process revealed issues that contribute to the current gaps. Of the SMs who were surveyed on the topic of transition, 28% identified the process as being “difficult” or “very difficult.” In particular, employment transition and finances were identified by 40% or more veterans as being difficult or very difficult.⁴² One potential explanation for these challenges is the variety of programs available to veterans, which is further complicated by the disjointed nature of these programs and services. The vast number of programs can make seeking support during reintegration into civilian life overwhelming to veterans.³¹ Another challenge relates to a

perceived lack of support from institutions, including the military, the VA, and community organizations. Veterans reported a lack of military support related to providing needed resources such as access to transition training programs after transitioning to civilian status. This is logical, since meeting veterans' needs now falls under the purview of the VA, but it underscores a need for consistency and connectivity before, during, and after the time of transition. In other words, veterans do not perceive the transition process as holistic from pre- to post-separation. The issues of concern regarding community program support were related to frustrations around translating military experiences to civilian situations, such as application of emergency medical technician (EMT) skills, or bank requirements for obtaining a loan.¹⁷ Reports also cite the transition to educational institutions as challenging, specifically with regard to difficulties in navigating campus resources, the applicability of support services to meet veterans' unique needs, and the potential for contentious relations with classmates and faculty.⁴⁸

The pace and requirements of military life leading up to the transition process can influence the access to transition resources. Of note is that military schedules are often demanding due to deployments, training, overseas assignments, and unpredictable work schedules, which may not allow for participation in transition programs. Preparatory programs, certification programs, and financial planning may thus not be viable due to the unpredictable nature of military activities at the end of service.³⁸

One data source,⁴⁹ in which data was gathered from transitioning SMs in order to identify how best to rethink and reimagine the possible form of employment support for transitioning SMs and veterans based on individual needs, preferences, and behaviors, included quotations from veterans on the transition process, giving valuable insight into their situations. Table 2 presents five illustrative quotations from the transitioning SMs in this study. They showcase the isolation and loss veterans can feel and the lack of preparation for the practical, mental/emotional, and social issues they face, and reveal that the transition to civilian status is a lengthy process that cannot be rushed.

Table 2: Quotations from Veterans

Examples of Evidence: Quotations from Veterans
“You're an outcast. You feel lost...overwhelmed and then if you are somebody who has longevity in the military...you have to make up in your mind, or have to come to grips that your military career is coming to an end. Divorce.”
“I think the advice that I can give those folks is that it doesn't matter how well you prepare and how well you think things are going to work out. It's a lot different once you get out of the uniform...on the outside you are pretty much on your own.”
“I was just excited to get out. I didn't really pay much attention. Just put me back out in the world and I'll be all right. I should have listened, but I was too young to realize that.”

Examples of Evidence: Quotations from Veterans
<p>“I felt like I didn't have anything. In the military, you're always around a mentor, you're never left alone right from day one. You'd always have a drill instructor yelling at you teaching you. Every step of the way you've always got some type of supervision, there's always an accountability piece.”</p>
<p>“[Transition] is the most difficult one to do and it can take from months to years. From my personal experience, it's still going on. So basically I kind of took about 10 years, kind of cycle through and you're not quite completely there, but you just got to find different ways of dealing with it.”</p>

From the DoD to VA

The DoD considers SMs to be in a transition to civilian status a full year before the actual separation from active duty; as noted above, this is encompassed by DoD TAP. All SMs must complete a Pre-Separation Counseling Checklist to indicate which programs are of interest during their transition process. The timing of access to pre-separation counseling used to be 90 days before separation. However, reflecting a new understanding of transition, the timeline has recently been revised to at least 365 days before separation; in cases of planned retirement, it can begin at any time 24 months before separation.

After separation, as the SM becomes a veteran, most transition resources and procedures come from the VA. (Some DoD benefits remain for up to 365 days post-separation, such as Military OneSource, which provides transition assistance through its MLC resources.) One of the priorities of the VA Undersecretary of Benefits (USB), Dr. Paul Lawrence, is to “provide veterans with the benefits they have earned in a manner that honors their service.”⁵⁰ The Office of Transition and Economic Development (OTED) was specifically formed to prompt and support a seamless transition from SM to veteran, including educational options, community re-establishment, and financial guidance. The newly created Outbound Call Initiative, via VA Solid Start,^{††} uses VBA call centers to contact veterans in their first post-separation year and ensure their awareness of services available to them. The Post-Separation Transition Assistance Program (PSTAP) Assessment surveys veterans at 6, 12, and 36 months post-transition to ensure that they received the support they needed.⁵⁰ Veterans attend TAP curriculum sessions at a site convenient to them; across a division of six regions world-wide, more than 300 sites are supported^{††}. In FY18 alone, nearly half a million SMs/veterans attended TAP.⁵⁰ TAP includes a core curriculum as well as optional sessions, depending on a veteran’s unique needs. A participant assessment allows VA to look for areas for improvement biannually, and annual technical reviews check for potential content updates.⁵¹

^{††} As outlined in Executive Order 13822, Joint Action Plan, Task 1.1

^{††} In April 2019, there were 332 TAP locations.⁴⁴

Recent Changes to the Transition Process

In coordination with the DoD, DOL, and VA, the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) provides comprehensive support to help SMs transition to civilian life. As part of the FY19 NDAA, TAP changed its core curriculum structure on October 1, 2019, to adjust the amount of time spent on elements of the transition process. A full day of the TAP covers content from the DoD (about transitions generally, the Military Occupational Code (MOC) crosswalk, and financial planning). The VA-specific curriculum (about benefits, services, and Capstone Support^{§§}) similarly now consumes a full day. DOL content (an employment workshop) now lasts 1 day instead of 3 days, but the additional content has been absorbed into other tracks (which are now also mandatory) to allow for differentiation among an increasingly diverse veteran population. Veterans must choose at least one additional 2-day workshop, each of which is a module within TAP, from DOL Employment, DoD Education, SBA Entrepreneurship, and DOL Vocational Workshops. Modules within TAP include “Supporting Yourself and Your Family,” “Getting Career Ready,” “Finding a Place to Live,” and “Maintaining Your Health.” The VATAP website also offers MLC modules, which are 45 to 60-minute information sessions on the benefits and services topics most important to SMs and veterans.

Future Changes to the Transition Process

VA has developed a survey, the PSTAP Outcome study, to learn more about the transition process and specifically TAP’s long-term benefits to veterans. The OTED spearheads the survey, and launched the first round in July 2019, with invitations sent to over 160,000 recently separated veterans.⁴⁵ The findings will allow the VA to improve services to veterans and analyze the effect of participation in TAP courses on the long-term outcomes of veterans in the broad life domains of employment, education, health and social relationships, financial, overall satisfaction and well-being.

This effort echoes calls in the literature for more longitudinal evidence of veteran wellbeing beyond the moment of transition.^{7,9} While awaiting the full results from this survey, VBA is exploring options for updating its Education and Career Counseling Program to better meet the personalized planning needs of SMs, veterans, and their dependents. Finally, DoD and VA are working to codify the transition experience as seamlessly encompassing 365 days both pre- and post-separation in order to further improve the transition experience.

Suggested Areas for Future Research

Previous work has called for focusing more research on transitioning veterans, specifically focused on younger veterans and female veterans, who often face different challenges than those

^{§§} Capstone Support is a program that occurs 90 days prior to separation to ensure service members are connected to their local VA resources. During a culminating Capstone event, Commanders verify achievement of Career Readiness Standards (CRS) prior to transition. If a veteran does not achieve CRS, they are referred to the appropriate agency for further services.

confronted by older, male veterans,¹⁰ and for breaking down findings about challenges by such factors as rank or number of deployments.^{7,31} Additionally, more information is needed to improve understanding of how skills learned in the military will transfer to civilian work environments.^{10,38} Future studies should also examine how positive aspects of military identities (e.g., resilience) can be used to smooth the transition process;⁸ to date little research exists in this area.

Another area of research that should be both updated and expanded centers on looking at veterans and their families simultaneously, or as a family unit, both pre- and post-separation.^{28,31,39,52,53} Although the SM is the person transitioning to veteran status, many of the changes associated with this transition extend to the SM/veteran's family as well; for example, a residential move affects a spouse and children as well as the SM/veteran. A mixed methods approach may be useful here, as it would allow for identification and exploration of "links between identity, culture, mental health, and reintegration."⁷ Information provided by a growing literature base in psychology related to this topic^{52,54} can be integrated with the findings in other disciplines for further insight. Multidisciplinary work may point to strategies that fully incorporate all the aspects of transition, including the roles of family members or other loved ones.^{31,55}

Research has shown the value of peer support, but more detailed information is needed regarding optimal use of this resource.¹⁷ It is likely that peer support ensures that veterans are aware that their transition process, in its complexity, is normative. Of particular importance is identifying who, in fact, should be considered veterans' peers in the areas in which they could use this type of social connection.²¹ For some veterans, their peers are other veterans who saw similar combat during their time in the military. For other veterans, establishing a "peer" relationship may mean connecting via other shared experiences, such as divorce or substance abuse, where the peer's veteran status is less consequential. Knowing that these types of social networks can be particularly supportive, researchers would benefit from understanding how to identify what connections would work best for a particular veteran.

The Canadian military has used a strategy known as third-location decompression to aid veterans in transferring from deployment back to the home environment. This strategy, which allows increased adjustment time in between those two locations and roles,³³ has yielded some positive results, but no scientific study of this method has been performed to date. Research findings could help to identify the most valuable components of this approach and thus aid the government in refining it and extending it to the appropriate populations of transitioning veterans in the U.S. context.

Finally, as Griffin and Gilbert state, "there is a pressing need for a clear, consistent, widely available, and unbiased method to evaluate institutions to determine if they are indeed veteran [sic] friendly."⁷ Many websites claim to offer "veteran friendly" resources, but it is often unclear how (and whether) these resources have been evaluated to justify that label. This has become a particularly pressing problem as some for-profit institutions target veterans for their G.I. Bill funding, often promising course credits and accelerated graduation, only to leave the veteran lacking a degree and burdened with student loan debt. By contrast, the campuses of some educational institutions have truly become more veteran friendly through additional support structures.^{43,56,57,58,59} More research is needed in this area to discover the full extent of and details

surrounding these improvements (e.g., benefits of VetSuccess on campus counselors and contracted Chapter 36 counselors).

Summary

This paper has provided an overview of the transition experience that veterans face when they move from SM to civilian status. It described how their identity shifts during this transition and noted that this is a normative experience; just as bootcamp integrates SMs into the military, a similarly immersive experience is needed to integrate them back into civilian life, and this applies to all veterans. Nevertheless, the transition experience can include many changes and shifts in a veteran's life, often occurring at the same time.

The paper summarized how various government agencies have supported veterans with all of these changes, and how this support has evolved over time to expand in scope and meet the needs of a continuously diversifying veteran population. The current system of benefits provides support for education, housing, and health, and it is crucial that veterans be fully aware of how to access all benefits owed to them at the time most suitable for them. Most recently, testimony surrounding transitioning veterans and their families "has focused on leveraging all VA benefits and services to holistically support their economic well-being."⁶⁰ Toward this end, both the DoD and the VA have established programs that seamlessly support veterans for a full year before and after transition from active duty. Shifting to a paradigm of 365 days pre- and post-separation allows for a more fluid transition process to encompass veteran needs both as they plan for separation and as they develop new needs after separating. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research centered on specific groups of veterans (e.g., female veterans, younger veterans), peer support, third-location decompression, and labeling institutions as veteran-friendly. These findings can then be used to guide government agencies as they seek to further improve support and services to our nation's SMs and veterans in the future.

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Acronyms

DoD	Department of Defense
DOL	Department of Labor
FY	Fiscal Year
MLC	Military Life Cycle
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
OTED	Office of Transition and Economic Development
PSTAP	Post Separation Transition Assistance Program Assessment
SBA	Small Business Administration
SM	Service Member
TAP	Transition Assistance Program
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs
VBA	Veterans Benefits Administration



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