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Integrating Wellness With Professional Skills In The Liminal Spaces Of The Military-To-Civilian Transition Experience: A Program Evaluation

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INTEGRATING WELLNESS WITH PROFESSIONAL SKILLS IN THE LIMINAL SPACES OF THE MILITARY-TO-CIVILIAN TRANSITION EXPERIENCE: A PROGRAM EVALUATION

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Dedication

Norman Durand

My Dad, Norman Durand, wore a gold chained necklace that had the Navy emblem with Jesus on the cross on top. It was given to him by my stepmother, Kelly, in 1993 and he never once took it off. When my dad passed away in 2013, I slipped his Navy necklace over his head and have kept it safe with his other Navy memorabilia, expect for when I need to draw strength from him, and I wear it for life's big moments, like when my two beautiful daughters were born and when I defend this dissertation. My Dad was a Navy man through and through—even though some would say he "only" served 8 years. But that's the thing about military men and women; they serve for a lifetime, regardless of when they take off their uniform for the last time. My Dad wore his Navy identity throughout his life, and it even helped shape who I would become. Navy was ingrained in the way he fought for what he believed in and how much integrity meant to him. Although we never talked about what his transition was like back into the civilian world after being on the U.S.S. Yosemite for months and months on end, I know he would agree with a lot of the veterans' voices lifted in this study, and he would love swapping those military stories too. I miss him and his stories so very much. This dissertation is dedicated to his larger-than-life memory.

DS

I met my dear friend, "DS," when I was 12 years old. We both spent the summer at our grandparents' houses, just a few doors down, and became fast close friends. He would tell me his dream of becoming an "Army man" and when he went to boot camp a few years later, he sent me letters every day and I could almost feel the thrill, fear, and pride in them. Years later, DS would serve multiple tours to Afghanistan and Colombia as an Army medic and after 24 years in the

service, he retired. His transition was incredibly difficult, and he fought a lot of battles that many couldn't "see." In the 2 years after he retired, we reconnected as friends and I did my best to get him the transition assistance he needed. In 2022, DS unexpectedly passed away with an official diagnosis of PTSD and the world got a little dimmer. DS's transition into the civilian world was hard because he carried his Army identity from 12 years old on; it was all he ever wanted to be, but he just couldn't find his civilian footing while dealing with the trauma that came with being an "Army man." This dissertation is dedicated to DS's sacrifice and transition. We will never forget you and will forever find ways to make it right for the next kiddo who dreams of being in the service; they deserve a better outcome and so did you. Now, 473 days after his passing, as I defend this dissertation, I have a new understanding of his transition.

Military and Veteran Program Alumni

The men and women I met in this study are truly remarkable. Their stories and words will stay with me long after I close this chapter of my academic career. I know how sacred it was for me to witness the bravery and vulnerability they showed in their application essays, survey, and in the focus group. Although their transitions are all different, their ability to honor their military identity while making an impact as a civilian (or future civilian) is inspiring. I am grateful they have allowed me to use their words to help tell the story of why our veterans deserve transition programming that encourages wellness and career development and why continued support is essential. I hope you all know that you also gave a voice to my dad and to DS, and the millions of veterans whose transition deserves to be heard, validated, and supported. This dissertation is dedicated to you all and to our nation's military men and women. As my colleague JD Due often says, "The best years of service just might lay ahead of you."

Acknowledgments

To my husband, Air Force Major Raymond Blount: you are the very heart of this dissertation. This academic journey happened because of your support and love; from my associate degree with our newborns, to my bachelor degree while you were deployed to Iraq, to countless nights of you putting our sweet girls to bed while I attended night classes for my master degree, and for the millions of moments you have lifted me up and made me believe in myself during this doctorate, I have carried your love through it all. I am reminded of our wedding poem by E.E. Cummings (1952) when he writes, "i carry your heart with me (i carry it in my heart)/ i am never without it (anywhere/i go you go, my dear; and whatever is done/by only me is your doing, my darling)". I love you to the sun and back. Thank you for your service to our country and for dreaming audaciously alongside of me. As you make the military to civilian transition in just under three years, I hope you know how proud I am of you and how much I admire the man that you are.

To my daughters, Caroline Raegene and Chloe Grace: thank you for being my constant sunshine. I am the luckiest because I get to be your mom. You've both spent your whole lives (all ten years of it) with your mama chasing down degrees and I hope you know how grateful I am for all the sweet ways you have supported this big dream of mine. You two are the best moments of my life and I hope you go out there and chase down your own big dreams someday. Thank you for choosing me to be your mom; it's my most favorite title.

To my family: Mom, thank you for the millions of pep talks on drives home from writing days; I could always feel your love and pride beaming through. To my sister, Kari: this entire academic journey has had you by my side and I could not be more grateful for a sister like you. To my stepmom Kelly, thank you for always finding a way to make me laugh through it all. To

my in-laws: thank you for loving and supporting me like I have always been your daughter and sister-in-law. To all my other siblings, thank you for cheering me on. Finding you all at the beginning of this doctoral program has made me a better person.

To my very dear friends who always made sure to help keep my dream alive, I am forever grateful for you. I will acknowledge you each more fully in private because it would take another dissertation to do so: Jen, Andrea, Cindy, Lindsey, Tammy, Maryjane, Colleen, Shel, John, Meghan, Denise, Meredith, Brenna, Karine, Jaime, Abby, Jenna, Ashley, Beth, Lynn, Tami, Lisa, Anna, Arielle, Margaret, Joanna, Neil, Tammie, Andrew, Erin, Stonehouse mamas, Bryce, Morgan, and my cohort; especially to Ash, my battle buddy and bestie, to Joel, thank you so very much for your unconditional friendship and our writing weekends, and to Carrie for encouraging this dream. Special acknowledgment to Walden Pond and the Amphitheatre in the rain or shine: magical places where I went on memorable walks (or *saunters* as Thoreau called them) with dear friends to breathe and remember who I am during this academic journey; I am deeply thankful for those memories.

To my colleagues (past and present): this dissertation is our dissertation. Thank you for the guidance, advice, and mentorship you have given me. You have inspired me in ways you may never know, and I am grateful: Kathleen, Charlie, JD, Kay, Katie, Liz, Kelly C., Kelly H., Jeremey, Pamela, Katie, Jeff, Whitney, Jessica, Fusako, and Sonya.

To Dr. Constantino and my committee members, thank you for your wisdom and guidance during classes and throughout this dissertation process. Dr. Constantino, I am forever grateful that you are my Chair. Your encouragement and belief in me are something I will always hold so dear.

To my undergraduate and graduate professors who put me on the path of a doctorate and who believed in me like no other. It is because of you that I have gotten this far: Dr. Eddy, Dr. Peterson, Dr. Selleck, Dr. Miller, Dr. Mitchell, Dr. Carroll, Professor Hersey, and Professor Dastrup. Thank you, so very much. The impact you've made on me is far reaching and I will forever be in gratitude.

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Abstract

The purpose of this formative program evaluation of a military-to-civilian transition program at a university sought to evaluate participant perceptions of the program. The evaluation focused on the perceptions of program effectiveness after one year of program participation. Because the program was in its first year, it was appropriate to examine the participants' perceptions formatively as a means of determining the effectiveness of the program's short-term outcomes. The 2-week transition program was an early adopter of integrating wellness interventions with career support. Existing literature has suggested integrating wellness content into military transition programming, but less information exists about the outcomes of these kinds of transition programs. Participants in the evaluation were selected after 1 year of program completion. A mixed methods approach was used to collect and analyze data from application essays, an online survey, and a focus group. The findings suggested program alumni perceived they learned to redefine their identities during transition, and they changed their coping behaviors because of the program. Findings also indicated wellness content had higher levels of satisfaction and direct usability. The findings in this evaluation suggested that integrating wellness and business into transition curricula may be necessary for a successful transition into civilian life. The changes in practice resulting from this study include strategies for continued career identity support, follow-up opportunities for military service self-reflection, and peer support beyond an isolated program. Suggestions for the work of practitioners include considering military spouse transition cohorts and mental health in transition programs.

INTEGRATING WELLNESS WITH PROFESSIONAL SKILLS IN THE LIMINAL SPACES OF THE MILITARY-TO-CIVILIAN TRANSITION EXPERIENCE: A PROGRAM EVALUATION

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Life transitions are processes that occur over time and space, marked by a psychological response to an event, and arise during adolescence developmental stages and in major life transformations such as career changes, marriage, and parenthood (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Bridges, 1980; Goodman et al., 2011; Meléis, 2010; Meléis et al., 2000; Willson, 2019). Some transitions are unexpected and can be challenging in unpredictable ways, like a job loss or a terminal illness (Willson, 2019). Other transitions, like military service members transitioning into civilian life, are welcomed and exhilarating, but some military veterans find the transition unsupported and stressful (Gilman, 2018; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). Moreover, transitions occur in phases that may be more challenging than others; without intentional support and guidance, a successful transition can be impeded (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Bridges, 1980; Goodman et al., 2011; Meléis, 2010; Meléis et al., 2000; Willson, 2019). Whether transition is expected, unexcepted, welcomed, or avoided, every transition requires a redefinition of situation and self through perceptions of the transition and defined coping strategies (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Bridges, 1980; Willson, 2019).

Scholars have examined transitions through a variety of lenses, including psychology, counseling, and education (Bridges, 1980; Willson, 2019), and have created theories and frameworks that support understanding and guidance for many life situations and circumstances. Theorists have noted different types of transitions, ranging from developmental (e.g., life cycle

changes); situational (e.g., personal and professional); organizational (e.g., career and workforce); and health illness (e.g., changes to health; Bridges, 1980; Goodman et al., 2011; Meléis, 2010; Meléis et al., 2000). Moreover, moving through simultaneous transitions can cause transition stress if not acknowledged and supported with coping strategies (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). Research on life transitions has highlighted the influences of a transition and whether those influences inhibit or facilitate a successful transition outcome (Meléis et al., 2000). Cultural belief systems and the lack of supportive or therapeutic resources can all prevent effective transitions, and access to resources that use well-being and mindfulness practices can facilitate a positive redefinition of oneself and an optimist outlook during transition (Meléis, 2010; Meléis et al., 2000; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Willson, 2019).

The U.S. military has one of the largest groups of members who undergo a transition when separating or retiring from active duty, with roughly 200,000 service members leaving the military each year and joining the 2.3 million already separated members since 9/11, and about 2.23 million to follow in years to come; thus, the military-to-civilian transition happens on a continuous and massive scale (Elnitsky & Kilmer, 2017; Markowitz et al., 2022; Vogt et al., 2018). When a military service member leaves the military, situational (e.g., relocation, family composition); organizational (e.g., career change); and health status (e.g., service-related injuries, physical or mental illnesses) transitions might occur simultaneously (Bond et al., 2022; Elnitsky & Kilmer, 2017; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). In a recent study that compared civilian transitions to military transitions, military members displayed a higher rate of depression and financial distress than the civilian sample and reported military members displayed poorer mental health and well-being (Bond et al., 2022). According to Bond et al. (2022), “The study findings highlight the need for access to

appropriate evidence-based mental health treatment as well as transition services to help manage the challenges of returning to civilian life" (p. 291).

The Military-to-Civilian Transition Experience

In Pew Research Center's study, *The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation*, 2,371 post-9/11 veterans were surveyed about the ease and difficulty of transitioning into civilian life, with a comparison made between people who reported having posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), people who served in combat, and officers (Parker et al., 2019). About half of the overall veterans surveyed said it was somewhat (32%) or very (16%) difficult for them to transition into civilian life. About 46% of people who served in combat reported their transition was difficult in comparison to 18% without combat experience. About 66% of people with a PTSD diagnosis reported a very difficult transition. Officers (67%) were more likely to say that the military prepared them well for transition than people who served as enlisted service members. Although PTSD is the fourth most prevalent disability among retired and separated veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023), recent studies have broadened efforts on understanding the wide range of other unique challenges that service members face, including grief caused by the loss of the military self and culture; identity changes; fear-based trauma around moral injury (Buechner, 2020); and transition stress around career placement, family obligations, housing, and health care needs (Markowitz et al., 2022; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Pease et al., 2016). Researchers have examined successful transitions for military service members that involve more therapeutic supportive measures, with well-being at the core of reintegration into civilian life (Bond et al., 2022; Castro & Kintzle, 2017; Flack & Kite, 2021; Markowitz et al., 2022; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018).

Well-Being and Flourishing in Successful Military Transitions

Research on the psychological and physical well-being interventions used to guide an individual toward flourishing during transition has established that social connectedness, optimism, meaning, purpose, and positive identity formation experiences have produced the most successful transitions (Crace & Crace, 2020; Flack & Kite, 2021). Military service members beginning their transitions into civilian life, especially those with service-related injuries and transition stress, could face critical risks during and after transition, including suicide, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and worsening mental health issues (Bond et al., 2022; Elnitsky & Kilmer, 2017; Pease et al., 2016). Incorporating specific well-being interventions, often based in positive psychology, into transition assistance programs for military service members is not only supportive for a transitioning service member to flourish as a civilian, but it could also assist in the well-being of veterans across varying life circumstances and transitions (Pease et al., 2016; Vogt et al., 2018).

Military-to-Civilian Transition Program Challenges

Navigating a transition from an extremely structured military life to one of civilian independent decision making requires coping skills not readily offered in most transition programs (Bond et al., 2022; Vogt et al., 2018). The specific needs of the military-to-civilian transition processes are often unsupported due to of a lack of understanding of the transitioning needs of service member (Bond et al., 2022; Gilman, 2018; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Vogt et al., 2018). Although more than 40,000 programs geared toward civilian reintegration exist, there is a gap in transition programming that integrates well-being into programming, with an overall lack of support for the most pressing needs of transitioning military service members (Berglass & Harrell, 2012; Institute of Medicine, 2013; Vogt et al., 2018).

In a testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, Armstrong (2021), managing director of the Research and Data Institute for Veterans and Military Families, argued that although the U.S. government spends tens of thousands of dollars to recruit and train a new service member to transition from civilian to military life, the government only spends roughly $910 to reintegrate service members back to civilian life. Armstrong (2021) noted, "It's stark considering that research consistently shows a strong connection between a positive transition experience and better health and well-being outcomes later in life" (p. 1). The $910 per service member is largely spent on requiring participation in the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The TAP focuses on navigating the paperwork required of a service member to receive postseparation health care and financial benefits, along with information for mental health and career services (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). Although informative, the TAP may miss the mark on the wide scope of transition needs among veterans.

Although many public and private military-to-civilian transition programs outside of the TAP are available for U.S. military service members, there is a considerable lack of programs that focus on integrating well-being *with* career skills (e.g., placement, interview prep) that are required to flourish during a service member's transition into civilian life (Flack & Kite, 2021). Markowitz et al. (2022) noted a successful transition for military members is supported by conceptualizing well-being practices into identify formation. Likewise, higher education intuitions have also begun to provide transition programming for their military and veteran students and communities; however, although the top-rated programs like the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University (n.d.) offer impactful transition

programming around career and entrepreneurship training, not many programs have integrated wellness, coping, or behavioral change into their curriculum.

Problem of Practice

I used the transition framework of Goodman et al. (2011) that promotes self and support as the mechanisms of change in a successful transition process to identify a considerable gap in holistic transition support that U.S. military members receive after separation. Therefore, this formative evaluation of a military-to-civilian transition certificate program at a 4-year public university in the mid-Atlantic region sought to evaluate participant perceptions of the program that consider both well-being (i.e., physical and mental health) and career development combined. In addition, this evaluation identified if the participants reported positive perceptions of self-redefinition into civilian professional and personal life, and if they attributed those changes to the program. Likewise, this evaluation examined if perceived behavioral changes transformed physical and mental wellness behaviors required to facilitate flourishing during participants' military-to-civilian transition. The findings in this study may provide program director participants' reactions to the program with an emphasis on learning and behavioral outcomes.

Program Description

The program of this study provided a military-to-civilian transition certificate to U.S. military service members transitioning to high-level civilian management positions. The program operated in a cohort model of 18 participants from the U.S. Army, Coast Guard, Marines, and Navy. The curriculum focused on both integrative wellness and business skills that offered participants the strategies to cope with and manage different types and points of transitions that separated and retired service members may encounter. The program's goals included creating

methods for participants to reflect on themselves, others, and the world postmilitary service, grounded in positive psychology and transition theory, and provide them with the skills, experiences, and knowledge necessary to flourish at all stages of their military-to-civilian transition. The program defined flourishing for a transitioning military service member as being in community with like-minded individuals with the intent of redefining self in life and as a professional through lifelong wellness practices and personalized and aspirational career development. The program goals aligned with the university's strategic goals for developing an inclusive culture for learning, particularly for physical and mental well-being and professional growth. The training consisted of a 2-week experiential in-person workshop; the 1st week focused on integrated wellness and the 2nd week concentrated on flourishing as a business professional. The program was offered at no cost to participants, with room and board included, and was open to any active, separated, or retired U.S. service member.

Context

The university is a high research activity (i.e., R2) public 4-year institution located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. At the time of the study, the school had approximately 8,600 students across five schools, with 65% of its majors in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and computational fields. The university is closely situated near major military instillations, which prompted a considerable increase in military and veteran students. The university's military and veteran office projected a veteran student enrollment increase of roughly 400 students over the upcoming 5 years, creating a need for innovative and connected resources to help veterans transition into the higher education and civilian world. In 2023, the university's military-affiliated student data report showed that of the 294 students who self-identified as veterans, 244 were graduate military and veteran students, with 186 enrolled in the

School of Business (a pseudonym). At the time of the study, about 71% of the military and veteran students were White, 2% were Hispanic, and 14% were African American/Black. Additionally, 81% were male students and 19% were female students.

The university launched a veteran-to-executive transition program that involved the School of Business, office of student affairs, health and wellness center, a government and intelligence community center, and other military campus partners. The program was housed in the School of Business's own military and veteran transition offices, overseen by an executive director. Although the program participants were not necessarily drawn from the veteran-to-executive transition program or the university's student body, the program's activities and theoretical framework were grounded by the veteran-to-executive transition program's research and the university's readiness to serve veteran populations.

Description of the Program

The program provided integrated wellness techniques and business skills to newly separated and soon-to-be separated military service members to address the challenges surrounding military-to-civilian transition, specifically transition stress from uncertain career placement, loss of military identity and culture, and location changes. The program began during the summer of 2022 and was facilitated by faculty and staff from the School of Business and health and wellness center who provided expertise in integrated wellness and professional business and career skills. The program was open to any U.S. military service member who would separate in the next year, or who already separated or retired within the prior 2 years. There were no required years of military service and participants did not need to be enrolled in the university, nor to identify as a student. The program was offered at no cost to participants.

The program directors recruited participants to the program through LinkedIn, networking, and word of mouth via the university's School of Business and program directors. Participants completed an online application process that required professional experience, a recommendation, and four short essays. Program directors evaluated the applications and all applicants who applied were admitted into the program. The writing samples prompted applicants to consider the following questions: What concerns you about your transition? What are you most looking forward to after military separation? What are your short- and long-term professional goals? What does wellness mean to you and what do you want it to look like in your postmilitary life?

The program facilitators from the university's School of Business and the health and wellness department selected a group of seven retired military service members and 11 separated service members for participation. The program consisted of 100 hours of an in-person workshop over 2 themed weeks. See Table 1 for a complete list of activities.

Table 1

Curriculum Map

Week/Day	Theoretical framework				Outcomes	
	Situation	Self	Support	Strategies	Participants will learn to redefine identity during transition into civilian professional and personal life	Participants will transform coping behaviors required for transition into civilian professional and personal life
Curriculum Week 1: Wellness sessions (physical wellness activities offered each morning)						
Day 1: Authentic excellence	X	X	X	X	X	X
Day 2: Storytelling workshop		X	X	X	X	X
Day 3: Authentic excellence [a]		X	X	X	X	X
Day 4: Storytelling workshop; Authentic excellence		X	X	X	X	X
Day 5: Authentic excellence; Expressive writing	X	X	X	X	X	X
Day 6: Wellness activities		X	X	X	X	X
Day 7: Wellness appointments	X	X	X	X	X	X
Curriculum Week 2: Business sessions (wellness physical activities offered each morning)						
Day 8: Flourishing in your craft		X	X	X	X	X
Day 9: Flourishing in professional relationships – The Big 5 exercise	X	X	X	X	X	X
Day 10: Flourishing in teams; Designing what comes next		X	X	X	X	X
Day 11: Flourishing as a communicator		X	X	X	X	X
Day 12: Flourishing in careers; Certificate celebration		X	X	X	X	X

Note. Theoretical framework adapted from *Counseling Adults in Transition: Linking Practice With Theory* (3rd ed.), by J. Goodman, N. K. Schlossberg, and M. L. Anderson, 2011, Springer Publishing. Copyright 2011 by Springer Publishing.

[a] Information about authentic excellence adapted from *Authentic Excellence: Flourishing and Resilience in a Restless World*, by R. K. Crace and R. L. Crace, 2020, Routledge. Copyright 2020 by Routledge.

Week 1: Flourishing as an Individual. Week 1 of the program focused on physical and mental wellness activities using lectures and hands-on activities in both individual and group work. Participants were introduced to an introspective exploration, grounded in values-based and transition theory research by Crace and Crace (2020), which taught them to break the natural fear-based behavior that often occurs with a transition and moved participants through a series of workshops to support a sense of well-being during change and transition. In workshops, participants identified their perception of the situation that brought about their transition and learned how to cope with changes using well-being practices and positive psychology to create a more positive impact on their lives throughout their transition.

Week 2: Flourishing as a Professional. With a focus on career transition, Week 2 explored the value of networking and how to craft their ideal careers, professional relationships, communication styles, and future teams. Based in transition career strategies, the 2nd week expounded upon what participants learned in the 1st week by including lectures and discussions led by School of Business faculty, experiential learning exercises, interactive individual and group learning modules, and discussions led by veterans who were flourishing in their transitions. The curriculum map in Table 1 illustrates program alignment with the theoretical framework described in subsequent sections and addresses the program's intended outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

The program was designed by university program directors with the theoretical underpinnings of Goodman et al.'s (2011) transition framework, adapted by M. L. Anderson et al. (2012), to understand the transition processes that U.S. service members will experience upon entering civilian life and work. Introduced as a transition framework that guides counselors to offer better support and coping strategies in adults, the theory is conceptualized in three parts: (a)

approaching transitions, (b) the 4S system, and (c) taking charge and is summarized in the following sections.

Approaching Transitions

Military service members either expect a transition type that involves a separation with honorable discharge or retirement, or an unexpected transition due to a service-related injury or illness (Armstrong, 2021; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Vogt et al., 2018). When adults encounter a transition, they must identify what the change means (e.g., transition type, context, impact) and where they are in the transition process (e.g., moving in, through, or out of transition; Goodman et al., 2011). Moreover, the impact on a service member transitioning to civilian life is often characterized as transition stress, creating the need for support and coping strategies that include physical and mental well-being (Flack & Kite, 2021; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Pease et al., 2016). Additionally, the personal perception of an individual's approaching transition influences how they will cope with the potential stress of the expected or unexcepted change (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Goodman et al., 2011; Meléis et al., 2000), creating a need for supportive programs for a successful transition.

The 4S System

To identify potential transition resources to cope with change, the 4S system (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012) provides a framework to assess and provide supportive measures during transition across the areas of (a) situation, (b) self, (c) support, and (d) strategies.

Situation. The quality and success of transition may be influenced by an individual's assessment of the preceptors for transition and the perceptions of the personal and professional role changes that will occur, how long the transition process will take, and if one is experiencing other life challenges in addition to the transition (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014). This

process requires an understanding of the types of circumstances that include an expected or unexpected transition and the perceptions and coping behaviors surrounding those triggers. Likewise, assessing the perceptions of moving from one identity to another requires a significant role change, both professionally and personally (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014).

Self. Identifying personal characteristics, values, demographics, and trauma experiences related to the individual experiencing the transition are helpful to assess which psychological resources are needed to support a successful transition (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014). Well-being interventions aimed at developing inner resources, such as resilience, confidence, self-efficacy, outlook, optimism, and meaning making throughout the transition process are important for a successful transition (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014).

Support. Defining available support through family, friends, programming, education communities, networks, and mentors are important coping mechanisms during a transition (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014). Support can often be found through programs that offer services in areas of physical and mental health, career readiness, well-being, and relationship building.

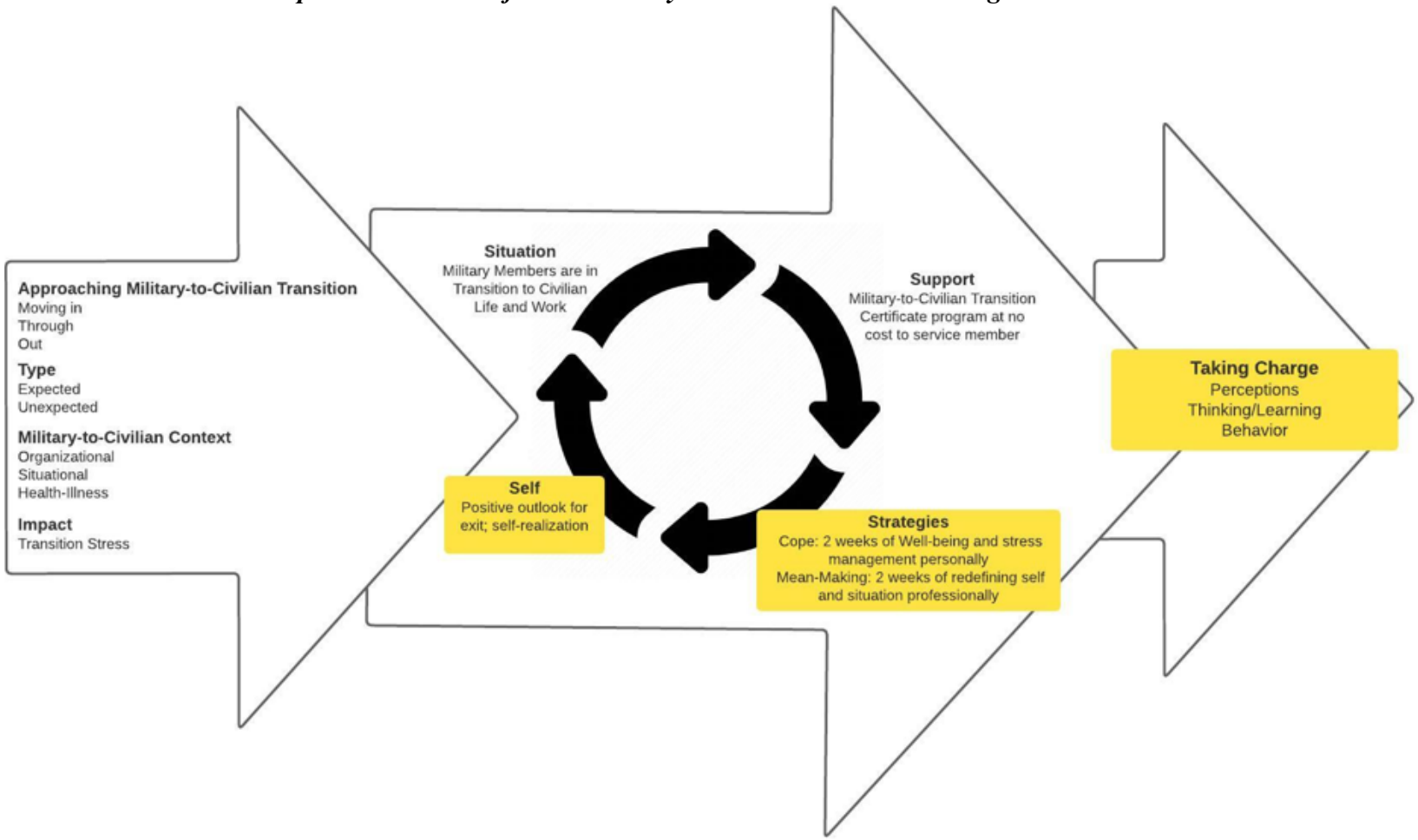
Strategies. Creating a plan for dealing with transition, managing stress, learning coping behaviors, and making meaning of new roles and identities associated with personal and professional changes is an important factor in a successful transition (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Ryan et al., 2011).

Demonstrating the ability to use new strategies by strengthening resources through personal and professional learning and effective coping behaviors is the hallmark of a successful and meaningful transition (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014; M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Goodman et al., 2011). Figure 1 provides the conceptual framework that grounded the program using Goodman et al.'s (2011) transition process framework. Although the program focused on

all components of the 4S system in its curriculum, this program evaluation focused on the shaded portions of Figure 1: *strategies* in the transition process and *self/taking charge* as the program short-term outcomes. Chapter 2 examines transition theories more fully.

Figure 1

Transition Process Conceptual Framework for the Military-to-Civilian Transition Program



Note. Theoretical framework adapted from *Counseling Adults in Transition: Linking Practice With Theory* (3rd ed.), by J. Goodman, N. K. Schlossberg, and M. L. Anderson, 2011, Springer Publishing. Copyright 2011 by Springer Publishing.

Overview of the Evaluation Approach

Evaluating a program offers justification of a program's contribution to an organization or community, determines if the program is effective and efficient, determines if the program should continue, and provides information on future program improvements (D. L. Kirkpatrick, 1998; Mertens & Wilson, 2019; Yarbrough et al., 2011). This program evaluation fit within the use branch of evaluation because it sought to provide evaluation findings to stakeholders, namely the program's directors, for the purpose of informing program effectiveness and potential program adjusting (Mertens & Wilson, 2019) through evaluating participant perceptions. Considering this program evaluation examined participants' reactions and perceptions of learning and behavioral changes, the D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) model was appropriate to evaluate the processes and short-term outcomes of the program.

D. L. Kirkpatrick Model of Evaluation

The D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) model provided a framework for this program evaluation, and I used the model to evaluate the effectiveness of training programs. The model examines four levels of evaluation: reaction, learning, behavior, and results.

Level 1: Reaction. D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) theorized that for participants to be interested and motivated to learn, they must react positively to the programming they receive. Thus, participant reactions are a worthy indicator of program effectiveness and subsequently inform how program developers will create future trainings. By evaluating reactions to trainings, developers may gauge how participants experienced learning and if the theoretical framework was supported.

Level 2: Learning. Measuring improved knowledge and increased skills are important indicators of participant learning and can be used to ensure program learning outcomes were

achieved (D. L. Kirkpatrick, 1998). Program directors can also gauge how the cohort learned as a whole and use that information for future programming.

Level 3: Behavior. Understanding how participants applied the skills they have learned and how they have transferred their new knowledge to their current roles is an indicator of behavioral changes due to programming (D. L. Kirkpatrick, 1998). For program directors to gauge an effective and successful program, they need to not only see changes in participant learning, but they also need to evaluate how participants viewed their jobs and if they changed the way they thought and acted in their jobs post training.

Level 4: Results. To ensure the programming has the best return on investment, evaluators consider questions involving the worthiness of the money spent on training, how the participants learned, how behavioral changes affected the organization, and if productivity increased for participants and their departments because of the training they received (D. L. Kirkpatrick, 1998).

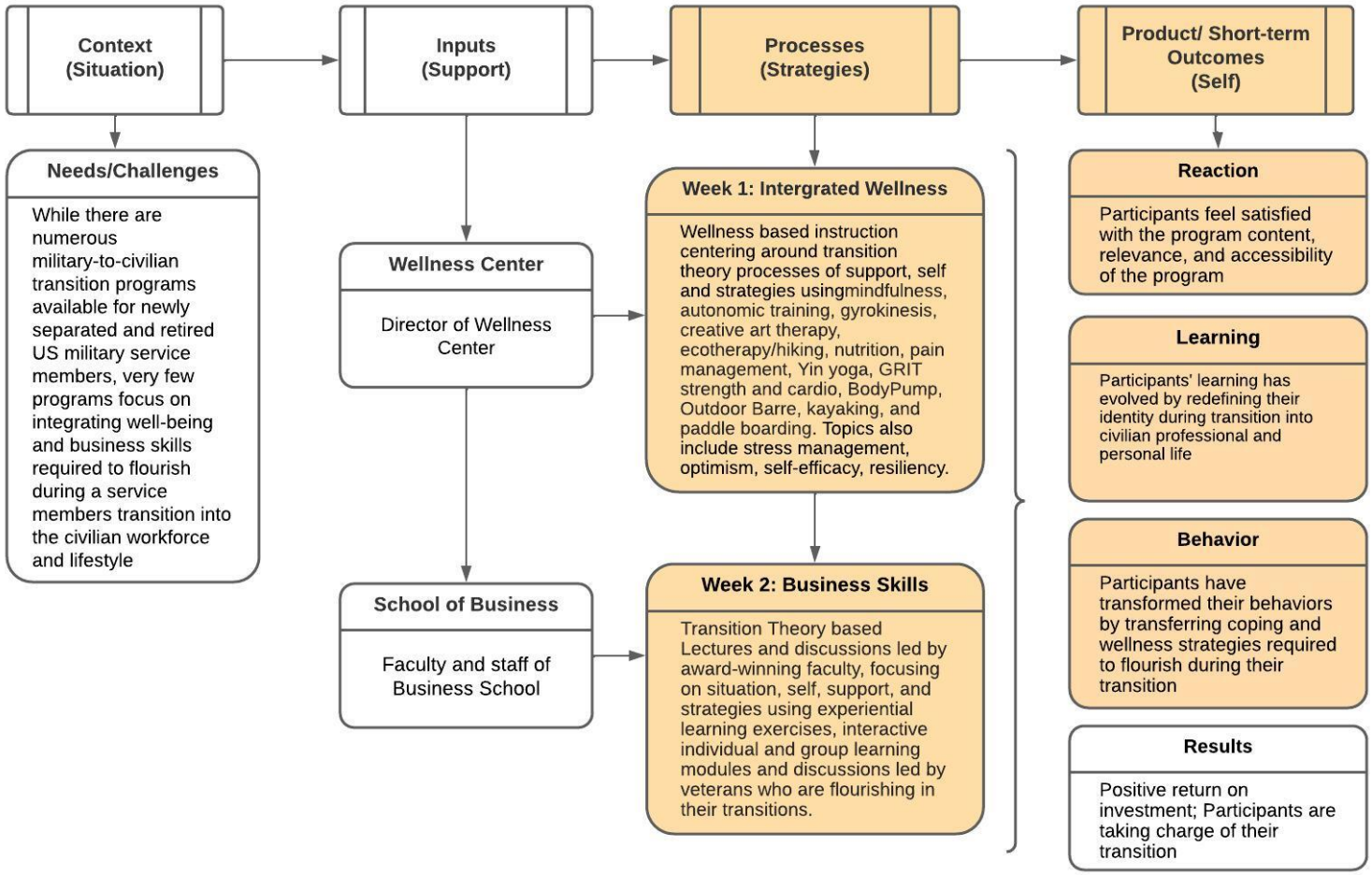
Logic Model

Although not all program components were evaluated in this study, I created a logic model as a frame for understanding the program using Stufflebeam and Coryn's (2014) context, inputs, processes, and products (CIPP) model in conjunction with the D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) model. CIPP, and the model of evaluation, were included in the logic model. Figure 2 shows the components of the program as they aligned with both the CIPP model and the D. L. Kirkpatrick model and incorporated the theoretical framework, illustrated in parentheses under each CIPP heading. Considering the program was still in its first year, the results level of the D. L. Kirkpatrick model were not evaluated for this study. Instead, this evaluation focused on the processes and strategies in relation to participants' reactions and in the products/short-term

outcomes in relation to participants' perceptions of learning and behavioral changes, as seen in the shaded portions of the logic model in Figure 2. The sections that follow provide an overview of the CIPP of the program.

Figure 2

Program Logic Model: Military-to-Civilian Transition Certificate Program



Note. Theoretical framework adapted from *Counseling Adults in Transition: Linking Practice With Theory* (3rd ed.), by J. Goodman, N. K. Schlossberg, and M. L. Anderson, 2011, Springer Publishing. Copyright 2011 by Springer Publishing. Evaluation model adapted from *Evaluating Training Programs: The Four Levels*, by D. L. Kirkpatrick, 1998, Berrett-Koehler. Copyright 1998 by Berrett-Koehler. Shaded boxes incorporate D. L. Kirkpatrick levels used in this evaluation.

Context. Although numerous military-to-civilian transition programs are available for newly separated and retired U.S. military service members, very few programs have focused on integrating well-being and business skills required to flourish during a service member's transition into the civilian workforce and lifestyle. The program was developed in the context of the specific needs of a transiting U.S. military service member, to include career and well-being interventions to assist in positive identity formation and successful transitions. The program sought to become the first military-to-civilian transition program of its kind in the United States to include wellness and career development into a transition program. Within the context, the theoretical framework can be seen in the *situation* aspect of the 4S system.

Inputs. The program originated from the university's veteran-to-executive program in partnership with the university military and veteran affairs office to address the growing transition needs of the area's military and veteran population. Educational leaders from the university's School of Business, health and wellness center, and office of military transition collaborated to develop a comprehensive approach that emphasized physical and mental wellness, developed introspective insights into corporate culture, and built business skills critical to flourishing in management and other positions. Educational leaders made considerations around curriculum alignment to ensure wellness and business theories were integrated and complemented throughout the program. Within the inputs, the theoretical framework can be seen in the *support* aspect of the 4S system.

Processes. The program was designed to be a transformational experience, with the goal of participants redefining their identities in a way that provided the most successful transition into civilian life and work. Educational leaders who developed and taught each workshop sought to stress physical and mental wellness, develop insights into corporate culture, and build business

skills critical to flourishing in management and other positions. Each session was grounded in the theoretical framework of Goodman et al.'s (2011) transition theory and integrated wellness throughout programming.

The 1st week of programming focused on wellness and was led by the university's director of the health and wellness center. Engaging in experiential learning, participants learned the difference between fear-based excellence and authentic excellence, and how to apply physical and mental wellness to their lives. In addition to the core curriculum on flourishing, participants engaged in a diverse array of wellness activities and instruction. Examples included mindfulness, autonomic training, gyrokinesis, creative art therapy, ecotherapy/hiking, nutrition, pain management, Yin yoga, cardio, BodyPump, outdoor barre, kayaking, and paddle boarding. Wellness activities took place in the university's facilities, including the wellness center, recreation center, and amphitheater on a lake adjacent to the School of Business.

The 2nd week of programming integrated the wellness activities and sought to create civilian identity formations required to transition in business, professional relationships, and in their career. Led by School of Business professors, learning content included lectures and discussions led by award-winning faculty, experiential learning exercises, interactive individual and group learning modules, and discussions led by military veterans who experienced successful military-to-civilian transitions. Each session began with a wellness activity and ended with a career networking opportunity. Within the processes, the theoretical framework can be seen in the *support* aspect of the 4S system.

Products or Short-Term Outcomes. The program's goals focused on developing an inclusive learning environment for transitioning military service members, particularly one that supported physical and mental well-being and professional growth, with an emphasis on

flourishing in careers and personal civilian lives. The short-term outcomes focused on participant reactions to program relevance, content, and accessibility; increased positive self-awareness surrounding participants' identity formations as civilians and professionals; and transformed behavioral change around coping required for a successful transition. Within the processes, the theoretical framework can be seen in the *self* and *taking charge* aspect of the 4S system.

Purpose of the Evaluation

The overarching goal of the program was to provide the university and broader military and veteran community with the tools and experience needed to transition into the civilian life and workforce. The purpose of this formative program evaluation was to evaluate participant perceptions of the program and to provide information to the intended stakeholders, namely program directors, to inform decision making related to the program's future (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). The findings provided the program's leadership a snapshot of the participants' perceptions of the program's value to their transition and offered valuable feedback for leaders when considering programming for the next cohort of the military-to-civilian transition certificate program.

Focus of the Evaluation

This evaluation examined the first three levels of the D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) model with respect to participant reactions and perceptions of learning and behavioral changes. The focus of the evaluation was grounded in the theoretical constructs of transition theory and examined newly separated and retired U.S. military service members' experiences in the 2022 program.

Evaluation Questions

This study's evaluation questions were rooted in the D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) model with an underpinning of Goodman et al.'s (2011) transition theory. The following evaluation questions considered only participants' reactions and perceptions of the program:

1. One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, what are participants' reactions regarding their experiences with the content, relevance, and accessibility of the program?
2. One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants redefined their identity during transition into civilian professional and personal life?
3. One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants transformed coping behaviors required for transition into civilian professional and personal life?

Evaluation Question 1 evaluated participants' reactions to their experiences in the program and considered D. L. Kirkpatrick's (1998) reaction level by evaluating feedback on program content, relevance, and accessibility, exploring whether the program provided the support required for a successful transition according to Goodman et al.'s (2011) transition process theory. When evaluating participant reactions on program content, I examined participant levels of satisfaction and perceptions around program topics and activities. For reactions to program relevance, I explored themes around transferable knowledge and curriculum significance. Finally, I examined accessibility reactions including participant comfort levels and perceptions of support.

Evaluation Question 2 appraised D. L. Kirkpatrick's (1998) learning level regarding how participants made meaning of their transition and redefinition of self. The question evaluated participants' perceptions of learning gained through concrete experiences, reflection, conceptualizing, and experimenting and evaluated whether the program was successful in providing concrete situational awareness and self-meaning-making strategies according to Goodman et al.'s (2011) transition process theory.

Evaluation Question 3 incorporated D. L. Kirkpatrick's (1998) behavior level by measuring the behavioral changes of the participants by evaluating whether they perceived a transformation had taken place regarding coping and physical and mental wellness behaviors required for a successful transition. The question considered whether the program had an impact on situation awareness and strategies, including stress management and career development, according to Goodman et al.'s (2011) transition process theory. Table 2 provides a snapshot of how the D. L. Kirkpatrick model and transition theory coincided with the evaluation questions.

Table 2

Relationship Between D. L. Kirkpatrick Model, Transition Process 4S Theory, and Evaluation

EQ	D. L. Kirkpatrick model level	Transition process theory
1. After completing the military-to-civilian transition program, what are participants' reactions regarding their experiences with the program content, relevance, and accessibility of the program?	1: Reaction	Support
2. After completing the military-to-civilian transition program, how have participants learned to redefine their identity during transition into civilian professional and personal life?	2: Learning	Situation, strategies, self
3. After completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways have participants transformed coping behaviors required for transition into civilian professional and personal life?	3: Behavior	Situation, strategies, self

Note. EQ = evaluation question. Transition theory adapted from "*Counseling Adults in Transition Linking Schlossberg's Theory With Practice in a Diverse World* (4th ed.)," by M. L. Anderson, J. Goodman, and N. K. Schlossberg, 2012. Copyright 2012 by Springer Publishing. Evaluation model adapted from "*Evaluating Training Programs: The Four Levels*," by D. L. Kirkpatrick, 1998. Copyright 1998 by Berrett-Koehler.

Definitions of Terms

- *Active-duty service member*: someone currently serving in the U.S. military (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019).
- *Civilian*: a person who is not currently serving, or has never served, in the U.S. military (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019).
- *Combat*: active fighting in war; for the U.S. military, serving in combat means a service member has experienced a deployment to a location that has active combat in and around the service member (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019).
- *Discharged*: a service member who completed their full military obligations and were released from service (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019).
- *Enlisted*: a group of service members "often considered the workforce of the military, . . . [who] join right after or shortly after graduating high school . . . after completing

basic military training, they train in an area of specialty and exercise their roles under the direction of officers" (Center for Deployment Psychology, n.d.).

- *Flourishing*: Crace and Crace (2020) stated flourishing is "a consistent level of productivity, fulfillment, and resilience that stems from values-centered motivation, action, and management" (p. 5).
- *Honorable discharge*: a military service member who completed their full military obligations, were released from service, and received a rating from good to excellent for their service (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019).
- *Military dependent*: a person with a spouse or parent currently serving in the U.S. military (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019).
- *Military-to-civilian transition*: a military service member who is either nearing or has completed service separation or retirement and will act as a civilian (Castro, 2018).
- *Moral injury*: creating, witnessing, not preventing, or learning about acts that go against deeply held moral beliefs and expectations (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019).
- *Noncommissioned officer*: a high-ranking enlisted service member with leadership authority (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019).
- *Officer*: a service member among "the leaders of the military, with responsibility for the units in their command. Most officers have 4-year college degrees; many have one or more advanced degrees. Officers are commissioned to serve" (Center for Deployment Psychology, n.d., para. 5).

- *Retired service member*: someone who served in the U.S. military for 20 or more years and received a retirement distinction (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023).
- *Separated service member*: someone who served in the U.S. military and reached their expiration of term of service and was released from active duty (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019).
- *Transition*: processes that occur over time and space, marked by a psychological response to a life event, and arise during adolescence developmental stages and in major life events such as career changes, marriage, and parenthood (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Bridges, 1980; Goodman et al., 2011; Meléis, 2010; Meléis et al., 2000; Willson, 2019).
- *Veteran*: a person who has served in the U.S. military (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Research on the broad spectrum of life transitions and the programming that supports individuals undergoing significant changes has been extensive. However, most of the literature has focused narrowly on a singular intervention recommendation, usually targeting career or basic life skills, with a major gap in the research that has examined programming that infuses interventions *with* well-being measures (Bond et al., 2022; Gilman, 2018; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Vogt et al., 2018). This program evaluation was informed by the lack of existing literature on whether a transition program that incorporates career skills with well-being interventions for military veterans could yield successful perceptions of transitions.

The following questions guided the review of the literature: Do military veterans perceive a successful transition to civilian careers after participating in a transition program that integrates well-being with and career skills? Do military veterans perceive they have created successful coping behaviors based on the wellness training they received in a transition program? Does combining wellness and career skills for military veterans yield perceptions of better transition outcomes? To begin answering these questions, I begin this chapter by offering a summary of transition and the theories that explore transitions among adults. Then, I examine the types of transitions and specifically give an overview of military transitions. Next, I explore the relationship between transition stress and well-being that might impact a successful transition among adults and military service members. The chapter concludes with an examination of military transition programs and assesses the limitations and outcomes of military-to-civilian

transition programs that may or may not incorporate well-being and business skills into programming.

Transition

The etymology of *transition* comes from Latin *transire* meaning "to cross over" or "pass through without staying" (Harper, n.d., para. 1). Researchers have explored the space between the end of one life situation and the beginning of another and how best to support people who find a particular transition challenging (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Bridges, 1980; Goodman et al., 2011; Meléis, 2010; Meléis et al., 2000). In addition, an overarching theme in transition literature involves a redefinition of *self* and the requirement to renegotiate one's identity against the backdrop of a life transformation (Palmer & Panchal, 2011; Scott, 2015; Willson, 2019). Literature has also shown an exhaustive list of notions on identity; depending on the discipline or social construct, identity could correlate to cultural, psychological, political, or personal ideologies (Wilson-Smith & Corr, 2019).

Saldaña (2015) wrote, "Identity exists by how it is defined" (p. 73) and offered a multitude of identity definitions. However, through the transition lens, identity *in* transition can be defined as a "process of negotiating between the self and the new social context, a progression of positioning oneself in new ways as the landscape changes" (Willson, 2019, p. 842). In this frame, the concept of *self* and *personhood* is introduced as a mutually exclusive process of negotiating transition. Scott (2015) further described *self* as a "reflexive state of consciousness about one's internal thoughts and feelings, while personhood is a set of publicly presented or externally attributed characteristics that others used to determine our status" (p. 9). Conceptualizing integrated conditions of inward and outward identity forming while undergoing a transition can lead to states of ambiguity that often challenge emotional and mental well-being

(Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015; Scott, 2015; van Dam, 2018; Willson, 2019). Furthermore, transition uncertainty, or the liminality phase, often creates a dichotomy for the need of continuity of the former identity (e.g., ending phase) and an individual's openness or even excitement for the change to happen (e.g., new beginnings; Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015).

Although there are many social contexts and landscapes to consider within transitions (e.g., childhood to adulthood, parenthood, overcoming illnesses, gender), this literature review focuses on career-related identity transitions and the effect those transitions have on an individual's sense of self and well-being. A successful integration of *self* and *personhood* in transitional identity involves accepting the transition is complete and embracing a new selfhood (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Scott, 2015). However, for people changing careers, transition also involves unraveling the established self while *learning* a new identity and acquiring knowledge and skills pertaining to the new role (Black & Warhurst, 2019).

Transition Theory

Palmer and Panchal (2011) noted, "All change involves loss and letting go, living with ambiguity and the possibilities of new beginnings" (p. 8). For most transition theorists, this notion correlates to three distinct phases that an adult undergoes during a transition process. Each researcher has their own terms but can be themed by the following overarching ideas: ending, liminality, and new beginnings (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Bridges, 1980; Goodman et al., 2011; Meléis, 2010; Meléis et al., 2000; Palmer & Panchal, 2011; Willson, 2019). However, transitions are not always linear; individuals may spend more or less time in each phase and may even go back to certain phases before experiencing a successful transition (Feiler, 2021).

According to transition theorists, in expected or unexpected transitions, disconnection and an altered sense of self can occur when an individual is separated from the roles and routines

they have come to know (Bridges, 1980; Crace & Crace, 2020; Hudson, 1999; Willson, 2019). Furthermore, in anticipated transitions, individuals may employ methods that may have worked for them in previous life transitions and find those approaches do not work in their current context, creating feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt (Crace & Crace, 2020). In unanticipated transitions, endings require recovery from potentially painful and stressful changes that involve self-care strategies and coping interventions (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Crace & Crace, 2020). Likewise, transitions can often feel as though there is a loss or letting go of a former lifestyle or identity, which can lead an individual to respond with fear or alternatively lead with their values, creating varying transitions outcomes (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Crace & Crace 2020; Iyer & Jetten, 2023). However, for people who have used values, hope, self-compassion, and productive coping strategies, endings can be viewed as a conduit for development, innovation, and new forms of identity (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Bloch & Richmond, 1998; Crace & Crace, 2020; Hudson, 1999). When an ending occurs, the liminal space emerges in the *in-between* of the passage through transition and can often be both confusing and exhilarating with the potential to invoke a need for self-redefinition (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Bridges, 1980; Willson, 2019).

Many discussions of liminality have included anthropological concepts and have almost always used van Gennep's (1909) ideas about the *rites of passage* (Thomassen, 2014) and Turner's *betwixt and between* notions (Beech, 2011; Tagliaventi, 2019; Thomassen, 2014; Willson, 2019). Turner's (1987) development of van Gennep's original 1909 *rites of passage* consisted of three phases: separation (i.e., ending); margin (i.e., liminal); and incorporation (i.e., new beginnings), with a marked emphasis on the study of the liminal phase where a deconstruction of previous norms occurs before a turn toward forming a new identity (Turner, 1987). For theorists expanding upon van Gennep and Turner, it is in the liminal phase where the

true work of identity reconstruction takes place (Beech, 2011; Tagliaventi, 2019; Thomassen, 2014; Willson, 2019) and anticipates what lies ahead.

Bridge's (1980) seminal work on transition theory described new beginnings as "when the endings and the time of fallow neutrality (liminality) are finished" (p. 134). The beginning phase of a transition, a time to reflect and reinvent, is where an individual will often find meaning in their new professional and personal lives and seek out significant opportunities (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Pryor & Bright, 2011). Crace and Crace (2020) described this as a time for an individual to flourish if they have gone through a successful transition, with flourishing defined as the "consistent level of productivity, fulfillment and resilience" (p. 5).

Transition Influences and Conditions

Although Meléis and Trangenstein's (1994) transition framework was born out of an interest of nursing transitional processes, the ideas surrounding the types and patterns of transition have been applied to multiple groups and professions (Wilson, 2019). Meléis et al. (2000) furthered ideas about midlife transitions and proposed a transition theory that is concerned with the influences of the transition conditions (e.g., facilitators and inhibitors) and patterns of response (e.g., process and outcomes). The types of transitions consist of developmental (e.g., changes in life cycle); situational (e.g., personal, and professional circumstances and relocations); health/illness (e.g., health-related consequences); and organizational (e.g., changes in organizational environment; Meléis, 2010; Meléis et al., 2000). The transition theory literature has also indicated an individual's *perceptions* of the conditions of a transition influence coping behaviors and impact successful transitions (Goodman et al., 2011; Meléis, 2010; Meléis et al., 2000; Willson, 2019).

Transitions can often appear challenging because of the potential for uncertainty involved in leaving one aspect of life or identity behind for a new and different one (Goodman et al., 2011; Iyer & Jetten, 2023; Willson, 2019). The conditions in which an individual experiences change also requires an adjustment in coping because some transitions are expected and some are not (Goodman et al., 2011; Iyer & Jetten, 2023; Meléis, 2010; Meléis et al., 2000; Willson, 2019). Goodman et al. (2011) noted an anticipated event leading to a transition is predicted and often involves mental or real "role rehearsal . . . to anticipate the transition" (p. 41). For example, a marriage, new job, or retiring are all changes an individual can imagine and plan for; however, these transitions still require coping behaviors when navigating a new identity born out of the anticipated change (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012). New parents, especially those who identify as mothers, often feel the reality of becoming a parent is different from what they anticipated, and they report having a new or altered identity after the birth of their first child (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Arnold-Baker, 2020; Mickelson & Marcussen, 2023). In other words, although they anticipated the change, their perceptions of the transition to parenthood are key components for a successful transition and often require unanticipated coping mechanisms.

Unanticipated changes, such as job loss, illness or injury, or a natural disaster can initiate a crisis for an individual (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012). Unlike anticipated transitions, there is no preparation available for these conditions and individuals are left navigating a transition that can often resort to harmful coping behaviors such as suicide, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and worsening mental health issues (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Bond et al., 2022; Elnitsky & Kilmer, 2017; Pease et al., 2016). Attaching meaning to an unexpected transition and the perception of what is to come in an expected change can either inhibit or facilitate a successful transition (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Goodman et al., 2011; Meléis et

al., 2000). Meléis et al. (2000) noted the conditions that influence transitions can be personal, community based, or societal. Table 3 provides more information on the transition conditions with examples of how a successful transition might be inhibited or facilitated.

Table 3

Transition Conditions Inhibitors and Facilitators

Transition condition	Inhibit	Facilitate
Personal	Ambivalent feelings toward transition; suppressed emotional state due to cultural stigma; feel shame to discuss transition in public; lack of knowledge about what to expect	Neutral and positive mean making; anticipatory preparation about what to expect during transition in terms of knowledge and strategies
Community	Planning or offering classes that are not accessible; insufficient resources; unsolicited or negative advice; hassle of being stereotyped	Support from spouses and family; relevant information obtained from trusted educational providers; advise from respected sources; answers to questions
Societal	Viewing transition event as stigmatized and with stereotype threat meanings; marginalization; cultural attitudes toward experiences of the person who will transition	Equality; access to interventions; inclusivity

Note. Adapted from "Experiencing Transitions: An Emerging Middle-Range Theory," by A. I. Meléis, L. M. Sawyer, E.-O. Im, D. K. H. Messias, and K. Schumacher, 2000, *Advances in Nursing Science*, *23*(1), pp. 12–28 (https://doi.org/10.1097/00012272-200009000-00006).

Schlossberg's Transition Framework

Although the literature on adult transition has comprised several notable theoretical conceptions suitable for inquiry—as mentioned in the previous section—the program in this study relied heavily on Schlossberg's (1981) transition framework due to its focus on individual identity and the significance of using coping skills. Later adapted and revised by M. L. Anderson et al. (2012), the systematic framework provides adults in transition the structure to experience a successful transition by suggesting the following method: identify the impending change; locate where in the transition process an individual may be (i.e., ending, liminality, or beginning);

identify coping resources using the 4S system (i.e., situation, self, support, and strategies); and take control of the ways in which an individual manages a transition by strengthening their resources. Because of its adaptability and broad range of usefulness, the Schlossberg (1981) framework has been applied across multiple disciplines to theorize adult transitions, notably among military transition researchers. As Schlossberg et al. (1989) suggested, the transition process consists of moving into, moving through, and moving out, a process that reflects military-to-civilian transitions: into the military, through the military experience, and into the civilian life.

Military Transition

For this program evaluation, examining the types of transitions that military service members were in was beneficial in understanding the need and support required to transition to the civilian world. Military members and veterans moving into a civilian transition can experience situational, organizational, and health/illness transitions simultaneously because many of them move to new locations, start new careers, or go back to school (Flack & Kite, 2021; Gilman, 2018; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016; Vogt et al., 2018). Moreover, military members undergo several types of transitions from the moment they begin their service until they separate, creating a longitudinal transition process over the span of 4–30 years (Castro, 2018; Kelty et al., 2010; Pease et al., 2016; Ramchand et al., 2023; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). Prior service life experiences, the overall health of the recruit, available educational benefits, and the military occupational specialty assigned can all facilitate or inhibit a successful transition both into and out of the military (Ramchand et al., 2023). The following sections explore the different types of military transitions, and the challenges these changes can create for postmilitary veterans.

Civilian-to-Military Transition

Scholarship on military transition has explored how key transitional experiences *into* military life shape a service member's identity and can affect experiences when transitioning *out* of the military and *back into* civilian life (Castro & Dursun, 2019). Military identity requires a social identity change, often coinciding with the undoing of the former civilian identity, which is adopted into the new *self* and *personhood* (Flack & Kite, 2021; Iyer & Jetten, 2023). For most new service members, this change coincides alongside emerging adulthood transition, the period between adolescence and adulthood (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Richard & Molloy, 2020) where recruits are "forming their adult identities" (Castro & Dursun, 2019, p. 28) while transitioning into the service.

The most recent demographics report issued by the U.S. Department of Defense (2021) stated the age composition of active-duty service members was vastly different from that of the U.S. civilian workforce, with almost 50% of the military between the ages of 17–25 compared to 70% of the civilian force with an average age of nearly 50 years old. Moreover, the average age of service members who transition *into* the military from civilian life was 19 years old for enlisted service members and 21 years old for officers (U.S. Department of Defense, 2021). With a major life transition from adolescence to adulthood already underway for these new service members, the transition and indoctrination into military life can be seen as the crossing over into adulthood, with unique military themed identity challenges to navigate (Kelty et al., 2010; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Ramchand et al., 2023; Richard & Molloy, 2020).

Military Identity Formation. The civilian-to-military transition process involves integration of military culture into a service member's identity through constant superior supervision, discipline, mental and physical toughness, organizational socialization, camaraderie,

and values (i.e., integrity, grit, stamina, and resilience; Atuel & Castro, 2018; Cooper et al., 2018; Flack & Kite, 2021; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Woodward & Jenkings, 2011). During military indoctrination, new recruits undergo a shift from the individual to the collective, which favors the group over the self (Atuel & Castro, 2018) by means of "entry level training [that] is meant to strip away the vestiges of civilian identity and transform men and women into Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines" (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018, p. 138). Initially fostered in the training unit and later in the broader military experience, unity and contentedness among everyone in the unit are demanded over the needs of the individual, creating a sense of *we* over *I* that is intended for combat readiness and successful future missions (Atuel & Castro, 2018; Cooper et al., 2018; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). Likewise, military identities can take on a transformative act based on the skills, knowledge, and careers a service member occupies, and the performance-orientated group cohesion that is experienced and performed together through unique uniforms, marching, insignia, and traditions (Castro, 2018; Cooper et al., 2018; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016; Woodward & Jenkings, 2011).

Gender plays a distinct role in the cultural assimilation of military identities and can be viewed as performative in military culture (Cooper et al., 2018; Crowley & Sandhoff, 2017; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). Hegemonic masculinities, such as displays of dominance over another, holding power (Boros & Erolin, 2021; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Richard & Molloy, 2020), "physical and emotional toughness, stoicism, self-reliance, and aggressiveness" (Cooper et al., 2018, p. 159) that are inherent in military culture are frequently acted out, regardless of gender, during recruit training (Cooper et al., 2018; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016) and is often described as *warrior culture* (Atuel & Castro, 2018; Pendlebury, 2020). For service members, assimilating strictly traditional military masculinities into their identities involves the

performance of mastering pain, invulnerability, and limited emotional expressiveness, traits socially valued when dealing with deployment-related trauma and transition stress (Fox & Pease, 2012; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018).

However, for female service members, negotiating a historically masculine culture demonstrates a complex relationship to cultural misogyny when forming their military identity (Cooper et al., 2018; Crowley & Sandhoff, 2017). It was not until 2016 that all positions in the military were available to female service members, coming after the 2013 lift on banning women from combat. Research has revealed service members tend to suppress their feminine identity and adopt traditional masculinities to experience success and ease of transition into the military and must balance their femininity constantly with military expectations of masculinity, creating a dichotomy of both empowerment and disempowerment (Boros & Erolin, 2021; Crowley & Sandhoff, 2017; Fox & Pease, 2012; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Richard & Molloy, 2020). Moreover, sexual assault on female service members has led researchers to explore the complicated reasons behind some female soldiers downplaying or not reporting sexual harassment that often leads to sexual assault as a direct consequence of a hypermasculine military culture (Boros & Erolin, 2021; Crowley & Sandhoff, 2017; Stander & Thomsen, 2016) and an "organizational climate condoning sexual aggression" (Stander & Thomsen, 2016, p. 27). With approximately 85% of sexual assault among female service members occurring within the first 2 years of active service, military sexual trauma among women can create barriers in later transitions to civilian life (Castro, 2018; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018).

Civilian-to-Military Transition Challenges. Recent literature has exposed some of the challenges new service members face, which often create depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other traumas in later transitions (Kesling, 2019). Rudenstine et al. (2015)

found certain recruits may have an increased chance for new-onset depression and PTSD during their military experience. The authors examined the relationship between childhood trauma and postdeployment mental illness and a history of preservice trauma, to include childhood abuse and other traumas, and found an increase in the likelihood of soldiers developing new-onset depression and PTSD during and after deployments than soldiers who did not report childhood maltreatment. Rudenstine et al. (2015) asserted people who experienced childhood maltreatment or other traumas may not have processed their trauma due to developmental maturity and suppressing painful memories; however, they found deployments can trigger "physiological and physiological vulnerabilities that make one more susceptible to depression" (p. 976). Other research on preservice and recruit trauma has indicated an increased risk of postservice alcohol and substance abuse if the effected service member does not receive the proper diagnosis and mental health treatments (Vest et al., 2018), which could be heightened by postmilitary transition stressors (Ramchand et al., 2023).

Moreover, in a recent roundtable discussion hosted by the Rand Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute (Ramchand et al., 2023), participants consisting of veterans and military professionals argued new recruits were not prepared or mentored when selecting a military job, nor were they advised on which military jobs could maximize future postservice career opportunities and earnings, creating difficult transitions for some service members. Furthermore, some "questioned whether long-term inequities are baked in from the start via aptitude scores on entrance exams" (Ramchand et al., 2023, p. 3). However, it was not clear in the roundtable discussion what percentage of participants were officers or enlisted service members, or their branch of service.

In-Military Transitions

The experiences a service member has in the military, especially regarding career fields, duty stations, and deployments, can affect their transition into civilian life (Flack & Kite, 2021; Kelty et al., 2010; Ramchand et al., 2023; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). With the help of a recruiter, a new service member will be assigned a career, called military occupational specialty in the Marines and Army, Air Force specialty codes in the Air Force, and Navy enlisted classification codes in the Navy, within the military based on their Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test scores, job qualifications, and the needs of the branch they are joining (Herbert, 2021). Although some military jobs may transfer easily into civilian professions, some military careers do not correlate directly to the civilian job market, leaving the transitioning service members to consider how to develop broader occupational skills on their own to translate their military experience on resumes and in interviews (Kleykamp et al., 2021; Ramchand et al., 2023). Additionally, a service member changes their job location, depending on their branch of service, every 2–4 years, creating a rotational career transition that requires new skills, knowledge, and social network change over (Burke & Miller, 2016; Kleykamp et al., 2021).

Each year, roughly 400,000 service members and their families receive permanent change of station (PCS) orders to move to a different duty station, which often involves a cross-country or oversees move, and occurs on average every 2–4 years (i.e., 3 times the civilian family average; Snyder, 2022; Sullivan, 2023). With relocation as one of the top stress factors for military service members—due to career change, financial burdens, family obligations, and the loss of a trusted support network—these PCS moves are a considerable transition that military members face during service (Clemens & Milsom, 2008; Sullivan, 2023). Although most of the literature on PCS transition stress has focused on the effects on military spouses and children,

Ramchand et al. (2023) noted that for service members, PCS-induced stress can often come from how the leadership environment changes from base to base and city to city, creating "varying degrees of support for accessing helpful resources" (p. 3). This fact is especially true for service members with families who require specific health care, and those who PCS to a state with unsupportive laws or racial inequities that may directly affect the service member's safety or that of their family, especially seen in the military LGBTQ community and with military personnel of color (Akin & Maury, 2021; Clemens & Milsom, 2008; Ramchand et al., 2023; Snyder, 2022; Sullivan, 2023). These PCS stressors can have a direct effect on how a service member views their own upcoming transition into civilian life, especially if they have had challenging experiences with previous PCS transitions (Ramchand et al., 2023).

The literature surrounding the effects of military deployments on service members has been extensive, with major emphasis on PTSD, moral injury, and other combat-related injuries and illness (Flack & Kite, 2021; Kelty et al., 2010; Ramchand et al., 2023; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). However, Castro's (2018) development of military transition theory furthered the supporting literature and hypothesized that "returning home from combat and deployment can make reintegration difficult, which can be magnified by the trauma and stressors of the deployment" (Slide 20). This reintegration provides another transition experience for military service members that often alter or challenge their previous identities, especially after combat exposure (Castro, 2018; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016), creating circumstances that could exacerbate risk factors for PTSD, depression, and even suicide. For a successful reentry and transition into post deployment life, research has argued for careful planning ahead of time for psychological interventions and social support, to not only alleviate transition stress, but also to allow service members to experience a successful transition *before* their transition into civilian

life because a challenging transition can often impede future ones (Castro, 2018; Crace & Crace, 2020; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016).

Military-to-Civilian Transition

With roughly 200,000 service members leaving the military each year, the military-to-civilian transition happens on a large scale and may include complex transition challenges for an individual immersed in military culture for an extended period (Elnitsky & Kilmer, 2017; Markowitz et al., 2022; McCormick et al., 2019; Rose et al., 2017; Vogt et al., 2018) and then must "return to an environment that was previously familiar but may no longer be so" (Cooper et al., 2018, p. 157). Researchers have proposed that veterans returning to their prior civilian culture may undergo a *reverse* culture shock, similar to studies completed on expatriates returning to their homeland (Bergman et al., 2014; Castro & Dursun, 2019; Mamon et al., 2017). Furthermore, veterans are often challenged by civilian socialization and cite stereotype threat, civilian media sensitization of veteran behavioral issues, and civilians misunderstanding military missions (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Smith & True, 2014).

Culture shock is the initial adjustment and adaptation to a new culture and environment (Bergman et al., 2014; Castro & Dursun, 2019; Fanari et al., 2021; Presbitero, 2016; Storti, 2022). Reverse culture shock considers the "stresses and challenges associated with moving back to one's own home culture after one has sojourned or lived in another cultural environment" (Presbitero, 2016, p. 29). For military veterans, the initial culture shock begins when entering the military and leaving behind their civilian culture, and reverse culture shock could potentially occur when reintegrating back into their civilian culture after military separation. Furthermore, studies on reverse culture shock have shown increased adverse reactions to readaptation and readjustment compared to culture shock experiences because returning people do not always

anticipate reentry challenges and lack the required coping skills to readjust (Cooper et al., 2018; Fanari et al., 2021; Presbitero, 2016; Storti, 2022). Furthermore, Presbitero (2016) found that "when an individual or a group experiences high levels of reverse culture shock, the likelihood of establishing a sense of identity and overall life satisfaction is low" (p. 30).

Ahern et al.'s (2015) qualitative study of veterans transitioning into civilian life using homecoming theory, like reverse culture shock, described the identity disconnection veterans feel upon returning home, or returning to civilian life, after being separated for an extended period. Data from the study's semistructured interviews revealed veterans felt identity confusion, lack of structure, and alienation when reentering civilian life and cited a lack of institutional support, loss of shared military connections, and civilian misunderstandings as the sources of challenging homecomings. Ahern et al. recommended the use of peer support programs, impactful higher education support, effective transition programming, and wellness interventions to support veterans forming new identities as they integrate back to civilian life. Furthering the notion of homecoming, Martin (2022) offered a definition that insinuated a "lifelong process through which veterans learn to articulate the meaning of their service" (p. 140). Although the research on military-to-civilian transition has been expansive, this literature review explored the program's emphasis on military-to-civilian identity formation and military-to-civilian role and career transition.

Military-to-Civilian Identity Formation. The label of "veteran" inherently separates military members from civilians; not quite a civilian, but no longer an active-duty military member, veteran is often an ambiguous title that carries multiple identity versions, depending on branch of service, military occupational specialty, gender, combat service, rank, and even civilian perceptions (Martin, 2022). However, although the term "veteran" does not represent all

military service members, the intent of this literature review is to give an overview of the collective veteran experiences.

With a deeply embedded identity as a solider, airmen, sailor, or marine, the civilian identity transformation poses a potential internal conflict for military veterans resuming civilian life (Kleykamp et al., 2021; Smith & True, 2014). The disciplined, structured, and superior/subordinate hierarchal nature of the military provides a sharp dichotomy to the autonomous and highly individualized civilian identity veterans encounter upon reintegration into the civilian world (Ahern et al., 2015; Castro & Dursun, 2019; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Smith & True, 2014; Woodward & Jenkings, 2011). While assimilating, veterans often struggle with their sense of status and self, and often experience unhappiness over having to break away from military identities, confusion over shifting masculine roles found in civilian life, and a longing for the controlled and predicable culture the military provided (Kleykamp et al., 2021; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018).

Identity conflict when navigating civilian social demands can occur when "self-advocacy is beneficial despite the impetus to do otherwise" (Smith & True, 2014, p. 158). Veterans who suppress the impulse to act on previous identity norms often experience stress and—in some cases—depression, and often withhold past military stories and experiences from civilians while longing for the connections made with other service members previously (Cooper et al., 2018; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). The loss of these strong bonds formed between military members are not often found in civilian corporate culture (Ahern et al., 2015; Mamon et al., 2017; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Rose et al., 2017). Research has indicated military service members experience powerful meaning and purpose through the work accomplished during deployments and missions; however, they feel a loss of meaning during transition (Ahern et al., 2015; Grimell,

2017; Herman & Yarwood, 2017; Naphan & Elliott, 2015). Grimell (2017) also noted veterans will often carry this purpose and meaning into their civilian identities and expect and yearn for that type of purpose in their civilian careers and redefinitions of *self*. In fact, in the Veterans in the Workplace 2023 report by Hiring our Heros and the Veterans Transition Research Lab, researchers Sherman and Gibbs (2023) urged companies recruiting veterans to appeal to a veteran's desire for "meaningful and balanced careers in the civilian workforce" (p. 3). In other words, purposeful work ingrained in the military identity carries over into the civilian world.

Recent research has explored the ways in which separating military members can negotiate a new civilian identity successfully while maintaining a semblance of their previous military one. For example, in a Pew Research Center study, 68% of veterans who participated in the survey reported they "frequently felt proud of their military service" (Parker et al., 2019, para. 4) in the years following their military service. Williams et al. (2018) found veterans assert military pride and identification through wearing military insignia on clothing in public and military-themed tattoos that hold symbolic significance. Researchers have also begun to understand how reflections on military experiences and identity are intertwined through autobiographical memory work and the importance of storytelling to maintain ties to military identities, heal trauma, and lessen the divide between veterans and civilians (E. Anderson & Nelson, 2017; Mamon et al., 2017; Martin, 2022; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Williams et al., 2018). In a qualitative study analyzing veterans' storytelling through oral histories performed in front of family members and civilian audiences, there was a noticeable shift in closer connections with civilians when speaking to family members and nonmilitary audiences, feelings of bravery for speaking out, and feeling supported by civilians (Mamon et al., 2017).

Martin (2022) further supported the importance of veteran storytelling to avoid historical veteran stereotypes of "hero" or "wounded warrior" that often suppress veterans' identities and are incomplete misrepresentations that do not allow the "right of self-definition" (p. 8). Martin (2022) suggested storytelling (e.g., in forms of writing, speaking, dance, artwork, and acting) allows veterans to "bleed on to a page or canvas or tell their stories through actions" (p. 109), taking ownership and individualization of their postmilitary identities. Using examples from veteran storytellers, Martin (2022) argued veterans transitioning into civilian spaces using storytelling techniques will not only disrupt traditional models of veteran identity available to transitioning veterans but will also create adaptable models of identity to future veterans.

Woodward and Jenkings (2011) used photo-elicitation to examine veteran identities after military separation and found that in giving veteran participants the autonomy to choose their own photos to tell their stories, "individuals constructed accounts of themselves as having military identities in the present. In this way, their military identities were locally situated, emergent in the interaction of the interview" (p. 45). The need to prioritize the military identity aligned with Stryker's (1968) identity theory, exploring identity salience. Wilson-Smith and Corr (2019) stated:

> The salience of an identity relates to its readiness to be acted out, with identities situated at the top of the hierarchy being more self-defining and readily acted out in given situations than those towards the lower end of the hierarchy. (p. 5)

In addition, Woodward and Jenkings's (2011) and Cooper et al.'s (2018) studies also revealed that military identities are constructed in doing rather than being, with military role identity tied to performing and acting out military skills, such as combat or weapons handling and use of technical equipment, not easily transferable to most civilian careers.

Military-to-Civilian Role and Career Transition. The military transition experience varies greatly across rank because length of time in the service, position of authority, and leadership proficiency plays a role in how a service member adjusts to a civilian identity (Biniecki & Berg, 2020; Wang et al., 2023). For enlisted service members, the military transition literature has mainly focused on transitioning into higher education to obtain a degree. Navigating the higher education culture while attempting to blend in with traditional-aged students requires veterans to renegotiate their identities against the backdrop of a new set of academic demands, rules, and social skills (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Morris et al., 2019). Moreover, the financial burdens on enlisted service members are significancy higher after military separation than officers due to service paygrades, historically low socioeconomic backgrounds, and family obligations (Castro & Dursun, 2019; Morris et al., 2019), creating a potentially stressful transition. Although there has been an abundance of literature on enlisted military members' transitions, this review drew upon the research that has supported the program's participant demographics (e.g., noncommissioned officers and officers) and the program's emphasis on transitioning into professional careers. However, it is important to recognize how military ranks could affect the ways in which veterans react to military-to-civilian transition programs and could affect future programming that considers the enlisted and student veteran experience.

In fact, studies by Griffin and Gilbert (2015), Morris et al. (2019), and Ryan et al. (2011) using Schlossberg's 4S model to analyze student veteran transitions yielded the following recommendations for separated enlisted and noncommissioned officer student veterans: (a) create a centralized student veteran office with financial aid and mentorship resources, (b) create student veteran transition programming that initiates exploring a civilian identity and intentional

spaces for veterans to gather and share experiences, and (c) civilian student and faculty sensitively trainings to bridge the military and civilian divide and allow veterans to feel understood as they traverse their newfound identities from solider to student. Likewise, Flink (2017) used Schlossberg's transition framework to understand the experience of student veterans with service-related injuries and disabilities, especially those considered invisible, like PTSD, anxiety, depression, and other health conditions. Similarly, Bartee and Dooley (2019) used the framework to study African American veterans' transition experiences in the Transition Goals, Plans, Success Program and found higher education has a role to play in veteran career counseling and resume-building skills. Flink's analysis revealed stigmatization of disability among military student veterans exists. Further, Flink sought to raise awareness of the considerable gap in literature surrounding higher education's ability to support these veterans and to combat both public and self-stigma that invisible disabilities often create.

For officers, the transition landscape might be quite different. Officers are required to obtain a bachelor's degree prior to being commissioned, and the majority go on to receive a graduate degree while in service (Biniecki & Berg, 2020). The average age of junior military officer retirement is roughly 45 years old for ranks O1–O5 and 52 years old for senior military officers ranked O6 and higher (U.S. Department of Defense, 2021). The juxtaposition between military retirement as transition into civilian life and subsequent new midlife career identities can be challenging for some officers (Biniecki & Berg, 2020; Wang et al., 2023). For retiring senior military officers, military experience includes giving orders and serving in positions of authority and command, not always transferable in the corporate civilian world, challenging roles deeply rooted in their identity. Ford (2017) further noted senior military officers have a dual external status when entering the civilian executive job market; they are not only external to an

organization itself, but they are also external to the entire civilian sector. Furthermore, Biniecki and Berg (2020) posited the senior military officer's identity transition process should move in a cyclical "novice to expert (civilian to military) and expert to novice (military to civilian) . . . suggesting a worldview shift from the concept of redevelopment to reinvention" (p. 28).

Biniecki and Berg (2020) offered an alternative to the blank slate that often coincides with a major career transition and instead proposed adapting knowledge and skills for the civilian work experience through specialized transition programming and corporate fellowships aimed at supporting junior military officers and senior military officers. However, Black and Warhurst (2019) expanded upon the adaptation of skills using human resource development and suggested a reformation of career identity by means of "identity learning" (p. 25). Findings from their autoethnographic study revealed "learning does not merely require the acquisition of knowledge or the cultivation of skills but also the capacity to identify oneself and to be identified by peers as a capable practitioner within a community sustaining practice" (Black & Warhurst, 2019, p. 38). Here again, career identities in transition provoke the dichotomy of *self* and *personhood*, explored in previous sections of this literature review, and reiterated by Scott (2015), who described "*self* as a reflexive state of consciousness about one's internal thoughts and feelings, while personhood is a set of publicly presented or externally attributed characteristics that others used to determine our status" (p. 9).

Without supportive measures and interventions in place, like appropriate programming aimed at all transitioning military service members, the literature has consistently expressed the potential for identity conflict to arise when a military service member transitions into a civilian professional role (Alonso et al., 2021; Biniecki & Berg, 2020; Black & Warhurst, 2019; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Morris et al., 2019; Wilson-Smith & Corr, 2019; Woodward & Jenkings, 2011).

To consider best practices for a successful and invulnerable veteran transition, Ford (2017) proposed a conceptual framework to guide civilian human resource development professionals considering integration programs for military veterans new to the private sector. Presented as a means to track veterans' integration processes, the framework suggests supportive measures in the three phases of veteran transitions that coincide with interactions between veterans and human resource development: (a) anticipate (e.g., prehiring activities); (b) maintain (e.g., onboarding); and (c) sustain (e.g., provide continuing resources). Ford (2017) explained that "understanding the flow of transition enables [human resource development] practitioners to serve the organization and veteran best through the timely application of planned activities and interventions" (p. 4).

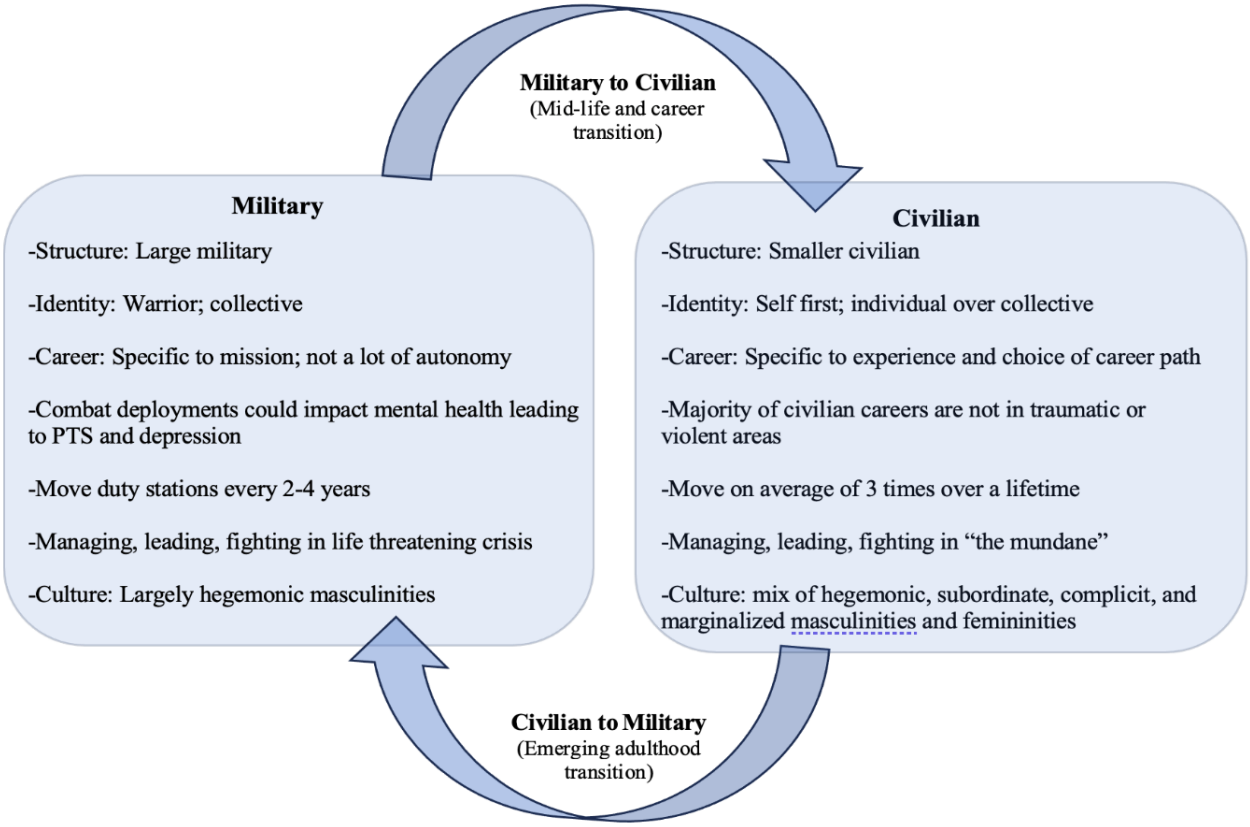
Research has further implied organizational recruiting and veteran job seeking should align regarding values, skills, and talent, with evidence suggesting veterans prefer being hired based on their leadership potential over a job offer based only on service to their country (Ford, 2017; Schultz & Chandrasekaran, 2014). Furthermore, in semistructured interviews conducted by Dexter (2020), veterans reported perceptions of civilian employer's knowledge deficit of veteran skills in the hiring process, hindering some veterans from obtaining positions that may align with their values. Veterans also reported feeling anxiety during the onboarding process (Dexter, 2020), to which Ford (2017) suggested human resource development professionals should continually monitor talent, help veterans adjust to social aspects of their jobs, and encourage learning organizations (Senge, 2006) to thrive.

To theorize career identity conflict for service members further, Wilson-Smith and Corr (2019) examined the seminal work of Blau's (1972) role exit theory to understand the process for which military members let go of a central aspect of their identity (e.g., their military career

roles) for a new and uncharted version of a professional *self*. Blau (1972) described role exit as "any stable pattern of interaction and shared activities between two or more persons ceases" (p. 2). For Blau, the cease of a stable identity was the cause of the conflict. In Wilson-Smith and Corr's (2019) research, connections were made between the military transition experience and Blau's key reasons for role exit conflict: an act of nature (e.g., illness or injury); voluntary (e.g., career change); involuntary (e.g., being fired); and group expulsion (e.g., banishments); all of which military members could face when they separate. For military role exit, Wilson-Smith and Corr (2019) noted it is "not suspiring that a major change to, or undesirable exit from, a role to which we feel strongly committed, is likely to make our identity feel threatened" (p. 20). The military-to-civilian transition process is visually depicted in Figure 3 for both enlisted and officer military members and was informed by the research presented in this literature review. The cyclical nature of the military-to-civilian transition process illustrates the process of not only military-to-civilian transitions, but also can be applied to the civilian-to-military transition as noted. Additionally, competing life transitions are noted in parentheses where the military and civilian transitions occur.

Figure 3

Military-To-Civilian Transition Process



Note. PTS = posttraumatic stress. Adapted from "The Senior Military Officer as a Veteran in Transition: Opportunities for Adult Learning and Bridging the Military–Civilian Divide," by S. M. Y. Biniecki and P. Berg, 2020, *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *2020*(166), p. 28 (https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20381). Copyright 2020 by John Wiley & Sons.

Military-to-Civilian Transition Challenges

Although some military veterans navigate the military-to-civilian transition with ease, the majority report difficulties readjusting to civilian life and careers (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Castro, 2018; Castro & Dursun, 2019; Vogt et al., 2018). The program in this evaluation was not designed to explore all the unique and intense challenges veterans may face when transitioning, but it is important to recognize how certain veteran experiences affect the ways in which they might react to a military-to-civilian transition program. Difficulties experienced by

some veterans during and after transition could include homelessness, financial distress, family problems, criminal behaviors, and maladjustment to career and educational setting (Castro & Dursun, 2019; Castro & Kintzle, 2017; Ravindran et al., 2020; Vogt et al., 2018; Whitworth et al., 2020). Likewise, some disabilities may be harder to identify, creating additional areas of concern in both career and higher education transitions. The following section briefly highlights challenges that may be outside of the program's resources or interventions.

Veteran Mental Health and Behavioral Challenges

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2023) issued their annual benefits report citing the top military service-related disabilities, based on compensation claims made by roughly 5.9 million people. Of the possible disabilities veterans could experience due to military service, PTSD was the fourth most prevalent disability among all recipients in 2022. PTSD is the result of experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event that can impede mental, emotional, and social functioning and can manifest through several symptoms, such as intrusive thoughts, hyperarousal, avoiding, and anger, which can result in depression, substance abuse, and suicide (Copeland et al., 2023; Finley, 2011; Kintzle et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023; Xue et al., 2015). Literature on veterans with PTSD spanning over 40 years has suggested veterans are more at risk for PTSD than civilians due to combat exposure, abuse such as military sexual trauma, disasters, and mass violence (Finley, 2011; Kintzle et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023; Xue et al., 2015).

Crawford et al. (2015) examined the health care options and obstacles for veterans reporting PTSD symptoms through a randomized survey. The quantitative study found getting assistance with navigating available health care benefits, involving family members in treatments, and using multiple interventions concurrently were principle preferences for veterans

with PTSD symptoms. However, the study also revealed the barriers veterans faced as privacy protections and trust in reporting their PTSD symptoms were areas of concern for veterans and often prevented clinical treatment. Although the literature on military service members' mental health has been almost exclusively on PTSD, Mobbs and Bonanno (2018) argued this narrow focus has created a gap in understanding the mental, emotional, and behavioral needs of veterans who may not have PTSD but experience what they consider to be *transition stress*. Moreover, it can be difficult to distinguish between PTSD distress and disorder; the ambiguous nature of transitions can often lead to PTSD misdiagnoses or misguided interventions (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Smith & True, 2014).

Furthermore, in a post-9/11 retrospective cohort study of 3.9 million U.S. military veterans, results showed a 2.5% increased risk of suicide among veterans who already transitioned to civilian life compared with veterans who were still on active duty and similarly elevated risks between veterans who deployed and veterans who did not (Reger et al., 2015). Transitions into civilian life can be a vulnerable time for veterans and may increase the possibility of mental health challenges, including increased risk of suicide (Castro & Kintzle, 2014; Ravindran et al., 2020; Reger et al., 2015). Navigating the loss of military identity, understanding civilian culture, stigmatization, and moral injury are just some of the many stressful experiences veterans can face when transitioning and reintegrating back to civilian life (Castro & Dursun, 2019; Markowitz et al., 2022; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Reger et al., 2015), regardless of whether they have been diagnosed with PTSD.

Veterans' military experiences may also create self-conceptions that are interpreted as highly valued identities through previous displays of heroism, fearlessness, and even violence (Smith & True, 2014). Markowitz et al. (2022) argued it is also in the unmet transition needs and

identity confusion that can lead to veterans engaging in risky behaviors such as substance abuse, drunk driving, and unsafe sexual encounters. To help veterans avoid risky behavior taking and experience a successful transition into civilian life, researchers have suggested the following measures: (a) transition programs should have a firm understanding of military culture and identities to build trust and better help their patients; (b) more empirical research is needed on the effects of transition stress on veterans; (c) access to supportive programming that recognizes the stress of identity loss and role exit on a transitioning service member is needed; and (d) well-being interventions that consider positive psychology and values-based identity formation are necessary (Adler et al., 2011; Castro & Dursun, 2019; Crace & Crace, 2020; Markowitz et al., 2022; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Pease et al., 2016).

Assessing Military-to-Civilian Transition Success

Castro's (2018) military transition theory is a framework to examine how military-to-civilian transitions can lead veterans to positive or negative results based on the potential of a successful transition. Although the program in this evaluation did not specifically use military transition theory in its implementation process, the program's indented short-term outcomes aligned well with the military transition theory's overarching theme: "a successful military transition includes a meaningful, well-paying job, strong relationships with family, friends and community and a sense of wellbeing and contentment" (Castro, 2018, p. 24). Well-being is at the core of military transition theory and conceptualized as a framework to determine successful and healthy transitions over the entire course of a military members transitions (e.g., civilian to military, military, military to civilian) and considers the following seven domains of well-being: (a) employment/purposeful activity, (b) finances, (c) health, (d) life skills/preparedness, (e) social integration, (f) housing, and (g) cultural/social environment (Castro & Dursun, 2019;

Robinson et al., 2017). Military transition theory suggests military-to-civilian transition programming should support each domain to ensure a successful transition.

Likewise, Vogt et al. (2018) proposed their well-being inventory to provide insight into well-being interventions designed to support military veterans, and to guide programming efforts for transitioning veterans. Informed by Jayawickreme et al.'s (2012) theoretical framework that considers the inputs, processes, and outcomes of well-being, the inventory addresses the same seven domains as military transition theory proposes as inputs and processes but goes further to include the following subdomains for veterans transitioning: education, intimate relationships, parenting, and community relationships (Vogt et al., 2018). Using a multidimension approach considers many different possible outcomes to assess successful veteran transitions; however, the inventory does not provide an in-depth analysis tool when participants may score lower on certain domains, creating a missed opportunity to dig more into the outcomes and possibly provide more interventions for specific veteran well-being needs.

Military-to-Civilian Transition Programs

Despite research on the mental, emotional, and physical benefits of well-being interventions for transitioning military service members, a gap remains in research on providing holistic programming that covers all domains of well-being (Perkins et al., 2020). In a recent review of veteran-focused needs assessments from 2008–2017, veterans were most in need of interventions and programming that not only consider their mental and physical health needs, but also their well-being needs, with employment and lack of coordinated programming listed in the top five needs out of 28 listed (Perkins et al., 2017). In response to veteran needs, thousands of public and private programs have been created; however, most programs have been criticized for not providing interventions and support for all domains of veteran well-being, leaving some

veterans to feel overwhelmed and confused by the sheer volume of different programs (Perkins et al., 2020; Vogt et al., 2018). Although the congressionally mandated Transition Assistance Program (TAP), provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, requires all service members to attend TAP before separation, it focuses largely on navigating the paperwork required of a service member to receive postseparation health care and financial benefits and is not available after separation when most veterans need access to supportive transition programs (Ramchand et al., 2023). Although informative, the TAP may miss the mark on the wide scope of transition needs among veterans.

The Veterans Metrics Initiative study assessed U.S. veteran well-being and transition program participation and usefulness (Perkins et al., 2020). The 9,566 survey respondents identified 1,736 unique programs, both Veterans Affairs and non-Veterans Affairs programs. Of these unique programs, 819 were employment programs, 160 were education programs, 203 were financial programs, 166 were health programs, 215 were personal relationship programs, and only 173 were listed as programs that included more than one well-being domain.

In their study on the Purpose After Service through Sport program, Waldhauser et al. (2021) noted some veteran transition programming that support well-being are only offered to people with a military service-related disability. The program offered physical exercise through sports activities for the purpose of promoting social connectedness, well-being, and health. Results from the 12 participant semistructured interviews yielded program benefits extending to better mental health, increased physical wellness, and an increased motivation to engage in social activities, all factors in a successful transition experience. Furthermore, program participants reported connections made to employment opportunities through organic networking among the

cohort, reflecting the need to include other well-being domains, such as employment, into transition programs.

Other military transition programs are situated in higher education intuitions and serve not only student veterans, but also the broader military community. Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families (2023) found its roots in 2011 and has been one of the leaders in higher education military transition programming for both service members and their families. Serving over 192,000 transitioning veterans, the Institute for Veterans and Military Families focuses on entrepreneurship; career training; community services; and research, evaluation, and policy. Although the Institute's research has been robust and has featured a health and wellness section, and a few other well-being domains, they have had no programming that incorporates well-being practices into activities or processes.

Summary

Of the topics explored in this literature review related to transition theory, military transitions, and successful military transition programming, there has been a substantial amount of research devoted to the military-to-civilian transition experience (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Castro & Dursun, 2019; Cooper et al., 2018; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Smith & True, 2014). Theories of adult transitions are complementary to the military transition experience, and some veteran research has used Schlossberg's transition framework to consider the best ways to evaluate transition programming and veterans' successful transitions (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Morris et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2011).

Furthermore, research has considered the many different types of transitions veterans can face over the span of 4–30 years and noted military transitions can happen simultaneously with other life transitions, such as emerging adulthood for new recruits and midlife career changes for

transitioning into civilian life (Flack & Kite, 2021; Gilman, 2018; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016; Vogt et al., 2018). Moreover, although much research has highlighted mental health challenges among transitioning veterans, the focus has tended to remain solely on PTSD and has not always considered transition stress as the cause for mental, emotional, and physical challenges (Castro & Dursun, 2019; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). The research has overwhelming argued that identity conflict for military veterans in civilian transition correlates with a successful transition, citing the need for supportive measures that help veterans navigate civilian culture (Ahern et al., 2015; Castro & Dursun, 2019; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Smith & True, 2014; Woodward & Jenkings, 2011).

Although the program in the current evaluation aligned with the research related to factors that influenced veteran transition success, the context of this program was unique in integrating well-being interventions with professional career programming. Although there has been no formal research on using this type of well-being domain combination, there was evidence that veterans were most in need of interventions and programming that not only considered their mental and physical health needs, but also their well-being needs, with employment and lack of coordinated programming listed in the top five needs out of 28 listed (Perkins et al., 2017).

Equipping military veterans with the professional skills and well-being knowledge to carry out a successful transition into civilian life, at a public university setting, could be influential for not only the military community, but also for the university's goals. This program evaluation expanded research and aimed to serve as a template for other institutions to replicate for the betterment of their military students and broader military community.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This mixed-method program evaluation examined participants' perceptions of a military-to-civilian transition program at a 4-year public university and provided formative feedback to program directors. Additionally, the findings of this formative evaluation may be useful for other institutions planning on-campus military-to-civilian transition programs for separating U.S. service members. The primary focus was on participants' perceptions of their transformed knowledge, behavior, and reactions related to successful transitions from military to civilian professional and personal life after participating in the program. This evaluation used triangulation of data consisting of quantitative data from surveys given to all participants 1 year after completing the program and qualitative measures from application essays and a focus group of participants.

Evaluation Questions

This program evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

1. One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, what are participants' reactions regarding their experiences with the content, relevance, and accessibility of the program?
2. One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants redefined their identity during transition into civilian professional and personal life?

3. One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants transformed coping behaviors required for transition into civilian professional and personal life?

Program Evaluation Approach or Model

This program evaluation adapted the D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) model for evaluation and focused on the processes of transition training and participants' reactions. The evaluation also examined the perceptions of how those processes affected their knowledge and behavioral changes in using the different well-being and business interventions to support transitioning military service members.

The purpose of this evaluation was to provide formative feedback of participant perceptions to program directors. This evaluation drew upon the use branch of program evaluation to allow for a strong focus on analyzing useful data for program stakeholders and allowed me to use a pragmatic approach because it provided an interpretation of the participant reality that was renegotiated against the backdrop of new and unpredictable situations (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). The pragmatic approach also allowed the use of mixed-method data collection to investigate different components of the research problems, providing researchers with the optimal research methods that answered the evaluation questions most successfully (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). With triangulation of data from surveys, a focus group, and extant data, the credibility of this evaluation's data analysis was strengthened and provided a synthesis of qualitative and quantitative results to provide greater understanding of reality and participant perceptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Mertens & Wilson, 2012).

Description of the Program Evaluation

This program evaluation used quantitative data collected through surveys completed by participants after the program to analyze reactions, and qualitative data collected through application essays and a focus group to measure perceptions of changed learning and behavior. The survey consisted of an electronic 5-point Likert scale used to measure participants' reactions to the program's content, relevance, accessibility, and perceptions of learning and behavioral changes. A semistructured focus group protocol, developed by me as the evaluator, was designed to measure qualitative data on participants' reactions, and learning and behavioral changes to inform the evaluation's three research questions. Additionally, I analyzed the data from the application essays and compared them to the survey and focus group data to measure participant transition perceptions before programming (e.g., essays) and 1 year later (e.g., survey and focus group).

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I served as the primary facilitator of the program evaluation. I worked with the university's program directors to gain understanding of the program's theoretical framework, implementation, and goals. I conducted the survey and focus group using protocols developed by researchers in the professional development and health and wellness disciplines. I used data software to analyze surveys and transcribed the qualitative data gleaned from the focus group using coding software to conduct all data analysis. To ensure internal validity, member checking was employed by providing focus group participants with my qualitative analysis and allowed for any additional information and explanation. I discuss more details about areas of potential bias in my role in the program and my own military affiliations in the ethical considerations section of this chapter.

Participants

This program evaluation included U.S. military and veteran service members who participated in the university's military-to-civilian transition certificate program in June 2022. Participants included 18 U.S. military veterans who completed the program over 12 consecutive days. Participants consisted of 10 officers and eight enlisted noncommissioned officers from the following military affiliations: seven from the U.S. Army, one from the U.S. Marine Corp, one from the U.S. Navy, and nine from the U.S. Coast Guard. A total of 17 participants were men and one was a woman. Further, four participants identified as Black, 12 as White, and two as Hispanic.

Participants' total periods of military service ranged from 4–28 years, with seven participants indicating they had 20–28 years of military service, four participants indicating they had 15–19 years of military service, and seven participants indicating they had 4–14 years of military service. Of the 18 participants, seven retired from military service and 11 were honorably discharged. Additionally, two participants experienced an unexpected military separation due to injury or illness. Table 4 includes the demographic data of all participants in the military-to-civilian certificate program in June 2022. All 18 participants were invited to complete the online survey and participate in the focus group and were given informed consent forms prior to the beginning of the study (see Appendix A).

Table 4

Program Participant Demographic Information

Demographic category	*n*
Gender	
Female	1
Male	17
Race	
Hispanic	2
Black	4
White	12
U.S. Military service branch	
U.S. Army	7
U.S. Marine Corps	1
U.S. Navy	1
U.S. Air Force	0
U.S. Space Force	0
U.S. Coast Guard	9
Years of service	
1–5	1
6–10	4
11–15	3
16–19	3
20–24	6
25–30	2
Rank	
Noncommissioned	8
Officer	10
Reserves	0
Separation status	
Retired	7
Honorably discharged	11
Injured/illness	2

Note. $N = 18$. Table contains self-reported data collected from the online application completed by participants for the June 2022 military-to-civilian transition program.

Data Sources

This evaluation used three data sources to answer the evaluation questions. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the study findings, a triangulation of the data derived from surveys, extant data, and a focus group was used to "build a coherent justification on themes"

(Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 200). Quantitative data were collected from the surveys and qualitative data were collected and analyzed from application essays and a focus group.

Application Essay

As part of the admission process into the program, participants were required to provide writing samples before the program began in May 2022 on the following considerations: (a) concerns about their transition, (b) what they were most looking forward to after military separation, (c) their short- and long-term professional goals, and (d) what wellness meant to them and what they wanted it to look like in their postmilitary lives. To evaluate whether there was a change in learning and behavior perceptions surrounding transition among participants because of the program, a document analysis was performed of the applications essays. Creswell and Creswell (2017) noted using extant data in the form of a document analysis of participants' written words allows for a convenient and unobtrusive source of information. Likewise, "the data collected is non-reactive, that is, the person creating the data does so for their own purposes that are not in response to the presence of a researcher" (Salmons, 2016, p. 115), creating an attentive representation of participants' perceptions of program goals (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The data were then compared to the survey and focus group data to understand if there was a change in perceptions on learning, identity, coping, behavior, and well-being.

Survey

A single descriptive statistics design survey was administered to capture one point in time (Mertens & Wilson, 2019) during Fall 2023. The survey asked participants to rate their level of agreement (i.e., 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) to the corresponding 10 survey questions. The quantitative data were captured using the Qualtrics platform and analyzed with descriptive statistics to evaluate participant responses for all rating scale items. To summarize

survey responses related to each D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) level and to help answer each evaluation question, I categorized the survey results further and found the average for each category. The design of the survey addressed issues of reliability and validity by including an expert review panel, pilot testing, and a revision of the survey before application (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). In doing so, I measured if the survey was "consistent over multiple applications and . . . if the instrument is measuring what it is intended to measure" (Mertens & Wilson, 2019, p. 341).

After proposal defense and Institutional Review Board approval, the expert panel provided feedback on whether the survey questions aligned with the evaluation questions and assessed grammatical mistakes and ease of use. The panel consisted of a faculty member from the School of Business, a colleague who ran a military-to-civilian transition program at another institution, and my dissertation committee chair. For the pilot test survey, I invited 10 program alumni from the most recent 2023 military-to-civilian cohort to participate and evaluate the survey timeframe, ease of survey, and any clarification on survey questions. These alumni were not part of this program evaluation but had recent experience with the program. Nine out of the 10 program alumni responded, and I used feedback from the expert panel review and piloting to revise the survey instrument.

I sent an email to all 18 participants asking for their survey participation (see Appendix B), with informed consent paperwork that gave permission to use their responses for data analyzing purposes, and explicitly stated the confidential nature of the information received (see Appendix A). The Qualtrics survey (see Appendix C) began by informing participants of the purpose, how the data would be collected and used, the voluntarily aspect of the survey, and the approximate time to take the survey based off the pilot test. After demographic questions, the

survey included 10 Likert-scale questions that emphasized participant perceptions of learning and behavior and reactions to their experience in the program. Each question included in the survey was designed to potentially answer one or more of the evaluation questions. The survey ended asking participants if they were willing to be contacted to participate in a focus group, scheduled for Fall 2023. Table 5 provides alignment of the survey, evaluation questions, D. L. Kirkpatrick model levels, and transition theory process that guided this program evaluation.

Table 5

Alignment of Survey, Evaluation Question, D. L. Kirkpatrick Model of Evaluation, and Transition Theory Process

Survey question	EQ	D. L. Kirkpatrick level	Transition theory process
1. I feel satisfied with the transition training I received in the program	1	1: Reaction (relevance)	Self
2. The wellness themed material covered in the program made a positive impact on my own coping behaviors during and after my transition from military to civilian life	1 3	1: Reaction (relevance/content) 3: Behavior	Self; strategies
3. The wellness instructor was able to provide information to me in an effective way	1	1: Reaction (accessibility)	Support
4. The professional business material covered in the program made a positive impact on my own professional relationships, communication styles, and transition from military to civilian careers	1 2	1: Reaction (relevance/content) 2: Learning 3: Behavior	Self; strategies
5. The professional business instructors were able to provide information to me in an effective way	1	1: Reaction (accessibility)	Support
6. The networking content provided during the program helped me feel supported during my transition from military to civilian life and work	1 3	1: Reaction (relevance) Level 3: Behavior	Support; strategies
7. I feel the program's content was relevant to learning how to redefine my new identity as a civilian	1 2	1: Reaction (relevance/content) 2: Learning	Self; strategies
8. There was a good balance between wellness and professional business content	1	1: Reaction (content)	Strategies; support
9. There was a good balance between presentation and group involvement	1	1: Reaction (content)	Support; strategies
10. The facilities (dorms and classrooms) were accessible and suited my needs	1	1: Reaction (accessibility)	Support

Note. EQ = evaluation question. EQ1: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, what are participants' reactions regarding their experiences with the content, relevance, and accessibility of the program? EQ2: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants redefined their identity during transition into civilian professional and personal life? EQ3: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants transformed coping behaviors required for transition into civilian professional and personal life?

Focus Group

I developed a semistructured focus group protocol, designed to capture qualitative data on participants' reactions, and learning and behavioral changes to inform the three evaluation questions (see Appendix D) and to provide more in-depth participant responses, complementary

to the survey. The focus group took place in Fall 2023, after participants had time after their military transition to absorb the program's intended outcomes. I emailed the participants who agreed to focus group participation on the survey with a scheduled time and date for one 60-minute virtual session, conducted over Zoom, to allow for increased participation from dispersed geographical locations. Eight out of the 18 program's participants agreed to participate in the focus group and all eight were present. I acted as the single moderator.

The focus group protocol included a script that welcomed participants and established the purpose of the focus group, intent of the data captured, and ground rules. Focus group respondents engaged with a single moderator. The focus group questions began with one introductory question asking participants to consider the aspects required of a training program to get them in the mind frame of the program. Immediately following were 15 open-ended base questions, with the option of probing follow-up questions, that were designed to potentially answer all three evaluation questions. To check for the validity of the focus group protocol, the expert review panel conducted a review before the start of the focus group, and I made modifications as needed. Table 6 illustrates the congruence of the focus group questions with the evaluation questions, the D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) model levels, and the transition theory process that underpinned the program evaluation, Goodman et al.'s (2011) transition framework, adapted by M. L. Anderson et al. (2012).

Table 6

Congruence of Focus Group Questions, Evaluation Questions, D. L. Kirkpatrick Model of Evaluation, and Transition Theory Process

Focus group question	EQ	D. L. Kirkpatrick model of evaluation level	Transition theory process
1. Of the professional development or transition training programs you have participated in, what aspects made it a powerful learning experience for you?	1	1: Reaction	Self
2. How did you anticipate your transition into civilian life would be? Probe: How did the program prepare you for those anticipations?	1 2	1: Reaction 2: Learning	Self; situation
3. How would you describe your identity before you participated in the program to now 1 year later?	2 3	2: Learning 3: Behavior	Self; situation
4. Do you feel you have successfully assimilated into the civilian life? Probe: What are some of the transition challenges you might still be facing	1 2 3	2: Learning 3: Behavior	Self; strategies
5. Why did you decide to participate in the program Probe: How was this training different than others you may have attended?	1	1: Reaction	Situation, support, self, strategies
6. What are some of the strategies you learned in the program that you now use to help you cope with some of the transition challenges you may have/or are facing?	1 3	1: Reaction 3: Behavior	Support; strategies
7. How have you used authentic excellence training in your current daily life? Probe: What parts of your transition might you still have some fear-base?	1 3 & Probe	1: Reaction 3: Behavior	Self, support, strategies
8. Describe the wellness activities that you participated in during the program that that you now find to be the most impactful for your transition.	1 3	1: Reaction 3: Behavior	Strategies; support, self
9. What was your overall impression of using Storytelling training as a tool for identifying and learning ways to network, communicate, and inspire leadership in a civilian career? Probe: In what ways have the Storytelling techniques you learned aided in your job search?	1 2 & Probe	1: Reaction 2: Learning	Support, strategies
10. What were your key take aways when learning how to craft your ideal job during the program? Probe: How have you integrated that into your current career/job search?	1 2 & Probe	1: Reaction 2: Learning	Strategies, self, support
11. What connections were you able to make between wellness and professional business training during the program? Probe: In what ways have you integrated wellness into your current career or schooling?	2 3 & Probe	2: Learning 3: Behavior	Support, self, strategies
12. After completing the program, what is your overall perception of military-to-civilian transition?	2 3	2: Learning 3: Behavior	Situation, self

Focus group question	EQ	D. L. Kirkpatrick model of evaluation level	Transition theory process
Probe: How would you say your perceptions are different than those military veterans you know who have not completed the program?			
13. In what ways has participating in the program helped you feel more supported during your transition?	1 3	1: Reaction 3: Behavior	Support, self, strategies
14. How would you describe aspects of the program that you did not find useful?	1	1: Reaction	Situation, support, self, strategies
15. How likely are you to recommend the program to other military veterans facing transition?	1	1: Reaction	Situation, support, self, strategies
16. What else would you like to share?	1 2 3	1: Reaction 2: Learning 3: Behavior	Situation, support, self, strategies

Note. EQ = evaluation question. EQ1: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, what are participants' reactions regarding their experiences with the content, relevance, and accessibility of the program? EQ2: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants redefined their identity during transition into civilian professional and personal life? EQ3: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants transformed coping behaviors required for transition into civilian professional and personal life?

Data Collection

After Institutional Review Board authorization, I collected data in October and November of 2023, more than 1 year after the program was completed. The extended timeframe between participants' experiences in the program and their perceptions 1 year after the program provided possible advantages and limitations to the evaluation's findings. Although insights into the program's impact on the perceptions of successful transitions from military-to-civilian life after participating in the program were provided, there was an increased risk of the participants reporting their perceptions 1 year after the program.

The first part of data collection included requesting application essay responses from program directors regarding participants' written documents to be sent via secure online file sharing. Next, I gathered feedback from the expert panel, piloted the survey and focus group protocol, and made any necessary alterations before procuring an email list of all 18 June 2022

participants from program directors. Then, I emailed an invitation to all 18 participants to participate in a web based Qualtrics survey with informed consent paperwork that gave permission to be recorded for data analyzing purposes, and explicitly stated the confidential nature of the information received (see Appendix A). Participants who responded with a signed consent had the survey link emailed to them and provided with a survey completion window of 2 weeks. Data from the survey were collected and stored in the Qualtrics platform. Immediately after the Zoom-recorded focus group, I recorded a summary of my own impressions in an analytic notebook kept in a Google document and I entered transcriptions from Zoom into MAXQDA 2022 for data analysis.

Data Analysis

This evaluation used and integrated three data sources and included a mixed-method approach to provide a complementary analysis and answer the evaluation questions (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). To ensure the analysis adhered to the programmatic D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) model, a triangulation of data using descriptive statistics to present quantitative data and coding to present qualitative data informed the evaluation questions that corresponded to the three D. L. Kirkpatrick levels of reaction, learning, and behavior. Using in vivo and axial coding for the application essays, and a prior coding and focused coding for the focus group, data from the application essays were compared with focus group codes and survey findings to triangulate the data and provide a meaningful analysis on the effectiveness of the program. During data analysis, I made analytic memos of notes that I took on initial themes produced during coding, observations, and reflections made during the focus group, and noted any changes to the evaluation.

Evaluation Question 1

Evaluation Question 1 asked: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, what are participants' reactions regarding their experiences with the content, relevance, and accessibility of the program? Evaluation Question 1 was answered by analyzing the survey responses and focus group feedback. First, an analysis of the descriptive statistics produced from participant responses from the 5-point Likert-scale survey led to the overall average and variability of participants' reactions to the program's content, relevance, and accessibility. Then, data collected from the focus group transcript, with emphasis on Focus Group Questions 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, and 15, were coded using a priori coding, with a second round of emergent coding.

Evaluation Question 2

Evaluation Question 2 asked: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants redefined their identity during transition into civilian professional and personal life? Evaluation Question 2 focused on participants' perceptions of learning and sought to understand if the program helped participants create a new and positive way of thinking about themselves and their identity as civilians. To answer Evaluation Question 2, data collected from 5-point Likert-scale survey, focusing on Survey Questions 2, 4, and 7, were analyzed using descriptive statics that produced the average and variability of participants' perceptions of learning and changed identity. To complement the survey, this question was answered with data collected in the focus group, allowing participants to elaborate more on the effect the program had on their personal and professional identity. The data were analyzed by focusing on focus group questions that emphasized learning (i.e., Focus Group Questions 2, 3, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 15) and were coded using a priori codes and a second

round of focused coding. Finally, the findings from the application essay analysis using in vivo coding and axial coding were compared to the survey results and focus group data to analyze any changed perceptions to questions surrounding learning before and after the program, giving a potential indication of program success.

Evaluation Questions 3

Evaluation Question 3 asked: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants transformed coping behaviors required for transition into civilian professional and personal life? Evaluation Question 3 sought to answer whether the program had any effect on participants' perceptions of coping behaviors regarding transition stress and if well-being interventions introduced in the program assisted in creating a more successful transition into civilian life. To answer this question, data were collected from the 5-point Likert-scale survey, focusing on Survey Questions 2, 4, and 6, and analyzed using descriptive statics that produced the average of participants' perceptions of behavioral changes around coping and well-being measures.

To complement the survey, this question was also answered with data collected in the focus group, allowing participants to elaborate more on the effect the program had on dealing with transition stress and if they found well-being interventions useful. The data were analyzed by focusing on focus group questions that emphasized learning (i.e., Focus Group Questions 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, and 16) and were coded using a priori codes and a second round of focused coding. Finally, the findings from the application essay analysis using in vivo coding and axial coding were then compared to the survey results and focus group data to analyze any changed perceptions to questions surrounding coping with transition stress and perceptions about well-being before and after the program, giving a potential indication of program success. Table 7

outlines the a priori coding used for the focus group qualitative data analysis and Appendix E provides the full code book. Emergent themes and codes were documented throughout the data analysis process using analytical memos to reflect and generate possible themes, phenomena, and other potential codes (Saldaña, 2015).

Table 7

A Priori Codes for Qualitative Analysis

EQ	Categories	Codes
1: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, what are participants' reactions regarding their experiences with the content, relevance, and accessibility of the program?	Reactions to satisfaction, expectations, relevance of training, suggestions for training improvement, and quality of instructors	Comfort Impact Content Satisfaction Negative perceptions
2: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants redefined their identity during transition into civilian professional and personal life?	Learning, improved knowledge, and increased skills related to transition	Learning new skills Successful Meaningful
3: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants transformed coping behaviors required for transition into civilian professional and personal life?	Coping, empowerment, and on-the-job behavior changes	Coping Empowered Supported Fear

Note. EQ = evaluation question. See Appendix E for the full code book, with definitions and examples.

Coding Process

Qualitative analysis from extant data of the program's application essay and the evaluation's focus group were analyzed through coding of the participant essay responses and the focus group transcript. Considering the application essays took place before the program and the focus group occurred 18 months after the program, different coding techniques were used.

For the focus group analysis, I created a code book with a priori codes derived from the research and supported by the literature on transitions, with an emphasis on perceptions and reactionary codes pertaining to transition programming and interventions. The application essays

were coded with in vivo coding and a second round of axial coding. Responses and the focus group transcript were uploaded into the MAXQDA 2022 software application.

To make meaning of the focus group data, I first read through the transcript and precoded participant quotes that stood out and appeared significant for later illustrative examples in subsequent chapters (Creswell & Creswell 2017; Saldaña, 2015). Then, I performed a second read through, applying the a priori codes related to Evaluation Questions 1, 2, and 3 to words and phrases and color coded them in the MAXQDA 2022 application. The third read through involved a second cycle of focused coding to examine frequent code counts to develop the most significant themes (Saldaña, 2015). Concurrently, I kept an analytic memo, for both the focus group transcript and the application essay responses, of the coding process observations and thoughts and themes of the analysis to reflect on potential ethical issues I faced and to think about future directions of the study (Saldaña, 2015).

After entering the participant application essay responses into MAXQDA 2022, I first conducted in vivo coding to capture the actual language found in the data. This language included words or phrases that stood out as meaningful and powerful to military transitions based on the review of literature in Chapter 2, and words used repetitively throughout the application essay responses. Then, I performed a second cycle using axial coding to characterize themes that emerged during the first round of coding. To surface emergent themes, I first placed the Round 1 in vivo codes into categories and subcategories and then linked the categories together to analyze how the codes were related to one another (Saldaña, 2015) and to create themes.

Triangulation of Data

The quantitative data collected and analyzed from the survey was triangulated with the qualitative application essay and focus group data to gain a deeper understanding of participant

perceptions of the program related to military-to-civilian transitioning. Using three data sources allowed me to "build a coherent justification for themes . . . [and] can be claimed as adding validity to the study" (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 200). Additionally, data from application essays and the survey and focus group data were compared to analyze participant transition perceptions before programming (e.g., essays) and 1 year later (e.g., survey and focus group) to report on the effectiveness of the program. Table 8 shows the specifications and triangulation of data of the program evaluation questions, data sources, and data analysis.

Table 8

Program Evaluation Questions, Data Sources, and Data Analysis

EQ	Data sources	Data analysis
1: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, what are participants' reactions regarding their experiences with the content, relevance, and accessibility of the program?	Survey (all 10 Qs) Focus group (Qs 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, and 16)	Descriptive statistics of Likert-scale survey Initial a priori coding followed by focused coding on focus group transcript
2: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants redefined their identity during transition into civilian professional and personal life?	Survey (Qs 2, 4, and 7) Focus group (Qs 2, 3, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 15) Application essays	Descriptive statistics of Likert-scale survey Initial a priori coding followed by focused theme coding on focus group transcriptions Document analysis of essays; initial in vivo coding followed by axial coding
3: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants transformed coping behaviors required for transition into civilian professional and personal life?	Survey (Qs 2, 4, and 6) Focus group (Qs 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, and 16) Application essays	Descriptive statistics of Likert-scale survey Initial a priori coding followed by focused theme coding on the focus group transcript Document analysis of essays; initial in vivo coding followed by axial coding

Note. EQ = Evaluation question, Q = question.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

Delimitations

The boundaries set for this evaluation included delimitations, which were decisions made by me as the researcher based on the context of the program, its participants, and the evaluation instruments. The program was introduced at high research (i.e., R2) public 4-year institution for the first time with award-winning faculty who specialized in areas of wellness and career transition; therefore, I did not focus the program evaluation on the program's inputs and whether the program was implemented with fidelity. Although the audience for the program was originally intended for anyone with a military connection who was facing a transition (e.g., service members, spouses, older children), the study focused on participants with military service experience. I sought out people with 4–25 years of military service because they had the closest shared experiences in military-to-civilian transitions. This choice limited the contributions of the participants to a select group of people with military experience only.

The evaluation focused on the perceptions of program effectiveness after 18 months of program participation; however, the impacts of transition on separated military service members may take longer to become evident. Because the program was in its 1st year, it was appropriate to examine the participants' perceptions formatively as a means of determining the effectiveness of the program's short-term outcomes and how to best meet the needs of military service members transitioning. Therefore, the fourth level of the D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) model was not used for this evaluation because it was not possible to determine an accurate return on time investment for the participants or a cost–benefit analysis for the university.

Limitations

Limitations occurred in this program evaluation that could have influenced the findings. To begin with, there was a COVID-19 virus outbreak among participants in the 2nd week of programming that necessitated some workshops shifting to an online platform for the people affected by the virus. These virtual workshops could have had an impact on some participant reactions to program content and accessibility, and their perceptions of support and coping behaviors while in isolation.

Data collected through the focus group were limited in that the focus group considered the experiences and perceptions of the participants that were colored by their personal backgrounds, rank, military experiences, branch of service, years in the military, gender, race, and health or mental complications. Additionally, not all U.S. military branches were represented in the evaluation; the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Space Force were not included in this study due to the lack of participants from those branches, and there was a significant overrepresentation of U.S. Coast Guard participants. There was also a lack of fully enlisted service members because the study only included noncommissioned and commissioned officers. Therefore, limitations could have come from participants experiencing any type of stereotype threat, nervousness, or not answering honestly. The participant responses in the application essays may have been filtered or skewed to ensure acceptance into the program and may not have been an accurate reflection of their true feelings and thoughts on transition or wellness.

Assumptions

This program evaluation was based on the perceptions and thoughts of the first cohort of the program. I assumed participants volunteered to be surveyed and participate in the focus group. I assumed participants were honest in answering questions and I assumed their

perceptions on the training they received in the program was a measurable outcome of the program. I assumed the military branches in which the participants served affected the overall perceptions of the program, based on the literature review findings.

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Considering both the study and the participant population were in the university, protecting the rights and personal information of everyone involved, particularly the participants, was paramount in the evaluation. Therefore, I put measures in place to ensure the evaluation was conducted ethically. Before the evaluation began, I submitted the program evaluation proposal using the School of Education Institutional Review Committee form via the protocol and compliance management system and awaited approval. All participants in the study completed consent forms that promised them confidentiality. To address these potential biases and impacts, I adhered to the *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* that included systematic inquiry, competence, integrity/honest, respect for people, and common good and equity (American Evaluation Association, 2018).

Positionality

My personal military affiliations and role at the university were significant ethical considerations of this program evaluation. At the time of the program evaluation, I had been a military spouse for the prior 11 years, with a husband who would experience a military-to-civilian transition in 3 years. I was also the sister of one active-duty military officer and two retired military veterans, and the daughter and daughter-in-law to military veterans. As a result of my own experiences as a military dependent witnessing military transitions, I believed that a successful transition was dependent on the integration of wellness and professional development.

At the time of the study, I had held a midlevel leadership position in the university's military and veteran affairs office for the prior year, where I regularly advised and managed projects and certificates that assisted transitioning military service members and students. Additionally, I worked closely with the program directors and was in concert with them to secure funding for the Summer 2023 military-to-civilian certificate program. To mitigate bias, I asked for input and feedback from trusted advisors, including check-in conversations with my dissertation chair and program directors, to provide an objective view.

Mitigating Bias. To reduce the risk of bias, I did not attend any of the Summer 2023 program workshops or debriefs; therefore, I remained unaware of any conditions until outcomes were measured. I excused myself from any meetings that consisted of planning the Summer 2023 program to avoid any conversations surrounding the first cohort that could color my point of view during the focus group and interviews. I also avoided asking program participants who remained on campus about their experiences in the program and asked my colleagues to support me in ensuring I was not in conversations that could create any bias for me.

After the focus group and interviews, I conducted member checking by offering participants a synthesis of the qualitative data I collected with the intent of eliciting feedback on accuracy, missed information, and any additional information they wanted to provide (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). To help assess the risk of bias, I discussed my coding analysis with a peer reviewer from the university's School of Education who reviewed 25% of the data with me (Barber & Walczak, 2009). My dissertation chair and I kept a reflexive journal throughout data collection, analysis, and findings for self-reflection, biases, and reactions to data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Program Evaluation Standards

Anchoring this program evaluation were the *Program Evaluation Standards: A Guide for Evaluators and Evaluation Users* (Yarbrough et al., 2011). Within the 30 standards are five subgroups: utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy, and accountability (Yarbrough et al., 2011). Developed by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, these standards provided reflective practice and a resource for program evaluation transparency.

Utility. A program evaluation becomes useful when a credible evaluator provides an analysis of processes and outcomes that stakeholders will use to review and redefine the meaning of the program and its intended purpose (Yarbrough et al., 2011). My role as the evaluator for this program evaluation required an effort to become more active in the military community, where I stayed current on military transition research and established professional relationships at a variety of military associations.

For this program evaluation, I examined participants' perceptions and reactions to program content and any learning and behavioral changes to the program's processes. By doing so, an understanding of the program's outcomes could help shape the ways in which program directors revise and reinterpret future military-to-civilian transition programs. Although the utility program evaluation standard reminds researchers that using only participant perceptions does not suggest trusting in only one source of perceptions to gauge overall program worth (Yarbrough et al., 2011), the data gleaned from participants can be useful to strengthen future program outcomes.

Feasibility. An evaluation is considered feasible when the concepts of evaluability, context, values, and accountability take place with a degree of effectiveness and efficiency (Yarbrough et al., 2011). To establish feasibility, I first discussed the program's goals and values

with the program directors, and the need for the evaluation to ensure the program was at a point to be formatively evaluated.

Propriety. Considerations surrounding ethical and respectful conduct when interacting with program participants, and protecting their rights and dignity, were paramount throughout the evaluation (Yarbrough et al., 2011). To ensure I upheld the standard properly, I completed the Protection of Human Subjects training and obtained Institutional Review Board approval from the Protection of Human Subjects Committee in advance of conducting any evaluations. Additionally, I conducted member checking to not only check for validity and accuracy, but also to ensure the evaluation was open to different views and beliefs about the data I collected.

Accuracy. Evaluations should strive for reliable information by providing "truthfulness of representations, propositions, and findings, especially those that support judgments about the quality if the program or program competent" (Yarbrough et al., 2011, p. 158). Considering this program evaluation examined participants' perceptions of the overall program, it was important for my data collection and analysis to provide accurate information gleaned from how participants responded to surveys and what I heard from them in the focus group and interviews. To ensure rationale and clarification, I used an analytic memo to record the decisions I made and the information I received. I also used peer review of 20–25% of all coding I conducted (Barber & Walczak, 2009) to identify any errors or biases I may have missed.

Accountability. Attention to evaluation accountability "creates a meaningful learning set for evaluators . . . [and] helps stakeholders better understand the warranted uses of the evaluation as they make decisions" (Yarbrough et al., 2011, pp. 226–227). To establish evaluation accountability, my dissertation chair read and reviewed all evaluation documentation and provided me feedback on how I could improve the evaluation. I also included the delimitations

and limitations of this study in this evaluation document to ensure program directors were able to make future program decisions without questioning the validity of my evaluation. I also had the opportunity to reflect on my evaluation to help me become more skillful during my dissertation defense, where my dissertation chair, committee, program directors, and community members took the opportunity to "identify what is needed to judge and improve evaluation quality" (Yarbrough et al., 2011, p. 227) in a meta evaluation setting.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this program evaluation was to investigate military veterans' perceptions of their knowledge, skills, and behavioral changes related to military-to-civilian transitions following participation in a targeted military transition program at a 4-year public university. I sought to determine the processes and program components that were especially supportive of participants' military-to-civilian identity formation, well-being implementation, and achieving the program's short-term outcomes. The following questions guided the program evaluation:

1. One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, what are participants' reactions regarding their experiences with the content, relevance, and accessibility of the program?
2. One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants redefined their identity during transition into civilian professional and personal life?
3. One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants transformed coping behaviors required for transition into civilian professional and personal life?

To answer these questions, I used an evaluation based on the D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) model in conjunction with the context, inputs, processes, and products (CIPP) model (Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014) to explain the overall program. I created a logic model (see Figure 2), which outlines the components of the program based on the CIPP and D. L. Kirkpatrick

models, and the products that I addressed in this program evaluation. This evaluation focused on the short-term products of the program, and the participants' perceptions of the program's influence on their knowledge, skills, and behavior 1 year after completing the program. I outlined the mixed-method design used for the study in Chapter 3. A brief description of the data analysis processes that led to the findings of the study begins this chapter. Next, I outline the results and summaries of the findings to support the conclusions for each evaluation question.

Data Analysis

The data sources used to answer the evaluation questions consisted of application essays, a 5-point Likert-scale survey, and a focus group. The triangulation of data strengthened convergence among qualitative and quantitative data and accounted for the validity of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) surrounding participant perceptions. Additionally, I compared data from the application essays to the survey and focus group data to analyze participant transition perceptions before programming (application essays) and 1 year later (survey and focus group). Although the application essays were not written to answer the evaluation questions, I used the comparative data to analyze program effectiveness and any changes in participants' learning and behavior.

Quantitative Data Analysis

To inform the study's three evaluation questions, I used an electronic 5-point Likert-scale survey to measure participants' reactions to the program's content, relevance, accessibility, and perceptions of learning and behavioral changes. All program participants ($N = 18$) were invited to complete the survey, with 16 of the participants responding to the survey. The survey asked participants to rate their level of agreement (i.e., 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) to the corresponding 10 survey questions. The quantitative data were captured using the Qualtrics

platform and analyzed with descriptive statistics to evaluate participant responses for all rating scale items.

Qualitative Data Analysis

To inform the study's evaluation questions, I used coding for the focus group and application essays to measure participants' reactions to the program's content, relevance, and accessibility, and perceptions of learning and behavioral changes. Considering the application essays took place before the program and the focus group occurred 18 months after the program, different coding techniques were used.

Focus Group. The first round of coding for the focus group included a search for a priori codes (i.e., satisfaction, impact, comfort/accessibility, learning/new skills, coping, supported, and negative perception) found in the focus group transcript of eight participants, including examinations of words and phrases that could have been associated with a priori codes. During the coding process, I discovered emergent codes and applied them to the transcript (i.e., fear, meaningful/purpose, content, identity, and empowered). One code (i.e., content) was further broken down into subcodes consisting of perceptions of integration of wellness and business, perceptions of wellness material, and perceptions of business materials. Code counts were recorded to gauge the level of frequency for each of the first-round codes.

To categorize emergent themes in the second round of coding, I used focused coding to examine frequent code counts to develop the most significant themes (Saldaña, 2015). From there, major themes for each evaluation question emerged and are defined in subsequent sections. Table 9 outlines code counts for all items coded in the focus group transcript. The code book of definitions of the a priori codes is found in Appendix E. Codes followed by an asterisk indicate codes that emerged during the analysis.

Table 9

A Priori and Emergent Code Counts from Focus Group Transcript

Code	*f*
Comfort/accessibility	12
Content (general)* = 19	40
Integration = 6	
Positive wellness = 10	
Positive business = 5	
Coping	23
Empowered*	35
Fear*	7
Identity*	30
Impact	27
Learning/new skills	26
Meaningful/purpose*	12
Negative perceptions	0
Satisfaction	38
Supported	20
Document totals	270

Note. 16 pages of transcript were reviewed and coded for a priori and emergent codes.
* emergent code.

Application Essays. The four-question application essay dataset consisted of 16 out of the 18 participants giving firsthand written responses of their perceptions of wellness, transition opportunities, transition challenges, and career goals. Two out of the 18 program participants did not give application essay responses because of last-minute course admittance and were instead verbally interviewed without a transcript captured. The first round of initial coding included in vivo coding to capture the actual language found in the data. This coding included words or phrases that stood out as meaningful and powerful to military transitions based on the review of literature in Chapter 2, and words used repetitively throughout the application essay responses.

In the second round of analysis, I used axial coding to characterize themes that emerged during the first round of coding. To surface emergent themes, I first placed the Round 1 in vivo codes into categories and subcategories and then linked the categories together to analyze how

the codes were related to one another (Saldaña, 2015). From there, four major themes emerged across all four application essay questions: stability, balance, fear/challenges, and meaningful work.

The theme of stability emerged through codes regarding a desire for consistency and improvement over financial, geographical, and career aspects of transition. Although balance can often be referred to as stability, the theme was separated out due to participants identifying balance as wanting a work–life balance and improvement of family life. The theme of fears/challenges consisted of anxiety, concern, and lack of confidence around impending transitions. Finally, meaningful work emerged as a theme for participants who wanted their impending transition to reflect their aspirations to make an impact in their careers and communities in a way that supported their passions and values. Table 10 provides the theme code counts that were recorded to gauge the level of frequency for each application essay question.

Table 10

Emergent Theme Code Counts for Each Application Essay Question

Emergent themes	AE1: Wellness	AE2: Transition opportunities	AE3: Transition challenges	AE4: Career goals	Total
Stability	4	11	11	10	36
Balance	12	13	10	12	47
Fear/challenges	28	4	16	5	53
Meaningful work	0	17	10	11	37
Document totals	44	42	47	38	171

Note. AE = application essay. Chapter 3 contains the complete essay prompts. A total of 34 pages of application essays were reviewed and coded for in vivo and axial coding to produce emergent themes.

I conducted a comparison between the application essay analysis to the findings from the focus group transcript and survey responses to analyze any changes in transition perceptions among participants. The application essay findings were not included in the evaluation question

sections of this chapter because they were not created to answer questions about program evaluation; rather, they were analyzed for comparison to and in support of the findings. For this reason, application essay findings follow this section, with a comparison summary at the end of the Evaluation Question 2 and 3 sections to evaluate any changes in participants' perceptions due to the program. Additionally, application essay findings were not used to compare Evaluation Question 1's findings because that question referred to the reactions of the program's content, relevance, and accessibility.

Application Essay Themes

Stability. A desire for a sense of stability among the participants emerged among the findings related to impending military transitions, with a code count of 36 across 15 out of the 16 participant essay responses, in all four application essay questions. Phrases that included "never having to move again" or "having the choice of geographical location" were among the most coded, followed by responses about "job stability," "unlimited financial growth," and "gaining financial literacy." Participants also related impending transition to potential identities that involved stability of choice, personal freedom, and *feeling* stable. Participants wrote the following on stability in response to the four essay questions:

- "The biggest element of my transition that concerns me is the uncertainty of my future and its stability. I have been in the Army my entire adult life and that has provided not just financial stability for me and my family, but job stability. I've never had to worry about losing my job or taking a pay cut. The loss of that stability and predictability in pay, location, and promotion is a huge source of concern and anxiety for both me and my family."

- "It's the known. I look forward to knowing where I will be and how long I will be there. Often throughout my career, I have had to be willing to drop everything at a moment's notice and respond to an operational obligation. While commitment and adaptability will be essential in the civilian workforce, I look forward to knowing where I will be tomorrow."
- "I am excited at the possibility of never having to move again unless I want to. Having a career where you have to move every few years is physically and emotionally exhausting; it is difficult to make new relationships with friends and neighbors, only to turn around and leave them 2–3 years later. I am looking forward to putting down roots somewhere so our relationships can flourish."

Balance. Participants shared their perceptions on how impending transitions could correlate to having a better work–life balance in the civilian world. In response to all application essay questions, 14 out of the 16 participants had themed codes relating to a total of 47 code counts for balance, and almost all wrote about their families. The phrase "work–life balance" appeared in the essay responses 12 times over all four questions. For participants, they seemed to relate who they would become after transition with how they could better the lives of their families while maintaining a new career that could support their families. They were hopeful the program could teach them "work–family harmony" because such harmony was often not supported in the military. They spoke of "stability for [their] family" and being "excited about the prospect of spending more time with . . . family," plus "finding a career that could be aligned with finding a better work–life balance." Some participants shared concern for the ability to balance their transition into new civilian careers with the obligations to their family. One participant shared, "I am concerned about being able to continue meeting that need for my family

while I prepare to transition out of the military." However, others were hopeful the program could offer them the "tools to better balance [their] mind and body."

Fear/Challenges. The highest code count and participant responses among the themes that emerged from application essay concerned fear and challenges with 53 code counts from all 16 participants. A sense of inner conflict and anxiety emerged among the findings related to the essay prompts, including a desire to learn how to conquer or get through the transition fears expressed in the responses. One participant described inner conflict about their upcoming transaction as "being excited about pursuing a new career focus, a new adventure." They shared, "Learning and education are both important to me and this will be an opportunity to exercise both. This fills me with both excitement and dread."

When asked what they were most looking forward to after transition, some participants used the following phrases when describing their perceptions: "I have fears associated with transitioning from the military to civilian life;" "I both fear and look forward to having choices. It is a weird dichotomy but, it feels very genuine;" "How all of this will manifest itself, I am not confident;" and "I am transitioning from the only professional and personal framework I've ever known." Other fears emerged from civilian career prospects, with one participant noting, "There's aways a fear that I'm not marketable or valuable outside of the service." However, most participants expressed hope that the program would help them "learn to manage the turmoil of transition into a new career." One participant offered the following perception on career transition challenges and revealed the fear of losing a part of their identity:

> One of my biggest concerns of transitioning away from the military is losing my professional credibility. I am excited to start a new career path, but the idea of starting from the bottom again is quite humbling and, frankly, scary. During my career, I have

been able to step into a room, and my reputation and rank often gave me a level of credibility before I ever opened my mouth to speak.

Questions surrounding wellness elicited the most code counts in this theme with 28 codes across 13 out of the 16 participants. Phrases surrounding wellness included "very little training," "not always consistent," "neglected mental health," "it's a complex subject," "wasn't a priority," and "mind is constantly going." Two participants shared the following fears: "I am concerned about my mental health as I balance completing the work expected of me, while also ensuring that I am exercising an effective exit strategy" and "One concern that I have is adapting to a new and different way of life while being able to change my lifestyle accordingly without a shock to the system."

Meaningful Work. Three out of the four application essay questions produced responses that were coded 37 times for themes of meaningful work, with Application Essay 1 (e.g., wellness) not producing meaningful work codes. Generally, participants identified meaningful work as something they looked forward to having after transition. The theme emerged through participant responses involving redefining their identities through contribution, impact, self-worth, and meaning. Some related responses to meaningful work were as follows: "I want to positively change in the world. I want to inspire and empower;" "Establishing my own worth through hard work;" "Be in an organization long enough to enact real change;" and "I want the opportunity to find a culture that I can contribute to and work that I am passionate about." Application essay findings illustrated participants' desires to learn and redefine their identity as civilians and career professionals, and expressing hope that the program would teach them coping techniques to handle the transition stress that most of the participants already displayed.

Evaluation Question 1

Evaluation Question 1 asked: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, what are participants' reactions regarding their experiences with the content, relevance, and accessibility of the program? Consistent with D. L. Kirkpatrick's (1998) Level 1 reaction model of assessing a program, Evaluation Question 1 considered participants' reactions related to the program's curriculum, learning environment, and facilitation features of the military-to-civilian transition program. Participants' reactions to a program can inform directors on effectiveness and areas for improvement (D. L. Kirkpatrick, 1998). All 10 survey questions and Focus Group Questions 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, and 16 contributed to answering Evaluation Question 1.

Survey Results Related to Participant Reactions to Program Content, Relevance, and Accessibility

To answer Evaluation Question 1, I collected all 10 survey questions to correspond to D. L. Kirkpatrick's (1998) Level 1 reaction model of evaluation and analyzed the participants' reactions to program content, relevance, and accessibility. Table 11 provides the results from the survey questions.

Table 11

Participant Survey Responses

Statement	Strongly disagree				Strongly agree	
	1	2	3	4	5	*M*
1. I feel satisfied with the transition training I received in the program.	0	0	0	2	14	4.88
2. The wellness themed material covered in the program made a positive impact on my own coping behaviors during and after my transition from military to civilian life.	0	0	0	7	9	4.56
3. The wellness instructor was able to provide information to me in an effective way.	0	0	0	4	12	4.75
4. The professional business material covered in the program made a positive impact on my own professional relationships, communication styles, and transition from military to civilian careers.	0	0	2	4	10	4.5
5. The professional business instructors were able to provide information to me in an effective way.	0	0	0	4	12	4.75
6. The networking content provided during the program helped me feel supported during my transition from military to civilian life and work.	0	0	2	3	11	4.56
7. I feel the program's content was relevant to learning how to redefine my new identity as a civilian.	0	0	3	3	10	4.44
8. There was a good balance between wellness and professional business content.	0	1	2	3	10	4.38
9. There was a good balance between presentation and group involvement.	0	0	0	4	12	4.75
10. The facilities (dorms and classrooms) were accessible and suited my needs.	0	0	0	4	11	4.5

Note. $N = 16$. Reactions measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

To summarize survey responses related to D. L. Kirkpatrick's (1998) Level 1 and to help answer Evaluation Question 1, survey results were further categorized under the themes of content, relevance, and accessibility and the average was then found for each category. Content referred to the learning materials, balance between wellness and business material, and the learning format and was evaluated through Survey Questions 2, 4, 8, and 9. Relevance indicated if the program had a positive impact on the participants' transitions into civilian life, coping behaviors when faced with transition stress, and a redefined identity through Survey Questions 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7. Accessibility evaluated whether the instructors communicated course materials

effectively and if the facilities (e.g., dorms, classrooms) were convenient, comfortable, and suited the participants' needs and was answered through Survey Questions 3, 5, and 10. Descriptive statistics were used to evaluate participant responses for all rating scale items, capturing the average for each category, as seen in Table 12.

Table 12

Participant Reactions to Program's Content, Relevance, and Accessibility

D. L. Kirkpatrick Level 1: Reaction	*M*
Content (Survey Questions 2, 4, 8, and 9)	4.55
Relevance (Survey Questions 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7)	4.59
Accessibility (Survey Questions 3, 5, and 10)	4.7
	4.63

Note. Reactions measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

Generally, participants rated the logistical elements of the program highly, including instructor pedagogy, course materials, format, and impact on participants' lives when considering transition. When evaluating participant reactions to the facilities, 11 strongly agreed and four agreed with the statement making a strong case that most participants believed the facilities were satisfactory. In addition, when evaluating participant reactions to the course content, one respondent disagreed with the statement that there was a good balance between wellness and professional business content, and two neither agreed nor disagreed, giving the statement the lowest average score of 4.38 out of 5.

Overall average scores for participant reactions to the program's relevance, content, and accessibility was 4.61 out of 5, suggesting positive reactions across participant perceptions with a score of 4.88 on overall satisfaction felt by participants on the training they received in the program. The highest level of response overall was the program's accessibility, with 4.7,

followed by program relevance with 4.59 and course content with 4.55. A high level of response consistency across wellness themed material and pedagogy was noted in participant responses with an average of 4.66, with responses ranging from 4 (*agree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Business themed material and instructor delivery were also rated high with an average of 4.63, with responses ranging from 3 (*neither agree nor disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Notably, there seemed to be a disconnect in the program's ability to balance wellness and professional business content because participant responses rated the lowest average score of 4.38 in the survey.

The analysis from the survey responses related to participants' reactions to the program suggested participants were satisfied with the training they received. One of the program's goals was to develop an inclusive learning environment for transitioning military service members, to which the survey analysis suggested participants thought the instructors provided information to them in an effective way and the facilities were suitable to participants' needs. Likewise, the survey data analysis suggested participants overall agreed the program provided relevant content to their unique transition circumstances.

Focus Group Responses Related to Participant Reactions to the Program's Content, Relevance, and Accessibility

Consistent with D. L. Kirkpatrick's (1998) Level 1 reactions, participants were asked to respond to questions related to their perceptions of program content, relevance, and accessibility. Participant responses to Focus Group Questions 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, and 16 were coded using one round of a prior codes and emergent codes, followed by a second round of focused coding to produce themes. The themes that emerged from coding the focus group transcript included participant satisfaction, impact on participant transitions, perceptions of

content relevance, and accessibility. Table 13 provides a summary of code counts and corresponding emergent themes that helped to answer Evaluation Question 1.

Table 13

A Priori and Emergent Code Counts That Answered Evaluation Question 1

Code	*f*	Themes
Comfort/accessibility	12	Accessibility and comfort
Content* (general) = 19	40	Program content: A step above the rest
Integration = 6		
Positive wellness = 10		
Positive business = 5		
Impact	27	Impact on participants' transition into civilian life
Negative perceptions	0	Positive perceptions of program
Satisfaction	38	Positive perceptions of program
Total	103	

Note. A total of 16 pages of the focus group transcript were reviewed and coded for a priori and emergent codes.
*emergent code.

Themes

The themes that emerged relative to Evaluation Question 1 are outlined in this section with the corresponding focus group data.

Accessibility and Comfort. When asked if the program provided comfortable and accessible course delivery to participants via instructors, materials, course design, and facilities, a priori and emergent codes involving comfort were coded 12 times out of seven of the eight participants. Ten out of the 12 coded responses were positive perceptions of course accessibility and comfort, one out of the 12 coded responses highlighted the impact the COVID-19 global pandemic had on accessing certain physical activities (e.g., yoga), and one out of the 12 coded responses suggested the food options should be healthier and not so carbohydrate heavy. When asked about other transition programs participants may have attended (i.e., Focus Group

Question 1) and how the program prepared for transition to civilian life (i.e., Focus Group Question 2), and why they decided to participate in the program (i.e., Focus Group Question 5), participants reported high levels of comfort and perceived the program to be accessible via geographical locations, networking, and community. For example, participants reported the following:

- "I'll say that being in person and being local, were two big things . . . in person and having something in the community where you wanna put down roots was, I think, really powerful, because it puts you in proximity to a network that you could reach, but reach back to in a different way than maybe if you were not in person."
- The approach was drastically different. As far as the way we're our own cohort. And we did a lot of activities together . . . it's different than what you would get at like a TAP [Transition Assistance Program] class, or something like that."
- "As the only woman veteran that was in the room, I felt very comfortable with all of my veteran brothers that were there, and even those still serving. So, I felt really comfortable with the character of the group. I didn't feel excluded. Everybody welcomed me in."

Program Content: Integrating Wellness and Business. The theme of content, referring to the learning materials, balance between wellness/business curriculum, and the learning format, was coded 40 times from comments made by eight participants across Focus Group Questions 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 14. Twenty-six of the 40 codes were linked to highly positive conversations about the course material, with participants saying the material was "tailored with a purpose" and had a framework that blended real-world issues "with scholastic approach, which enables the legitimacy of the program." Content had the highest code count and the most positive

reactions of all a priori and emergent codes, suggesting materials, format, and curriculum were at the forefront of what was perceived as valuable in a transition program.

When asked about how the program's wellness content might have made an impact on participants' transitions (i.e., Focus Group Question 8), 10 of the 40 content codes involved positive perceptions from six out of the eight participants on wellness materials and instruction. Participants shared the following:

- "I really enjoyed the wellness week of instruction, and I still even go back and read the book that [the instructor] gave us and use it in in decision making and share it with others."
- "I kind of had to get out of my head with feeling like the nontraditional approach to things was okay. And so, that's a big part of what I got from the program, like it doesn't have to fit in a box. It can be a little bit different and still be effective."
- "The art therapy class we did as a group was useful. And then the individual one. I also enjoyed the yoga by the water."
- "The one, the thing that really kind of stood out about portion was the approach to looking at holistic health."

When asked about key takeaways when learning how to craft future civilian careers and job searches (i.e., Focus Group Question 10), code counts were slightly lower than wellness perceptions codes, coming in at five codes out of 40 content codes. Although participants had positive reactions to the business materials and instructors, with conversations around "what you actually value when setting up your career" and "getting to meet a lot of the veteran correspondents and visitors and speakers," only three out of the eight participants offered any feedback regrading business-related materials.

When asked what, if any, connections were made between wellness and professional business during the program (i.e., Focus Group Question 11), there were six code counts pertaining to perceptions of business and wellness integration across three participants, with some ambiguity revealed among participant perceptions. Participants indicated that although they thought the order of the weeks (e.g., wellness in Week 1, followed by business in Week 2) was well done, the integration was not as directly stated. Participants offered the following:

- "But I think because we talked about wellness first, we anchored that in our minds before we started thinking about business. So, as we were going through the business, everything that was fresh in our head was all about wellness . . . even though it might not have said and an [instructor] might not have come on said like, 'Here is the connection.' But it was the order that it was put in that made it, I think, very useful."
- "And then, you combine that with all the activities that we've had to do in [the program], it wasn't apparent at in the beginning that the wellness realm was intentional on [the program's] part to put that first instead [of business]. Now in the 2nd week, I think, [wellness] kind of broke down a lot of everyone's barriers in the class."
- "I think it more helped with life decisions like making changes in my life than it did my career, which was very helpful. And so, sorting through all that first, before I jump into the career step, I think, was useful. And so, that I thought was another unique thing about this is because we focus so much about introspection and understanding ourselves."

Impact on Participants' Transitions Into Civilian Life. Participants responded favorably to questions regarding relevance and the impact the program had on their transitions.

Impact was coded 27 times in the focus group transcript, with all eight participants giving positive reactions regarding the difference the program made overall in their lives. When asked how the program changed their perceptions of military-to-civilian transitions (i.e., Focus Group Question 12) and if they thought they assimilated into civilian life successfully (i.e., Focus Group Question 4), participants indicated the following:

- "The program really gave me balance and perspective, after spending 29 years in the military."
- "[The program] definitely had a strong impact in the way I do a lot of things in my life."
- "Talking about your values, for life after the military is, you know, what does matter to me . . . what is going to be the most important thing after I transition? Is it to make money or is it to live a purposeful life? That's going to drive my decisions. The wellness block of instruction had a very profound impact on me."
- "The program helped me be more deliberate in my decision-making process outside of the professional piece. Personally, I think I just pay more attention now than I probably did before."

Positive Perceptions of Program

Participants agreed overwhelmingly that the program was a positive experience, with 38 code counts of satisfaction over all eight participants and no code counts for negative perceptions. Satisfaction came out of multiple focus group questions, especially among course content and relevance. The most code counts were indicated when participants were asked if they would recommend the program to other military veterans facing transition (i.e., Focus Group Question 15), with the eight participants sharing they would "definitely recommend the

program." Participants shared the following about their perceptions of the program: "I love the program. I'm grateful for it. Thank you for allowing me to come. It's a great experience;" "It is an excellent course;" "I thought the whole thing was fantastic;" "It was very helpful to discovered things that we may not have thought about;" and "Very, very beneficial."

The analysis from the focus group transcript related to participants' reactions to the program's content, impact, and comfort/accessibility suggested an overwhelmingly positive experience from all participants. The data implied participants felt high levels of comfort and perceived the program to be accessible and inclusive. Almost every participant shared they would highly recommend the program to other transiting military service members and the program made a positive impact on their lives, suggesting the program met the participant satisfaction projected outcome.

Summary

To answer Evaluation Question 1, participants had overall positive perceptions and reactions about the program's content, relevance/impact, and accessibility. There were strong correlations between the survey and focus group regarding the integration of wellness and business material because both data sources supported a weaker perception of integration. Questions directly asking about the benefits of wellness activities among data sources elicited strong reactions of positive perceptions from participants and all agreed the activities associated with the program were satisfactory.

Evaluation Question 2

Evaluation Question 2 asked: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants redefined their identity during transition into civilian professional and personal life? Consistent with D. L. Kirkpatrick's (1998) Level 2

learning model of evaluation, Evaluation Question 2 considered participants' perceptions of learning and sought to understand if the program helped participants discover a new and positive way of thinking about themselves and their identity as civilians. The literature review in Chapter 2 presented a large amount of research aimed at identity formation for military veterans entering civilian life and "without learning, no change in behavior can occur" (D. L. Kirkpatrick, 1998, p. 31). Therefore, evaluating participant learning gleaned from the program in this study led to a change in how participants perceived themselves and their new identities as civilians.

Evaluation Question 2 was answered by analyzing data from participant responses to Survey Questions 2, 4, and 7 related to learning and identity formation and the focus group transcript seeking perceptions of learning in Focus Group Questions 2, 3, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 15. Finally, I coded the application essay questions. The findings from the coding process were then compared to the survey results and focus group data to analyze any changed perceptions to questions surrounding learning before and after the program.

Survey Results Related to Participant Perceptions of Learning How to Redefine Identity

To answer Evaluation Question 2, Survey Questions 2, 4, and 5 corresponded to D. L. Kirkpatrick's (1998) Level 2 learning model of evaluation and were analyzed for participants' perceptions of learning and identity formation. Learning was identified as the course material, instruction, and environment having an impact on participants' perceptions of changed identity, communication styles, wellness techniques, and relationship building after transitioning into civilian life. Table 14 provides the results from the survey questions.

Table 14

Participant Survey Responses

Statement	Strongly disagree				Strongly agree	
	1	2	3	4	5	*M*
2. The wellness themed material covered in the program made a positive impact on my own coping behaviors during and after my transition from military to civilian life.	0	0	0	7	9	4.56
4. The professional business material covered in the program made a positive impact on my own professional relationships, communication styles, and transition from military to civilian careers.	0	0	2	4	10	4.5
7. I feel the program's content was relevant to learning how to redefine my new identity as a civilian.	0	0	3	3	10	4.44

Note. *N* = 16. Reactions measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

I used descriptive statistics to evaluate participant responses for all rating scale items that correlated to participants' perceptions of learning and changed identity, capturing the average for each category. A summary of survey responses related to participant perceptions of learning how to redefine identity is included in Table 15.

Table 15

Participant Perceptions of Learning to Redefine Identity

D. L. Kirkpatrick Level 2: Learning	*M*
Learning/wellness (Survey Question 2)	4.56
Learning/business (Survey Question 4)	4.5
Learning/identity formation (Survey Question 7)	4.44
	4.5

Note. Reactions measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

Overall average scores for participant perceptions of learning outcomes were 4.5 out of 5, suggesting positive perceptions of learning and identity formation. The highest level of response overall was the program's wellness training with 4.56, followed by business material with 4.5 and identify formation with 4.44. Once again, as seen in Evaluation Question 1 results, wellness materials scored slightly higher than business materials with responses ranging from 4 (*agree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), suggesting a somewhat greater level of perceived learning occurred in the wellness courses than in the business courses. Notably, participant responses on learned identity formation scored relatively low compared to the entire survey at 4.44, with six out of 10 scoring in the *neither agree nor disagree* responses; however, 10 participants strongly agreed that the program impacted their identity formation.

The analysis from the survey responses suggested participants had a positive perception of learning outcomes in the program, particularly surrounding the wellness content and the positive impact on professional relationships and communication styles. One of the program's goals was to support participants in learning to redefine their identities as civilians, to which the survey analysis suggested the program generally accomplished its short-term outcome of teaching veterans how to redefine new identities as civilians.

Focus Group Related to Participant Perceptions of Learning to Redefine Identity

To answer Evaluation Question 2 about participants' perceptions of learning and identity formation, participant responses to Focus Group Questions 2, 3, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 15 were coded using one round of a prior codes and emergent codes, followed by a second round of focused coding to produce themes. The themes that emerged from coding the focus group transcript included embracing new identities, exploring and learning new skills, and meaningful and

purposeful futures. Table 16 provides a summary of code counts and corresponding emergent themes that helped to answer Evaluation Question 1.

Table 16

A Priori and Emergent Code Counts That Answered Evaluation Question 2

Code	*f*	Themes
Identity*	30	Embracing a new identity: The value of introspection
Learning/new skills	26	Exploring the unknown and learning new skills
Meaningful/purpose*	12	Meaningful and purposeful futures
Total	68	

Note. A total of 16 pages of the focus group transcript were reviewed and coded for a priori and emergent codes.
*emergent code.

Themes

The themes that emerged relative to Evaluation Question 2 are outlined in this section with the corresponding focus group data.

Embracing a New Identity: The Value of Introspection. All eight focus group participants touched upon the theme of identity, with 30 code counts on the words or phrases that coincided with identity and introspection. During the focus group, participants were asked how they would describe their thoughts on identity, and how it may have changed after participating in the program (i.e., Focus Group Question 3). Embracing new identities and the value of being introspective emerged as themes, with positive connotations and perceptions surrounding new identities, suggesting they did learn to redefine their identities after completing the program. One participant shared the following about their identity journey and introspection:

> I'd say that I felt like I was living kind of like, a separate life, like there was different versions of me and then, I was playing roles and all these different things. So, I think the course gave me permission to be one person all the time, and instead of you know, being

> Army-man, being the family man, being a friend, or whatever I feel like. But now, I'm gonna do it under my terms. You know, I'm gonna be who I want to be. And I think that's the same person that I'll carry forward into the civilian world. But instead of just, you know, trying to play the role of, this is what a good military member looks like, I now understand what my actual strengths are that I bring to a team regardless of what it is, and being able to bring that to the table, I think was powerful. We got to focus so much about introspection and understanding ourselves.

Other participants shared some more powerful comments, sharing, "The program almost gave us permission to be our true authentic selves in every way;" "It was a safe reminder to kind of embrace our new identity, but also just know that it's not our only identity;" and "It's really just the eye-opening experience that there's more to us than just the uniform and I think that's a huge benefit of the program."

Exploring the Unknown and Learning New Skills. Participants were asked to identify how the training may have inspired leadership, learning, and confidence in transferable skills, with further probing on how the program prepared participants to handle any anticipations surrounding transition (i.e., Focus Group Questions 1 and 9). Learning and new skills was coded 27 times, with all eight participants giving positive feedback about learning. During the focused coding process, the theme of exploring the unknown and learning new skills was identified. Participants spoke specifically about learning as "discovering," "contrary to the unknown," and "getting out of the box." The responses also involved them saying "how your skills transfer" and "setting realistic visions for different people at different stages in their career." Some related statements from participants on learning, skill transfer, and exploring the unknown were as follows:

- "In this program, we acknowledge what we didn't know, and we explored that unknown space. And so, it was very helpful to discover things that we may not have thought about. I can't speak to what other people are doing [nonparticipants who are transitioning], but I think it's probably a lot more mechanistic than what we [program participants] did and they're [nonparticipants] probably not exploring those dark spaces, those empty spaces, those unknowns."
- "I learned that the industry [professional business] is looking for me and they want me, my skills and my experience, and that that really helped me out. And that was kind of my big takeaway."
- "[The program] helped me be more deliberate in my decision-making process."

Meaningful and Purposeful Futures. When participants were asked why they participated in the program and how it was different than other transition programs they attended, responses elicited a priori codes of meaningful/purposeful and were coded 12 times, with the actual word "meaningful" coded five of the 12 times in relation to their program experience and outcomes. Other associations with the code of meaningful came from seven out of the eight participants and almost always insinuated a connection to their futures. For example, the following conversation between two participants illustrated the perception of how the program changed their viewpoints on their future and career:

> Participant A: "It's like, what do you want your life to become? It's not just about the job in the military anymore, it's about what's your self-worth."
>
> Participant B: "I agree, and something I took away was okay, do I really want to go to an organization that has like, a structure like the military? Or, do I want to go to a place

> where I can kind of be myself and kind of guide myself through my own career, and figure things out on my own?"

Another participant who chose to go back to school to obtain a Master of Business Administration degree after participating in the program said:

> I guess I expected to go to business school and spend the first several months learning different career options. But what [the program] really helped me do was narrow down what industries I was actually interested in, which made the initial jump into business school a lot smoother and allowed me a head start on that recruiting aspect, which I think correlated with an earlier job offer than most people. So, [the program] really helped me focus that [job] search in a more meaningful matter.

Others shared how the program helped them in "knowing what you want to do, and knowing what you don't want to do" because the content was "purposeful and meaningful."

The analysis from the focus group transcript pertaining to learning and identity suggested participants had an increased positive self-awareness surrounding identity formation as a civilian and professional due to the learning that occurred in the program. The analysis also suggested participants' learning evolved by redefining their identities through increased confidence, newfound empowerment, and finding meaning in transitions. All of these factors tied directly to the program's processes and projected outcomes and coincided with D. L. Kirkpatrick's (1998) Level 2 learning evaluation.

Summary

To answer Evaluation Question 2, there was a strong indication in the findings that participants successfully learned ways to redefine their identity during transition into civilian professional and personal life. Although learning to redefine identity did score low in the survey

results, the focus group prompts gave participants a chance to fully explain what identity meant to them outside of the traditional definition they encountered in the survey. The findings showed the program taught participants that identity means embracing their true authentic self and learning how to value introspection and finding meaning and purpose in new career roles.

The findings also showed a direct correlation between participating in the program and redefining identities. After comparing the application essay responses to the survey and focus group findings, there was a marked change in how participants felt about their transition and identities through the skills they learned in the program. Participants wrote about lacking confidence and self-worth when thinking about civilian job searches in the application essays; however, after participating in the program, they reported strong convictions of being "worthy of the industry," and shared, "Industry is looking for me" and "my skills will transfer." Likewise, there was a change in perceptions around meaningful work because application essays revealed a desire to make an impact and contribution in their future civilian careers, whereas in the focus group findings, participants reported meaningful work meant also being themselves, saying, "It's not just about the job; it's who do you want to be." In other words, participants learned through the program that to make an impact, they needed to align their identities successfully to the meaningful work on which they wished to make an impact.

Evaluation Question 3

Evaluation Question 3 asked: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants transformed coping behaviors required for transition into civilian professional and personal life? Consistent with D. L. Kirkpatrick's (1998) Level 3 behavior model of evaluation, Evaluation Question 3 considered participants' perceptions of changed behavior after the program, especially related to learned coping and

supportive measures and implementing wellness techniques. This study evaluated participants' perceptions 18 months after the program ended, to which D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) noted time is the greatest indicator of changed behavior; evaluations should allow for participants to have the opportunity to use and apply the learned new behavior. Changed behavior in this evaluation sought to understand if the program helped participants discover new and positive ways of coping with transition stress and using wellness modes as they transitioned to civilian life and careers.

Evaluation Question 3 was answered by analyzing data from participant responses to Survey Questions 2, 4, and 6 related to behavioral changes and the focus group transcript seeking perceptions of coping and supportive measures in Focus Group Questions 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, and 16. Finally, a document analysis of the application essay questions was conducted and focused on Essay Questions 1 and 4. I compared the findings from the document analysis to the survey results and focus group data to analyze any changed perceptions to questions surrounding behavior, coping, and wellness interventions after completing the program.

Survey Related to Participant Perceptions of Changed Behavior

To answer Evaluation Question 3, Survey Questions 2, 4, and 6 corresponded to D. L. Kirkpatrick's (1998) Level 3 behavior model of evaluation and analyzed participants' perceptions of changed behavior and new coping skills. Survey responses included a 5-point Likert scale as previously described under Evaluation Question 1. Table 17 provides the results from the survey questions.

Table 17

Participant Survey Responses

Statement	Strongly disagree				Strongly agree	
	1	2	3	4	5	*M*
2. The wellness themed material covered in the program made a positive impact on my own coping behaviors during and after my transition from military to civilian life.	0	0	0	7	9	4.56
4. The professional business material covered in the program made a positive impact on my own professional relationships, communication styles, and transition from military to civilian careers.	0	0	2	4	10	4.5
6. The networking content provided during the program helped me feel supported during my transition from military to civilian life and work.	0	0	2	3	11	4.56

Note. $N = 16$. Reactions measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

I used descriptive statistics to evaluate participant responses for all rating scale items that correlated to participants' perceptions of changed behavior surrounding coping and wellness interventions, capturing the average for each category. A summary of survey responses related to participant perceptions of learning how to redefine identity is included in Table 18.

Table 18

Participant Perceptions of Changed Behavior

D. L. Kirkpatrick Level 3: Behavior	*M*
Behavior/wellness (Survey Question 2)	4.56
Behavior/business (Survey Question 4)	4.5
Behavior/support and coping (Survey Question 6)	4.56
	4.54

Note. Reactions measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

Overall average scores for participant perceptions of behavior outcomes were 4.54 out of 5, suggesting positive perceptions of changed behavior surrounding coping and wellness interventions. When asked to rate perceptions of wellness and business-themed materials having an impact on participant coping behaviors, both were averaged around the same with 4.56 and 4.5, respectively. However, although two participants were undecided if the business materials made an impact, there were no ambiguous responses for the wellness material themed questions with all participants either agreeing or strongly agreeing on the impact wellness had on coping behaviors. When asked to rate perceptions of the networking content provided during the program to aid in feeling supported during the transition from military to civilian life and work, the overall average was 4.56, with most responses rated as *strongly agree* (5).

The analysis from the survey responses suggested participants transformed their coping behaviors by transferring wellness and business strategies learned in the program into their new civilian lives. The data suggested participants also used networking skills learned in the program to enact supportive coping mechanisms, suggesting a successful transition experience, which was an intended outcome of the program.

Focus Group Related to Participant Perceptions of Behavior

To answer Evaluation Question 3 regrading participants' perceptions of changed behavior after the program, related to learned coping and supportive measures and implementing wellness techniques, participant responses to Focus Group Questions 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, and 16 were coded using one round of a prior codes and emergent codes, followed by a second round of focused coding to produce themes. The themes that emerged from coding the focus group transcript included coping mechanisms enacted, moving past fear and into empowerment, and the value of community and support. Table 19 provides a summary of code counts and corresponding emergent themes that helped to answer Evaluation Question 3.

Table 19

A Priori and Emergent Code Counts and Themes

Code	*f*	Themes
Coping	23	Coping mechanisms and storytelling
Empowered*	35	Transitioning from fear toward empowerment
Fear*	6	Transitioning from fear toward empowerment
Supported	20	Community and culture: I got your six
Document totals	60	

Note. A total of 16 pages of focus group transcript were reviewed and coded for a priori codes and emergent codes.
*emergent code.

Themes

Transitioning From Fear Toward Empowerment. This theme emerged in the focus group coding more than any other in the transcript, with the research memo noting it was the only code that had an indication of physical reactions of participants, with notes of getting "choked up" and "almost moved to tears" when speaking about their experience.

When asked about the challenges participants may have faced during their transition over the prior 18 months, with a probe of how the program may have helped alleviate those challenges, the a priori and emergent codes of words and phrases that coincided with fear and empowerment appeared a combined total of 41 times from all eight participants in the focus group. The theme of moving through fear toward empowerment emerged from participant conversations that used fear-based language as something they felt *before* the program and perceptions of empowerment emerged *during* and *after* completing the program. Responses with fear codes included phrases like, "I think it's taken a lot of the fear away" and "I was quite apprehensive about the process [the program] because all the other programs the military offers really doesn't hit some of those marks, but this one took the fear out of transition."

Six out of the eight participants either directly used the phrase "it's going to be okay" or a version of it to indicate they moved beyond the fear of transition and into an empowered state due to the program. Some examples of this phrase were in the following participant quotes:

- "I would say, going into the course, you know, I had this mentality, like I had this fear of what is next, and the unknown, because military is all I've done in my adult life. I've done the military more than I haven't done the military so, not knowing, you know, am I good enough? What is it gonna be? How am I gonna fit into this world? And I left the course feeling and knowing that I'm going to be okay. That industry is looking for me that they want me."
- "[Doing the program] was a reminder that everything's going to be okay, like we all got to take the uniform off eventually. And life is, life is going to be good."

- "It was all fears in my head that we get built up from barracks, deployments, and things like that. And then I was able to, you know, talk to people about it [in the program] and say, 'No, this is okay. You're going to be fine. There's no problem.'"

Empowerment themes showed up in focus group conversations surrounding the program's influence on participants' confidence to take control over their future and power to enact their goals. For example, phrases from the transcript included the following: "I'm gonna do it under my terms" and "I'm for sure going to be who I want to be going forward." When asked how participants might have used the authentic excellence training they received during the program in their current life (i.e., Focus Group Question 7), the following exchange between two participants highlighted actionable ways they were empowered to move beyond fear and into more authenticity and confidence:

> Participant A: "I've learned to push through portions that make me uncomfortable and to take the bull by the horns and just going out there and being uncomfortable. And knowing my strength. And where my weaknesses are at and what I need to do to overcome."
>
> Participant B: "I agree with you. It [authentic excellence] has been forcing me to speak up more, and even on the topics that are difficult or challenging."

Coping Mechanisms and Storytelling. When asked about strategies participants may have learned directly from the program that they now used to help them cope with transition challenges (i.e., Focus Group Question 6), input from all eight focus group participants was recorded with the a priori code of coping measured 25 times. Participants' answers were more tangible action items that were enacted because of the program. For example, participants powerfully stated the following:

- "One thing I did that I would not have done otherwise [without the program] is, I started therapy full time. So, like, a holistic therapy practice where they have yoga and other things like that. And I also just started taking some medication because I always feared like, oh, what about my security clearance? And I just got to the point where, like, my wellness is more important than my fears are of going in and seeing and talking to somebody. I've been doing that since [the program], and it's been really helpful and useful."
- "I started writing poetry. To try to get my thoughts out of my head and on paper. And that's been helpful."
- "I journal often now, and I never done that before prior to [the program]. Not only was it helpful, for just like organizing thoughts, but also reaffirming lessons from mistakes that I made, or something interesting that I heard. I'm developing myself in a healthy manner and learning from mistakes and learning from failures and not feeling like it's the end of the world."
- "I definitely wanted to do more yoga and massage [after the program] and I did integrate it into my life."

Storytelling techniques were used in the program to assist in coping behaviors in the professional business environment. When asked about their overall impression of storytelling training as a tool for learning how to communicate (i.e., Focus Group Question 9), participants responded with positive perceptions of the coursework, with five out of the eight speaking up about how surprised they were that they enjoyed it, and it was impactful. Reponses included the following: "I found that that class has really set a strong foundation for not only personal storytelling, but also for strategy and consulting" and "It has really helped build strong

narratives" and that it helped them with "getting comfortable in uncomfortable situations." One participant elaborated on how learning to tell their military stories in the workplace helped to bridge the military–civilian divide. They shared:

> [The storytelling course] made it easier. You know, sometimes in the military, you don't want to talk to people about your experiences. And you don't know how to relate. And I think that hearing other peoples' experiences and how they told their stories helped. You find ways to maybe articulate a little bit better: how you either discuss your military service, or how you implement it when you're interviewing, and you kind of leave it into how you know civilians would understand. You know, everything from your stories can equate to business.

Community and Support: I Got Your Six. The most critiqued portion of the focus group came when participants were asked about the ways in which the program helped them to feel supported during their transition (i.e., Focus Group Question 13). Although support was coded 20 times, five of those codes correlated with positive perceptions surrounding the cohort community found during the program, and the other 15 codes were identified as recommendations to strengthen supportive measures after the program. Positive perceptions of support seemed to come from the feelings of belonging the cohort gave, as seen in the following response:

> I was more nervous about leaving the military because I was medically retired and sad about leaving so entering into spaces with other veterans who maybe weren't in that same place, was a little bit different for me. So, I think I had a little bit of kind of shame associated with it, but being in the program was helpful, because it just kind of showed

me that things were still possible for me, and some of the same concerns that I had about my future other people kind of shared. So, I realize I'm really not alone in this.

Suggested responses to improve support measures after the program involved ongoing professional development sessions, a program alumni network, including more women and veterans from diverse backgrounds, and more connections with the business world. One poignant critique from a participant garnered many head nods of agreement and one participant clapped their hands in agreeance. The participant shared:

> So, we are launching ourselves into the civilian world and we had that one networking night. But we're kind of talking to ourselves, right? There's a lot of veterans talking to other veterans. I want to get with people who aren't necessarily veterans, but they want to help veterans. And sometimes, I feel like we get caught in the military circle, even when we're making the transition out. I also wish there was a way to continue linking together formally.

The analysis from the focus group transcript suggested participants not only overcame their fears surrounding transition, but also that they exhibited behavior that implied feeling empowered as a program outcome. Using coping strategies learned in the program, including storytelling, authentic excellence (Crace & Crace, 2020) training, and business strategies focusing on their craft, the analysis also suggested participants transformed their coping behaviors and were flourishing in their transitions. Although feeling supported was also an outcome of the program, the focus group transcript analysis suggested a lack of longitudinal support for participants, in the form of networking and ongoing wellness and professional development training needed to sustain a successful transition.

Summary

To answer Evaluation Question 3, there was a marked positive change in behavior related to coping in military-to-civilian transitions. The application essay responses revealed participants' perceptions of managing transitions before the program were largely filled with anxiety and fear, with little to no coping skills. Participants wrote about fearing for their mental health, worry over the loss of their military identity, and wondering how they would create a healthy work–life balance for themselves and their families.

The application essays also exposed a general lack of understanding around wellness techniques that could be used to help cope with looming transition stress. However, in the focus group and survey findings, participants overwhelming reported feeling like they moved through fear and into empowerment. Most reported feeling confident in using wellness techniques and some were now going to therapy and using more introspective, reflective, and physical wellness techniques to ensure they were taking care of their mental health. Likewise, behaviors around creating stability were transformed after the program through networking and supportive measures. In the application essays, participants reported anxiety over where they would live and how they would provide their families financially; however, after the program, many reported a feeling of "it's going to be okay" and took comfort in knowing they "weren't alone" in the process of transition.

Summary of Findings

The mixed-method findings included participants benefiting from the program positively by learning to redefine their identities successfully and transform their coping behaviors to manage their transitions into civilian professional and personal life better. Participants also reported a strengthened ability to enact wellness techniques when faced with transition stressors

and felt the program also had an impact on their decision making when approaching new career choices. The theme of overcoming fear and embracing new identities was most prevalent among participants, exhibiting positive changes in behavior and identity formation resulting from the program. Overall, the wellness course material was rated higher than the business material, and participants gave feedback on better integration between wellness and business content. This finding was confirmed by the overwhelming need for wellness and mental health concerns that participants wrote about in the application essay responses before they entered the program. Participants offered some suggestions on how to improve the program, mainly in the form of postprogram longitudinal support by means of ongoing professional development, an alumni network, and including more diverse participants in the program.

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS

Reintegrating back into civilian life after serving in the U.S. military often creates challenges and stress for many military service members (Bond et al., 2022; Castro & Kintzle, 2014; Flack & Kite, 2021; Markowitz et al., 2022; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). Identity conflict for military veterans in civilian transition is often correlated with the chance for a successful transition, creating the need for supportive measures that help veterans navigate the civilian ethos (Ahern et al., 2015; Castro & Dursun, 2019; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Smith & True, 2014; Woodward & Jenkings, 2011). Recent research has examined how well-being and positive coping behaviors might be at the core of a successful reintegration into civilian life, with recommendations for transition programming that integrates wellness into curriculum (Castro & Dursun, 2019; Robinson et al., 2017). Considering higher education institutions are equipped to handle program design, research, instruction, and wellness-based lessons, these learning environments have a unique advantage in providing not only continuing education in the form of degrees, but also transition programming for military service members (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Morris et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2011).

The purpose of this mixed-method study was to formatively evaluate participant perceptions of a military-to-civilian transition program in a higher education setting that considered integrating well-being with career development. In addition, in this evaluation, I sought to identify whether the participants reported positive perceptions of self-redefinition in civilian professional and personal life, and if they attributed those identity changes to what they

learned in the program. Likewise, in this evaluation, I examined if perceived behavioral changes transformed physical and mental wellness actions required to facilitate flourishing during participants' military-to-civilian transition.

I adapted the D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) model for evaluation as the research design I used to evaluate this program, with emphasis on the first three levels of the model: Level 1 (i.e., reactions), Level 2 (i.e., learning), and Level 3 (i.e., behavior). The D. L. Kirkpatrick model levels directly coincided with this program evaluation's three evaluation questions and are explained more fully in subsequent sections of this chapter. I used a triangulation of data sources consisting of quantitative data analysis from surveys given to all participants 1 year after completing the program and qualitative data analysis from application essays and a focus group of participants.

Chapter 5 provides an interpretive discussion between the findings from the evaluation and the literature, and recommendations for practice and future research. This chapter begins with a summary of the findings from the data sources relating to the evaluation questions, followed by a discussion of those findings and how they are linked to the research. Next, recommendations for policy and procedures are offered based on the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, as well as new research to support those recommendations. Chapter 5 concludes with a summary of the study, as well as the impact the evaluation had on me as the researcher.

Summary of Major Findings

This section summarizes each evaluation question and provides a discussion of the findings considering the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

Evaluation Question 1

Evaluation Question 1 asked: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, what are participants' reactions about their experiences with the content, relevance, and accessibility of the program? Evaluation Question 1 directly coincided with the D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) model Level 1 (i.e., reaction), which sought to understand if participants perceived their experience with the program's curriculum, instructors, relevance, and accessibility to be satisfactory. I collected data from a 5-point Likert-scale survey and then conducted an analysis using descriptive statistics produced from participant responses. Then, I analyzed the data collected from the focus group transcript, with emphasis on Focus Group Questions 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, and 15, using a first round of a priori coding, followed by a second round of focused coding. In the following subsections, I summarize the themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Program Content. D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) noted that for a program to be effective, participants must react positively to its content; otherwise, learning will not occur. In addition, participant reactions should guide program directors into modifying future programming based off participant feedback and satisfactory levels. The findings about participants' reactions to the program were largely positive, with highly rated responses and code counts on logistical elements of the program including business and wellness instructor pedagogy, course materials, format, and impact on participants' lives when considering transition. The findings support Ahern et al.'s (2015) recommendation of the use of impactful higher education support, effective transition programming, and wellness interventions to support veterans in their successful transitions because the findings showed the program's materials, format, and curriculum made a perceived impact on participants' transitions. In fact, some participants responded with "love"

and “gratitude” for the program and others called the content “excellent,” “fantastic,” and “helpful.”

In the survey, there was an equally high level of response consistency across wellness and business themed material, with wellness scoring slightly higher than business. However, the focus group seemed to give participants the opportunity to take a deeper dive into their reactions to the content. The focus group findings related to content showed there was more collective agreement that wellness content was more impactful than business content, with 10 of the 40 content codes involving positive perceptions on wellness and five out of the 40 content codes involving business content. These positive perceptions of wellness in the findings not only supported the literature that wellness content is needed for veterans to navigate transition challenges (Castro & Dursun, 2019; Robinson et al., 2017), but also provided data that supported the positively perceived *use* of wellness interventions in transition programming (Ahern et al., 2015; Castro & Dursun, 2019; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Robinson et al., 2017). Despite research on the mental, emotional, and physical benefits of well-being interventions for transitioning military service members, Perkins et al. (2020) indicated a gap in providing holistic programming that covers all domains of well-being; the findings of the current study could help fill in that gap with positive perceptions of wellness occurring in transition programming.

Disconnect in Integrating Program Content. A major purpose of the program was to incorporate wellness *with* business content to assist military veterans with a successful transition into civilian lives. However, both the survey and the focus group responses showed participant uncertainty on whether the program was successful at integrating wellness content with business content. When asked what connections participants were able to make between wellness and professional business training during the program, there was a 10-second pause in responses

during the focus group, with three of the eight focus group participants reporting wellness integration was not directly stated as the intention of the program and instructions were not clear on "here is the connection." Instead, participants indicated they inferred through their experience that the program was "attempting to integrate wellness" into the program. One participant noted, "It wasn't apparent in the beginning the wellness realm was intentional on [the program's] part to put that first instead [of business]." However, some participants did note the wellness week "broke down a lot of everyone's barriers in the class," supporting Vogt et al.'s (2018) and Castro's (2018) recommendations that a successful military transition includes well-being interventions incorporated into other domains, like career development, networking, and finances, to be the most impactful.

Impact on Transition. Impact was coded 27 times in the focus group transcript, with all eight participants giving positive reactions regarding the difference the program made overall in their transitions, specifically on assimilating into civilian life successfully and redefining identities using learned coping behaviors. Impact findings indicated the program aligned with literature that has suggested creating veteran transition programming that initiates exploring a civilian identity and creates intentional spaces for veterans to gather and share experiences (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Morris et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2011). The findings indicated the program's business and wellness themed materials and instruction not only made an impact on their transition, but because the program ran in a cohort model, participants also reported feeling "safe" to learn and explore wellness and business themed topics, a coping intervention commonly used by veterans (Brunger et al., 2013; Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Herman & Yarwood, 2014; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Romaniuk & Kidd, 2018). As a result of using the coping mechanism of shared experiences and comradery in the program and perceived impactful

program content, participants noted the program impacted their transition by giving them "balance," "community," "perspective," "values," "purpose," and "decision-making skills," attributes researchers have viewed as conduits for impactful development, innovation, and new forms of identity (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Bloch & Richmond, 1998; Crace & Crace, 2020; Hudson, 1999).

When assessing reactions to impact on the survey, I noted the wellness themed material covered in the program scored slightly higher than the business material regarding a positive impact on participants' coping behaviors in comparison to a positive impact on professional relationships and communication styles during and after transition from military to civilian life. This finding suggests wellness themed topics were valued highly among the participants, supported by the literature that has suggested veterans are most in need of programming consisting of interventions and supportive measures that reflect well-being needs because the majority of available transition programs focus only on business skills or mental health issues (Ahern et al., 2015; Castro & Dursun, 2019; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Perkins et al., 2017; Smith & True, 2014; Woodward & Jenkings, 2011).

Evaluation Question 2

Evaluation Question 2 asked: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants redefined their identity during transition into civilian professional and personal life? Evaluation Question 2 directly coincided with D. L. Kirkpatrick's (1998) Level 2 (i.e., learning) model of evaluation and considered participants' perceptions of learning to understand if the program helped participants discover a new and positive way of thinking about themselves and their identity as civilians. Learning was identified as the course material, instruction, and environment having an impact on participants'

perceptions of changed identity, communication styles, wellness techniques, and relationship building after transitioning into civilian life.

I collected data from the 5-point Likert scale survey, focusing on Survey Questions 2, 4, and 7, that correlated with learning and identity, and then conducted an analysis using descriptive statistics produced from participant responses. I then collected data from the focus group transcript, looking at Focus Group Questions 2, 3, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 15 that emphasized learning and identity, and analyzed the data through coding using a priori codes and a second round of focused coding. Finally, the findings from the application essays were analyzed using in vivo coding and axial coding, which were then compared to the survey results and focus group data to analyze any changed perceptions to questions surrounding learning before and after the program, giving a potential indication of program success. The following subsections summarize the major themes for this evaluation question that came out of the findings.

Unraveling Self and Learning New Identities. An overarching theme in the transition literature from Chapter 2 involved a redefinition of *self* and the requirement to renegotiate one's identity against the backdrop of a life transformation (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014; M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Bridges, 1980; Grimell, 2017; Willson, 2019). In the evaluation findings, evidence of positive redefinitions of identity emerged related to participants' abilities to unravel their established military identity and transition into a civilian self successfully by acquiring new skills learned in the program (Black & Warhurst, 2019). The data implied that learning did take place through an exploration of unknown skills (i.e., coded 27 times in the focus group transcript) and embracing introspection during identity formation (i.e., coded 30 times). One participant stated that before the program, they felt like there were "different versions" of themselves and that they were "playing roles;" however, because of what they learned through

the program, they could be “one person all the time.” Another participant shared a feeling of “safety” in exploring their new identity through the program’s interventions. This navigation of identity directly linked to Goodman et al.’s (2011) assertion that an impending transition often involves mental or real “role rehearsal to anticipate the transition” (p. 41) and often requires new learning strategies and coping mechanisms to assimilate successfully to the new or altered identity.

Research on the psychological and physical well-being interventions used to guide an individual toward flourishing during transition has established social connectedness, optimism, meaning, purpose, and positive identity formation experiences produce the most successful transitions (Crace & Crace, 2020; Flack & Kite, 2021). The current study findings suggest the learning that occurred in the program offered participants the ability to redefine their identity and experience a successful transition.

Meaning and Purpose. As a time to reflect and reinvent, the beginning phase of a transition is where an individual will often find meaning in their new professional and personal lives and seek out significant opportunities (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Pryor & Bright, 2011). Meaning and purpose emerged in the application essays and again in the focus group frequently, with a combined 49 code counts, aligning with the literature on military career transition that has indicated veterans value meaningful civilian professions after experiencing purposeful military careers (Ahern et al., 2015; Grimell, 2017; Herman & Yarwood, 2014; Naphan & Elliot, 2015; Sherman & Gibbs, 2023).

Before the program, participants noted in application essays that “finding meaningful work,” being able to “contribute,” and “finding something to be passionate about” were attributes they hoped to gain in the program. Although helping participants find meaningful work

modalities was not a specific program outcome, the evaluation findings implied that after participating in the program, the connotation of meaning and purpose began to shift toward more identity-focused implications of meaning and purpose, rather than the actual work modality itself. For example, participants stated, "It's not just about the job anymore; it's about your self-worth" and "I want to be myself in the career that I am passionate about." Another participant noted the program created a need to find meaning and purpose within themselves and harness that as the focus of their job search. This type of identity forming through meaningful careers was supported by Grimell's (2017) study, which highlighted that veterans will often experience redefinitions of *self* as a result of carrying over the importance of meaningful work from military experiences like deployments, missions, and feeling as if they were a part of something bigger.

Interestingly, when participants were further asked to explain what meaningful work looked like to them when considering career placement, their responses in the application essays and focus group aligned with evidence from the literature that has suggested veterans prefer being hired based on their leadership potential over a job offer based only on service to their country (Ford, 2017; Schultz & Chandrasekaran, 2014). Furthermore, the findings indicated the modalities of those meaningful careers were based off how their identities were forming during their transition experiences, rather than the meaningful work they may have done in the military. For example, one participant was medically retired and now wanted to help trauma survivors, and another participant said, "I also realized that I am worth much more than my military specialty and would like to explore more about the potential I have, to find who I really am."

Evaluation Question 3

Evaluation Question 3 asked: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants transformed coping behaviors required for

transition into civilian professional and personal life? Evaluation Question 3 directly coincided D. L. Kirkpatrick's (1998) Level 3 (i.e., behavior) model of evaluation and considered participants' perceptions of changed behavior after the program, especially related to learned coping and supportive measures and implementing wellness techniques. Changed behavior in this evaluation sought to understand if the program helped participants discover new and positive ways of coping with transition stress and using wellness modes as they transitioned to civilian life and careers.

I collected data using a 5-point Likert-scale survey, focusing on Survey Questions 2, 4, and 6, and analyzed the data using descriptive statics that produced the average of participants' perceptions of behavioral changes around coping and well-being measures. Then, I collected data from the focus group transcript, focusing on Focus Group Questions 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, and 16 that emphasized behavior and coping themes, and analyzed the data using a priori codes and a second round of focused coding. Finally, the findings from the application essays were analyzed using in vivo coding and axial coding and were then compared to the survey results and focus group data to analyze any changed perceptions to questions surrounding coping with transition stress and perceptions about well-being.

Overcoming Transition Challenges. The theme of fear arose most frequently across the four application essay questions and was coded from all 16 application essay respondents. This finding was illustrated through responses reflecting anxiety, concern, inner conflict, identity loss, and a general lack of confidence around impending transitions into civilian personal and professional life. One participant noted they were not confident in how their transition would manifest, which caused them considerable fear. This finding coincides with research that has suggested a loss or letting go of a former lifestyle or identity can lead an individual to respond

with fear (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Crace & Crace, 2020; Iyer & Jetten, 2023). Difficulties veterans experience during and after transition due to fear and anxiety could include financial distress, family problems, maladjustment to career and educational settings, mental health issues, and even homelessness and criminal behaviors (Castro & Dursun, 2019; Castro & Kintzle, 2017; Ravindran et al., 2020; Vogt et al., 2018; Whitworth et al., 2020). However, veterans who use values, hope, self-compassion, and productive coping strategies can achieve successful transition (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Bloch & Richmond, 1998; Crace & Crace, 2020; Hudson, 1999).

In fact, the focus group and survey findings showed participants perceived a transformation in their feelings and behaviors toward transition because the themes of empowerment and assurance replaced fear-based language. For example, six out of the eight participants in the focus group used the phrase "it's going to be okay" to indicate they had moved beyond fear and now had confidence in their ability to handle transition stress. Likewise, participants responded with empowered statements, such as "being who I want to be" and "take the bull by the horns." When considering new careers, one participant said, "The industry is looking for me and wants me," a stark difference to the application essay responses that professed a new career being "frankly scary" and they felt they had "very little training" with "little to no confidence in being able to start a new career outside of the military."

Participants attributed the authentic excellence (Crace & Crace, 2020) training they received and the business material (e.g., the Big 5 workshop, the What Comes Next workshop) as actionable ways they were empowered to move beyond fear and into a more enabled sense of being, transforming their behavior in transition positively. The research supported these findings; veterans who use productive coping strategies may view transitions as a conduit for

development, innovation, excitement, and new forms of identity (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Bloch & Richmond, 1998; Crace & Crace, 2020; Hudson, 1999).

Coping Through the Liminal Space of Transitions. The liminal space, or the in-between part of the transition process where an induvial is no longer in the phase of preparing to leave the military but also not fully in their civilian careers, is where participants often encounter a deconstruction of previous norms before a turn toward forming a new identity (Turner, 1987). For some theorists, it is the liminal space where the true work of identity reconstruction takes place (Beech, 2011; Tagliaventi, 2019; Thomassen, 2014; Willson, 2019). Coping, in the form of behavioral changes required for transition into civilian professional and personal life, emerged as a theme in this evaluation to express the inward and outward work during the liminal phase of transition.

Participants reported the storytelling workshop to be the most impactful coping strategy used during the program for not only personal identity forming—and as one participant noted, "getting comfortable" in civilian culture and spaces—but also for professional networking and career development. During the storytelling workshop, participants learned from Armed Services Arts Partnership trained instructors to tell their real-life military experiences in relatable and impactful stories. Using exercises designed to uncover important memories, participants created an engaging narrative arc and learned to perform their stories (Armed Services Arts Partnership, n.d.). Participants may have perceived this exercise as powerful because they were able to bring forward their military identity in a safe civilian environment. It also allowed them to begin to craft a new civilian identity while maintaining a semblance of their previous military one. In turn, the findings indicated participants began to taking ownership and individualization of their postmilitary identities through storytelling, supported by Martin's (2022) assertion that veterans

should have the “right of self-definition” (p. 8). Participant responses to the storytelling workshop aligned with the research on how military experiences and identity are intertwined through autobiographical memory work; military pride and identification; and the importance of storytelling to maintain ties to military identities, heal trauma, and lessen the divide between veterans and civilians (E. Anderson & Nelson, 2017; Mamon et al., 2017; Martin, 2022; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Williams et al., 2018). This notion of narrating their military experience has also been supported in the literature as a successful coping mechanism in military-to-civilian transitions (E. Anderson & Nelson, 2017; Mamon et al., 2017; Martin, 2022; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Williams et al., 2018).

Participants reported employing strategies, either learned or inspired by the program, to create new and different ways to cope with transition in the 18 months after the program, including starting therapy for the first time, writing poetry to express their thoughts more clearly, journaling, and developing healthy eating and exercise habits. I consider these new learned coping behaviors to coincide with building their civilian lives and redefining their new identity, creating pathway toward the new beginning phase of a transition (M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Bridges, 1980; Pryor & Bright, 2011). Crace and Crace (2020) described the beginning phase as a time for an individual to flourish if they have gone through a successful transition, with flourishing defined as the “consistent level of productivity, fulfillment and resilience” (p. 5). In other words, the findings supported the program’s intended outcomes of positive transformed coping behaviors and suggested participants should then flourish in their new beginnings phase of transition.

Supportive Mechanisms. Defining available support through friends, programming, education communities, networks, and mentors are important coping mechanisms during a

transition and one of the tenets of the 4S system (i.e., situation, self, support, and strategies) that Goodman et al. (2011), adapted by M. L. Anderson et al. (2012), asserted is the basis for a successful transition. Opportunities for program improvement were found in the survey and focus group responses involving community and supportive strategies, which are the basis of a successful transition in the 4S transition framework (see Chapter 1 for a full description of the 4S framework).

Participants indicated that although they felt supported during the program, their cohort community provided the most comfort and positive perceptions of support. This coping through comradery indicated in the findings is supported by the literature. For example, unity and contentedness among everyone in a military unit are demanded over the needs of an individual, creating a sense of *we* over *I* that is intended for combat readiness and successful future missions (Atuel & Castro, 2018; Cooper et al., 2018; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Romaniuk & Kidd, 2018). Although this finding was not an intended outcome of the program, participants found comfort and support in the comradery of their cohort. Therefore, future programming should consider using the innate participant desire for social connectedness as a mechanism for coping during transition and incorporate more opportunities for togetherness outside of the program (e.g., outings on the weekend between the 2 weeks of programming).

Although the focus group transcript yielded 20 codes indicating themes of support, 15 of those codes aligned with participant recommendations to strengthen supportive measures after the program. Participants suggested ongoing professional development sessions that support their career search and identity, a program alumni network that allows participants to connect and continue the important relationships they formed in the program, more professional connections that allow them to build their civilian network, and more diversity in future participant cohorts

that include more women and veterans from different cultural backgrounds. By incorporating these recommendations, military service members in the program could have even better transition outcomes related to identity formation and coping behaviors as the continued longitudinal career and peer support. Further, cultural representation and understanding could help alleviate the transition stress many service members could face after the program ends and civilian life begins.

Discussion on Findings

This section provides an interpretative discussion on the findings as they related to the literature in Chapter 2, as well as new research. The discussion is broken down by guiding themes.

Integrating Wellness and Business in Military Transition Programming

Guskey (2000) found reactions to content are often more positive when participants can implement solutions to key issues they face immediately. Because the findings showed a favorable slant to wellness content, it could be that participants were getting real-life practice with wellness techniques in the program, such as storytelling workshops, physical fitness activities, and art therapy. By contrast, the business content material was generally delivered via lecturers with no deliverables and was especially limited due to the COVID-19 virus outbreak during the 2nd week of the program, forcing some participants to quarantine and continue learning online. However, only one participant mentioned the COVID-19 virus outbreak during the focus group and only suggested it impeded the social connectedness aspect of the program. This finding does suggest future programming should plan contingencies for online programing with consideration on how best to engage a military friendly virtual cohort if needed, or if the

program directors decide to use online learning for future program iterations (Townsend et al., 2022).

Content delivery models and demographics could also be considered when deciding what participants need to learn and how much content for each domain should be administered and taught. The program's wellness material was offered every day of the 2-week program, even if only in the form of wellness activities in the morning of the 2nd week. By contrast, the business material was limited to only Week 2. In other words, the wellness dose was stronger and more recurrent than career development doses; therefore, participants had more time and practice with the wellness material. In addition, the cohort represented a combination of participants who were still active duty and would not experience transition for another year or even 2 years, and some who were separated and either in their civilian careers, obtaining degrees, or actively searching for their next career. This difference led to some participants being able to practice career development in real time and others using the content to think in a more meta level, giving possibly skewed perceptions of the findings when considering the balance of wellness and business material.

Although research has overwhelmingly stated that wellness interventions are needed to support a successful transition (Bond et al., 2022; Crace & Crace, 2020; Flack & Kite, 2021; Pease et al., 2016; Vogt et al., 2018), research has lacked information on how much wellness content compared to career development should be implemented (Armstrong, 2021; Bond et al., 2022; Gilman, 2018; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Vogt et al., 2018). The findings from this evaluation support the need for wellness interventions in military-to-civilian transition programming based on the overwhelming positive reactions and life-changing behavior changes due to wellness activities and content. However, striking that balance between the correct

amount of content for each learning objective needs to be researched further, especially when planning a program of this scope.

Continued Identity Formation Support

The findings of this evaluation indicate participants experienced some level of success at redefining their identity and found meaning and purpose when considering civilian careers due to their participation in the program. This finding has been supported by many transition theorists who have believed the hallmark of a successful transition is a positive identity formation that occurs after an individual moves through the transition process and demonstrates the ability to use new strategies by strengthening resources through personal and professional learning (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014; M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Bridges, 1980; Crace & Crace, 2020; Willson, 2019). However, Black and Warhurst (2019) expanded upon the adaptation of skills using human resource development and suggested a reformation of career identity by means of "identity learning" (p. 25).

In other words, identity is not static and ever evolving, just as life transitions are constant, especially in the civilian professional world where so many people have been changing careers or positions on a more rapid basis than ever before. Using identity learning rather than identity redefining considers a growth mindset framework (Dweck, 2016) and could expand upon the authentic excellence (Crace & Crace, 2020) training that was highly rated in participant surveys and the focus group transcript. Additionally, this notion of identity learning could create more avenues for continued professional development and identity work after the program is completed. This idea could also alleviate some of the fears indicated in the application essays surrounding a loss of military identity. For example, military veterans are not necessarily losing their military identity; rather, they are learning a new civilian one. Similarly, they did not exactly

lose their civilian identity when they became service members; rather, they learned a military identity.

The Transition of Vulnerability

The findings indicated participants perceived they were successful at changing their coping behaviors after the program and were using new coping behaviors even 1 year after the program. Emotional reactions were most elicited during the focus group when discussing new coping mechanisms, and most were related to the wellness content learned in the program. In my analytical memo, I noted my own emotional response when a participant reveled that because of participating in the program, he was now in therapy full time and removed the stigma from taking medication to help alleviate some of the larger transition stresses he encountered. Many of the other participants fell silent while he spoke and then began to speak up about their own new coping behaviors, which was incredibly powerful to witness. It seemed participants learned to become vulnerable in sharing their coping behaviors and stories, a difference from the application essay data that had responses of fearing for their mental health and holding their military experiences close to the vest. Citroën (2023) further supported the idea of vulnerability in veterans by encouraging a change of thinking in the connotation of vulnerability, often eliciting thoughts of being weak or a loss of control. Rather, Citroën suggested military members think of using vulnerability to build community and connect in civilian spaces, suggesting the findings indicated a successful use of vulnerability to realize a successful transition.

Although becoming vulnerable was not an intended program outcome and was not specifically coded in the focus group, it did shed light on some of the more powerful long-lasting outcomes of the program's effectiveness on fostering a successful transition. Becoming vulnerable in reflecting and communicating is why the storytelling workshop was so successful

in the participants' responses and elicited some of the highest satisfaction scores. During the focus group, many of the participants reported feeling "shocked" and "surprised" by how much they enjoyed the storytelling workshop; however, it was not surprising to me given some of the application essay responses doubted their "ability to form good professional and personal relationships without a common shared military experience." In the storytelling workshop, participants gained confidence in not only telling their stories, but also in understanding their stories mattered and had the power to bridge the military–civilian divide (E. Anderson & Nelson, 2017; Mamon et al., 2017; Martin, 2022; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Williams et al., 2018). In fact, research has suggested veterans often withhold past military stories and experiences from civilians while longing for the connections made previously with other service members (Cooper et al., 2018; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). However, the program can move the needle on veteran storytelling, as the findings could indicate that veterans who share stories may experience more vulnerable transitions than veterans who withhold such stories.

Likewise, the findings indicated vulnerability not only challenged many of the stereotype threats (Steele, 2011) associated with military veterans, but also supported the importance of veteran storytelling to avoid those historical veteran mischaracterizations (Martin, 2022). Furthermore, the findings directly confronted the hegemonic masculinities inherent in military culture (Boros & Erolin, 2021; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Richard & Molloy, 2020; Smith & True, 2014) and created a pathway toward a new identity that values vulnerability over the performance of mastering pain, invulnerability, and limited emotional expressiveness often seen in transitioning military veterans (Fox & Pease, 2012; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018).

Comradery Support

The literature on military transitions has consistently mentioned using supportive measures through family, friends, programming, education communities, networks, and mentors as important coping mechanisms during a transition (Brunger et al., 2013; Herman & Yarwood, 2014; Romaniuk & Kidd, 2018) and is the support component of the 4S transition process (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014). Moreover, researchers have found that separation from the military can cause grief-like symptoms in the loss of the strong bonds formed between military members not found in civilian corporate culture (Ahern et al., 2015; Brunger et al., 2013; Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Herman & Yarwood, 2014; Mamon et al., 2017; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Romaniuk & Kidd, 2018; Rose et al., 2017). The evaluation findings aligned with the research on support in transition; participants expressed in the focus group that having other veterans and active-duty military members in the cohort gave them comfort and made them feel welcomed. Because the program consisted of a military cohort, participants were able to enact a transition coping mechanism in real time through military comradery. Burkhart and Hogan (2015) supported this finding because their study indicated veterans believed they needed to maintain connections to the military and military-connected friends and groups to cope with their transition into civilian life and to help maintain some of their military identities, to which I would add helped participants *become* veterans and ease the loss of their active-duty military identity.

Participants also noted having some of the instructors and staff as military veterans helped them feel at ease. Others said the experience of comradery in the cohort made them feel like they "weren't alone" in their transition and that they had the same shared transition concerns as others in the group. Romaniuk and Kidd (2018) found—in their systematic review of the

literature on psychological adjustments during military transition—that the relationships formed during military service is one of the most important features of military culture; therefore, losing those bonds during reintegration results in a loss of community. Thus, the program was successful in its intended outcome to use coping interventions to change behaviors around transition, in that participants leaned on their military-connected cohort to practice reestablishing their community in a civilian context.

The program was designed with the theoretical underpinnings of Goodman et al.'s (2011) transition framework, adapted by M. L. Anderson et al. (2012), that promoted better support and coping strategies. Ahern et al. (2015) more specifically recommended the use of peer support to help veterans navigate the integration back to civilian life; however, the findings indicated the program did not exactly offer supportive measures in the form of peer support and comradery. In fact, the only real program feedback participants gave was to create a program alumni network so participants could "link together more formally" and "bring [them] together."

In addition, participants recommended program directors provide more consistent communication. For example, one participant noted a few times during the focus group that they reached out to the program director to get more involved with the university's veteran population and events; however, their emails often went unanswered, and they felt they "got lost in the mix." Some participants also expressed a desire to make sure their "name is on that list of the events" and noted because they "were not included," they missed out on networking and community. Considering the focus group was conducted more than 1 year after participants completed the program, it would appear not all participants were invited consistently to any veteran-focused events and a missed opportunity for continued support seems to have occurred.

This lack of invitation could have created an added transition stress if participants were not supported continually throughout their transition process.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This evaluation highlighted the fundamental wellness and business themed content involved in providing transition programming to military veterans. The program evaluation findings surfaced positive participant perceptions in the areas of learning, identity formation, transformed coping behaviors, and high levels of satisfaction in the program's content, instruction, relevance, and accessibility. In this section, I propose four recommendations for policy and practice, including those related to considerations for more intentional curriculum that aligns with needs and transition conditions of the participant cohort, providing opportunities and strategies for continued career identity support, providing follow-up opportunities for military service self-reflection, and supporting longitudinal peer support activities beyond the isolated program. These recommendations are based in the theoretical underpinnings of Goodman et al.'s (2011) transition framework, adapted by M. L. Anderson et al. (2012), which suggests a successful transition should provide supportive measures during and after transition across the areas of (a) situation/conditions, (b) self, (c) support, and (d) strategies. Although the program attempted at using the transition framework, there were gaps in the theory versus the actual findings; therefore, I provide recommendations to strengthen program outcomes. This section concludes with additional recommendations and future research. Table 20 outlines the major evaluation findings, recommendations, and supporting literature.

Table 20

Recommendations Related to the Findings of the Program Evaluation

Finding	Recommendations	Supporting literature
Results of positive participant reactions to accessibility and impact are consistent with program evaluation research; identified disconnects in integrating program content	Consider intentional curriculum that aligns with needs and transition **conditions** of the participant cohort	Ahern et al. (2015); M. L. Anderson et al. (2012); Castro & Dursun (2019); Goodman et al. (2011); Perkins et al. (2020); Robinson et al. (2017)
Successful learning of redefinition of identities occurred; meaningful careers were tied to identities	Provide opportunities and **strategies** for continued career identity support	M. L. Anderson et al. (2012); Black & Warhurst (2019); Bergman et al. (2014); Castro & Dursun (2019); Goodman et al. (2011); Mamon et al. (2017); Meléis et al. (2000)
Well-being coping strategies transformed transition behaviors; communicating military experiences plays a role in successful transitions and helps bridge the civilian–military divide	Provide follow-up opportunities for military service **self**-reflection	E. Anderson & Nelson (2017); M. L. Anderson et al. (2012); Goodman et al. (2011); Mamon et al. (2017); Martin (2022); Mobbs & Bonanno (2018); Williams et al. (2018); Woodward & Jenkings (2011)
Community is important; underused peer support services: need to increase alumni networks	Plan to **support** longitudinal peer support activities beyond isolated program	Ahern et al. (2015); M. L. Anderson et al. (2012); Goodman et al. (2011); Mamon et al. (2017); Mobbs & Bonanno (2018); Rose et al. (2017); Wilson-Smith & Corr (2019)

Note. Transition framework elements are noted in bold font. Adapted from *Counseling Adults in Transition: Linking Practice With Theory* (3rd ed.), by J. Goodman, N. K. Schlossberg, and M. L. Anderson, 2011, Springer Publishing. Copyright 2011 by Springer Publishing.

Recommendation 1: Program Development Alignment

When implementing a transition program, directors should consider intentional curricula that align with the needs and transition conditions of the participant cohort. M. L. Anderson and Goodman (2014) noted the quality and success of transition may be influenced by an individual's assessment of the preceptors for transition and the perceptions of the personal and professional role changes that will occur, how long the transition process will take, and if an individual is experiencing other life challenges in addition to the transition. Program directors should engage in understanding of the types of circumstances that include an expected or unexpected transition

and the perceptions and coping behaviors surrounding those triggers. Program directors should know what transition conditions participants are facing before they begin designing the program to allow for better support and services focused on the needs of the actual participants.

Thus, a proper needs assessment should be completed *before* beginning curriculum design and desired program outcomes. This design should include research on data-driven transition best practices, using theoretical frameworks to guide the program, surveying, and hosting focus groups among potential participants to assess their needs, prioritizing those needs in a well-balanced instructional design (Collins et al., 1999), and intentional collaborations with other campus partners who specialize in curriculum development. Although the findings in the application essays provided insight into how 16 of the 18 participants felt about wellness, military transition, and civilian careers before participating in the program, it was discovered in my program evaluation feasibility assessment that the responses were not used in their entirety to create the program's content or short-term outcome. Instead, the content was created while application essays were coming in for the wellness instructor and none were viewed by the business instructor before curriculum development and program design. Additionally, not all participants completed application essays, with one participant admitted to the program without an application essay; this individual noted in the focus group that they enjoyed the business content and wished there was more of it as it applied to their unique situation.

Although the fidelity of program implementation was not a part of this program evaluation, I do believe a more researched and data-driven program design could have offset the unbalanced wellness and business curriculum indicated in the findings. Guskey (2000) further supported this idea and indicated participants will often have more successful outcomes and positive reactions when they have input on the program's content. Had the business instructor

been given the application essays before designing program content, the instructor may have been able to provide a more tailored business content approach for participants.

Likewise, the program was not created with the outcomes in mind; one program director noted there was not enough time to use full curriculum development planning due to university time and financial constraints. This lack of planning resulted in a missed opportunity to align participants' situations with program's deliverables and could be why there was ambiguity around participants' perceptions of wellness and business integration. This finding could also indicate why the program leaned so wellness heavy, when some participants may have benefited from more business content. Therefore, aligning learning objectives with content and practice could offer a richer and more balanced experience for participants and could help contribute to the lack of research on wellness and business content in military-to-civilian transition programs.

Recommendation 2: Provide Strategies for Continued Career Identity Support

For military veterans changing careers, transition involves an unravelling of the established self while learning a new identity and acquiring knowledge and skills pertaining to the new role (Black & Warhurst, 2019). The program's findings indicated a positive perception of identity redefinition among participants; however, research has supported *continued* identity support in civilian careers through means of continuous and reinforced training (Biech, 2014; J. D. Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2009). Creating a plan for dealing with transition, managing stress, learning coping behaviors, and making meaning of new roles and identities associated with personal and professional changes is an important factor in a successful transition (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Ryan et al., 2011).

The program was successful in providing participants with a new established self during the liminal phase of their transition, but the findings also supported the research that has called

for a continuation of services and a plan for when participants find themselves in the new beginning phase of transition, and any other transition thereafter (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014; M. L. Anderson et al., 2012; Bridges, 1980; Crace & Crace, 2020; Willson, 2019).

During the focus group, one participant noted they felt they were being "launched into the civilian world" and they "had that one networking night." Program directors should offer opportunities for activities that align with research-based career readiness for participants during the program to anticipate a more learning identity approach, and postprogram activities to sustain healthy identities (Biech, 2014; J. D. Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2009). Providing more in-depth knowledge about corporate culture, networking as a civilian, role exit theory, and the possible reverse culture shock participants may encounter when entering a civilian career could help sustain the positive career learning identity that participants established before entering the civilian workspace (Bergman et al., 2014; Castro & Dursun, 2019; Mamon et al., 2017; Wilson-Smith & Corr, 2019). In other words, programs should prepare participants for the reality of an ever-evolving identity and transition.

As supported by the literature on training programs, learning is most effective when reinforced through content delivery before and after the program (Biech, 2014; J. D. Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2009). Therefore, program activities could include preprogram reading on career identity, online activities or lectures that complement program learning, creating a career identity development plan, and post program continuing education or professional development seminars. In addition, 6-, 12-, and 18-month check-ins with business instructors should be made available to participants, especially when some participants are in their careers and experiencing the new beginnings phase of transition.

Additionally, program directors should consider partnering with corporations to provide mentoring opportunities for participants. These mentors should sit in the career the participant anticipates and preferably be a veteran themselves. This partnership could provide invaluable networking skills and guidance while also sustaining that comradery in a civilian career that the findings supported as a tangible need among transitioning military veterans.

Finally, corporations could also adopt mentoring to provide a mentorship program in their own companies for new veteran employees for long-term support. Program directors could use this model as a source of revenue to provide training for corporations and their mentors on veteran transition in the corporate world.

Recommendation 3: Provide Follow-Up Opportunities for Military Service Self-Reflection

Well-being interventions aimed at developing inner resources, such as resilience, confidence, self-efficacy, outlook, optimism, and meaning making throughout the transition process (i.e., endings, liminal spaces, and new beginnings) are important for a successful transition (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014). Confirmed evaluation findings about specific wellness interventions related to developing inner resources suggested that when participants share their military stories in a new and research-based way, learning and coping behaviors increase positively.

Due to the impact of the storytelling workshop on participants' abilities to feel empowered, make meaning of their transition, and begin to feel comfortable in civilian spaces, program directors should consider providing follow-up workshops and opportunities to participants for military service self-reflection. These opportunities could include furthering a partnership with programs like the Armed Services Arts Partnership (n.d.), which provides an array of additional storytelling modalities to veterans and connecting participants with nonprofit

organizations aimed at providing veterans with avenues to tell their stories. Program directors could create military veteran town halls where program alumni can tell their story to the university community, supporting research that veterans' storytelling through oral histories performed in front of family members and civilian audiences creates closer connections with civilians, feelings of bravery for speaking out, and feeling supported by civilians (Mamon et al., 2017). Additionally, business instructors could assist program alumni by one-on-one calls to learn how to weave those storytelling aspects into upcoming job interviews and in cover letters. Recommendations for other activities include events featuring program alumni showcasing people who have used programs such as CreatiVets (n.d.), a nonprofit whose mission is to "provide disabled veterans with the opportunity to use art therapy, music, and creative writing to address the psychological and emotional needs that arise from combat-related trauma" (para. 1).

Martin (2022) argued that veterans transitioning into civilian spaces using storytelling techniques will not only disrupt traditional models of veteran identity available to transitioning veterans but will also create adaptable models of identity to future veterans. Therefore, program directors could also include other storytelling modes that are research based into the curriculum to better equip participants with the tools needed when entering civilian spaces. Embedding techniques into program workshops or giving them homework to practice storytelling is recommended. Examples include using photo-elicitation exercises, oral histories, and autobiographical memory work that research has suggested creates ties to military identities, heals trauma, and lessens the divide between veterans and civilians (E. Anderson & Nelson, 2017; Mamon et al., 2017; Martin, 2022; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Williams et al., 2018).

Recommendation 4: Support Longitudinal Peer Support Activities Beyond Isolated Program

Defining available support programming, education communities, networks, and peer support are important coping mechanisms during a transition (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014). Support can often be found through programs that offer services in areas of physical and mental health, career readiness, well-being, and relationship building (M. L. Anderson & Goodman, 2014). The program itself provides tangible support for transitioning service members through findings of positive identity formation and successful learned coping behaviors; however, the participants' recommendations on program improvement in the evaluation revolved around continued peer support beyond the program.

Research has recommended the use of peer support programs to help veterans form new identities as they integrate back to civilian life and help ease the loss felt when military relationships are not a constant feature in civilian life (Ahern et al., 2015; Brunger et al., 2013; Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Herman & Yarwood, 2014). Although the program inherently created comradery with its cohort-based model, program directors should use the relationships and bonds formed during the program to provide participants with lasting alumni networking opportunities, alleviating the grief or loss of community commonly felt by veterans after separating from the military (Ahern et al., 2015; Brunger et al., 2013; Romaniuk & Kidd, 2018). These opportunities include creating a virtuous network of program alumni who can offer support through networking, storytelling, and transition empathy that only a fellow veterans could understand. Creating an email list or social media account for connection, hosting events that bring alumni together, and providing contact with program directors are all modes that can be used to promote longitudinal peer support. Likewise, providing networking and ongoing wellness and professional development training to program alumni allows them to continue learning together

and creates a constant touchpoint to the greater university military community. Needs assessments should be done on program alumni to understand what specific wellness and career training they may need at their phase of transition.

Additional Recommendations

Although not directly tied to specific evaluation questions, two additional recommendations for programming surfaced, which I outline in the following subsections. These recommendations were based on the themes that emerged across evaluation findings and the literature.

Mental Health in Transition. The program was not designed to explore all the unique and intense challenges veterans may face when transitioning. Given the program directors had no way of knowing if a participant was facing a mental health issue, aside from self-identification, it is important to recognize how certain veteran experiences impact the ways in which they might react to a military-to-civilian transition program. Program directors should consider including accessible mental health services so the program could suit the needs of all participants; for example, they could provide programming for participants with mental health needs in the same way they would for someone without posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Considering the potential for varying combat, transition, and life experiences across the cohort, having targeted mental health access points, both during and after the program, for individuals who are undergoing a transition program that uncovers fears and concerns, like the program does, is recommended (Bond et al., 2022; Elnitsky & Kilmer, 2017; Pease et al., 2016). Incorporating specific well-being interventions, often based in psychology, into transition assistance programs for military service members is not only supportive for a transitioning service member to flourish

as a civilian, but it could also assist in the well-being of veterans across varying life circumstances and transitions (Pease et al., 2016; Vogt et al., 2017).

The program should offer prework on mental health in transition, a consultation with a university mental health counselor *before* the program begins for all participants, and follow-up programming or offerings on topics surrounding mental health. Mental health offerings could give anyone instructing the wellness content a much better picture of the cohort's needs and assess any potential triggers that the program could induce with someone facing mental health issues. Program alumni should also be offered the same benefits at the university's health and wellness center that university student veterans receive, such as access to after-program mental health counselors, massage, acupuncture, yoga, and meditation classes.

Financial Feasibility/Return on Investment. Although not a major theme in the findings, participants did express some surprise that the program was offered to them at no cost because some stated they had to pay for other professional development and transition programs in the past. This finding did raise a concern that there could have been some positive feedback bias and perceived value of the program without an actual buy in. More research could be done on the value of free programming as opposed to having to pay for training and having a potential financial stake in the perceived impacts of the program.

The university absorbed the cost of room and board, parking, instructor fees, transportation to activities, and supplies. Although the results level of the D. L. Kirkpatrick (1998) model was not included in this program evaluation, it is recommended for future program iterations and evaluations. The program cannot remain substantiable on one non-endowed private cash donation (i.e., the current model); therefore, a cost–benefit analysis that forecasts expected

return on investment of the program should be done to ensure the financial model is sustainable for future programming.

A fiscal contingency plan should be in place for unforeseen or unexpected circumstances, such as the university no longer supporting the absorption of the program's fees without a clear return on investment, or the program getting defunded due to competing university programming or economic downturn. It is recommended that program directors consider other avenues of revenue, such as a tuition-based model, lobbying for funding, or applying for grants. These additional sources of revenue will require clear and transparent communication with the university and budget directors, as well as conducting research on tuition program models, available grants, and grant writing.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although not directly tied to specific evaluation questions, I outline recommendations for future research in the following subsections. These recommendations are based on the findings and the literature explored in this program evaluation.

Consider Evaluating Targeted Participants in the Cohort

A delimitation to this evaluation was the choice to examine participants' perceptions as a whole cohort, rather than look at perceptions based off rank, years of service, gender, or combat versus noncombat military experiences. A future evaluation on military-to-civilian transition programs could consider the variations across the participant experience that might provide further insight into the value of such a program for each category of service member, such as rank, gender, and years of service.

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 discussed the differences in challenges that noncommissioned officers and officers face while in the military, but more research and

evaluation could be done on what those challenges look like during transition, especially after participating in the program at a higher education institution. This research could include the following evaluations: different ranks of the military to compare findings and reactions to wellness and business content, the power structure dynamics of a cohort ranging from junior enlisted service members to colonels, accessibility reactions for each gender, and the implications of combat versus noncombat experiences on a service members' needs and perceptions of program content. Implementing this kind of targeted evaluation could come in the form of a demographic survey and one-on-one interviews with participants to provide more in-depth findings. These kinds of evaluations could also better equip the unique experiences of military service members in transitions and could provide specialized future programming.

Furthermore, future evaluations on this program could also study the trajectory of military veterans who do and do not receive this transition program assistance to further assess the program outcomes. They could also look at the differences in rank, years of service, and gender to understand how effective this military-to-civilian transition programs is for everyone in the cohort.

Consider Military Spouse Transition Cohorts

Although not a part of this evaluation, two military spouses participated in the program. I chose not to analyze their perceptions because my study was based on the actual service member's experiences. However, some research has supported the need for military spouse transition assistance with a considerable gap in the literature that has addressed programs that specifically target the military spouse experience (Cole & Cowan, 2022; Corry et al., 2022; Keeling et al., 2020). As a military spouse to an active-duty Air Force officer, I can attest to the considerable transitions that military spouses face, both during their partner's military service

and after. From constant location moves, to spouses deploying, to starting new careers every 2–4 years, to learning how to make new friends constantly, to worrying over their children's schooling and social integrations at new duty stations, and to the drop back into civilian life and work, the list goes on for military spouse transition challenges. Although many spouses face similar transition challenges as their partners, additional challenges are unique to a military spouse that could be researched more. In other words, there should be transition programs aimed at the distinctive transition situations that military spouses face.

Future research could include action research cycles that further identify the problem and assess the needs of military spouses, as well as evaluate the few transition programs available to spouses, especially programs that include employment readiness, well-being, and civilian community and career integration. Although integrating spouses into the military transition programs is an available option, I believe future research should be done on cohorts of only military spouses that support the specific well-being and career needs military spouses have while transitioning back into civilian life.

Summary

Higher education intuitions have served as access points for military veterans entering the civilian world for centuries. The tradition started in 1775 when a group of students at The College of William and Mary left their desks to fight in the American Revolutionary War, only to return to their campus and transition back to civilian life. As of 2022, 5.06 million military veterans obtained a bachelor's degree from accredited universities and colleges (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023), indicating higher education institutions have incredible influence on a military service member's transition experience through education. However, universities can also

leverage their resources to make an even bigger impact on the lives and transitions of U.S. service members.

Equipping military veterans with wellness techniques and business acumen in this program evaluation proved essential for a successful transition into civilian life and careers. The findings indicated that by using the university's highly qualified instructors to teach research-backed skills in a comfortable, safe, and inclusive learning environment, program participants were able to experience a positive redefinition of their identity and transform their coping behaviors in transition. One of the most profound moments for me as a researcher was seeing the evolution of fear to empowerment because of the program's influence. Even though it was over 1 year after the program, participants exuded confidence compared to their application essays, over a myriad of experiences, ranging from going to therapy for this first time, "finally knowing [their] worth," to landing a meaningful high-paying job after using the business and storytelling techniques in their interview. The findings also indicated a need for transition programs to consider the importance of well-being in their curriculum. I argue the findings support wellness content as a requirement for all military transition programs, no matter the specific program focus. In other words, this program, because of integrating wellness and business content at a higher education institution, made a difference in the lives and transitions of the 18 military service members who participated in the program in Summer 2022.

This program evaluation also made a difference to my personal and professional growth. When I began this study, I admittingly approached it from a positivist paradigm that offered me the narrow idea that military transitions were only really challenging for people who experienced hard service. U.S. civilian culture has traditionally tumultuous perspectives on veteran transitions and homecomings, and even in my military-connected worldview, I had a narrow definition of

transition. Now that I have intentionally studied the theories and concepts behind military transitions, I find myself aligning with more constructivist thinking in that I am now interested in the lived experiences of all military transitions. My research was also much more concerned with providing intentional wellness-based programming to all military service members and their families, rather than the reality of one kind of transition.

As an evaluator, this study provided me insight into the value of research and data-driven program implantation, as well as the powerful ways a program evaluation can add to not only the literature, but also to the lives of the individuals it assesses. Although the purpose of evaluations is to give feedback on program effectiveness and to help support program directors on decisions for future iterations, these kinds of evaluations create new knowledge and inspire different ways of thinking. Considering the program was an early adapter of wellness and business integration at a public higher education institution, there is something to be said about the overwhelming positive changes and reactions from participants. In other words, this daughter, daughter-in-law, sister, sister-in-law, and wife of military veterans has seen the difference the program has made and is excited for the future of military-to-civilian transition program research.

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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study regarding your experiences with the program. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the perceptions of military veterans in integrated wellness and business military-to-civilian transition programs.

As a participant, I understand that my participation in the study is purposeful and voluntary. All participants will have the opportunity to participate in in one online survey and one Zoom focus group to be held at the conclusion of the survey.

I understand that the interviewer has been trained in the research of human subjects, my responses will be confidential, and that my name will not be associated with any results of this study. I understand that the data will be collected using a survey platform called Qualtrics, and in a Zoom focus group and then transcribed for analysis. Data will also be gathered from surveys and analytic memos kept by the researcher. Information from these surveys and analytic memos will be safeguarded so my identity will never be disclosed. My identity will not be associated with the research findings.

I understand that there is no known risk or discomfort directly involved with this research and that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time. I agree that should I choose to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the study, I will notify the researcher listed below, in writing. A decision not to participate in the study or to withdraw from the study will not affect my relationship with the researcher, William & Mary, or the School of Education, specifically.

If I have any questions or problems that may arise as a result of my participation in the study, I understand that I should contact Lindsay Blount, the researcher, at xxxxx@xxxxx.edu, Dr. Margaret Constantino at XXX-XXX-XXXX or xxxxx@xxxxx.edu, or Dr. Tom Ward, chair of EDIRC, at XXX-XXX-XXXX or xxxxx@xxxxx.edu. THIS PROJECT WAS APPROVED BY the W&M PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (Phone 757-221-3966) ON 2023-11-01 AND EXPIRES ON 2024-11-01.

My signature below signifies that I am at least 18 years of age, that I have received a copy of this consent form, and that I consent to participate in this research study.

_____	_____
Signature of Participant	Date
_____	_____

APPENDIX B

EMAILS TO PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Email 1:

Dear Program alumnus,

I am currently enrolled in an EdD degree program and am interested in understanding the value of integrated wellness and business military-to-civilian transition programs to military veterans and how participants perceive the program has prepared them for a successful transition into civilian personal and professional life. To study this question, I am conducting dissertation research that evaluates the 2022 program. I want to learn more about your experience to determine your perceptions of wellness and business readiness as you enter(ed) the civilian job market and lifestyle. On [date when finalized], I will email you with a link to a brief Qualtrics survey and invite you to participate, along with informed consent paperwork for you to sign and return. Additionally, you will be given the opportunity to participate in an optional follow-up Zoom focus group scheduled for [date when finalized]. Participation in both is completely optional. I would greatly appreciate your help in studying this important question.

Thank you in advance and if you have any questions or concerns regarding the assessments, please do not hesitate to reach out to me directly.

All the best,

Lindsay Blount

Email 2:

Dear Program alumnus,

I am following up with you regarding the dissertation research I am conducting that evaluates the program to study value of integrated wellness and business military-to-civilian transition programs to military veterans. I am interested in learning more about your experience to determine how you perceive the program helped in your wellness and business readiness as you enter(ed) the civilian life.

Would you please consider taking a few minutes to complete the following:

1. Sign the informed consent paperwork attached and return to me at xxxxx@xxxxx.edu
2. Complete the brief and completely optional survey [Survey Link]

At the end of the survey, you will be given the opportunity to participate in an optional follow-up Zoom focus group scheduled for [date when finalized].

Thank you in advance and if you have any questions or concerns regarding the assessments, please do not hesitate to reach out to me directly.

All the best,

Lindsay Blount

Email 3:

Dear Program alumnus,

This email serves as a reminder if you would like to participate in my research that evaluates the program. I am interested in learning more about your experience in the program and to hear about your perceptions of how the program contributed to your transition into civilian life.

Would you please consider taking a few minutes to complete the following:

1. Sign the informed consent paperwork attached and return to me at xxxxx@xxxxx.edu
2. Complete the brief and completely optional survey [Survey Link]

At the end of the survey, you will be given the opportunity to participate in an optional follow-up Zoom focus group scheduled for [date when finalized].

Thank you in advance and if you have any questions or concerns regarding the assessments, please do not hesitate to reach out to me directly.

All the best,

Lindsay Blount

Email 4:

Dear_____,

Thank you for volunteering for a follow-up Zoom focus group on [date when finalized] so I can learn more about your program experience! I look forward to talking with you about how the program contributed to your transition into civilian life.

Thank you in advance and if you have any questions or concerns regarding the assessments, please do not hesitate to reach out to me directly.

All the best,

Lindsay Blount

APPENDIX C

SURVEY

Thank you for participating in this optional survey that is part of a program evaluation for my EdD degree. The survey will take approximately [TBD based off pilot] and will consider your experiences and perceptions of the 2022 program. Your participation is critical in this evaluation and the resulting data will be used for my dissertation, which may be used for subsequent publication. Your name and identification will remain confidential and will not be linked to the data responses. Your responses will be held in strict confidence and no comments will be attributed to your name.

Bio & Background Information:

1. Full Name
2. Preferred Email
3. Military Branch of Service
4. Years of Military Service
5. Rank
6. Which summer did you participate in the program?
    a. 2022
    b. 2023
7. Have you completed any other military-to-civilian transition programs? If so, which ones?
8. What is your current position?

Likert Survey

The following items are about your experience in the Program.

How strongly do you agree or disagree with these statements?

Item	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
1. I am satisfied with the training I received in the program.	□	□	□	□	□
2. The wellness themed material covered in the program made a positive impact on my own coping behaviors during and after my transition from military to civilian life.	□	□	□	□	□
3. The wellness instructor was able to provide information to me in an effective way.	□	□	□	□	□

4. The professional business material covered in the program made a positive impact on my own professional relationships, communication styles, and transition from military to civilian careers.	□	□	□	□	□
5. The professional business instructors were able to provide information to me in an effective way.	□	□	□	□	□
6. The networking content provided during the program helped me feel supported during my transition from military to civilian life and work.	□	□	□	□	□
7. I feel the program's content was relevant to learning how to redefine my new identity as a civilian.	□	□	□	□	□
8. There was a good balance between wellness and professional business content.	□	□	□	□	□
9. There was a good balance between presentation and group involvement.	□	□	□	□	□
10. The facilities (dorms and classrooms) were accessible and suited my needs.	□	□	□	□	□

Focus Group Question

1. Are you willing to participate in a 1-hour follow-up Zoom focus group on [date]?

Thank you for your participation in this survey! If you said "yes" to participating in the focus group, Lindsay will be in touch on [date].

APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Introduction: *My name is Lindsay Blount and I will be the moderator for today's focus group. The purpose of this focus group is to learn more about your experience in the 2022 program. As a military veteran and program participant, you have a unique point of view about the impact the transition into civilian life has on an individual. This research project focuses on understanding your perceptions or points of view about military-to-civilian transition and the impact the program may have had on you. After the conclusion of the focus group, the information we discussed will be categorized into themes and topics before being shared anonymously with institutional stakeholders. They will then take that anonymous focus group information coupled with your survey results and use to help them to improve practices and procedures for future military-to-transition programming. Your personal information will not be connected to the results of this focus group.*

Introductory Protocol: *To help with notetaking, our conversations will be recorded today. Only the researcher on the project, who is Lindsay Blount, will have access to the recording, which will eventually be destroyed after the conversations are put into written form. All information will be held confidential. Your participation is voluntary. You may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable. No harm is intended to be inflicted upon you. Thank you for your participation.*

The interview consists of 15 questions. The interview is intended to last no longer than 1 hour. Each person will have an opportunity to respond to each question. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to limit the time you are allowed to speak to complete all of the questioning.

Ground Rules:

1. *Confidentiality* – As per the informed consent form, please respect the confidentiality of your peers. The moderator will only be sharing the information anonymously with relevant staff members.
2. *One Speaker at a Time* – Only one person should speak at a time in order to make sure that we can all hear what everyone is saying.
3. *Use Respectful Language* – In order to facilitate an open discussion, please avoid any statements or words that may be offensive to other members of the group.
4. *Open Discussion* – This is a time for everyone to feel free to express their opinions and viewpoints. You will not be asked to reach consensus on the topics discussed. There will be no right or wrong answers.
5. *Participation is Important* – It is important that everyone's voice is shared and heard in order to make this the most productive focus group possible. Please speak up if you have something to add to the conversation!

Any questions before we begin?

Probes: *Tell me more. What do you mean when you say...? What does 'sometimes' mean to you?*

File Name of Audio: _____

Date:_____Time:_____Location:

_____

Participants:

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1. Of the professional development or transition training programs you have participated in, what aspects made it a powerful learning experience for you? (SOFTBALL)
2. How did you anticipate your transition into civilian life would be?
    a. How did the program prepare you for those anticipations? (EQ1, EQ2)
3. How would you describe your identity before you participated in the program to now 1 year later? (EQ1, EQ2, EQ3)
4. Do you feel you have successfully assimilated into the civilian life? (EQ2)
    a. Probe: What are some of the transition challenges you might still be facing? (EQ3)
5. Why did you decide to participate in the program? (EQ1)
    a. Probe: How was this training different than others you may have attended?
6. What are some of the strategies you learned in the program that you now use to help you cope with some of the transition challenges you may have/or are facing? (EQ1, EQ3)
7. How have you used Authentic Excellence training in your current daily life? (EQ1, EQ3)
    a. What parts of your transition might you still have some fear base? (EQ3)
8. Describe the wellness activities that you participated in during the program that you now find to be the most impactful for your transition. (EQ1, EQ3)

9. What was your overall impression of using storytelling training as a tool for identifying and learning ways to network, communicate, and inspire leadership in a civilian career? (EQ1, EQ2)
    a. In what ways have the storytelling techniques you learned aided in your job search? (EQ1, EQ2)
10. What were your key take aways when learning how to craft your ideal job during the program? (EQ1, EQ2)
    a. How have you integrated that into your current career/job search? (EQ2)
11. What connections were you able to make between wellness and professional business training during the program? (EQ1, EQ2, EQ3)
    a. Probe: In what ways have you integrated wellness into your current career or schooling? (EQ3)
12. After completing the program, what is your overall perception of military-to-civilian transition? (EQ 1, EQ2, EQ3)
    a. How would you say your perceptions are different than military veterans you know who have not completed the program?
13. In what ways has participating in the program helped you feel more supported during your transition? (EQ1, EQ3)
14. How would you describe aspects of the program that you did not find useful? (EQ1)
15. How likely are you to recommend the program to other military veterans facing transition? (EQ1)
16. What else would you like to share? (EQ1, EQ2, EQ3)

Thank you for participating in the focus group. You can be assured all information will remain confidential. Are there any final questions?

EQ1: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, what are participants' reactions regarding their experiences with the content, relevance, and accessibility of the program?
EQ2: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants redefined their identity during transition into civilian professional and personal life?
EQ3: One year after completing the military-to-civilian transition program, in what ways, if any, have participants transformed coping behaviors required for transition into civilian professional and personal life?

EQ = evaluation question.

APPENDIX E

CODE BOOK

Code	Definition	Example
Satisfaction	The state of feeling as if one's expectations/needs are fulfilled	I really liked . . . I really enjoyed"
Impact	Having a powerful effect on someone; a difference was made	The program made a difference in my life"
Learning New Skills	The course material, instruction, and environment having an impact on participants perceptions of changed identity, communication styles, wellness techniques, and relationship building after transition into civilian life.	I learned . . . I understand now . . .
Supported	To feel encouraged to succeed, welcomed, helped, appreciated, and part of a network	I feel like I have a network of people who can help me when I need them"
Coping	Successfully dealing with challenging emotions and difficult life situations	I can handle stress in new and different ways
Comfort/Accessibility	State of ease; free from worry; provides physical and emotional relaxation; feeling of being taken care of	I felt at ease during the program; the facilities/lodging/food was great
Successful	Turing out as one hoped; having pride for oneself	I feel I have become the version of myself I am most proud of
Negative Perceptions	Participant has a pessimistic tone or comment about the program's content, accessibility, or relevance"	"I didn't like when we . . . "; "I don't feel like that session made a difference in my life"

VITA

Lindsay Elise Blount

Education

William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA — May 2024
- Doctor of Education in Educational Policy, Planning and Leadership
- Higher Education Administration

Boston University Boston, MA — January 2019
- Post-Master Graduate Certificate in English Education, Grades 5–12
- Massachusetts Initial Secondary Certificate in English, Grades 5–12

Boston University Boston, MA — May 2018
- Master of English and American Literature

University of Massachusetts Lowell, MA — May 2017
- Bachelor of Arts, English
- Minors: American Studies, French, and Medieval & Renaissance Studies

Salt Lake City Community College — May 2015
- Associate of Arts, English

Professional Experience

William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA
- Project & Business Manager, Military & Veteran Affairs — August 2022–Present
- Assistant to the Dean of University Libraires — July 2019–August 2022

Walden Woods Project, Concord, MA
- Education Programs Asst. & Communications Coordinator — January 2016–July 2019

SkyWest Airlines
- Flight Attendant and Inflight Ground Instructor — August 2009–May 2014