

# Learning Challenges Faced by Transitioning Military Service Members

## Voices of Military Transition Counselors

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### Abstract

Because military lifestyle, standards, and culture are developed and fortified throughout soldiers' service, the decision to exit the military is often difficult, and challenges related to posttransition adjustment and employment are substantial. The U.S. Army's Transition Assistance Program (TAP) attempts to alleviate these challenges by teaching soldiers about the obstacles they will face as well as the corresponding strategies that can enhance the likelihood of a successful career transition. This article presents findings from a nonexperimental survey design with the administration of a survey for qualitative thematic analysis. The surveys examined 69 counselors' perspectives on the major knowledge and learning challenges soldiers face upon transitioning into the nonmilitary workforce. Analyses of the counselors' survey responses revealed three themes: (a) developing increased cultural awareness, (b) developing career awareness and job search strategies, and (c) developing new financial and personal integration strategies. Thus, the findings highlight transition counselors' perspectives that soldiers going through TAP have unique learning needs and challenges that may impact their transition experience.

**B**efore members from any branch of service depart from the military, they are required to complete a Department of Defense (DOD)-sponsored transition program. The U.S. Army's transition program is called the Soldier for Life—

Transition Assistance Program (TAP); it was congressionally mandated in 2011 for all soldiers transitioning out of the military. The program prepares them for postmilitary life and includes assistance with their transition to civilian employment (Kamarck, 2018). During TAP, soldiers complete a program that incorporates the following:

- ◆ core curriculum—including finances, family adjustments, mentorship, and Veterans Affairs benefits;
- ◆ career-related workshops—including job search practice, resume building, social media usage, and interview practice; and
- ◆ noncompulsory workshops addressing one of three different trajectories: college, work, and entrepreneurship (Transition Offices, n.d.).

Further, throughout this process, soldiers also meet and work with military commanders, TAP managers, and counselors who specialize in veteran career transitions. Specifically, commanders ensure service members can attend the TAP curriculum; TAP managers engage and educate service members and commanders on transition services; and transition counselors provide support services, transition planning, and individualized counseling to service members (Military.com, n.d.). In short, each party performs an integral function to the program, though transition counselors in particular play a vital role in soldiers' final weeks and months of military service; they are direct witnesses to the myriad learning challenges that may be involved in a successful transition back into civilian society. Additionally, they can help provide a realistic preview of the employment challenges that could be encountered after transitioning out of the military. However, despite a growing interest among employers and learning professionals who recognize the unique needs of this population of adult learners, no research study has reported on the perceptions of transition counselors regarding the learning needs and challenges faced by transitioning service members.

Exploring transition counselors' perceptions of the learning needs and challenges faced by soldiers after leaving the military leverages the voices of this particular source of expertise in the context of other research on transition challenges and will shed additional light on service members' learning needs and strategies to enhance transition success. Accordingly, the work is organized into the following main sections: (a) a review of the literature on military-to-civilian transition challenges and adult learning processes, (b) a description of the qualitative study used to explore transition counselors' perceptions of transitioning service members' learning needs, (c) a presentation of the findings from our analyses, and (d) a discussion of implications for Army educators and transitioning service members as well as directions for future research.

### **Military-to-Civilian Transition Processes**

The military becomes a way of life for soldiers (Cole, 2014; Halvorson, 2010; Rodriguez & Andersen, 2015). As such, transitioning out of the military is frequent-



ly cited as a trying experience for soldiers due to the numerous and varied challenges encountered along the way (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Davis & Minnis, 2016; Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Prudential Financial, 2012; Zogas, 2017). Aspects of postmilitary life such as finding civilian employment, identifying a new sense of purpose, and family adjustment require a period of learning and adaptation for soldiers (Morin, 2011). Cultural adjustment, identity confusion, hierarchy upheaval, skill mistranslations, postmilitary unemployment and underemployment, civilian stigmas, and lack of purpose are only a few challenges that veterans experience (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Barrera & Carter, 2017; Cole, 2014; Davis & Minnis, 2016; Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Prudential Financial, 2012; Rose et al., 2017; Stone & Stone, 2015; Zogas, 2017). Moreover, some soldiers reenlist because of transition uncertainties such as future employment or job instability as well as reduced compensation and benefits experienced upon exiting the military (Hansen & Nataraj, 2011). These challenges can discourage transitioning soldiers, impact veterans, and ultimately impede postmilitary success (Hansen & Nataraj, 2011; Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Maury et al., 2017). Because military lifestyle, standards, and culture are developed and fortified throughout soldiers' service, the decision or directive to exit the military is often problematic, and challenges related to posttransition adjustment and employment may be substantial (Halvorson, 2010).

## Employment

Postmilitary employment challenges are a particular concern for transitioning service members (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Prudential Financial, 2012). Historically, unemployment has been a common issue, but in the past few years, the rate has favorably shifted for veterans (Hiring Our Heroes, 2016; Veterans' Employment and Training Service, 2018). In October 2018, the veteran unemployment rate shrank to a near record-breaking low of 2.9%, and while these numbers are encouraging, the percentages should not suggest veteran employment problems are obsolete; unemployment rates do not consider underemployment or veterans who have stopped looking for work altogether—both factors need to be considered in the larger picture of veteran career transitions (Barrera & Carter, 2017; Kasperkevic, 2017; Veterans' Employment and Training Service, 2018). Meaningless employment, skill mismatch and mistranslation, disability stereotypes, and overqualification may still be prevalent problems for veterans transitioning into the workplace and may contribute to underemployment (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Maury et al., 2017). One study comprised of over half a million veteran job seekers found veterans struggle to find meaningful employment, with nearly one-third experiencing underemployment (Barrera & Carter, 2017). Further, while veteran job seekers are more likely to be employed than their civilian counterparts, veter-



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ans are also more likely to leave jobs earlier than the national averages (Barrera & Carter, 2017; Maury et al., 2017).

Civilian employment may at times seem daunting for veterans, with many acknowledging the disconnect they feel with their civilian employers. For instance, a study of more than 700 post-9/11 veterans revealed 41% of respondents believed hiring managers do not understand their military experience and 37% believed hiring managers actually devalued veteran experience (iCims, 2016). Perhaps as a result of veterans' perceptions of

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employers' perspectives on military service, nearly half (47%) of the veteran respondents either understated or omitted their service on resumes or applications (iCims, 2016).

## Foundational Challenges

Civilian employer misperceptions regarding veteran physical and mental health concerns may pose a particularly substantive transition challenge (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Kukla et al., 2015; Ohio Department of Veteran Services, n.d.; Vogt et al., 2017). Despite contrary perceptions, only about 10% of veterans are diagnosed with a substance abuse disorder—slightly higher than the civilian population, and roughly 20% suffer from a mental health disorder (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2019; Tanielian et al., 2008). Moreover, unsupported disability stereotypes perceived of veterans compound these struggles in the civilian sector, particularly in postmilitary employment (Constantine & Morton, 2018; France, 2016; Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Ohio Department of Veteran Services, n.d.; Stone et al., 2018; Stone & Stone, 2015). Some companies have hesitated hiring veterans because of erroneous beliefs that a disproportionate number of veterans, as compared with employees without military affiliation, are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder or suffer from traumatic brain injuries (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Ohio Department of Veteran Services, n.d.). With some employers reluctant to hire veterans because of their perceived disabilities, transition concerns seem warranted. These veteran biases may negatively impact all spheres of life, especially work (Constantine & Morton, 2018; France, 2016; Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Kukla et al., 2015; Ohio Department of Veteran Services, n.d.; Vogt et al., 2017).

## Learning Processes

Adult learning is an ongoing and continuous process within the military. Civilians who join the Army receive months of intense training that emphasizes the fundamentals of soldiering as well as the Army's core traditions, standards, and ethics (Military OneSource, 2018). Specialized soft skills (e.g., teamwork and problem-solving), behaviors (e.g., leadership), and values (e.g., loyalty and duty) are direct learning outcomes of the transformation from a private citizen to a soldier (Zogas, 2017). This training and shaping process continues throughout service until soldiers depart the military (Military OneSource, 2018). As such, an extensive amount of time and funds are devoted to transforming civilians into soldiers. In contrast, far fewer resources are allocated toward transitioning soldiers back to civilian life (Zogas, 2017).

From an adult-learning perspective, transitioning soldiers are likely most concerned with the learning needs related to their future well-being after leaving the



military. According to adult-learning research, adults face identity development, moral development, and personal trajectories related to their ongoing learning throughout adulthood (Day et al., 2009). Importantly, these learning challenges are similar to civilian challenges, yet the learning curve is particularly accelerated for transitioning adult service members who may have never reflected on their identities, moral development, or personal trajectories while serving in the military. Thus, critical steps in adult learning for transitioning soldiers include developing new identities, defining morals, and outlining a career path (Day et al., 2009).

### **Tacit and Explicit Knowledge**

One of the reasons service members may struggle in their transition process is the lack of explicit and tacit knowledge regarding ways to function as a civilian. Explicit knowledge refers to information that can be transmitted from materials such as encyclopedias or handbooks and made explicit by learners through a verbal statement (Davies, 2015). Whereas explicit knowledge can be readily expressed and easier to teach, tacit knowledge is grounded in experience and tough to transfer through formal training (Hedlund et al., 1999). As Babin and Garven (2019) noted, many military activities require development of tacit knowledge that can best be acquired through actual experience. For example, whereas soldiers are taught the operational characteristics of weapons (explicit knowledge), the majority of learning occurs through actual operation (Babin & Garven, 2019). TAP counselors are thus tasked with creating opportunities for soldiers to apply their learning to real-life contexts, which can aid successful knowledge transfers and military transitions (Conger, 2013).

### **Transfer of Learning**

For successful transfer of learning, the learner needs to be able to effectively apply what he or she learned in appropriate context (Caffarella, 2002). In other words, transfer of learning refers to the “so what” aspect of training, and it highlights why the information delivered can lead to favorable outcomes (Caffarella, 2002). For TAP counselors, transfer of training is a vital element of a soldier’s transition experience, though admittedly difficult to execute. Transfer of training application requires soldiers to have knowledge of the content, acquisition of skill(s), and understanding of the context in which the knowledge and skills can be leveraged (Ottoson, 1995). Soldiers who are able to apply their learning through TAP demonstrate a series of competencies, such as resume building and interview skills, that are often necessary for all civilians as they enter the nonmilitary job market.



The military-to-civilian transition process entails a transformation in perspective for the soldier as he or she considers the decisions involved in the transition. The transition process is holistic in nature, involving decisions about where to live, whether to seek employment or educational opportunities and how to do so, how to meet family members' needs, and other considerations (Air Force Personnel Center, n.d.; Department of Defense, 2019). TAP transition counselors, who work with soldiers of all ages and backgrounds from the beginning stages to the actual transition out of the Army, have a unique and valuable perspective about the learning and transformational perspectives transitioning soldiers need. Thus, the purpose of this study was to leverage these perspectives to gain a better understanding of transitioning soldiers' learning needs and challenges.

## **Methodology**

### ***Design***

The study used a nonexperimental, phenomenological, qualitative research design with the administration of an open-ended question survey for qualitative thematic analysis to explore the research question (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative research design approach is appropriate for investigating transition counselors' perceptions for several reasons, including the exploratory nature of studying this heretofore unstudied population and because no quantitative survey instruments or scales exist to measure perceived military-to-civilian transition challenges (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, this design is more likely to elicit rich and detailed responses, which may be used as the basis for subsequent theory building and development of empirical scales that measure the construct under study (Bonds-Raacke & Raacke, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2019). Data were obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request.

### ***Participants***

Survey participants were lead counselors, transition service managers, and other transition experts who participated in a U.S. Army Soldier For Life—Transition Assistance Program (SFL-TAP) symposium meeting in 2015. The purpose of the symposium was to gather together the interagency partners and key leaders of the SFL-TAP, including the lead counselors and transition service managers from all large U.S. Army installations around the globe, to exchange best practices and collect knowledge to better the program. Sixty-nine counselors and transition experts completed the questionnaire, representing approximately an 88% response rate.

### ***Survey Instrument and Analyses***

One week prior to the symposium, participants were administered a questionnaire designed to gather their perceptions regarding transitioning soldiers' needs and learning challenges to inform and provide inputs for topics addressed during the





symposium. To address the current study's research question about post-transition challenges, researchers asked participants to provide their responses to the following open-ended question: "Once a transitioning Soldier has begun a new job after transitioning out of the Army, what are the major challenges you see that Soldier facing once he/she has begun working in a civilian job outside the military?" Responses to this question were uploaded into NVivo and the content was analyzed to identify challenge themes. A qualitative methodology utilizing thematic analysis of the open-ended survey responses was appropriate for the study focus, which was exploratory in nature, and "characterized as inductive ... [and] emerging" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 22) from the data analysis in order to make sense of the study of participants' experiences and perspectives. In addition, thematic content analysis allows for the data to be organized into categories, and the frequency of the categories to be reported (Miles et al., 2013).

### Results

The table (on pages 44–47) presents the results of the qualitative thematic analysis of the presymposium questionnaire, including the coding theme label, example quotes, and the number of references. A total of 118 separately identifiable references were provided by the survey participants, with some participants providing more than one content response to the focal question for this study: "What are the major challenges you see the Soldier facing once he/she has begun working in a civilian job outside the military?" We used an inductive coding strategy to identify the underlying coding categories and themes that emerged from the data. To do this, we first uploaded the open-ended survey responses into NVivo, and each person read through each response word for word and line by line. We highlighted and placed into "nodes," or coding categories, phrases and sentences that alluded to emergent themes. This coding process allowed the data to be interpreted and categorized in ways that were specific to this set of data, as befitting an exploratory phenomenological study (Miles et al., 2013). After independent analysis, the researchers met to compare coding of response references and to establish inter-researcher reliability in interpretation of the grouping of coding categories into themes (Miles et al., 2013).

As shown in the table, 11 coding categories emerged from the coding analysis of the 118 references provided by transition counselors about their perceptions of challenges experienced by transitioned soldiers: civilian "culture shock" (i.e., stress arising from interacting with foreign cultures), identity, life balance, ambiguity and structure, language, camaraderie, leadership roles, job search process, budgeting and expenses, poor job satisfaction, and physical and mental health issues (Azari et al., 2010). Based on an analysis of the reference quotes in each of the coding categories, three overall themes were found to capture the emergent patterns of respons-





**Table.***NVivo Analysis Themes, Code Categories, and Transition Counselor Quotes*

Themes	Coding categories	Quotes	Number of references
Developing increased cultural awareness	Civilian “culture shock”	<p>“Adapting to change in culture”</p> <p>“Assimilating in the civilian work environment and culture”</p>	27
	Ambiguity and structuring challenges	<p>“Ambiguous rules and policies”</p> <p>“Adjusting to the new environment—they make their own decisions.”</p> <p>“Differences in structure from military to civilian life”</p> <p>“I have heard a lot of soldiers say that the thing about being in the Army is that your days are scheduled for you. So, that seems to be a challenge for them. Scheduling their own days.”</p> <p>“Learning new processes that may be more loosely defined from what they are used to. Changes in organizational culture that may not have the structure and discipline of a military organization.”</p>	15
	Identity learning	<p>“Feeling of losing identity from the military”</p> <p>“Losing the self-discipline and self-respect they had in the military”</p> <p>“Having trouble identifying with civilian coworkers; lack of common experiences”</p>	11

Table by Ann Herd.



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**Table.**

*NVivo Analysis Themes, Code Categories, and Transition Counselor Quotes (continued)*

Themes	Coding categories	Quotes	Number of references
Developing increased cultural awareness	Leadership roles	"Soldiers that have been in leadership positions may find it difficult to be a subordinate and not the leader making it difficult to deal with taking direction from another individual/supervisor that may not have as much experience/knowledge, etc. Some may have difficulty accepting they do not have the respect as a leader they had while in the military."	8
	Language	"Not using military jargon" "To leave the Army language behind"	5
	Camaraderie	"Not having the camaraderie he or she experienced in the military."  "Exclusion from his support network. His/her battle buddies are the best friends that he/she will ever have. It is very possible that he/she cannot relate to, or feel comfortable with their new co-workers. Distinctly different life experiences. It can take a while to get beyond that."  "The I syndrome of the civilian workforce versus the team concept creates a challenge for our soldiers because they are used to working in the team environment."	5

Table by Ann Herd.



**Table.**

*NVivo Analysis Themes, Code Categories, and Transition Counselor Quotes (continued)*

Themes	Coding categories	Quotes	Number of references
Developing career awareness and job search strategies	Civilian job satisfaction and retention	<p>"Job satisfaction. Many soldiers take jobs due to desperation and quickly become disillusioned with their new-found place."</p> <p>"Getting stuck in a 'transition job' and not continuing the job search to find a career they really want."</p> <p>"Retaining the job as it may not be a good fit for a soldier's skill set, income is too low, and lack of a 'mentor' within the new workplace to assist a soldier with learning the new work culture."</p>	9
	Job search process	<p>"Not having a civilian career map."</p> <p>"They need to engage early, understand their cross functional skills and how to articulate them to an employer! This way the employers know what he/she is getting in the soldier and the soldier fully understands the requirements which may lower turnover for the employer."</p>	5

Table by Ann Herd.

es: developing increased cultural awareness, developing career awareness and job search strategies, and developing new financial and personal integration strategies.

***Developing Increased Cultural Awareness***

The theme of developing increased cultural awareness captured the most responses regarding challenges that transitioning service members face once they are in the civilian workforce. Of the 118 references provided in the open-ended responses, "culture shock" was the most frequently mentioned challenge. Participants mentioned the culture shock that soldiers might experience in their civilian work organizations as well as in civilian society overall. Participants also mentioned the need for the transitioning soldiers to adapt to the new cultures in these civilian environments. Interestingly, some of the responses alluded to soldiers negating their



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**Table.**

*NVivo Analysis Themes, Code Categories, and Transition Counselor Quotes (continued)*

Themes	Coding categories	Quotes	Number of references
Developing new financial and personal integration strategies	Budgeting and expenses	<p>“Understanding just how expensive medical care can be and budgeting for utilities, car payment(s) and rent/ mortgage.”</p> <p>“Adjusting to the demand of time and money when it comes to the company. Soldiers are used to having the resources without the thought of cost expenditures which greatly differs from the civilian sector.”</p> <p>“Being in a job that does not pay enough to cover the veteran’s expenses, especially for those younger veterans with families.”</p> <p>“They often have a hard time adjusting to their new financial situation. Most service members grossly underestimate how much money it takes to replace their military entitlement package.”</p>	26
	Work and non-work integration	<p>“Adjusting to new work routines and family life.”</p> <p>“Reintegration into civilian life and new family routines.”</p> <p>“Acclimating to their new environment which consists of work, family, and self.”</p>	5
	Physical and mental health issues	<p>“Having civilian supervisors understanding and being flexible to accommodate veteran medical and other residual service-related activities”</p> <p>“Flashbacks of unpleasant experiences, effectively dealing with anger.”</p>	2

Table by Ann Herd.



military experience (i.e., “forgetting about their military culture”), while most responses alluded to the need to adapt, understand, or assimilate into the new work culture (i.e., “adjusting to the new work environment,” “adapting to the new culture,” and “acclimating to the culture of the organization”).

Related to the responses about forgetting or adapting to a new organizational culture (e.g., unique values, degree of hierarchy, degree of urgency, people or task orientation, functional orientation, and subcultures), another category in this cultural awareness theme pertained to identity (Society for Human Resource Management, 2019). Here also, some responses alluded to a sense of loss, or the need to throw away one’s military identity in order to take on a new civilian identity (i.e., “taking off the uniform—physically and mentally,” “feeling of losing identity from the military,” “losing the self-discipline and self-respect they had in the military”).

Specific aspects of culture, such as language, camaraderie, leadership norms, and work environment structure made up the remainder of categories pertaining to developing cultural awareness. Many of the responses in these categories also alluded to a sense of loss or the need to negate one’s military experience. For example, regarding language, responses referred to “not using military jargon,” “suppressing the past military experience and language,” and “leaving the Army language behind.” The sense of loss was also evident in the references to camaraderie (e.g., “not having the camaraderie he or she experienced in the military”; “the ‘I’ syndrome of the civilian workforce versus the team concept creates a challenge for our soldiers because they are used to working in the team environment”; “Exclusion from his support network. His/her battle buddies are the best friends that he/she will ever have. It is very possible that he/she cannot relate to, or feel comfortable with, his/her new coworkers. Distinctly different life experiences. It can take a while to get beyond that”).

In contrast to the sense of loss associated with participants’ responses relating to identity and camaraderie, the responses in the categories of leadership and structure alluded to the need to learn new ways of operating in these areas. For example, several responses in the leadership category referred to the need to learn to lead informally and as a team member without acknowledged position power that accompanies rank. Example responses include the following:

- ◆ “Adjusting to a new role (maybe used to leading) and becoming a team player.”
- ◆ “Inability to interact well with civilians, especially for more senior leaders who get used to people doing what they say because of their rank. Ex-military may be a bit rough around the edges.”
- ◆ “Expectation management. Soldiers are groomed for leadership roles throughout their life cycle. When they transition they may go into a role that is not a leadership position.”
- ◆ “Soldiers who have been in leadership positions may find it difficult to be a subordinate and not the leader, making it difficult to deal with taking direction from another individual/supervisor who may not have as much experience/



knowledge, etc. Some may have difficulty accepting they do not have the respect as a leader they had while in the military.”

In the coding category of “ambiguity and structure,” responses referred to the learning needs of transitioning military members to develop skills in flexibility, dealing with ambiguity, and learning new norms. Example responses in this category included the following:

- ◆ “Learning new processes that may be more loosely defined from what they are used to. Changes in organizational culture may not have the structure and discipline of the military organization.”
- ◆ “Flexibility to adjusting to a different work environment/culture.”
- ◆ “Civilian companies often do not have regulatory guidance or SOPs (standard operating procedures) that soldiers often refer to for guidance, direction, etc. This may cause stress or lower confidence to do their job.”
- ◆ “Recognizing and stepping up to meet the needs of their (new) employers. Sometimes it means conforming to the new organization but often it means using the training and skills they already have to get the job done.”

### *Developing Career Awareness and Job Search Strategies*

A second learning theme that emerged from participants’ responses regarding challenges faced by transitioning service members pertained to developing career awareness and job search strategies. Responses in this theme included both psychological and practical career development concerns. Responses in the category of “civilian job satisfaction and retention” pertained to the challenges that may occur when developing awareness about gaps between one’s career goals, competencies, and perceived fit with one’s current job. Examples of responses in this category included the following:

- ◆ “Job satisfaction. Many soldiers take jobs due to desperation and quickly become disillusioned with their new-found place.”
- ◆ “Getting stuck in a ‘transition job’ and not continuing the job search to find a career they really want.”
- ◆ “Retaining the job as it may not be a good fit for soldier’s skill set, income is too low, and lack of a ‘mentor’ within the new workplace to assist soldier with learning the new work culture.”
- ◆ “Staying with that particular job as it is not a career! We need to sell the career not a new JOB! Most leave because it may have been the first thing that came along.”

Regarding the category of job search processes, participants’ responses pointed to practical strategies such as developing a career map, getting additional education, certification, or credentialing, updating their resumes, and understanding and communicating how their skills translate into civilian job terms. Respondents also noted the need to treat the job search process as an important commitment involving reality checking and exploration so that both the transi-



tioning service member and the potential employer have a clear picture of the employment relationship:

- ◆ “This is the reason they need to engage early, understand their cross-functional skills and how to articulate them to an employer! This way the employer knows what he/she is getting in the soldier and the soldier fully understands the requirements—which may lower turnover for the employer.”
- ◆ “Setting and staying with meaningful goals. Stop thinking that the world owes them a living. Wake up to the need for school or training.”

The Army has invested heavily in developing soldiers’ career readiness, likely out of recognition for its need. The transition counselors we spoke with highlighted why career awareness and job search strategies are important for service members leaving the military.

### *Developing New Financial and Personal Integration Strategies*

The final theme that emerged from participants’ responses regarding their perspectives of challenges faced by service members who have transitioned out of the military pertained to developing new financial and personal integration strategies. Responses with this theme referred to “adjustment” (i.e., changing to fit into civilian life) and “acclimating” (i.e., becoming accustomed to civilian life) in both work and nonwork spheres, and interacting primarily with people who may have no knowledge of one’s military experiences (i.e., “acclimating to the new civilian schedule and lifestyle”; “reintegration into civilian life, new family routines”; and “readjusting to family and friends who never served in the military”). A small but significant number of responses also referred to the need to learn strategies for dealing with mental health issues that may have been precipitated or exacerbated by military service. On a practical level, the coding category “budgeting and expenses” accounted for 22% of responses (see table, pages 44–47) and alluded to practical concerns regarding budgeting; living within one’s means with a likely lower civilian salary; obtaining affordable insurance, medical care, and housing; and generally adjusting to a more difficult financial situation. In this regard, respondents frequently mentioned having the perception that transitioning service members had unrealistic expectations about how much they would earn in their new civilian employment situation and how far their earnings would stretch (i.e., “They often have a hard time adjusting to their new financial situation. Most service members grossly underestimate how much money it takes to replace their military entitlement package”).

## **Discussion**

Results from the present study suggest that transition counselors report that transitioning service members experience learning challenges regarding both tacit and explic-





it knowledge as well as processes related to transformational learning and development that occur throughout adult life (Mezirow, 1991). These findings also revealed consistencies with previous research on veteran career transitions. Developing increased cultural competence highlighted one of the commonly cited transition issues experienced by veterans (Simmelink, 2004). Whether referencing military culture's influence or need for transitioning service members to learn to function as civilians, the transition counselors echoed prior research (Davis & Minnis, 2016; Ghosh & Fouad, 2016; Prudential Financial, 2012; Zogas, 2017). Similarly, the findings revealed civilian and career-related knowledge requirements may be lacking for transitioning service members.

As Loughran (2014) highlighted, veterans often struggle to secure meaningful employment that matches their skills and interests. Based on the study's findings, the lack of career readiness, financial planning, and integration strategies may contribute to the loss of sense of purpose for veterans who have completed their transition out of the military. Although TAP offers extensive career-readiness training, the frequency of responses regarding soldiers' career transition challenges suggests transitioning service members may struggle to transfer their learning outside of the classroom. The findings also suggest the Army's lifestyle is essentially embedded in soldiers and can make it difficult to transition from and merge with new norms and identities (i.e., "Having trouble identifying with civilian coworkers; lack of common experiences"; "Exclusion from his support network. His/her battle buddies are the best friends that he/she will ever have. It is very possible that he/she cannot relate to, or feel comfortable with their new co-workers"; and "Acclimating to their new environment which consists of work, family, and self"). The perspectives of transition counselors on the challenges faced by soldiers leaving the Army provide direction for improving current practices and guiding additional research.

### Implications

Career transition is a process of moving from one stage to another in one's career journey (Johnston et al., 2010). The study highlights learning concerns regularly encountered by TAP counselors relating to this journey, and it leads to several implications for stakeholders invested in military transitions. Transition counselors identified a sense of identity, language and norms, command structure, camaraderie, and sense of purpose amongst the top challenges faced by Army service members leaving the military. These challenges relate to broad cultural differences between the military and nonmilitary organizations and represent tacit knowledge areas that may be developed by transformational learning strategies involving perspective taking, storytelling, and other reflective practices that allow the learner to gain insights about how their experiences relate to new situations (Merriam & Brockett, 2007; Mezirow, 1991).



### ***Developing Increased Cultural Awareness***

Although TAP has a career exploration component, there may be opportunities to further integrate cultural awareness into the program—an area of serious concern cited by transition counselors in this study. Training related to cultural adjustments, hierarchy transfiguration, identity confusion, and civilian biases are significant concerns plaguing soldiers returning to the civilian sector (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Cole, 2014; Davis & Minnis, 2016). These concerns appear warranted because cultural awareness (e.g., shared values, group norms, and person-organization fit) is an important factor of civilian life, particularly employment (Cable & Judge, 1996; Groysberg et al., 2018). As veterans, scholars, and transition counselors have all identified cultural awareness as a barrier to successful transitions, introducing a more in-depth cultural component in TAP may improve the transition process and better prepare soldiers for civilian work and family life.

### ***Developing Career Awareness and Job Search Strategies***

TAP transition counselors in this study referenced career-related challenges for transitioning soldiers including difficulty securing employment, poor job satisfaction, and low retention. While TAP offers instruction on obtaining postmilitary employment, such as military occupational specialty crosswalk demonstrations, the curriculum may benefit from further examination. These courses are completed over a condensed time frame and cover large quantities of information—an approach that is not conducive to memory retention (Meacham, 2017). As such, transitioning service members may benefit from more adequately distributed courses. Longer program lengths may allow for shorter, more manageable courses and lessen the overwhelming amount of content currently provided in one sitting. Further, additional direction on challenges that commonly occur after postmilitary job attainment (e.g., overqualification/underemployment, high turnover rates for veterans, and employer-veteran employee disconnect) may be beneficial to program participants. As such, the study's findings suggest a broader and extended career development course for soldiers.

### ***Developing New Financial and Personal Integration Strategies***


The transition counselors identified money management, finances, and new routines as a third area of concern for transitioning service members. Although service member pay may be perceived as low for the number of hours worked and corresponding dangers of the job, the entitlement package, including housing, meals, and insurance, are at times underrecognized. The added expenses, which veterans previously did not have to consider, consume significant portions of civilian paychecks. As such, current TAP training that educates transitioning soldiers on how to manage their money and new environment appears appropriate. In fact, considering the high number of references, TAP may even consider expanding on current programming related to the management of money and self.



## Future Research

Research regarding military-to-civilian-life transition challenges is expanding, but little work has concentrated on the TAP counselors who contribute toward lessening service members' postmilitary struggles (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Davis & Minnis, 2016; Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Prudential Financial, 2012; Zogas, 2017). Studies that explore relationships between TAP counselors' background and effectiveness can contribute toward identifying attributes of counselors well-positioned to be successful. Findings from these studies may explain the various perspectives of TAP's necessity and effectiveness. Finally, the military itself is periodically perceived as having its own culture that is instilled in its members. Comparative research related to veterans' understanding of military culture's influence in shaping their identities may assist in recognizing service members likely to be considered "high risk" during their transition.

## Conclusion

This study explored Army transition counselors' perspectives of the learning challenges faced by transitioning soldiers. Perhaps no other stakeholder plays as important a role in veterans' transitions than counselors, and as such, transition counselors offer unique insight into the experiences of soldiers leaving the military. Based on the study findings, addressing learning needs pertaining to developing increased cultural awareness, developing career awareness and job search strategies, and developing new financial and personal integration strategies may prove beneficial in enhancing service members' transition outcomes. The Army's substantial investment in soldier transitions has positively impacted thousands of veterans. With continued exploration and program improvement, career transitions may become a less substantial stressor for veterans and instead become a positive experience as part of the civilian-military-veteran trajectory. 

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