

**PROGRAM PROFILE**

# Reconceptualizing the U.S. Military's Transition Assistance Program: The Success in Transition Model

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This article describes and proposes the Success in Transition Model as a guiding framework for a reconceptualized Transition Assistance Program (TAP) to support U.S. military members as they leave the service. Key groups of veterans have ongoing difficulties adjusting to civilian settings after their time in the service. Even with recent changes, the current TAP has a narrow focus of primarily aiding members to prepare for finding post-military employment, education, and benefits. Little attention is given to other key areas of their functioning such as adjusting to their new work/educational/cultural settings, meeting family transition needs, financial management issues, procuring housing, dealing with trauma responses, or assuring that veterans truly obtain the benefits and support they need. This new model addresses key flaws with the current TAP and is grounded in human and military transition theories and research into optimal ways to foster improved outcomes for transitioning military members.

**Keywords:** veterans; military; transition; reintegration; employment**Introduction**

Approximately 200,000 U.S. military members leave the armed services each year. Since its inception in 1991, the U.S. military's Transition Assistance Program (TAP) has sought to help prepare these military members for their shift to civilian life. Despite recent modifications, TAP continues to largely ignore the full range of challenges and life changes faced by transitioning military members as they leave the service. TAP principally focuses on preparing transitioning military members for employment or education after their service along with helping them understand and apply for a broad range of available veteran's benefits (Congressional Research Service, 2018).

While many separating military members successfully adapt to civilian life, 40 to 75% describe some difficulties managing this major adjustment (Castro & Kintzle, 2017; Zoli, Maury, & Fay, 2015). These difficulties include problems adjusting to educational or work settings, substance abuse, homelessness, financial mismanagement issues, confrontations with the criminal justice system, family problems, and military-related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) responses (Cook & Kim, 2009; Edens, Kasprow, Tsai & Rosenheck, 2011; Elbogen, Johnson, Wagner, Newton and Beckham, 2012; Hawkins, 2010;

Sayers, Farrow, Ross and Oslin, 2009; Summerfield, 2001). Sixty percent of these service members describe the process of navigating Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA) programs, services, and benefits as challenging, with 40% who also report addressing financial challenges as part of their transition (Zoli et al., 2015). Military members who have the most problems with this transition include those who experienced traumatic events, have service-connected disabilities, been seriously injured, served in combat, have known someone who was killed or injured, and who were married during their time in service (Pew Research Center, 2011; Zoli et al., 2015). Members who did not initiate the end of their time in the service such as those who are separated or retired due to a reduction in forces, being medically separated/retired, or separated due to administrative/legal concerns also have more difficulty with this transition (Coll & Weiss, 2013, Zoli et al., 2015). Although there is a wide-ranging spectrum of organizations providing services and support to transitioning veterans, many are highly under-utilized (Aronson et al., 2019; Institute of Medicine, 2013). Some veterans report they are unable to find the right program to meet their needs while others describe not knowing which agency or program to go to for the assistance they need (Aronson et al., 2019).

Although TAP programs have been significantly revised since 2011, their primary focus remains on preparing separating military members for post-service employment and improving their awareness of benefits. Little emphasis is placed on supporting and building up the resilience of the military member to address the broad range of challenges they frequently face during their transition to non-military life. On a broader systemic level, the Department of Defense's (DoD) and the Departments of Veterans Affairs' (VA) responses to difficulties experienced by transitioning military veterans has historically focused on each individual problem such as PTSD, homelessness, substance abuse, or suicide risk. Limited programmatic attention has been given to understanding and addressing the common systemic factors underlying these difficulties from a holistic perspective.

After describing the current TAP and identifying persistent issues and concerns with the program, this article outlines a reconceptualized TAP based on the Success in Transition (SIT) Model. Grounded in Schlossberg's (1981) Adult Transition Theory, the ecological model of military and service member reintegration and in the Military Transition Theory (MTT), SIT provides a guiding theoretical framework for a new TAP as a more effective way to conceptualize and conduct these programs.

### Historical and Recently Revised TAP

First initiated in the National Defense Authorization Act of 1990, for fiscal year 1991, congress recognized the need for service members to have assistance in understanding how the skills they developed during military service transferred to civilian employment. They also wanted them to have a general awareness of the benefits they would be entitled to after leaving the military (Congressional Research Service, 2018). The mandate and focus for this transition assistance was precipitated in part by the end of the first Gulf War and mandatory reductions in the armed forces in the early 1990s (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018). Initially, TAP primarily consisted of providing transitioning military members with several days of educational class sessions addressing employment issues, benefit awareness, and job training assistance (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018). TAP is administered by the DoD with the assistance of the VA, and the Departments of Labor (DoL), Education (ED), Homeland Security (DHS), Small Business Administration (SBA), and Office of Personnel Management (OPM) (Congressional Research Service, 2018).

Beginning with passage of the Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) to Hire Heroes Act (Title II of Public Law 112–56), a number of changes to TAP were initiated in 2001 (Federal Register, 2016). This revised TAP is sometimes referred to as Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success). Required changes encompassed within Transition GPS included making participation in some core components of TAP mandatory for most exiting military members with only a few exceptions. The VOW Act mandated that these military members receive

counseling and information regarding employment assistance and VA benefits. It also required them to receive pre-separation counseling to develop an Individual Transition Plan (ITP). The reformatted TAP was created around four core recommendations: (1) Adopt standards of career readiness for transitioning members, (2) Implement a revamped TAP curriculum of individually tailored and value-added training to help members effectively pursue their post-military objectives, (3) Implement a "Capstone" signed by the members' commander to verify that they have met career readiness standards along with their ITP, and (4) Implement a Military Life Cycle Transition Model that encompasses their entire military career versus a model that only focuses on the brief period before their departure from the military (Federal Register, 2016). As part of the first recommendation noted above, DoD adopted Career Readiness Standards (CRS) to help them measure a service member's readiness for a civilian career. They include pre-separation career counseling, attending VA benefits sessions and DoL employment workshop briefings, registering for benefits, completing their Individual Transition Plan (ITP), completing a military to civilian financial plan, along with number of other tasks to help them obtain employment such as completing a job application (Department of Defense, 2019).

Transition GPS also included a number of expanded topics addressing health-related needs/benefits/services, financial planning, career/employment, and material related to spouses and caregivers (Federal Register, 2016). It involved optional individual training tracks where members attend two-day courses focused on their self-selected career, educational, vocational, and/or entrepreneurship paths. More recent changes to TAP include a requirement that military members complete their initial counseling with a TAP advisor and complete their ITP no later than 365 days prior to their planned departure from the military. Commanders must now complete the Capstone requirement no later than 90 days before separation (Military.com, 2019).

### Issues/Concerns with TAP/Transition GPS

The recent revisions to TAP include key new components and processes that will likely help more military members obtain employment and move into their new non-military settings. These relatively slight changes to TAP contained within Transition GPS, however, only marginally modify a narrowly-focused and largely atheoretical program that still requires comprehensive reconceptualization, review, and overhaul. Persistent and fundamental deficits that are still present even within the newly redesigned TAP are outlined in the following section.

#### *Narrow focus*

TAP's primary focus remains on enabling military members to obtain post-military employment or education along with helping them understand and utilize the benefits and programs that are available to them. The central goal of TAP, as outlined in current federal guidelines and legislation,

even with the recently enacted changes, continues to be ensuring that service members leaving active duty, “are prepared for their next step in life whether pursuing education, finding a job in the public or private sector, starting their new business or other form of employment, or returning to school or an existing job” (Federal Register, 2016, p. 41803). This narrow focus on employment, education, and benefits ignores the many complex and dynamic elements present in the military to civilian transition process. A central element absent from TAP’s focus is helping military members adapt to the loss of military culture, camaraderie (i.e., relationship connections), and support systems. Transitioning military members frequently miss their “military identity” when they leave the service. The military has also enabled them to have a “sense of purpose” along with providing an overall structured system that includes rules and guidelines for living. For the many members who joined the service as young adults, their sense of self competency, worth, and value are highly linked to the roles they held in the military. When they leave the service to enter what can often be a highly competitive and individualistic civilian culture, many members are ill-prepared for pursuing new sources of support, structure, or meaningful guidance. Little attention in TAP is given to helping military members identify or address psychological needs such as post-traumatic responses (i.e., PTSD), mood issues like depression and anxiety, or potential changes to family/interpersonal relationships. TAP also only minimally addresses the impacts of the transition process on the spouses, partners, and family members.

#### ***Absence of a guiding theoretical framework***

Military missions are guided by justifiable goals and purposes linked to overriding core objectives/principals or national goals such as achieving national defense or protecting a national interest (Army University Press, 2018). In the same manner, human intervention or service programs like TAP require a theoretical framework to guide, manage, and evaluate all activities encompassed within their program(s) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1999). A guiding theoretical framework is built from available theories and research regarding the processes or systems that the program seeks to address (Nilsen, 2015). It provides leaders, participants, stakeholders, and staff with a commonly agreed upon consensus driving their actions (DeLeon, 2000). Until recently TAP has been an atheoretical program that chiefly functioned to help military members find employment after their time in the service. The DoD and the VA report that TAP is working to integrate a Military Life Cycle (MLC) transition model into this program (Department of Defense, 2015; Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018). The MLC transition model initiates the military member’s preparation for transition near the beginning of their time in the service and it identifies, “various key touch points throughout their MLC that provide them opportunities to align their military career with their civilian goals.” (Department of Defense, 2015). It also seeks to make sure that members know and use the CRS

for their future career planning. The MLC solely addresses career issues and goals and wholly excludes any recognition of the multiple interrelated biopsychosocial-cultural, individual, and experiential factors that impact the transition process for each member. It does not reference or utilize available human transitions theory, military transition theories, or research-based knowledge and findings about the complex, dynamic elements involved in transition.

#### ***Lack of an individually tailored approach***

Contrary to claims by the DoD and the VA, the newly-revised TAP continues in practice to employ a “one size fits all” approach that does not reflect the broad range of military members and their different capacities to manage the transition. It overlooks the benefits of providing individually-tailored support and training based on the specific needs, strengths, and goals of each member. The new TAP does mandate that military members complete initial counseling with a TAP advisor, that they complete an ITP, and it does make available optional individual training tracks comprised of two-day courses to address career, educational, vocational, and/or entrepreneurship paths. However, the primary and most extensive components of TAP (i.e., the required briefings) continue to be broadly directed to all transitioning military members. Very few military members are electing to participate in the available tracks comprised of the individual courses (Congressional Research Service, 2018).

#### ***Use of outdated learning approaches***

TAP briefings or sessions addressing VA benefits, employment, and resilient transitions, which compose major portions of this program, continue to be provided using mostly outdated didactic teaching approaches that rely heavily on Microsoft PowerPoint presentations. These briefings rarely employ more current learning approaches such as experiential learning techniques, computer-assisted instruction, or simulation-based instruction which have been found to improve student participation, retention, and application of course material (Fletcher, 2009; Kempf, Manconi, & Spalt, 2017; Menaker, Coleman, Collins, & Murawski, 2005; Reime, et al., 2017).

#### ***Flawed data collection and reporting***

Data collection and reporting for TAP has historically focused on reporting the numbers and percentages of military members who participate in their program(s). In 2016 the DoD reported 92 to 97% compliance rates with the mandated elements of TAP GPS (Congressional Research Service, 2018). A 2017 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, however, concluded that DoD’s 2016, “public reporting on the four performance measures under its Transition to Veterans agency priority goal may have misstated the extent to which underlying TAP requirements were met for National Guard and Reserve members and all other TAP-eligible service members” (Government Accountability Office, 2017, p. 150). DoD data on TAP continues to lack information on

timeliness of member attendance, completion of all TAP requirements, or results-focused data that reflects impacts of the program for actual military members' outcomes (i.e., does this program help improve their transition to their new civilian settings?).

### Theories for Understanding Military Transition

Various theoretical frameworks help explain the complex interaction of the many factors involved in the military to civilian transition process. Schlossberg's (1981) Adult Transition Theory provides a comprehensive model for examining how humans respond to transition. It has been employed by researchers and administrators to help appreciate what transitioning veterans are experiencing and to also identify optimal ways to support student veterans adapt to academic and work environments (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011). Schlossberg defines transition "as any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 30). She identifies three different types of transitions (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). Anticipated transitions are those that happen in generally predictable ways such as graduating from high school or college. Unanticipated transitions are unscheduled and not predictable ones like major losses including the death of a loved one or a divorce. Non-event transitions are those that are anticipated, but they do not happen, such as failure to be offered a specific job or to be accepted into college. Schlossberg describes four factors that affect the quality of someone's transition which are also known as the "4 Ss" (Anderson et al., 2012). They are a person's situation, self, support, and strategies. Weaknesses and strengths in each of these four factors may enable or deter an individual's ability to experience a successful transition (Evans et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2011). Regarding the situation transitional factor, it is important to note the individual's triggers, timing, level of control, role changes, duration, prior similar experiences, concurrent stressors, and their personal assessment of the transition. Under the factor of self, determining each individual's personal and demographic characteristics such as age, stage of life, or health and their psychological resources can indicate their view and response to transitions. Support includes close relationships with family, friends, community, and institutions. Strategies include coping responses to positively change the situation or the meaning of the transition, along with ways to manage the stress associated with the transition (Evans et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2011).

The ecological model of military and service member reintegration which is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory highlights the key aspects of transition and adjustment across individual, interpersonal, community systems, and societal system levels (Elnitsky, Fisher, & Blevins, 2017). This model views the complex interactions of these four interacting system levels that impact a member as they move from being in the military

into non-military settings. It emphasizes the influence that broader macro and mezzo systems (i.e., societal and community) have on interpersonal and individual levels. There are multiple interrelated biopsychosocial-cultural factors at each system level that impact the transition process for each person. From this perspective, all of these factors individually and collectively can either hinder or facilitate this process (Elnitsky et al., 2017). Individual level factors in this model include physical and psychological health, productivity at work or school, and cultural and demographic characteristics. Interpersonal level factors comprise the member's friends, family, spouse/partner, and children. Health systems, work and school, civilian community, and legal systems are contained within the community system level factors. Societal level factors include DoD and VA policies regarding benefits and status.

Researchers, policy makers, theorists, and the practitioners who work with military members, veterans, and their families increasingly emphasize the major roles of culture and cultural dynamics involved in the transition process (Ahern et al., 2015; Castro & Kintzle, 2016; Cooper, Caddick, Godier, Cooper, & Fossey, M., 2016). Within the broader sense of culture, service members often experience the military environment as "family" that has provided them with regular support, norms, values, and structure (Ahern et al., 2015). Military cultural values and beliefs are often central aspects of a service members' identity which directly influences how they see themselves, others, and society (Cooper et al., 2016). They understandably seek to maintain these central values and norms even after their time in the service. As military members, they obtained a needed level of cultural competence of what is acceptable and appropriate within that culture in order to adapt and succeed (Cooper et al., 2016). Successfully transitioning to non-military settings requires different sets of cultural competencies such as new ways of communicating, dressing, and interacting (Cooper et al., 2016). However, in the face of dealing with the frequent stressors, changes, and challenges, transitioning members may cling to their military cultural norms which can disrupt their ability to adapt to their new settings. What is frequently seen as normal within civilian settings such as the high level of value placed on individual or personal rights may seem alien or strange to military members (Ahern et al., 2015).

Military transition theory (MTT) incorporates a number of elements found in Schlossberg's (1981) theory and the ecological model, while also addressing the role of cultural factors in the transition process (Castro & Kintzle, 2016). This theory specifically addresses the complex multidimensional interacting transition process experienced by military members. It has been utilized in several major urban populations within the U.S. as part of a broader community assessment to evaluate the state of veterans in those areas (Castro & Kintzle, 2017). MTT highlights three interrelating and corresponding segments: approaching the military transition, managing the transition, and assessing the transition

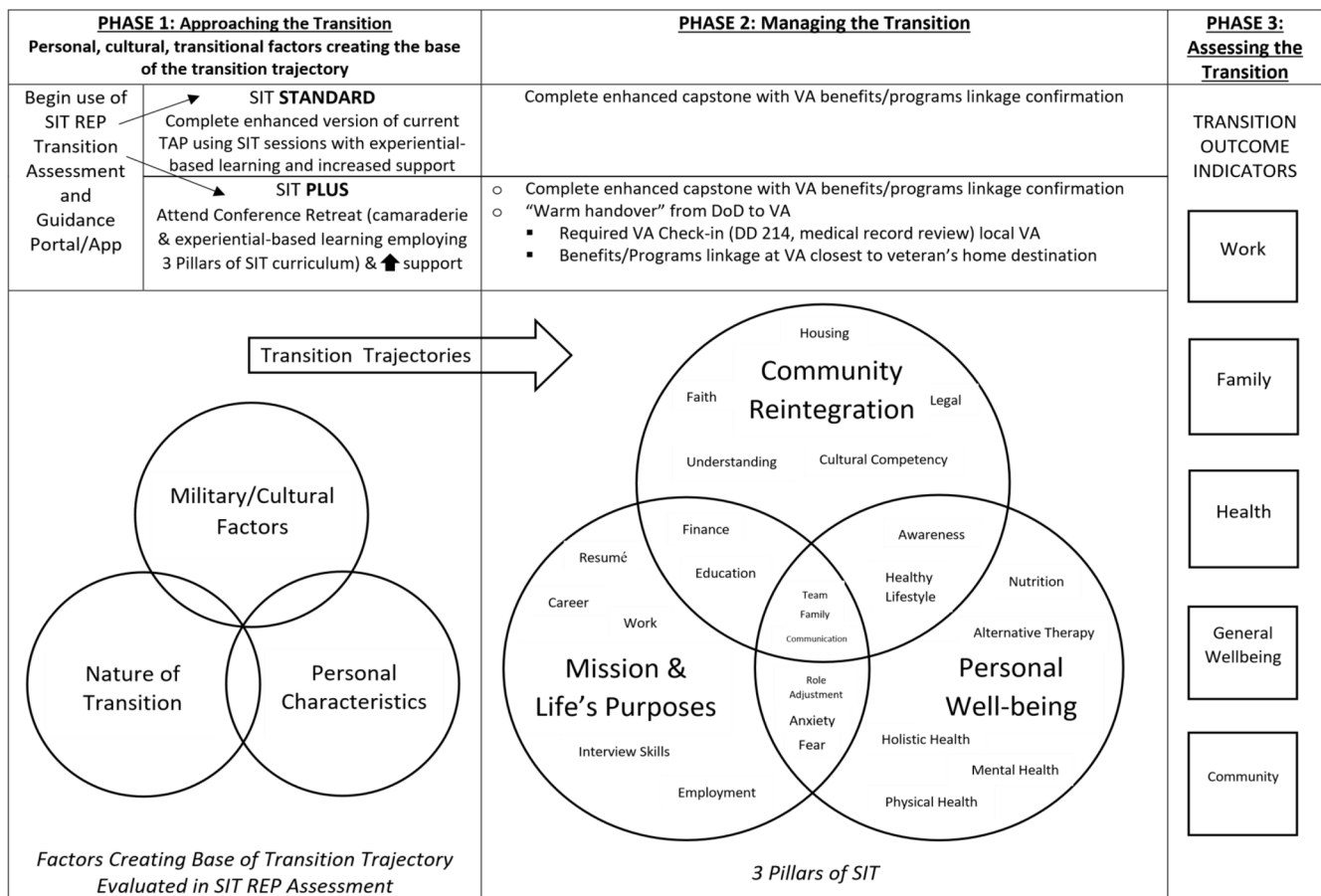
(Castro & Kintzle, 2017). From this perspective, transitioning members who lack a sense of a shared military cultural identity, and who also have an unrecognized sense of privilege, can experience a limited feeling of belongingness placing them at a particularly high risk for having difficulty forming connections in their new civilian context (Castro & Kintzle, 2014). MTT is particularly insightful for reconceptualizing a new TAP given its grounding in existing theories of human transition and because it highlights the interrelatedness of the many complex individual, family, cultural, and systemic factors at key segments throughout this process.

A reconceptualized TAP also benefits from using the key ingredient of camaraderie since it plays such a vital role in helping military members initially transition into and stay within the service. Military camaraderie can be described as social cohesion or the forming of highly close connections and friendships among military members as they jointly work toward accomplishing their mission (Angel et al., 2018; Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011). It has been found to be one of the primary components of military service that veterans miss the most after they leave the service (Nevarez, Yee, & Waldinger, 2017). Camaraderie can enable military members to overcome barriers often associated with asking for

assistance (Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011; Menger, Robbins, & Bell, 2017). Aspects of camaraderie, especially when it is formed during military deployment, have been shown to decrease the development and severity of PTSD along with aiding in recovery from trauma responses (Nevarez et al., 2017; Wright, Kelsall, Sim, Clarke, & Creamer, 2013). Infusing features of camaraderie into education and social service programs is also linked with improved retention/use of material and higher levels of participation (Brake & Kelly, 2019; Harrod et al., 2016).

**The Success in Transition (SIT) Model**

The Success in transition (SIT) model (Figure 1) provides a guiding theoretical framework for a reconceptualized TAP. It emerges principally from a task force commissioned by U.S. Representative Gus Bilirakis who represents Florida’s 12th District. The task force was comprised of a broad array of current and former military members, researchers, mental health/behavioral science practitioners, business leaders, and policy experts. They met several times in 2017 and 2018 and conducted community events to solicit perspectives on this topic from leaders highly involved in supporting transitioning military members, veterans, and their families.



**Figure 1:** Success in Transition (SIT) Model.

Source: Adapted from Castro, C.A., & Kintzle, S. (2017). The state of the American military veteran: The San Francisco veterans study. Retrieved from [http://cir.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/USC-CIR-SF-VET-2017\\_FINAL-Pgs.pdf](http://cir.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/USC-CIR-SF-VET-2017_FINAL-Pgs.pdf).

The SIT Model for TAP was further developed and adjusted by the authors who are members of the task force after a thorough review of available literature using the search terms of human transition, military transition, military reintegration, and readjustments. This model is grounded in Schlossberg's (1981) Adult Transition Theory, the ecological model of military and service member reintegration, and it integrates key elements of MTT (Castro & Kintzle, 2017). It recognizes the complexity of the many interacting factors involved in transitioning out of military cultural systems, subsystems, and structure into highly distinct and different civilian environments. This model incorporates information and training that addresses the whole transitioning member, including changes to their military identity, psychological, and family needs. The SIT Model seeks to provide an individually tailored program to support and train each transitioning member based on their own needs, strengths, and goals. Training is provided using experiential, computer-assisted, and simulation-based instruction techniques which challenge participants to learn, practice, and apply valuable information needed for their post-military lives. (Fletcher, 2009; Kempf et al., 2017; Menaker et al., 2005; Reime et al., 2017) These learning approaches which require the learner to interact, manipulate, and sometimes modify the course learning material to solve problems or address needs, have been found to effectively foster information retention by participants participant information retention in military, business, medical, and social service educational programs (Fletcher, 2009; Kempf et al., 2017; Menaker et al., 2005; Reime et al., 2017).

The SIT Model for transition addresses and applies Schlossberg's (1981) three different types of transitions (i.e., anticipated, unanticipated, and non-event transitions). By assessing and responding to each member's transitional factors, it also integrates the "4 Ss" that Schlossberg (1981) identified (i.e., situation, self, support, and strategies) that affect the quality of someone's successful transition. The SIT Model views each transitioning member from an ecological systems theory perspective by understanding and assessing the interdependent connections between their sense of military cultural, levels of support, and interpersonal/individual levels. It also infuses aspects of military camaraderie as a necessary motivational and rewarding component throughout the model.

The SIT Model for transition also addresses several key deficiencies within the current TAP. By seeking to understand, assess, and respond to each member's multidimensional transition trajectory, each phase of the model specifically addresses the narrow focus and lack of an individually tailored approach found in the current TAP. It significantly modifies the outdated learning approach of TAP by heavily employing experiential, computer-assisted, and simulation learning techniques to engage the member into active participation in their own preparation for transition. Maybe most significantly, the SIT Model addresses current TAP's lack of a guiding theoretical framework by providing

a research-based, theory-driven conceptual structure to inform the U.S. military's transition assistance efforts.

The SIT Model outlines three phases of the military transition process: approaching the transition, managing the transition, and assessing the transition. Each of these overlapping and interacting phases, as detailed below, emphasize specific tasks, challenges, and roles for the transitioning service member. Suggested programmatic actions or steps that the military member and others will take as part of the reconceptualized TAP are also outlined for each phase of the model.

#### ***Phase one: Approaching the transition***

During the initial phase there are three primary factors: personal, cultural, and transitional that create the base of the member's transition trajectory. These three overlapping and interacting factors play major influencing roles in the member's experience of transition and in their eventual outcomes. Member strengths in these factors can predict a more successful transition while numerous needs or issues may reflect future difficulties. They include military/cultural factors such as deployment or combat experience, comprehension of military mission during time in service, and what precipitated the member's military discharge. Personal characteristics are another principal influencing factor in the transition trajectory. These characteristics consist of the transitioning member's health, service-connected disabilities, personal preparedness, and expectations. They also encompasses the member's perceived level of informal and formal support, how successful they have managed prior transitions, and their level of expressed religious beliefs. These personal characteristics further contain the member's responses to any military-related trauma they may have experienced, their ability to manage finances, any difficulties they may have had with supervisors, commanders, or law enforcement, and any family problems. The member's level of social support, community, and civilian transition support, ability to navigate resources such as those provided by the military and the VA, coping styles, and individual attitudes and beliefs further makeup their personal characteristics. The third transition influencing factor is the overall nature of the transition; for example, is their leaving the service occurring as a predictable or unpredictable event and does the member perceive departure as something that is positive or negative?

Every transitioning member completes an evaluation assessing these three factors in Phase One of the SIT Model. They complete an online assessment tool (i.e., needs assessment) in order to gauge their particular trajectory during this initial phase. This assessment will be embedded into the SIT REP Transition Assessment and Guidance Portal/App. SIT REP is an abbreviation for the phrase "situation report" which is commonly used in the military to referring to a concise form of reporting that describes a situation. This portal/application will provide transitioning veterans with information about the vast array of resources, programs, and services available

to support a successful transition. The assessment tool could be built in-part from available valid and reliable instruments designed to assess how military members adjust to transition, such as the Transitioning to Civilian Life Scale (TCLS) and the measures used in the Veterans Metrics Initiative, which are described in Phase Three of the model (Weiss, Rubin, & Graeser, 2019; Vogt, et al., 2018). Members with higher scores on this assessment that indicate multiple risk factors potentially predictive of a more difficult transition could be interviewed by current TAP staff or possibly by an online avatar to fully assess responses. This process also assures that members in significantly higher risk categories, such as those we are separated for Uniform Code of Military Justice or Article 15 violations, receive more robust transition support. If responses are confirmed during this interview as placing them into higher transition risk categories they are placed into the SIT Plus Program. Members with low to moderate scores on the SIT REP assessment are directed to complete the SIT Standard Program. Efforts should be made to assure that each member's responses to the SIT REP assessment are accurate. Completion and documentation of all the tasks and steps outlined in the SIT Model can be monitored through the SIT REP portal and application. This will greatly assist with data collection and required reporting for evaluating outcomes of the program.

The SIT Standard Program during Phase One involves the member completing enhanced versions of the currently existing TAP requirements along with having access to greater levels of formal support. The existing TAP requirements are significantly modified to address major components of the SIT model. The in-person and online required and optional training sessions they complete will now employ experiential-based, simulation, and computer-assisted learning approaches that are all focused on helping address the Three Pillars of SIT. Example experiential and simulation learning sessions include participating in a mock job interview, preparing a healthy/appetizing meal, practicing communicating with a spouse/partner/friend about plans for the transition, creating a practice post-military monthly budget, and completing a "Veteran's Benefits Game" where they practice matching needs to resources. The member completes each of these experiential simulation learning sessions via the SIT REP tool or during an on ground class session. They are also provided with a far greater level of easily available support through the SIT REP tool, where they can communicate with avatars and actual veteran transition experts who can address questions about the process and who can also provide basic-level supportive counseling.

The SIT Plus Program during Phase One seeks to help the transitioning member understand and plan for the broad range of needs identified in the SIT Model. The most prominent new component of the SIT Plus Program involves the member attending a week-long conference retreat focused on preparing for transition using SIT Model-informed curriculum. When possible, efforts should be made to accommodate the separating military person's family members

to attend the retreat as well. The retreat will place individuals/families into similar cohorts based on rank and military job specialty. Within their groups they will jointly participate in a number of simulation and experiential-based learning workshops focused on helping address and prepare for the Three Pillars of SIT. This would include at a minimum, workshops in a) identification of potential stresses during transition to look out for; b) potential intervening measures veterans or family members can access and adopt; c) thorough briefing on VA support systems; d) alternative interventions and wellness programs available; and e) job, career, and education transitional growth programming. Their experiential learning experiences on these topics will be somewhat like those described above for the SIT Standard with the notable difference that these sessions are all completed in-person in the military member's cohort group. The retreats will also include some non-programming time for military members to spend with their families or other service members. In addition to the retreat, members in the plus group are provided with extensive support through the SIT REP tool as described above for those in SIT Standard.

#### ***Phase two: Managing the transition***

Throughout Phase Two of the SIT Model, the member is actively participating in the transition process into their new civilian setting. It includes each member's three overlapping pillars of SIT identified as community integration, their mission and life purposes, and their personal well-being during the transition process. These three pillars represent central areas of needs, challenges, and strengths involved in a successful military to civilian transition. As part of their community reintegration, each member will need to find appropriate housing, develop cultural competence within their new setting along with utilizing their personal/communal faith resources and legal assistance as needed. Transitioning members will need to identify their new non-military mission and life purposes. This will often be accomplished, in part, through obtaining new employment and pursuing a career along with learning interviewing skills and developing an appropriate resume. For some it may mean working toward an educational goal/degree or establishing their own business. Personal well-being represents a historically under-recognized pillar of a successful transition. When transitioning members plan for and address their personal well-being needs, including physical health and mental health, they have a much better chance of succeeding in the other pillars of SIT. Personal well-being can also improve by learning about the benefits of a healthy lifestyle, nutrition, and practicing some alternative therapy approaches. Military members can improve transition in all three SIT pillars as they work on the three overlapping areas of developing a supportive team and family along with fostering clear/open communication during this process. When they address fears and anxieties about their role adjustment in all three pillars, they can improve potential for successfully adapting to the transition.

During Phase Two members participating in the SIT Standard program complete an enhanced capstone process where they not only specify how they have met career readiness standards, but they outline their transition plan identifying the VA benefits and other programs they have accessed or plan to utilize. The enhanced capstone is completed via the SIT REP tool where their military commander can review their completed transition plan and confirm they have completed all elements of the program.

Phase Two includes a number of more robust components to assure participants are fully linked-up and connected to the services and programs available to support them. In addition to completing the enhanced capstone as described above, they also participate in a process to assure they have a “warm handover” from the DoD to the VA. This handover requires the member to complete a formally documented VA check-in, which involves a review of their DD 214 and medical record by VA personnel. This initial check-in can occur at any appropriate VA facility selected by the member. However, they will also later document that they have linked-up with benefits/programs at the VA that is closest to their planned home destination. This final check-in process at the VA or Vet Center nearest to the veteran's home will include a review of the needs assessment first introduced during Phase One of the SIT REP Process, and updated during Phase Two, with a representative of the VA and/or Vet Center. During this check-in the representative will also go over job/career and educational resources available in, and unique to, the local community and provide assistance and recommendations for further exploration. The representative will provide a tour and explain what resources the local VA or Vet Center has to offer the veteran and their family, and will provide information on alternative services the local community may have to offer as well. The session will conclude with an appeal by the representative for the member to enroll into the VA system with explanation for how to do so.

### ***Phase three: Assessing the transition***

The last segment of the theory, assessing the transition, outlines key outcome indicators associated with transition such as work, family, health, general well-being, and community. Utilizing the robust SIT REP portal and application tool throughout the entire transition process can greatly assist with assessing each of these outcome indicators. Both the VA and the DoD have developed and deployed similar portals to manage systems and gauge outcomes for other programs including contract managements, medical records, personnel actions (Vogt et al., 2018). As part of the deployment of the Success in Transition Model efforts should be made to create and evaluate measures for assessing these outcomes. The following assessment tools could be utilized to measure ongoing outcomes at regular intervals throughout the transition process. The TCLS and the measures used in the Veterans Metrics Initiative both appear quite

promising as helpful tools to be explored for use as part of the evaluation process. The TCLS has been specifically developed to assess key outcome measures reflecting how transitioning members are adjusting to life after their military service (Weiss, et al., 2019). In an initial study involving 197 veterans, this instrument demonstrated solid criterion validity as well as excellent internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha = .911$ ) (Weiss, et al., 2019). Factor analysis of the TCLS identified three factors (economic well-being, physical health, and psychosocial well-being) which closely match some of the key outcome indicators of the SIT Model. The Veterans Metrics Initiative is an ongoing study seeking to assess important aspects of veterans' transition to the civilian world (Vogt et al., 2018). This cohort study consists of a national sample of newly separated veterans assessing them within three months after separation from the military and again at six-month intervals. A recent update on this study identified the programs and services most frequently used by nearly 10,000 transitioning veterans to help with their reintegration (Perkins et al., 2019).

### **Conclusion**

Vital groups of military veterans continue to have difficulty transitioning to the civilian world despite the availability of a broad range of public and private programs and services. TAP improvements have been developed to support transitioning military members; however, their primary focus remains on helping members pursue post-service employment, education, and benefits. TAP continues to largely ignore helping military members prepare for challenges they may face to maintain health, general well-being, financial needs, and in supporting their families through the often complex and changing transition process. The SIT Model provides a guiding theoretical framework for a new TAP. This model outlines a reconceptualized program that is based on human and military transition theories and is supported by current research into the military to civilian transition process. It deals with core problems found in the current TAP by employing research-informed strategies to assess, intervene, and support these veterans along with measuring the important outcomes of a successful transition.

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### **Competing Interests**

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

### **Author Contributions**

The first author conducted the majority of the research and writing while the second and third authors led the initiative and reviewed/edited drafts of the manuscript.



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