With the advent of the Post 9/11 GI Bill and the drawdown of forces subsequent to the end of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, college campuses across the United States have seen a marked increase in student veteran enrollment. These students face multiple challenges in their transition from military to college, and the road to graduation can be difficult. While greater attention has been given to the student veteran experience over the past decade, much of the research has noted the challenges in meeting their needs. Providing proactive and tailored support at orientation for veterans, and particularly those who have transitioned out of combat zones, can aid in their success in higher education (Ackerman, DiRaimo, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; Bissell, 2015; Coll & Weiss, 2015; Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011; Vacchi, 2012). In order to support student veterans’ transition to college, the University of Colorado Colorado Springs (UCCS) Office of Veteran and Military Student Affairs (OVMSA) has partnered with the Office of New Student Orientation to provide intentional and specific programming for this student population at orientation. During the orientation, students meet the OVMSA staff, including a student veteran orientation leader who provides support over the course of the students’ first year at UCCS. Additionally, campus and community resources are shared—academic support and career development, veteran’s educational benefits and other financial aid and scholarship avenues, and ways in which to become engaged on campus.

Setting
Orientation programs are available for veterans, active duty military, and family member using military benefits. The program is offered to those students whose life experiences are very different from many of those entering the UCSS as new students. The Veteran and Military portion of orientation is held in conjunction with Transfer Orientation. If a student is under the age of 21 and attending UCCS on military benefits, he/she will need to attend the Freshman Orientation.

Students attending the Veteran and Military Orientation arrive one hour prior to other transfer students and are greeted by staff from the OVMSA. This office delivers a briefing aimed at explaining VA educational benefits and resources available to active duty, guard, reserve, veteran, and dependent students. It is imperative for any student using VA educational benefits to attend this Veteran and Military Orientation in order to understand how their VA educational benefits work and what resources are available to them both on and off campus.

Method
Data was collected from all students participating in the veteran and military and transfer student orientation program at UCCS during Summer 2015. Students completed an assessment of their experience at the culmination of the orientation. A total of 1087 transfer students participated in an on-campus orientation and 652 surveys were completed, yielding a 64% response rate. Students indicated if they were a veteran and the data was analyzed comparing the responses of veterans and non-veterans.

Literature Review
One of the most important aspects of student veterans’ orientation is their introduction to the campus community to ensure a successful transition to college (Bissell, 2015). In veteran-specific orientation programs, students should be presented with the pertinent information and resources related to cultivating a successful college experience, as well as be given the opportunity to connect with other new and returning student veterans (Hendrickson, 2014; Kelley, Smith, & Fox, 2013). Orientation programs can moderate many of the common struggles with which student veterans begin college by providing an introduction to seeking support and advocating for themselves, developing meaningful relationships with their peers, identifying with their “new” identities, moving past doubts they may hold about their academic abilities, and managing finances (Coll & Jarret, 2014; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Schiavone & Gimzy, 2014; Vacchi, 2012; Wurster, 2013).

Some student veterans desire more direction than others, and difficulty may occur in finding that balance to ensure all new students are satisfied with orientation, particularly with the truncated time usually devoted to veteran specific sessions. Some institutions have mitigated these time constraints by creating an online orientation session focused on student veteran needs (American Council on Education, n.d.). These needs center around accessing Veteran’s Affairs educational benefits in a timely manner, as they are extremely complex and often require one-on-one financial advising sessions apart from orientation (Kelley et al., 2013). Other relevant resources needed during orientation include representatives from the disability services office, the career center, the campus veteran center, and vocational rehabilitation counselors. Many student veterans also require detailed information from admissions and records relative to residency status and transfer credit evaluations. Coll and Weiss (2015) recommended orientation evaluations and follow ups to ensure institutions meet the orientation needs of veterans and respond to the unique and shifting college transitional experiences of these students.

Conclusion
The first impression of college often occurs for student veterans during orientation; it is vital that this experience be affirming and encouraging, as they are experiencing a major life transition. The results of the transfer student orientation survey indicate that student veterans rated their orientation experience statistically significantly more positive than other students and indicated to a stronger degree that they made connections with other students, although not significantly. These findings are in line with the best practices indicated from the literature review; UCCS makes a concerted effort to connect students with university academic, career, and VA benefits staff, as well as other student veterans (Hendrickson, 2014; Kelley et al., 2013). Yet, student veterans rated orientation significantly lower than other students in making them feel welcomed and part of the university community. This rating could be a result of the abbreviated allotment of only one hour dedicated to the veteran specific session, which is filled with considerable material and resources. As student veterans often have unique circumstances, individual needs may not be being met during this time period. Relative to other all other transfer student orientation survey measures, veterans and other students share strong agreement that orientation programming meets the needs of students in promoting belonging, ensuring safety, encouraging involvement, and building community at UCCS.

References

Veteran Population at Orientation
The students who attended a veteran and military and/or transfer orientation and submitted a survey reported the following:

- Total veterans, 1087 (66.5%): 725 (66.7%)
- Total veterans, 755 (47.8%): 225 (30.0%)
- Total veterans, 550 (36.9%): 275 (50.0%)

Comparison of Veteran vs. Non-Veteran Orientation Experience

- Most of non-veteran and/or military students
- Value of veterans and/or military students
- Statistically significant difference

Conclusion
The first impression of college often occurs for student veterans during orientation; it is vital that this experience be affirming and encouraging, as they are experiencing a major life transition. The results of the transfer student orientation survey indicate that student veterans rated their orientation experience statistically significantly more positive than other students and indicated to a stronger degree that they made connections with other students, although not significantly. These findings are in line with the best practices indicated from the literature review; UCCS makes a concerted effort to connect students with university academic, career, and VA benefits staff, as well as other student veterans (Hendrickson, 2014; Kelley et al., 2013). Yet, student veterans rated orientation significantly lower than other students in making them feel welcomed and part of the university community. This rating could be a result of the abbreviated allotment of only one hour dedicated to the veteran specific session, which is filled with considerable material and resources. As student veterans often have unique circumstances, individual needs may not be being met during this time period. Relative to other all other transfer student orientation survey measures, veterans and other students share strong agreement that orientation programming meets the needs of students in promoting belonging, ensuring safety, encouraging involvement, and building community at UCCS.