How Veterans Make Meaning of the College Choice Process in the Post-9/11 Era

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Project Recover

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Abstract

The Post-9/11 GI Bill was implemented in 2009. Since then, more than 1.9 million people have used the benefits afforded by the bill to attend college, and more than $90 billion has been paid to institutions of higher learning and Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries. During this time, the types of colleges that veterans attend as well as the educational models they select have shifted. Veterans are more likely to utilize online or distance education models. Additionally, veterans attend for-profit universities at an increasing and greater rate than do their nonveteran counterparts. These shifts differ from the trends observed among the general population. The purpose of this study was to learn from veterans how they make sense of decision-making related to college choice prior to matriculation into a 4-year institution. Qualitative methods were utilized to examine the lived experiences of 12 post-9/11-era U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps student veterans during the college choice process. The experiences shared by the participants in this study were used to further examine and critique an established theory of college selection. This study provides practitioners and academics with insight into how to better engage with this diverse and unique community of prospective students on and off campus through greater understanding of how they make meaning of the college choice process.

Since its inception, the United States military has represented a cross section of the American community. In recent years, the veteran population has been shrinking because fewer citizens serve in the military today than served in previous decades (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015). Despite this trend, a steady stream of student veterans continues to flow onto college campuses (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). Individuals who serve in the military become part of a unique, rich culture that is present in varying levels across the entire country and national community. These potential students bring with them this culture and a set of experiences that can contribute positively to the breadth and depth of the diversity of campus communities.

In 2009, the Post-9/11 GI Bill took effect. This new version of the GI Bill significantly increased the level of support provided to student veterans. Since its inception, more than 1.9 million people have benefited from it, and more than $90 billion has been paid to institutions of higher learning and to Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries. During this time, the types of colleges and universities that veterans attend as well as the educational models they select have shifted. The number of veterans attending for-profit institutions has increased from 14% of the student veteran population to 24%. Although the total number of veterans attending all models of public colleges

has increased, the overall percentage of student veterans who choose these school settings has decreased from 63% to 56%. Additionally, veterans are more likely to access higher education online when compared to their nonveteran independent counterparts. *Independent students* are students over the age of 24 and those students under age 24 who are married, have dependents, were orphans or wards of the courts, were homeless or at risk of homelessness, or are determined to be financially independent by a financial aid officer using professional judgment (Radford et al., 2016). The factors influencing these changing enrollment trends have yet to be thoroughly researched. The number of new Post-9/11 GI Bill students entering higher education averages 200,000 per year and is forecast to remain the same in the coming years (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015).

The recruiting practices of many institutions catering to veterans have been called into question (Ochinko & Payea, 2018). In 2012, U.S. president Barack Obama issued Executive Order 13607, which condemned colleges' predatory practices of recruiting veterans and called for the creation of principles of excellence for colleges serving veterans. Despite widespread condemnation of colleges' practices and the establishment of administrative boundaries to prevent them, evidence suggests that these practices continue (Ochinko & Payea, 2018). A 2018 brief released by

Veterans Education Success stated that six of the top 10 schools receiving Post-9/11 GI Bill payments "were being investigated by, sued by, or had reached settlements with federal or state law enforcement agencies for actions such as misleading advertising and recruiting and fraudulent loan programs" (Ochinko & Payea, 2018). Additionally, ITT Tech, which received close to $1 billion in Post-9/11 GI Bill payments—the third-highest amount of Post-9/11 GI Bill funds received by any institution—closed in 2016 while under investigation by multiple state attorneys general and federal agencies (Ochinko & Payea, 2018).

There is an understanding that first-generation college students often lack the social and cultural capital that helps prospective students efficiently access the higher education system. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has stated that 62% of veterans are first-generation college students (2015). This fact, combined with the significant financial benefit for veterans who attend college using the Post-9/11 GI Bill, may explain why institutions are using predatory practices to lure veterans into their systems. Without data on the factors that influence veterans' college choice decision-making processes, quality colleges and universities have little information that they can use to inform and adjust their recruiting methods to meet the needs of veteran students.

Academics have been examining the reasons why students choose the colleges that they attend since the middle of the 20th century. This research initially focused on high school students and the impacts of counselors and parents on their decisions. Over time, the theories have expanded to examine a broader range of factors and influences on college choices. In the 1980s, multistage models of college choice theory were created, including Donald Hossler and Karen Gallagher's college choice theory (Chapman, 1981; Chapman & Jackson, 1987; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982). Since it was created, Hossler and Gallagher's theory has been used to examine the general population, and in recent years it has been used to study the college choices of specific racial and ethnic groups (Hurtado et al., 1997). However, this theory has yet to be used thoroughly as a theoretical frame to explore the factors influencing veterans' decision-making related to college choice.

A significant amount of research has focused on veterans in higher education. The majority of this research has explored the experiences of veterans once they arrive on campus as well as the frictions they face in the transition to the higher education environment (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Heitzman & Somers, 2015). These studies are often prescriptive, offering best practices for serving these students once they are on campus. In recent years, researchers have started to examine the college choice process for veterans at specific types of colleges (Circle, 2017; Hill, 2016; Ives, 2017; Vardalis & Waters, 2011). However, there remains a significant need for research in the post-9/11 era that explores the period before veterans matriculate into a college.

In this study, the researcher used qualitative research methods to develop a theoretical understanding about how post-9/11 veterans make meaning of the college choice process, how they decide which universities or colleges to consider and apply to, how they decide which educational model is right for them, and in what ways emotions influence the college choice process. The significance of this study is in providing data to colleges and universities that could influence their recruitment and outreach practices in order to better serve these potential students. Additionally, practitioners that work with veterans will be able to use these data to better inform their work with student veterans.

Methodology

Qualitative methodology was applied because of the gap in current data related to the veteran population during the college choice process and the need to develop a theoretical understanding of the phenomenon. Semistructured interviews following an interview guide were used as the primary source of data collection. This approach allowed for flexibility in the interviews and gave the researcher more opportunities to explore topics as they emerged. The interview guide in this study was based on several sources: Hossler and Gallagher's college choice theory (1987), a review of interview guides used in other studies based on the same theoretical framing (McWhorter, 2015), common influencing factors as outlined in the *Handbook of Strategic Enrollment Management* (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014), and unpublished pilot studies (Abbey, 2016a; Abbey, 2016b) conducted in preparation for this study. Additionally, as part of the daily requirements of working at a university and with appropriate approval, the researcher conducted document analysis and worked as a participant observer with the student veteran population.

Participants in this study were a convenience sample of 12 student veterans from eight different 4-year universities (see Table 1).

The 12 participants included three male Marine Corps veterans, three female Marine Corps veterans, three male Navy veterans, and three female Navy veterans who were either attending a 4-year university or had attended and completed a 4-year degree during the Post-9/11 GI Bill era, which spans from August 2009 to the present. In keeping with institutional review board approval for this study, pseudonyms are utilized throughout this article to protect the identities of the participants.

All interviews were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo for coding. A variety of first cycle coding methods were used, including initial, in vivo, emotion, longitudinal, and value coding (Saldaňa, 2012). This initial coding identified the tentative codes by highlighting verbatim quotations from the interviews that represented emotions, values, beliefs, knowledge, understandings, and respondents' experiences through the college choice process. Once all of the interviews and first cycle coding were complete, second cycle coding was conducted using holistic, focused, axial, and longitudinal coding (Saldaňa, 2012). The second cycle coding process examined both the experiences of the participants as a whole over time and the frequency of their experiences in order to group the codes into the major themes of the study. Triangulation was used not only to search for convergence across data sources to support findings but also to note inconsistencies and contradictions in the data (Mathison, 1988). Data sources used for triangulation were the participants, literature, and data gathered through document analysis and observation. Member checking was conducted with all participants to further confirm findings and minimize bias.

Findings
College Choice Theory

Hossler and Gallagher's college choice theory (1987) was used as the theoretical framing for this study. The interviews were conducted using this theory as a foundational guide. The questions were divided according to the theory's three phases: predisposition, search, and choice. The *predisposition* stage is when the student first decides to either attend college or pursue other routes, such as entering the workforce or military service. The *search* phase occurs next, once the student has decided to attend college. In this stage, the student gathers information about the potential colleges in consideration and adds these colleges to a selection pool. The *choice* stage is when the student applies to one or multiple institutions and finally chooses one to attend.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Branch	Race	First Generation
Amber	Female	Navy	Multiracial	Yes
David	Male	Marine Corps	White	No
Donald	Male	Navy	Multiracial	Yes
Hokage	Male	Marine Corps	Black	No
Jav	Male	Marine Corps	Hispanic	Yes
Jordyn	Female	Marine Corps	White	Yes
Kyle	Male	Navy	Multiracial	Yes
Lynn	Female	Navy	White	No
Melanie	Female	Navy	Mexican	Yes
Melinda	Female	Marine Corps	Hispanic	No
Persephone	Female	Marine Corps	Hispanic	Yes
Scott	Male	Navy	White	No

Predisposition

All of the participants were veterans of the Navy or Marine Corps. However, five of the participants attended college prior to joining the military. Two of the five that started college directly out of high school struggled academically. When they did not find initial success in college, they enlisted in the military. Three of the five that started college directly out of high school faced additional life circumstances that interfered with desired college track. Of the seven participants that entered the military directly, all expressed a desire to go to college. However, many did not have the resources to pay for a college education. Additionally, some lacked the social and cultural capital associated with successfully applying to and accessing college.

Although all of the participants aspired to attend college, they were not always sure how to achieve this goal. Both first-generation college students and students whose parents had college degrees demonstrated a lack of knowledge about the college application process. A lack of cultural and social capital obstructed these students early and also influenced some participants' decisions to join the military before going to college.

Search

This study focused on student veterans at 4-year universities. However, all but one of the participants attended multiple colleges, with seven of the 12 participants attending more than two colleges. The search phase for these students took many routes: from searching universities in high school, to exploring courses offered through military programs, to starting at a community college after separating from the military. For this study, the researcher examined how the participants searched for their current university or the university from which they graduated.

When exploring which university to attend in order to attain their 4-year degree, the participants in this study did not conduct in-depth searches. The majority of the participants selected a region or city and then briefly researched local universities using online search engines or websites. When asked how she searched for her college, Melanie, a Mexican female Navy veteran attending a private, nonprofit university, stated, "So I knew I wanted to move to San Diego and I literally just typed in 'colleges in San Diego.'" In addition to or in concert with online research, most of the participants received guidance from trusted relational partners. Advice came from relatives, other people with

whom participants had previously established relationships, or perceived persons of authority. Persephone, a Hispanic female Marine Corps veteran attending a for-profit university, used a social media platform for female Marines and sought guidance from her colleagues there. She said, "I didn't have an opportunity really to visit places. I talked to other veterans, you know, the female Marines Facebook page. 'Hey ladies,' you know, 'What have your experiences been at these universities?'" Figures of authority included professors or guidance counselors as well as leaders in university or college veterans programs. The participants gave significant weight to the input of these trusted relational partners, with some making decisions to apply for and attend a university based on the guidance of a single person.

Choice

Although most of the participants attended more than one college, all of the participants only applied to one university when accessing the institution from which they would ultimately strive to attain their 4-year degree. The participants decided on the college they wanted to attend, confirmed that it had the degree they were seeking, and applied without a backup plan for their education. Kyle, a multiracial male Navy veteran attending a private, nonprofit university, only applied to one university, although he was aware that there was a chance he would not be accepted. He said, "I chose to go with [this university] and I put all my eggs in that basket and took a leap of faith and it worked out okay."

The participants in this study decided whether or not they were going to continue their education at a university prior to applying. For these participants, the scope of the choice phase was limited to this point. Since each student submitted an application to only one institution, choosing between multiple institutions was not part of the process; they did not consider multiple options nor compare them to each other after being admitted. For the participants, the search and choice phases were thus blended together into one phase. This finding is notable because it suggests that a better theoretical framing could be developed or utilized to examine how the veteran population accesses higher education. It appears that the factors that influenced the college choice process for these participants encouraged them to follow a different course than the one outlined by Hossler and Gallagher's college choice theory (1987).

Themes Influencing Meaning Making for Veterans During College Choice

Numerous themes emerged throughout the interview process. Through first and second cycle coding, these were combined and narrowed down to seven major themes: lack of social and cultural capital, receiving little guidance and lots of discouragement about going to college, using and seeking out trusted relationships when making college choices, significant outside responsibilities while selecting and attending college, joining the military as a means to education, fear and anxiety during the college choice process, and the influence of location and convenience when selecting a college.

Lack of Social and Cultural Capital

All of the participants lacked social and cultural capital related to higher education. While 62% of veterans are first-generation college students, and this sample closely mirrored that percentage, the students that were not first-generation college students also lacked capital related to higher education. For example, Melinda, a Hispanic female Marine Corps veteran attending a private, nonprofit university, had several family members who were college graduates, including her parents. However, in explaining the steps she took to apply to her current university, she said, "I honestly did not know how to do that crap. I was just like, why do you do this? And then I had to get these stupid letters of recommendation…I just kinda went with the motions." Additionally, all of these students lacked a thorough understanding of how their veteran education benefits would work while they were attending college, or they maintained a complete lack of awareness of some benefits. This general lack of awareness exacerbated the negative effects of their lack of social and cultural capital related to higher education.

The deficit of cultural and social capital in the veteran population has been discussed significantly in the literature, primarily in relation to the large portion of the population that is composed of first-generation college students. The fact that this lack of capital extends beyond first-generation college students was noted in the pilot studies that preceded this study. In the role of observer, the researcher noted that the staff of the military and veterans program at their university regularly worked with students who did not know how to access the university nor what the application timelines were. The addition of complex military education benefits seemed to make this situation even more difficult, as the participants expressed a lack of understanding of higher education, their benefits, and how the two systems work together.

Receiving Little Guidance and Lots of Discouragement About Going to College

Multiple participants expressed that the resources available to them while they were actively serving were lacking in quality. In addition, all of the participants either felt that they were not provided guidance along the way or that they were discouraged, directly or indirectly, from seeking higher education or certain options. This deterrence came from multiple sources. Donald, a multiracial male Navy veteran attending a private, nonprofit university, said that the Navy failed to inform him fully and completely about all of the education benefits that were and would be available to him. He indicated, "So that, I guess was…a failure, you know, on the Navy's part." Participants were discouraged directly and indirectly not only by military representatives but also, for two participants, by a community college counselor and a university faculty advisor. For instance, Melinda shared that her assigned faculty advisor at her current university was very discouraging. She stated, "He told me I wouldn't make it. It made me angry. I'm an ambitious person and positive. I always want to achieve success. That's just my personality. It just made me angry and I never went back to him." Despite the participants' eventual success, the limited amount of quality resources, lack of guidance, and discouragement that they described had a negative impact on their educational pathways.

Using and Seeking Out Trusted Relationships When Making College Choices

Participants' decisions to research colleges and ultimately select a college were often based on perceived relationships of trust. When asked how they heard about or why they selected a college, several of the participants expressed that their friend told them about the college or their friend attended the college. Participants placed a great deal of trust in the thoughts and input of these friends, enough to select the college they finally pursued. David, a White male Marine Corps veteran attending a private, nonprofit university, explained, "I got so much more support from peers and nontraditional advisors than I did from anyone whose job it was to help me." Other times, students developed trusting relationships with professors or counselors on the campuses they were exploring.

Hokage, a Black male Navy veteran attending a private, for-profit university, visited the campus he was considering and found trust in a counselor that he consulted. He said, "I walked around the school then visited a counselor. . . . She was really adamant about the school, so I took a leap of faith. Say just gave it a shot." At times, students found trusted relationships in a veterans center on the campus or in students who were already attending the college. In all, 10 of the 12 participants sought out and placed significant weight in these relationships while going through the college choice process.

Significant Outside Responsibilities While Selecting and Attending College

The study participants fell into the category of nontraditional students. One common characteristic of many such students is outside responsibilities. Given that nontraditional students, like the participants in this study, are emancipated from their parents and have had professional careers as well as families of their own, the influence of these responsibilities is predictable (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014).

All of the participants maintained significant responsibilities outside of class. Half of the participants were married, and four of them had children. The majority worked on or off campus. Additionally, these participants were very engaged in the various on-campus student veteran organizations. These other responsibilities came with competing time commitments and stress in addition to the regular strain of college life. Scott, a White male Navy veteran attending a public, nonprofit university, said, "I am participating in a federal work study and I also hold a leadership position in my college's student veteran organization." Many of these responsibilities existed prior to attending their current university and would remain upon leaving or graduating. Lynn, a White female Navy veteran attending an online, public, nonprofit university, shared, "You know, I kind of anticipated, you know, the stress of, of working full time and going to school full time. It was just a hard thing to learn to balance at first." When asked about outside responsibilities, many of the participants had to be asked multiple times about specific responsibilities before they acknowledged them, as though they had become so routine that they forgot that they were still responsibilities and took up a significant portion of their time.

Beyond the participants' underselling of their outside responsibilities, they also held responsibilities not readily apparent to the common observer. Familial relationships that held the same commitment as blood relationships, strong commitments to extended family, and obligations to causes or beliefs all brought with them significant commitments. The time required to meet the obligations of college, social interactions, formal roles, work, family, and more maximized these students' schedules. Given that the researcher had to probe for answers related to responsibilities, it appeared that the participants were not completely conscious of how busy they were and how much responsibility they maintained.

Joining the Military as a Means to Education

Nine of the 12 participants explained that they were able to go to college because they served in the military. Some described how the intangible drive, confidence, and discipline that they gained while serving allowed them to attempt to seek out higher education. For instance, Kyle shared that the military provided him with the ambition and determination to face challenges like college and be successful. He stated, "I just feel I have the drive, the perseverance. I have overcome the adversity. You know, in the military there's a lot of adversity."

Education is one of the top reasons why people join the U.S. military today. The benefits earned through service provide a way for people who may not have been able to afford the costs otherwise or who want to avoid being a financial burden on their families to pay for college. Additionally, the significant support provided by military education benefits like the Post-9/11 GI Bill expand education options to include universities with high attendance costs. When Donald was asked if he would be in college without the GI Bill, he stated, "Absolutely. But not here." Donald is attending a private university and studying engineering. Each of the participants in this study expressed that they would not have been able to attend the university that they were attending or had attended if not for their service in the military and its attendant benefits.

Fear and Anxiety During the College Choice Process

Many of the participants expressed that they gained confidence, discipline, and drive from the military. Yet, 10 of the 12 participants also voiced substantial fear about the idea of going to college. Scott shared, "I was terrified, and it took a couple years before I finally settled in." This fear was based on the perceived potential for failure, doubts about their own aptitude, and the lack of a distinct pathway toward success. It should be noted that

the two participants that did not experience these emotions had previously attended college.

The participants were asked specifically about the emotions that they felt when going through the college choice process because fear had emerged as a theme in previous pilot studies (Abbey, 2016a; Abbey, 2016b). It proved to be common again in this study. Given that this population is departing a very structured system, the military, and now venturing into another system that, as the previous findings in this study show, they know little about, it makes sense that there would be a fear of the unknown. The military system provides strict guidelines in the form of documented standard operating procedures for everything from daily tasks to career progression. This strict guidance is missing in the higher education environment. As an observer, the researcher witnessed several veterans display anxiety when seeking out a solid pathway or specific answers at the university. This anxiety increased when they discovered that the solid answers that they were seeking many times did not exist.

The Influence of Location and Convenience
When Selecting a College

The study participants came from across the nation and represented nine different states. Of the 12 participants, 10 attended colleges in regions different from their home region. Many expressed that they joined the military as a means to leave the area or circumstances in which they found themselves. For instance, Hokage shared, "I lived in a really poor neighborhood…Okay. And that's the only way out. Basically, sports and the military." Often, the military represented a socioeconomic opportunity for veterans like Hokage in the form of a stable income, access to higher education prospects, leaving negative surroundings, and more.

In searching for and selecting higher education options, location was a common factor. Scott simply stated, "My current university was the closest four year [university]. So, it only made sense geographically and financially." Of the 12 participants, 10 focused their exploration on one region or city. While sometimes they conducted this focused search because they did not want to return to their home region, most of the participants had established ties to their chosen region, including employment and family commitments. These 10 students attended resident programs where the majority of their classes were taught in traditional classroom

settings. The two students that selected and continued their education at hybrid and online programs did so because the programs provided the flexibility to move and still continue their education. Lynn needed the flexibility of an online program. She shared, "It was really just the convenience of, you know, being able to live on base, and do that degree on my computer and then knowing that I could be sent away for something."

Factors Influencing College Choice

Over the decades, college choice researchers have examined the factors that influence college choice decisions among a variety of populations. The *Handbook of Strategic Enrollment Management* recognizes nine key predictors that influence college choice (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). The six factors that were noticeably present in this study were peer effect, social and cultural capital, information sources, personal characteristics, academic ability, and location and convenience. Three factors were missing as influencers in this study: family income, high school attended, and cost of attendance and financial aid.

Peer Effect

As described in the previous section's discussion of common themes, peer effect significantly influenced college choice for the participants in this study. Multiple student veterans made the decision to apply for and attend a given university based on the suggestion of a peer, sometimes without any previous knowledge of the university. Additionally, participants emulated the paths taken by respected peers.

Social and Cultural Capital

The participants in this study lacked social and cultural capital related to higher education. While the majority of the participants were first-generation college students, social and cultural capital were also lacking in the participants that were not first-generation college students. Additionally, all of the students lacked knowledge related to military education benefits and how those benefits work with the variety of higher education institutions. This factor had a negative influence on the college choice process for the participants.

Information Sources

Hossler and Bontrager's *Handbook of Strategic Enrollment Management* (2014) states that "having information sources that can provide accurate college information is…associated with positive

college choice outcomes" (p. 54). It can be inferred, in turn, that not having quality information sources may have a negative impact on these outcomes. In this study, the participants expressed and displayed that they lacked information sources: They described the deficiencies in official military education programs and displayed a lack of knowledge about where to access quality information. Like social and cultural capital, this factor had a negative impact on the college choice process for these student veterans.

Personal Characteristics

Studies of college choice as it relates to students' personal characteristics have often examined differences between male and female students. Although gender was examined during this study, no obvious differences between genders were observed. Additionally, no differences were observed between Navy and Marine Corps veterans. However, veteran status itself appears to be a unique characteristic that influences the college choice process, as this paper has so far outlined. The study participants shared how the drive, maturity, and confidence they gained while serving in the military influenced them on their path toward attaining their higher education goals. Additionally, emotions of fear and anxiety were common across most of the participants.

Academic Ability

Academic ability influenced participants' college choice processes in multiple ways. It most directly affected students who were not eligible for some universities because of their grade point averages and previous performance in college or high school. In a more common but less direct way, the students' negative perceptions of their own academic ability and resultant fear and anxiety influenced them to narrow their searches to a single institution.

Location and Convenience

Location and convenience significantly influenced the college choice process for the study participants. Participants picked a location and restricted their search to a small region without considering universities outside of their chosen location. As outlined previously, these restrictions were based on personal, professional, or familial connections to the area. For those without a tie to their chosen region, convenience replaced relational influence. Participants striving to complete their degree on active duty or who

expected to move selected programs that allowed them to travel or move while continuing their studies with the same institution, such as online or hybrid programs.

Three Factors Not Found in This Study

Family income, high school attended, and the cost of attendance are common predictors that influence college choice (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014), but they were not observed factors among these participants. The participants came from families with varying incomes and socioeconomic statuses. However, as nontraditional students, the participants had emancipated from their parents and were no longer legal dependents. Although family income and cost of attendance did not affect the colleges participants attended, they were common reasons for joining the military. The participants came from various high schools across the nation, but their high schools did not appear to affect college choice. Cost of attendance did not influence college choice for the participants, but some of the students noted that they would not have selected the college they were attending if the cost to attend were not covered by military education benefits.

Limitations

The sample used for this study is not representative of the entire veteran population, as it lacks participants from all of the military branches. Additionally, the demographic breakdown does not proportionally represent the veteran population in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, and more. Although participants represented multiple 4-year universities from multiple regions, the sample is heavily weighted in the southwest region of the United States and primarily includes resident programs where students attend most of their courses in classrooms on a physical campus. Lastly, all participants were highly engaged students on their campuses, which is not representative of all student veterans and could be connected to some of the homogeneity in their responses.

The researcher's own social identities and positionality must be named and acknowledged for how they might influence bias related to eliciting biased responses and interpreting participants' answers. At the time of the study, the researcher was a student veteran, first-generation college student, veterans' advocate, and the leader of a highly visible military and veterans program at a large public university. These circumstances motivated the researcher to study this topic and

influences their views and beliefs connected to it. Subjectivity is always an issue in research. At the beginning of all interviews, the researcher announced their veteran status and explained their own personal experience to establish a bond with the participants and create openness and comfort in the interview process. These efforts created an environment of trust that encouraged the participants to more quickly open up and share their experiences. However, bias and positionality cannot be ignored, despite the efforts taken to minimize them.

Acknowledging researcher's subjectivity related to this study was only one step that was taken to create awareness and minimize the impact of bias. Although only one participant attended the university where the researcher worked, it cannot be ignored that the researcher's military background and position at the university had the potential to sway participants' answers. Sound interview techniques were used to minimize the influence of these factors on the interview responses. These included avoiding encouraging or discouraging responses through voice or body language. Additionally, member checking was utilized with the participants to ensure that their responses were interpreted accurately and not misrepresented.

This was a qualitative study and therefore is not generalizable. However, it still provides valuable and actionable data for the consumer. Donmoyer (2000) outlined how a single qualitative study does have value in providing vicarious experience. Through processing this research, the consumer can create a more integrated cognitive structure that will inform their future research and work as a practitioner.

Recommendations

Additional steps should be taken by the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs to build active duty service members' and veterans' knowledge of the higher education system and how to successfully access it. Although the general nontraditional student population may lack social and cultural capital related to higher education, these students do not have to also determine how to use complex benefits like the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The combination of complex military benefits and a convoluted higher education system exacerbates the issue of access and makes this recommendation even more important.

Understanding that active duty and veteran populations are generally lacking cultural and social capital related to accessing higher education, it is imperative that the people working with them in mentorship and guidance roles on college campuses are knowledgeable of all education models, how to access them, and how military education benefits will work or may not work with specific systems. This knowledge is vital when recruiters and outreach specialists focus their efforts within a limited region, as location and convenience are given significant weight by the population they are serving. Providing insight into all of the options available and how they are similar and different will allow veteran students to make more informed decisions when selecting

Figure 1. Study Theme Flow and Opportunity for Intervention
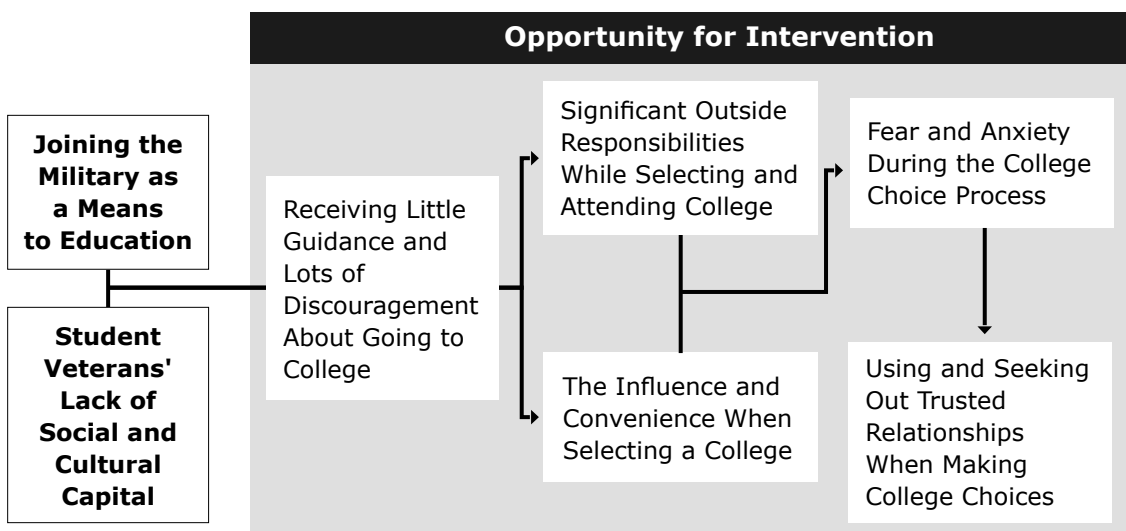
Note. The shaded area indicates where opportunities for intervention exist.

universities to apply for. It is recommended that professionals working in recruitment roles receive appropriate training and guidance to better understand this information and the best ways to transfer it to their constituents.

Universities and colleges that seek to conduct outreach among or recruit veteran students should ensure that lines of communication are easily accessible and as open as possible. This is especially true for campus military and veterans programs. Facilitating communication allows potential students to connect and build trust with individuals and teams on these campuses. As outlined in this study, trusting relationships carry significant weight as prospective students decide which institutions to explore and attend. Additionally, these professionals can provide quality information to students who may lack information or find themselves confused as they research universities.

Recruiters and practitioners on college campuses need to be aware that student veterans are independent students with significant outside responsibilities. They should communicate their mindfulness of students' responsibilities in recruiting practices, and steps should be taken to address this on campuses. Beyond establishing a college or university center for military-connected students, additional actions may help student veterans manage their increased responsibilities, including those associated with their education. These steps could include but are not limited to childcare options, a commuter center, prioritized parking privileges, and other things that help minimize the load associated with outside responsibilities.

There are multiple opportunities to conduct positive interventions along the pathway outlined in this study. An intervention in the form of providing quality information or building a positive relationship with veterans could be of significant benefit. As seen in Figure 1, such an intervention could occur early in prospective students' active duty careers as a counter to the discouragement and lack of guidance they receive, all the way to the point where veterans are deciding which university to apply for and attend. This type of intervention and community engagement could provide the vital information many veterans are seeking during the college choice process.

Conclusion

The participants in this study struggled when making meaning of the college choice process. All of the participants had early aspirations of going to college but either were not initially successful in college or utilized the military to mature or earn resources that would allow them to go to college. For several participants, the military and subsequently college provided an escape from their earlier circumstances. Participants' overall lack of social capital, cultural capital, and guidance added burdens to the process. Additionally, the college choice process was exacerbated by discouragement and misinformation along the way. Without a strong understanding of the process or where to find quality information—and scared of failing— the participants sought out perceived trusted relational partners for information and guidance. These relationships were one of the primary contributors to the direction participants would take in searching for and selecting a college. Given their narrow searches and commitments early in the process to one institution, the participants limited the amount of risk they took on in their search for and choice of a college. The college choice process was further limited due to the circumstances that restricted their searches to specific locations.

Colleges and universities are extensions of their communities. By achieving a better understanding of their own roles on and off campus, these institutions can deepen their bond with and understanding of the communities they serve and in which they participate. Results from this research demonstrate that veterans follow a unique path through their college choice journey. Certain distinctive characteristics influence veterans' decision-making as they consider and ultimately select a college to apply for and attend. With a greater awareness of how veterans make meaning of the college choice process, college recruiters and practitioners can open and maintain quality lines of communication while establishing relationships of trust with these potential students. This approach will ultimately minimize friction in the process and have a positive impact on the campus and surrounding community. Veterans are present in all communities across the nation. The recommendations listed provide opportunities for community engagement that are often missed by colleges and align with efforts on many campuses to connect with the nontraditional and independent student population.

Having led military and veterans programs at two separate universities, the researcher used the data gathered from this research to influence their work as a practitioner. They implemented a policy of providing student-focused advising to

potential student veterans and military-connected students in both programs. This practice included asking the potential students about their professional and higher education goals and from there recommending quality university options that allowed them to efficiently pursue those goals while getting the most out of the education benefits they had earned through their military service. Many times, the researcher and their staff referred students to other colleges and universities. Despite referring students to other universities, upon implementing these protocols at the first military and veterans program the researcher led, the student veteran population increased by 30% within the first three semesters as student veterans began to refer their peers to the military and veterans program for guidance on higher education. By establishing relationships of trust and connecting with these students through outreach, all of those involved in the process benefited, including student veterans, the campus military and veterans program, the university, and the greater community. This campus community was recognized as welcoming to the military population, and as a result they were trusted and engaged by potential student veterans. Ultimately, this unique population of students became active university participants once they matriculated, and the university became more highly engaged with the surrounding community.

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