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How Navy and Marine Corps Veterans Make Meaning of the College Choice Process in the Post-9/11 GI Bill Era

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HOW NAVY AND MARINE CORPS VETERANS MAKE MEANING OF THE
COLLEGE CHOICE PROCESS IN THE POST-9/11 GI BILL ERA

by

Derek Michael Abbey

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2019

Dissertation Committee

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TITLE OF DISSERTATION: HOW NAVY AND MARINE CORPS VETERANS
MAKE MEANING OF THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROCESS IN THE POST-9/11 GI
BILL ERA

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ABSTRACT

The Post-9/11 GI Bill was implemented in 2009. Since then more than 1,900,000 people have used the benefit and more than \$90 billion have been paid to institutions of higher learning and to Post-9/11 GI Bill users. During this period there has been a shift in the types of college and universities veterans attend, as well as the educational models they select. These shifts are different than the general population of students. This period also included a spike in questionable recruiting practices by some colleges. In response to many institutions taking advantage of veterans, the President of the United States in 2012 published an Executive Order that condemned malicious recruiting practices and provided guidelines for working with veterans on campuses. This executive order and the majority of academic studies related to veterans in higher education do not focus on the period prior to matriculation.

The purpose of this study was to examine how Post-9/11 Marine Corps and Navy veterans make meaning of the college choice process, how they decide which university or college to consider and apply for, how they decide which educational model to attend, and in what ways emotions influence the college choice process. Twelve student veterans were interviewed, and marketing and recruiting materials (aimed at veterans) were examined to better understand the college choice process for student veterans.

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.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my mom.

Christi Lynn Abbey

July 9, 1952 – September 11, 1986

I love you - All of you.

Whether you can see me or not,

I still love you. - CLA

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I reflect on the journey from my youth until this point, it seems like a miracle that I am where I am at in this moment. When I was 13 years old, my mother unexpectedly passed away. Until that point she, lacking a high school diploma, struggled as a single parent to provide as well as she could for her “Number One Son.” When she died, I found myself without a sail and rudder. To say that I would not have been able to reach this point without the support, encouragement, guidance and more from others is an understatement of epic proportion. Although I have spent five years in the doctoral program that has resulted in this dissertation, the foundation and building blocks leading to this summit have been gathered and laid since that tragic day when I was barely a teenager.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

In 1944, as war raged throughout much of the world, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act was signed into law. The intention of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act was to provide a means to stimulate the economy post-war and avoid inflation and unemployment (Olson, 1973). The law provided a number of benefits to veterans of World War II. These benefits included significant support for those veterans seeking higher education, which would come to be known as the GI Bill of Rights or GI Bill for short (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018).

Following the end of World War II, millions of veterans flooded the higher education system utilizing their GI Bill benefits. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, "By the time the original GI Bill ended on July 25, 1956, 7.8 million of 16 million World War II veterans had participated in an education or training program" (2018). Universities and colleges struggled to meet the needs of the significant increase in the number of students, as well as how to best work with a new demographic of student that had previously not been prevalent in higher education. This created many challenges from the administration of these programs, to providing access to veterans. These challenges remain today.

Since the first version of the GI Bill was created in 1944, it has gone through several iterations and changes. These changes coincided with the different conflicts that the United States was involved in from the conflicts in Korea to Vietnam. Each iteration of the GI Bill varied in the amount of benefit and support provided to veterans (Smole & Loane, 2008). In 2009, the most recent version of the GI Bill, referred to as the Post-9/11

GI Bill was activated. The new version of the GI Bill significantly increased the level of support provided to the veteran. The Post-9/11 GI Bill pays the entire cost of resident tuition and fees for a public institution, as well as a monthly housing allowance based on location and \$1000 dollars per year in book stipend. Those students attending private institutions receive more than \$20,000 per year in tuition and fees benefits paid directly to the institution.

Since September 11, 2001 there has been a significant increase in veterans seeking higher education (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). In 2015, Zoli, Maury, and Fay published *Missing Perspectives: Service Members Transition from Service to Civilian Life* where they, among many things, explored why people join the military. Of the reasons for joining, the number one reason was for educational benefits. Currently, there are over 4 million veterans from the Global War on Terror (GWOT) era. This period includes the United States' involvement in conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and other nations over the last 17 years. Since the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2009, there has been 1.9 million new GI Bill users, with approximately 200,000 new users entering the higher education system each year. In total, \$90 billion in Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits have been paid to higher education institutions and beneficiaries.

Since World War II, however, the higher education landscape has changed drastically. This has included the creation of new educational models. These models include for-profit colleges, as well as online degree programs at public colleges, private non-profit colleges, and for-profit colleges. This change in landscape and the implementation of the newest version of the GI Bill has brought new questions and

challenges. Since the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill the number of veterans attending for-profit institutions has increased from 14 percent of the population to 24 percent. Although the total number of veterans attending all models of public colleges has increased, the overall percentage of the student veteran population who are attending all models of public colleges has decreased from 42 to 37 percent. Additionally, veterans are more likely to attend online models of higher education when compared to their non-military independent counterparts. Independent students are students over the age of 24 and students under the age of 24 that are married under, have dependents, were orphans or wards of the courts, were homeless or at risk of homelessness, or are determined to be independent by a financial aid officer using professional judgment (Radford, Bentz, Dekker, & Paslov, 2016).

The recruiting practices of many of the institutions catering to veterans has been called into question (Ochinko & Payea, 2018). The President of the United States, Barrack Obama, responded to these actions by releasing Executive Order 13607 in 2012. This order condemned predatory practices of recruiting veterans by colleges and called for creating principles of excellence for colleges and universities serving veterans. Despite the condemnation of these practices and the establishment of administrative boundaries to prevent them, evidence suggests that these practices continue (Ochinko & Payea, 2018). A brief released by Veterans Education Success in 2018 states 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.” Additionally, ITT Tech, which has received close to \$1 billion in Post-9/11 GI Bill

payments and is the institution to receive the third highest amount of Post-9/11 GI Bill funds, closed in 2016 while under investigation by multiple state Attorneys General and federal agencies (Ochinko & Payea, 2018).

College Choice Theory

Academics have been examining the reasons students choose the colleges that they attend since the middle of the 20th century. This research initially explored high school students and the impact that counselors and parents had on the decisions they made. Over time, the theories have expanded to examine a broader range of factors and influences on their decisions. In the 1980's, multi-stage models of college choice theory were created to include Donald Hossler and Karen Gallagher's *College Choice Theory* (Chapman, 1981; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982; Chapman & Jackson, 1987; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Since it was created, *College Choice Theory* has been used to examine the general population and in recent years has been used to study specific racial and ethnic groups (Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee, 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.

Statement of the Problem

There has been a significant amount of research completed that focuses on veterans in higher education. The majority of this research explores the experience of veterans once they arrive on campuses, as well as frictions they face in the transition to the higher education environment. These studies are often prescriptive noting best practices for serving these students once they are on campus. However, there remains a

gap in the literature that explores the period prior to matriculating into a college. *College Choice Theory* has yet to be used to thoroughly examine the veteran population.

There is an understanding that first-generation college students often lack social and cultural capital that assists in efficiently accessing the higher education system. The Department of Veterans Affairs states that 62 percent of veterans are first-generation college students. This information in combination with the fact that veterans receive a significant financial benefit for attending college in the Post-9/11 GI Bill may inform us why institutions are using predatory practices to lure veterans into their systems. Beyond the questionable moral and ethical reasoning of these practices, the billions of dollars paid to these failing and underperforming institutions run counter to the purpose of the creation of the GI Bill through the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. With a lack of data related to the factors influencing veterans' decision-making and how veterans make meaning of this process, quality colleges and universities have little information to inform and adjust their recruiting methods in order to meet the needs of veteran students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to learn from veterans how they make sense of their decision making prior to matriculation into a four-year college or university. This study examined how Navy and Marine Corps Post-9/11 veterans make meaning of the college choice process. Within that, the study examined how this population decides which four-year colleges they consider and ultimately, apply for. Additionally, this study examined how veterans decide which educational model to utilize: resident, online, or hybrid. Lastly, given the influence of fear noted in the previous studies (Abbey, 2016), this study also sought to determine in what ways emotions influence the college choice process. As

a unique population with different experiences and backgrounds, it is important to understand what influences veterans' educational pathways. Colleges and universities can utilize the data generated from this study to influence their own recruitment and outreach practices in order to better work with these potential students.

Research Questions

The following research question and sub-questions guided this study:

1. How do Post-9/11 veterans make meaning of the college choice process?
 - a. How do Post-9/11 Veterans decide which four-year colleges and universities to consider and subsequently apply to?
 - b. How do Post-9/11 Veterans decide which educational model (resident, online, or hybrid, public, private) to attend?
 - c. In what way do emotions influence the college choice process?

The research questions for this study helped to examine a diverse sample of veterans to learn about differences or similarities between and among genders, military branch and other demographic boundaries.

Key Terminology

For this study, the term *veteran* refers to all of those that have completed one service obligation in any of the US Armed Forces or are actively serving in the military. These forces include, the United States Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, as well as their reserve components and the Army and Air National Guard. The intention is to be inclusive with this term. The level and condition of the discharge status from the military was not considered. Although discharge status can influence eligibility

for certain educational benefits to include the Post-9/11 GI Bill, it was not explored nor considered for this study.

The term *student veteran* is used for veterans that are attending college or in the process of considering college. Student veterans may or may not have been using any number of educational benefits. The use of benefits did not affect the status of student veterans interviewed for this study.

The term *Post-9/11 veteran* or *Post-9/11 student veteran* is in reference to a veteran or student veteran that serves after September 11, 2001. This term is used to separate this generation of veterans from previous generations that had different experiences and were not eligible for the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

At times, the term *military-connected* will be used. Military-connected includes those with a direct connection to the military. This includes the veteran, dependent children of the veteran, and the veteran's spouse, as well as those still serving on active duty, reservists, and members of the National Guard. This term is used because the military-connected population has a unique experience due to their direct connection to the military. Additionally, the Post-9/11 GI Bill can sometimes be transferred to dependent children and spouses.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last seven decades, research has explored the topic of the military population in the higher education environment. In 2008, the Post-9/11 GI Bill was signed into law and implemented in 2009. The Post-9/11 GI Bill provides a significant expansion of the benefits utilized by United States military veterans for higher education. This expansion of benefits, in parallel with a large number of veterans returning from conflicts overseas, resulted in a significant increase in the number of student veterans entering higher education over the last decade (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). Since its implementation, over 1.9 million people have used the Post-9/11 GI Bill. It is estimated that 200,000 new Post-9/11 GI Bill users per year enter the higher education system. This flow of student veterans into college is projected to be maintained for years to come (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015). In response to and mirroring this dynamic, academic research exploring military populations in postsecondary education has also increased.

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Education conducted research that profiled the military population in higher education (Radford, Bentz, Dekker, & Paslov, 2016). This research compared the military population in college before and after the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and also compared veteran and active duty students to their counterpart traditional and non-traditional students in college. Beyond the general increase in the population of veterans in higher education, the research also unveiled a shift in models of education and types of institutions veterans are attending. The number of veterans and active duty personnel utilizing for-profit institutions increased from 14

percent of the student veteran population to 24 percent. Although there was an increase in the overall number of student veterans attending public schools, the percentage of this population attending public colleges decreased from 42 to 37 percent. Additionally, 18 percent of veteran and active duty students utilize only the online model, compared to 12 percent of their non-military, non-traditional counterparts (Radford et al., 2016). Despite the increase in the total military population accessing higher education during this period and the difference in the type of educational models used by this population in comparison to the general population, there is no research exploring why student veterans are making different decisions in comparison to the general population.

This review examines and critiques established literature related to student veterans in higher education. This includes early research from the World War II era and a thorough examination of current research on student veterans in higher education. Additionally, I discuss the adult development theory often used to examine struggles veterans face in the higher education environment and outline why it falls short as a foundational theory for this study. The vast amount of research related to college choice decisions is critiqued, which includes the earliest studies completed to the current models and theories utilized today. Lastly, this review highlights gaps in the literature that support the need to conduct research related to student veterans and college choice.

Early Research

Traditionally, there has not been a significant amount of literature related to the military population in higher education (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Following World War II and the implementation of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, commonly known as the GI Bill, literature began to be published related to veterans and

higher education. Over the decades, publications related to this topic have been limited, and the depth of the research has not been significant. The US has been involved in constant conflict abroad since 2001 and during this period publications related to student veterans in higher education have increased. However, even with the significant influx of veterans onto college campuses and ongoing conflict abroad the peer-reviewed literature remains relatively scarce (Barry, Whiteman, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2012).

During the period following World War II, researchers analyzed how colleges would react to the millions of veterans returning from war and what the best actions were in reacting to this dynamic. The concerns centered on the massive numbers of service members who were exiting the military, and reentering civil society (Flynt, 1945; Hillway, 1945; Howard, 1945; Allen, 1946; Carpenter & Glick, 1946; Justice, 1946). While this literature acknowledged the unique experiences of veterans, the primary topics were the exploration of how the campuses across the nation would deal with the hundreds of thousands of students entering colleges. Additionally, university systems were not familiar with working or having a large number of non-traditional students with varied backgrounds on their campuses (Washton, 1945; Justice 1946). Although consumers of this literature can glean some insight into the current dynamic of veterans attending higher education, the present-day higher education environment is vastly different when compared to the 1940s. Because of this, the majority of the work from this period focused on these topics is dated with a minimal amount of value.

Issues related to transition are present for many students when they begin college. This experience was exacerbated for student veterans and was acknowledged by the majority of the researchers during the post-World War II period (Hillway, 1945; Howard,

1945; Kraines, 1945; Washton, 1945; Carpenter & Glick, 1946; Justice, 1946). The anxiety caused by the transition from military to civilian life and college was substantial for individuals to process. Administrators sought to find ways to understand and aid students with their transition, which often included a movement from a war zone to a campus. This thinking continues to be addressed in research conducted by today's scholars and is explored in greater detail later in this literature review.

Current Research

A major topic of concern after World War II was the lack of knowledge about working with a large population of student veterans who had been exposed to extended periods of conflict and combat before entering or reentering higher education (Hillway, 1945; Kraines, 1945). Sixty years later, this question was again explored. In the late 2000s, DiRamio, Ackerman, and Garza Mitchell (2008, 2009) began conducting qualitative research with student veterans. For this research, the authors interviewed 25 student veterans from three universities. These students had all participated in, at least, one deployment in support of the conflicts in Afghanistan or Iraq between 2003 and 2007. Eleven of the 25 student veterans had been or were members of the National Guard. The articles and book published from this study have since become some of the most cited works related to student veterans in higher education (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; DiRamio, & Jarvis, 2011).

The authors acknowledged that the experiences of student veterans on campus are unique and provided many recommendations for colleges and universities to utilize when working with student veterans while they are on campuses. These recommendations include taking an active approach to providing services for veterans on campus and

sharing best practices with other campuses. The researchers encouraged colleges to provide a variety of services for veterans ranging from creating a stand-alone office for veterans to informing and preparing the disabilities office of potential mental and physical health challenges that combat veterans may experience.

There are some shortfalls in these seminal works that must be noted. The first is that although the work is insightful, it is not generalizable. The research conducted was qualitative and the sample is small, and not representative of the student veteran populations. The researchers intended to gather a sample of veterans with combat experience. The definition of “combat” needs to be provided but was not. Although our nation has been involved in conflict since 2001, not all veterans that served during that period participated in combat, despite the definition. Additionally, 11 of the 25 participants were members of the National Guard. Members of the National Guard can be and have been activated for deployments. However, the experiences of members of the National Guard are different from the experience of active and reserve forces. National Guard members make up 44 percent of the sample, although they only represent 21 percent of the U.S. military. Additionally, the National Guard only has Army and Air Force components. They do not have Navy, Marine Corps, nor Coast Guard members (US Department of Defense, 2015). Caution must be exercised in using this work as an all-encompassing guide for colleges and universities as the population of student veterans on their campuses, and the experiences of those students, may be different.

The previous research was completed before the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2009. Since the activation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, there has been a significant increase in the number of student veterans on campuses across the country. Over 1.9

million new people utilized Post-9/11 GI Bill users since 2009, and 200,000 new users entering college each year (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014; US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015). As outlined previously, in parallel to this dynamic the distribution of these students across the various educational systems has shifted (Radford et al., 2016). The impact of this educational benefit and the change in educational models accessed by this population must be acknowledged and explored in current research.

Transition Theory

The difficulty faced by individuals when transitioning from the military environment to the college environment is a topic often covered in the literature on student veterans. This theme was consistent in the historical writing and remains present in articles published today. Current researchers have often used Nancy Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1984) as a framework to outline the dynamic and the difficulties student veterans face throughout their transition into higher education (Ackerman, et al., 2009; DiRamio, et al., 2008; DiRamio, & Jarvis, 2011; Heitzman, & Somers, 2015). Schlossberg began exploring adults in transition in 1966 when she studied males aged 30-60 who refused to "stay put" in a conference paper titled *Adults in Transition* (p.7). In her initial exploration, she acknowledged the lack of a theoretical foundation on the subject, which she would later establish. Schlossberg first presented her theory in *Counseling Adults in Transition* in 1984. For more than three decades, the theory has been adjusted several times and developed into a useful tool for assessing individuals facing transition and outlining possible actions for intervention when assisting these people (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995, Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2011). The most recent version of the theory was published in the 2011 book *Counseling*

Adults in Transition, Fourth Edition: Linking Schlossberg's Theory with Practice in a Diverse World. (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2011).

Schlossberg's Transition Theory has broad value as an adult development theory and as a counseling tool. It has become an informative lens for looking at the experience of veterans transitioning into the college environment. In a book titled *Improving Higher Education Environments for Adults: Responsive Programs and Services from Entry to Departure*, Schlossberg teamed with Ann Lynch and Arthur Chickering (1989) and they used Transition Theory to explain the experiences of non-traditional aged students in higher education and guide practitioners working with this population at colleges and universities. Although not all non-traditional aged college students are veterans, student veterans are, for the most part, non-traditional aged college students (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). Because of this, researchers have discovered that the use of this theory is valuable when examining the student veteran population.

Transition theory was developed and has been specifically used as a counseling tool. The theory is designed to outline a process that can be used by individuals and observers, to assess a situation and intervene with guidance and assistance to an individual moving through a transition. The transition process is divided into three major parts: approaching transition, taking stock in coping resources, and taking charge. The theory can be used to highlight where one is in the process. The first part of the process is used to identify the nature of the transition by looking at the type, context, and impact of the transition. A transition is "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles." (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 33). The three types of transition are anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events. An anticipated

transition is one that is expected and planned, while the unanticipated events are transitions that occur that were not planned. Non-event transitions occur when an event that was planned for does not occur. These types of transitions combined with the context in which they occur and the impact they have on the individual aid in outlining the nature of the transition.

The second part of the process is the response that takes place when the transition occurs. Schlossberg (1984) used the four S's to inventory the factors that influence the ability to cope with the transition. The four S's are situation, self, support, and strategy. Situation is the ability to analyze things like the environment, timing, and context of the transition to determine the impact. Self is the ability to use personal characteristics and the resources available to the individual to deal with the transition. Support is the ability to inventory the help networks available to the person going through the transition and the accessibility of those networks. Lastly, strategy explores the coping responses available to determine the appropriate action to take to address the transition.

The last part of the transition process, taking charge, relates to the strengthening and utilization of resources. The individual experiencing the transition does this. However, someone external to the person, like a counselor or an advocate, can assist with the process. As individuals accept the changes brought about by the transition that has occurred, they can take steps to manage their control and the four S's.

Researchers (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; DiRamio, & Jarvis, 2011) have discovered that Schlossberg's transition theory is valuable and useful in studying student veterans transitioning into higher education. The theory is used as a foundation to explain the process student

veterans are going through. The four S's allow researchers to insert the student veteran into a linear timeline and be prescriptive in their conclusions. Not only does it provide value in the ability to assess student veterans who are experiencing a transition, but it also provides a means of intervention for professionals and institutions working with student veterans.

Although Transition Theory is valuable as a foundational theory in researching student veterans moving into and through higher education, there are multiple items to be mindful of when applying the theory to this population. First, the theory was created as a general transition theory for adults. Although research for the theory included non-traditional students, it did not focus on the military, nor reference the military (Schlossberg et al., 1989). Second, as stated previously, most student veterans are non-traditional students. However, the experiences of student veterans do not translate to all non-traditional students. This is displayed in institutional choices of student veterans outlined previously in this paper. Finally, in the literature that has been presented, there have been multiple examples of the participants going through several types of transition that have included: from the military to the general population, from combat (although not explicitly defined) back to the general population, from combat to higher education, from the military to higher education, as well as additional inferred transitions, such as from the military to both work and college. (DiRamio et al., 2008; Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio, & Jarvis, 2011; Heitzman, & Somers, 2015). The consumer must ask which of these transitions is having the most impact and how does the researcher justify focusing only on the transition into and through higher education. The common factor in these transitions has been the military and some universal transition from it. Perhaps the focus

of transition in this literature should not be solely on the transition into higher education, but on the departure from the military into many contexts. Kevin Jones (2013) stated, “Many student veterans are undergoing a constant dynamic tension as they transition from a previous state (servicemember), to several simultaneous current states (college student, civilian, employee)” (p. 12). While Schlossberg references multiple adult development theorists in her work, researchers should be encouraged to explore additional adult development theories or develop theories that have the potential to more thoroughly explain the unique experiences of veterans in transition to include those in higher education. Some academics have recently begun to challenge the usefulness of Schlossberg’s theory when examining this dynamic (Jones, 2016; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). However, all of these researchers, again, focus on the experience of these students once they have arrived on campus.

While the theory is valuable for practitioners and developing best practices, it is not a solid theory for framing the research of this study. Transition theory assumes a struggle through the process of transition, which may or may not be true for veterans selecting a college or university. The theory does not provide a means for answering how veterans make meaning of the process of selecting a college to apply for and attend.

Student Veterans Goals and Success on Campus

Some of the most extensive research projects related to the veteran community and higher education have been conducted in the last three years. Of note, two of the most extensive studies were conducted by the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) (2015) and Student Veterans of America (SVA) (2017). The IVMF study used a mixed-methods survey instrument that consisted of 117 questions. It explored four areas

related to higher education that included: the importance of higher education in attaining post-service goals, motivations for seeking higher education, barriers in reaching education goals, and challenges and comfort levels on campus. The instrument was delivered to active duty military, veterans, and family members. 8,561 people participated in the survey, with 4,933 completing the entire instrument. The data generated from this study provided very valuable insights into the experiences, needs, and desires of the military population. The study included an entire section that focused specifically on higher education. The most valuable insights from this study related to the motivations that veterans had for seeking higher education. Although IVMF provided valuable and generalizable data, it still failed to directly address the factors influencing decision making when these individuals are seeking access to colleges.

SVA conducted one of the first large-scale research projects focused explicitly on Post-9/11 GI Bill users, titled National Veteran Education Success Tracker (NVEST) (2017). This quantitative study examined enrollment data maintained by the National Student Clearinghouse of Post-9/11 GI Bill users from 2009 to 2013. This sample included 822,327 Post-9/11 GI Bill users, which included 96.4 percent of all Post-9/11 GI Bill users during this period. The concentration of the research was on the performance of these students, which ultimately shows higher grade point averages, higher persistence, and higher graduation rates when compared to their non-traditional counterparts. This research, although valuable, again does not provide any depth of understanding to the period when this student population selects a college.

College Choice

The factors that influence college choice for students has been a research topic for decades. Some of the earliest literature was produced in the 1950s and 1960s. This research focused on traditional-aged students and the period that they were in high school in preparation for college. Leslie Moser (1955) surveyed 1350 college freshman in Texas to determine what year of high school these students made the decision to attend college and which college they would attend. Before 1958, high school counselors maintained power and authority over the choice of colleges students sought, as college board scores were only released to colleges and these counselors (Palmer et al., 2004). Because of this, high school counselors retained a strong influence on college choice for students.

Seven years later, William Kerr (1962) asked again at what point in students' lives these college choice decisions were made. He added an inquiry about who aided with or most influenced their college choice. This time a similar population in Iowa was used as the sample. Additionally, Kerr explored if the students' perceived personal traits influenced the choice. These traits included academic ability, study habits, aptitude, interests, and talents. Although Kerr broke out traits for the study, he does not share nor discuss the gender or race of the sample examined for the study. The results of these studies showed that the vast majority of students made their college choice decision in high school. The most influential people in the decision process were the students' parents and the perceived traits that most influenced the choice were academic ability and interests (Kerr, 1962).

Over the next decade, researchers would expand the factors considered for influencing college choice to factors external to the student. These factors included:

proximity, cost, the atmosphere of the college, reputation, faculty, and more (Bowers & Pugh, 1973; Holland & Richards, 1965). The study conducted by Holland and Richards (1965) was a large-scale national survey that included a breakdown of the male and female population, as well as a comparison of the factors influencing their decisions. The top factors for both male and female students included: quality faculty, intellectual atmosphere, cost, location, and social opportunities. Holland and Richards note that these were the same areas emphasized in informational publications provided to the students by counselors, but fell short in suggesting that the publications influenced the students' answers in their surveys. Bowers and Pugh discovered the same top factors eight years later when they surveyed thousands of freshmen and their parents at an Indiana university (1973). Bowers and Pugh sought to determine if there were different factors of importance between the students and their parents. They discovered a slight difference, but more importantly found similar weightings of importance as were discovered in the Holland and Richards data. It is important to note that the research subjects up to this point were primarily white and the researchers had yet to examine the difference experienced across gender lines.

Kalmer Stordahl (1970) offered that factors influencing college choice decisions were complex and may be different based on several factors. Stordahl stated,

The decision of a young adult to enroll in a particular college or university is no doubt influenced by a complex set of forces including his own goals, abilities, and personality as well as parental values, socioeconomic status, and other environmental factors (p. 212).

This study separated the participants along multiple demographic lines that included gender, home location, and socioeconomic status. In doing so, Stordahl acknowledged the complexity of the college choice decision and that those seeking higher education were not a homogenous population. Although this study expanded the demographic categories, it did not include race nor other demographics.

College Choice Models and Theories

Models and theories related to college choice began to be further researched and created over the following decade between 1981-1987. These new models and theories acknowledged that there are multiple factors influencing decisions and the weight of these factors vary across demographics (Chapman, 1981; Chapman & Jackson, 1987; Litten, 1982). Chapman acknowledged that “student college choice is influenced by a set of student characteristics in combination with a series of external influences” (1981, p. 492). Over the years, several theoretical and conceptual models were developed. The most common and well-known models include the economic approach, sociological approach, information processing approach, and combined models.

Economic approach. The economic approach frames the college choice decision as a cost-benefit analysis. The potential student considers financial factors that include the cost of the institution, financial aid available, time spent attaining a degree, and other resources available. These are balanced against a human capital assessment that includes a number of things from increased earning ability to improved social status. The economic approach assumes that the student will select an institution that will provide for the greatest human capital over time. (Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Becker, 1993; Fuller, Manski, & Wise, 1982).

The assumptions used with the economic approach are not realistic. The first assumption is that the data is available to potential students to make a well-informed cost-benefit analysis. Not all populations have the ability to gather information needed to make such an analysis. Further, if a cost-benefit analysis is completed, some students may not have the ability or be willing to take on the risk of debt associated with pursuing an education at some institutions, particularly students with low socioeconomic status (Wells & Lynch, 2012).

Sociological approach. The sociological approach focuses on the earlier influences in a student's life in comparison to the economic approach, which centers around the cost-benefit analysis that occurs closer to the decision of where to attend college. This approach still gives weight to these factors, but assumes social and cultural capital influences are the prime factors influencing this decision (Park & Hossler, 2014). Social and cultural capital are connected to things like parents' education level, daily interactions in the community and more. When looked at through the lens of first-generation college students, Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) explained how the presence or lack of these capitals influenced these choices when they stated,

Social capital is a form of capital that resides in relationships among individuals that facilitate transaction and the transmission of different resources. Such perspectives suggest that individuals with highly educated parents may have a distinct advantage over first-generation students in understanding the culture of higher education and its role in personal development and socioeconomic attainment (p. 252).

The mention of first-generation college students is particularly important in my research, given that 62 percent of student veterans are first-generation college students (Wurster, Rinaldi, Woods & Liu, 2013).

Information process approach. While the economic and sociological approaches focused on the information that students consider when making college choice decisions, the information process approach explores how students access information and process the information once it is attained (Huber, 1984; Stinchcombe, 1990). Not only is the access to information different across varying populations, how that information is analyzed and absorbed is also diverse among students. The information process approach accounts for this difference between populations and within populations. DesJardins and Toutkoushian (2005) explain that, “rationality does not hold that given like information individuals will make the same decisions, or make decisions that an individual observing the situation would have made” (p. 233). While the information process approach acknowledges this difference in attaining and processing the information it falls short in providing insight into why this occurs, beyond the reasons provided in the sociological approach related to social and cultural capital.

Combined models. More complex models, called combined models, have been developed that outline the process of college choice taking place through multiple stages. Several combined models were developed in the 1980s (Chapman, 1981; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982; Chapman & Jackson, 1987; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). These models included three to five stages that each student went through during the college choice process. Multistage models allowed for the economic,

sociological, and information process approach to all be utilized and considered in the decision-making process.

Of all of the models developed during the period, the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model has become one of the most widely used. It consists of three stages that all students experience. These stages are predisposition, search, and choice. The predisposition stage is when the student first decides to attend college or pursue other routes that could include entering the workforce or other activities, such as military service. The search phase occurs next when 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 decides to attend. Park and Hossler noted that “This is the simplest model and has been widely accepted as a foundation in later studies on college choice,”(2014, p. 52) Several others agree (DesJardins et al., 2006; Perna, 2006; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2012). For more than three decades Hossler and Gallagher’s college choice model has been a foundation for research related to college choice. It has been used to expand research to more focused populations such as students of color (Freeman, 2002; Pitre, 2006). Additionally, it has also been challenged for not aligning with the choice process of some ethnic groups (Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs & Rhee 1997; Teranishi et al., 2004). However, this tested model has the potential to provide insight into the college choices made by student veterans in the same way that it has been used as a start point for examining other groups. In fact, the theory is uniquely compatible to the student veteran population given that the majority of veterans decide to

take an alternate route in the predisposition stage, which is service in the military (US Department of Defense, 2016).

Factors Influencing College Choice

Park and Hossler's (2014) chapter in the *Handbook for Strategic Enrollment Management* examined the historical data and listed eight college choice factors that were most often referenced in research. These factors are personal characteristics; family income; social and cultural capital; academic ability; high school attended; information sources; peer effects; and the cost of attendance and financial aid. Additionally, the factors influencing this choice were separated along racial lines between Whites, African American, Latino, and Asian students. For example, cost was a significant factor across the White, African American, and Latino students, but was a more significant factor in the African American and Latino population. Additionally, African American male students and Latino students gave more weight to proximity to family. Asian students, in general, were significantly influenced by parents, despite the education level of the parents, and were less concerned for the cost of college (Park & Hossler, 2014).

The non-traditional student population was broken out as a separate population from the race categories as a stand-alone population in the handbook. According to Park and Hossler, this population "unlike traditional students, have multiple responsibilities - managing home, family, work, and study - which set hurdles for them as they try to pursue their education" (p. 62). Financial concerns, convenience, and quality were the top concerns for this population. Their reasons for seeking higher education differed from traditional students in many ways. Non-traditional students were seeking a degree for things like a career change, qualification for internal advancement, or a pure interest in

attaining knowledge. Lastly, because of other responsibilities, non-traditional students often considered college choices within a limited geographical range.

The *National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report* conducted by Levitz (2017) included an examination of factors that influenced students' college choice. A total of 683,000 students from 970 colleges completed the survey. These colleges included four-year and two-year colleges, as well as public and private colleges. Additionally, the online learners and non-traditional student demographics were examined separately. The survey covered the academic years that spanned from 2014 to 2017. The common top factors associated with the four and two-year colleges, both private and public, focused primarily on cost and financial aid, as well as the academic reputation of the institution. For the online learners and non-traditional students, convenience and flexibility were added to the top of the list along with cost. This should be noted given that the majority of student veterans are non-traditional students and there are a disproportionate number of student veterans that seek out online education judgment (Radford, Bentz, Dekker, & Paslov, 2016). This survey did not separate the military population. Given the unique experience and significant educational benefits available to this population via the Post-9/11 GI Bill, these statistics are not generalizable to student veterans.

Current Research on Veterans' College Choice

In recent years, four studies were conducted that focused specifically on military members and veterans' decision making related to higher education. Vardalis and Waters (2011) conducted a survey of military police based in Texas. The survey questioned the participants interest in higher education and criminal justice programs. The researcher

concluded that there was a significant interest in pursuing a college degree. Additionally, participants sought out convenience in academic programming. The sample used in this study was not representative of the greater military and veteran population, as they were all military police officers. Furthermore, only one field of study was explored, criminal justice. Lastly, the instrument provided to the participants only offered limited answers related to the factors influencing their decisions.

In a dissertation titled *Factors Affecting College Choice and Transfer: A Study of the Decision-Making Process of Student Veterans*, Regenia Hill (2016) began to explore this topic more directly. While she touches on factors that veterans take into account when selecting a college, she only looked at veterans who had initially attended a for-profit college and later transferred to a community college. Much can be garnered from her study as to why veterans attend for-profit institutions, such as convenience and ease of access. However, additional exploration should be made to determine if there are generalities across the greater veteran population when they are deciding on what college to attend.

In another dissertation titled *College Choice of Veterans: Variables Affecting and Factors Veterans Consider in Choosing Their Institution of Higher Education*, Kerry Collins Circle (2017), uses a qualitative approach to specifically examine the factors that impact veterans' college choice. Collins Circle highlighted three reasons student veterans sought higher education. These included: the desire to prepare for a new career and anticipation of high financial returns, utilization of an earned benefit, and the desire to obtain a higher education credential. In her study, she only interviewed students from one community college to determine the factors that influenced them to attend that specific

college. The factors noted in her research included: transferability of credits, location, veterans' services, and cultural fit. Given that she only interviewed student veterans from one college about their decisions to attend that specific college, the results are limited to that institution with no ability to accurately infer reasons veterans would select other colleges.

Emily Ives (2017) used *College Choice Theory* to examine student veterans that were attending research universities. In her dissertation titled *Understanding the College Choice Process of United States Military-Affiliated Transfer Students* she outlined the demographics, as well as the military and education background, of the veteran population that were attending research universities in California. She surveyed student veterans from multiple campuses and interviewed 20 students from one of the campuses. In her research, Ives discovered that academic quality was one of the most influential factors that impacted student as they were searching for and selecting a university. This information stands out as contrary when compared to the other studies. Considering that the population examined were students at some of most competitive institutions to access in the nation, the contradiction is understandable.

While all four of these studies lack considerable value as stand-alone studies, they all provide data that can be used to support follow-up work and are sources for triangulation. There are common themes in these studies and the pilot studies referenced previously, specifically convenience, location, and ease of access.

Recent work has started to examine sub-populations within the veteran population, specifically female veterans. The experiences of women veterans are different from those of their male counterparts. Heitzman and Somers (2015) examined some of

the tendencies witnessed by women student veterans, such as engaging less in the college experience beyond the classroom. Although their research focused primarily on the experiences of these students while they were on campus, they did note that these students were attracted to campuses with more visible female veterans. This work is contributing and building on the growing base of research related to female veterans in higher education (DiRamio et al., 2015; Sander, 2012) and highlights that this population potentially makes meaning of the process different from other student veterans and non-traditional students.

Conclusion

This literature review examined the limited amount of research related to student veterans in higher education from World War II to present day. Although much of this research provides insights to the surface level experiences of student veterans on campuses, the earlier work is dated given the change in the higher education environment over the decades. Additionally, modern seminal works on the subject fall short in addressing the change in the dynamic since the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory has provided a useful theoretical foundation for research related to the military. However, Transition Theory does not encompass the entire phenomena of military transition and falls short of providing a solid framing for addressing the research questions.

It is clear that there is a significant gap in the literature related to the period before veterans start college and to the time when factors are evident in influencing their college choice decision. Despite the increase in literature related to veterans in higher education, there are no peer-reviewed articles that examine veterans during the period when they are

searching for and selecting a college. Given the known difference in the educational models selected by this population and a shift in the increased number of veterans selecting these models since the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, there is a distinct need to research the topic and determine answers to the research questions.

The literature related to college choice is vast and has matured over the years through the creation of utilized models and theories, primarily the Hossler and Gallagher combined model. This model acknowledges that decisions may be influenced differently from population to population and within populations. It has yet to be significantly utilized in exploring veterans' college choice. Research using this model as a foundation for exploring the factors influencing veterans' college choice decisions has the potential to address the significant gap in the literature and provide answers to the research questions associated with this study.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This chapter covers the research methods that were used for this study, starting with the research questions, participants, and data gathering and analysis processes. An explanation of where the research was conducted, as well as how the participants were selected will be outlined. The research question and sub-questions used to guide this study are:

1. How do Post-9/11 veterans make meaning of the college choice process?
 - a. How do Post-9/11 Veterans decide which four-year colleges and universities to consider and subsequently apply to?
 - b. How do Post-9/11 Veterans decide which educational model (resident, online, or hybrid, public, private) to attend?
 - c. In what way do emotions influence the college choice process?

This study used qualitative interviews as the primary source of data collection. Interviews were semi-structured using an interview guide. Patton has noted, “The interview guide lists the questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of an interview” (2015, p. 439). The intention of this method is to split the difference of the spectrum offered by Patton from a conversational style approach, at one end of the spectrum, to a highly structured interview, at the other end. This approach allowed for flexibility in the interview and it gave me more opportunities to further explore topics as they emerged. The interview guide in this study was based on several aspects: Hossler and Gallagher’s *College Choice Theory* (1987), the review of interview guides used in other studies that used the same theoretical framing, common influencing factors as

outlined by in the *Handbook of Strategic Enrollment Management* (Hossler, & Bontrager, 2014), and pilot studies (Abbey, 2016) conducted in preparation of this study. I also gathered demographic information and used the guide with specific questions with all of the participants, but left flexibility in the interview process for themes important to the interviewees to come forth. See Appendix A for a copy of the interview guide used in this study.

To better understand how universities are attempting to engage with veterans during the college choice process, I examined the marketing and recruiting materials used by universities tailored for veterans. Additionally, as part of my daily work at a university and with appropriate approval, I conducted document analysis and work as participant-as-observer with the student veteran population.

Research Site and Participants

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, this study was initiated. Research participants in this study were a convenience sample of 12 student veterans that were attending or had attended various four-year universities. Selection criteria for this study included male and female Navy and Marine Corps veterans who were attending or had recently completed their studies at a four-year university. Those students that had recently completed their education must have been in college during the Post 9/11 GI Bill era. The Post 9/11 GI Bill era spans from August 2009 to the present.

The initial participants for the study were gathered at a national conference for student veterans in Florida. This conference was attended by student veterans from various universities and colleges across the country. Participants were solicited to participate by the researcher through face-to-face verbal invitations and multiple

announcements made at the conference. Four participants from the conference agreed to participate in the study. Three of the participants were interviewed at the conference and another agreed to be interviewed at a later date via the online video conference platform Facetime. The remaining eight participants were solicited in the Southwest region of the United States which is the home to the researcher. To gather these participants, multiple announcements were made for participation on several campuses by the leaders of university veterans programs on those campuses. Additionally, snowball methodology was used to identify additional candidates as the interviews took place. A convenience sample of 12 students was gathered that included three male Marine Corps veterans, three female Marine Corps veterans, three male Navy veterans, and three female Navy veterans that were attending a four-year university or had attended and completed a four-year degree during the Post-9/11 GI Bill era. The first candidates that met the above stated selection criteria were selected to be interviewed.

I am a current employee at a large four-year public university where part of the research occurred. I am the director of the military and veterans program at the university, which is linked to all military-connected students attending that college. The duties of the position require me to interact daily in multiple capacities with student veterans. This automatically places me in the participant-as-observer role as outlined by Glesne (2016). During work hours I focused primarily on the requirements of my position, however this allowed me the opportunity to also serve in the role of observer. Additionally, I had access to documentation related to the student veteran population that I work with, which when appropriate I used to support my data collection efforts. It is

important to name my positionality during this process. This will be outlined in detail later, as well as the steps taken to address it.

Upon receiving IRB approval, I presented the approval to my supervisor to receive permission and provide awareness of the research I was conducting. I sought and was granted permission to conduct documents analysis and work as a participant-as-observer within the regular scope of my daily duties. This permission was granted by my supervisor with the understanding that quotations from my interactions with students would not be directly attributed to the students and all appropriate confidentiality was maintained. I did not take any intentional action in this role and as part of this analysis. It was only used to tangentially inform this research and provide potential confirmation and contradictions to findings.

Data Collection Procedures

Each participant reviewed and signed a consent form prior to the interviews and all participants received a \$25 gift card to Amazon as compensation for participating in the interview. The interviews were conducted in a semi-private, agreed upon location, except for the distance interview which was conducted via online video conference application Facetime. During the distance interview, I ensured that my location was private. However, I had no control over the location of the interviewee. These steps allowed all of the participants to share their answers openly and in confidence.

Open-ended semi-structured interviews were the primary data gathering mechanism. Each of the 12 participants completed a pre-interview demographic survey (Appendix A). Prior to the interview, I ensured that the participants felt comfortable and provided an overview of what the interview would entail. Additionally, I introduced

myself and provided aspects of my personal background. This included a confirmation of my status as a first-generation college student, a former enlisted marine, and more. These steps were taken to establish trust and connection with the participants, so that they would feel more comfortable sharing their personal stories. Once this was complete the participants were asked questions from the interview guide. Some questions were excluded and additional questions were added in order to explore emerging topics. The interviews ranged in length from 35 minutes to one hour and 20 minutes. Upon completion of the interviews, I explained to the participants what I would do with the recorded interviews, that I would be conducting member checking with them at a later date and when they would hear from me next. See Appendix B for a copy of the consent form that was used in this study.

The interviews were recorded using the online application Temi. Additionally, a backup recording device was used for redundancy in the event that the primary recording device failed. Upon completion of the interview, the recordings were then transcribed using Temi. I reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. Additionally, I took notes during interviews and more detailed analytical memos after the interviews to highlight key themes expressed during the interviews. These notes were used as a reference to influence future interviews with other participants as well as a reference when reviewing the data. These memos captured the general overview of the interview, observed body language, tone of the interview, and additional observations.

Rudimentary categories were used in order to provide an initial structure for coding (Glesne, 2016) and to assist in note taking. The categories were the overarching phases of *College Choice Theory* (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) titled *predisposition*,

search, and *choice*. These categories functioned as a guide and starting point for coding data. They were used again later for theoretical framing when analyzing the data.

In my role as participant-as-observer (Glesne, 2016) I participated in informal conversations and professional discussions with other student veterans and potential student veterans on a daily basis. Key themes were noted however, these conversations were not recorded and quotations have not been attributed to them. Additionally, I reviewed documents daily that had the potential to provide convergent, inconsistent, or contradictory data related to this study (Mathison, 1988).

In order to understand how universities are marketing toward veterans, I conducted further document analysis by examining advertising in periodicals maintained at a local Marine Corps base combined library and education center, as well as television commercials and social media advertising. I toured the local Marine Corps base library and education center. During this tour, I reviewed all military themed periodicals maintained at the location. While reviewing these periodicals, I noted all college and university advertisement, what type of institution the college was and the message they were expressing in the advertisement. All these data were recorded and totaled. In addition to this, I noted the same data in television commercials and social media marketing I viewed during the length of this study. Lastly, I conducted a Google search using common terms related to the military, as well as the phrases used by the participants during their Google searches for universities. Again, the college types and recruiting messages were noted.

Data Analysis

As the interviews were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy, they were uploaded into the coding software NVivo. The demographic surveys were reviewed and the data from the surveys were inputted in NVivo and connected to the appropriate transcribed interview. This action created a case in the software for each participant that included their transcribed interview and their demographic information under the title of their pseudonym.

As the cases were created in NVivo, the software was utilized to conduct first cycle coding. These data were evaluated to determine the accuracy of the rudimentary categories. The rudimentary categories were quickly discarded and replaced with emerging themes. As coding was conducted themes were developed and stored in the software as nodes. Each node was given a descriptor. Each set of text associated with a theme was highlighted and connected to the appropriate node. A variety of first cycle coding was used that included initial, in vivo, emotion, longitudinal, and value coding (Saldaña, 2012). This initial coding identified the tentative codes by highlighting the verbatim quotations from the interviews that represented emotions, values, beliefs, knowledge and understandings, as well as their experiences through the process. Once all of the interviews were complete, the transcribed interviews were uploaded into NVivo, and first cycle coding was complete, second cycle coding was conducted using holistic, focused, axial, and longitudinal coding (Saldaña, 2012). The second cycle coding process examined the experiences of the participants as a whole over time and examined the frequency of their experiences in order to group the codes into the major themes of the study.

A digital codebook was generated in NVivo, which included all of the themes or nodes. Each node included all of the associated quotations and notes associated with it. This allowed me to review the themes for frequency and compare the participants answers to each other. During this period themes were combined to the major themes presented in Chapter Four.

Once all themes had been generated for the entire sample, cross-case analysis was conducted to compare the similarities and differences between the genders, services, and other demographics. The themes discovered through this study were used to answer the research questions. Triangulation was used to not only 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 of the participants. Once coding had been completed and quotations were identified that would be utilized, an initial draft of the findings was created. This draft was distributed to the participants. They were each asked to review the draft to ensure that their quotations were accurate and they felt they were represented accurately and appropriately. All concerns expressed or questions asked by the participants were addressed to their satisfaction and accurately depicted in the findings. Four of the 12 participants confirmed they were accurately depicted in the findings. One participant provided one correction, which was changed and confirmed. One participant asked a clarifying question, which was answered to their satisfaction. Six of the 12 participants did not respond. However, the participants were informed that a

response was not required, specifically if they did not have any questions, concerns, or corrections.

Pilot Studies

I conducted two pilot studies in preparation for this study (Abbey, 2016). These studies both used grounded theory and explored the factors influencing veterans' decision making when selecting colleges. During the first study, three student veterans were interviewed. Data from this study was used to generate rudimentary categories related to factors influencing veterans' decision making when selecting colleges. Additionally, these data were used to improve the interview guide for the second study. During the second study, ten student veterans were interviewed. Three categories, each with two to four subcategories, of factors were determined to influence veterans' decision making when selecting a college to apply for and attend. Table 1 shows the categories and subcategories that emerged as a result of both studies. Of note, is the subcategory of fear as a common factor influencing college choice. This is unusual because it is an emotion and does not fit well into the factors influencing college choice according to the *Handbook of Strategic Enrollment Management* (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). The common factors influencing college choice as listed in this document include: Personal Characteristics; Family Income; Social and Cultural Capital; Academic Ability; High School attended; Information Sources; Peer effects; and Cost of Attendance/Financial Aid.

The two pilot studies generated unique data related to how the veterans make meaning of the college choice process and the factors that influence college choice

decisions. This study is a more in-depth analysis of this phenomenon using an established theoretical framework.

Table 1

Pilot Study Categories and Subcategories

Category	Subcategories
Lack of Knowledge	First-Generation College Student Access Fear Drive
Influence of Others	Colleagues Family College Connections Military Programs
Convenience	Location Outside Responsibilities

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the knowledge base related to veterans’ college choice decisions and how they go about making meaning of the process. Additionally, this study highlights several areas of need for future research. The data generated from this study provides practical knowledge for institutions of higher education to use in planning and executing recruiting and outreach efforts aimed at this unique population. The hope is that the information generated from this research will have a positive impact on the veteran population currently participating in higher education and those seeking to advance their education in the future.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter outlines the findings from this study. The chapter begins with an overview of the participants, followed by the findings including the major themes discovered in the study. Next, the chapter discusses the findings using the framing of *College Choice Theory*. Then, the chapter examines advertising used by universities and colleges that focuses on the veteran population. Lastly, answers to the research question and sub-questions are discussed in the conclusion.

Participants

Of the twelve participants in the study the first four were recruited at a national conference for student veterans. Multiple announcements were made at the conference and an announcement flyer was distributed. Four participants agreed to participate at the conference. Three interviews were conducted at the conference and the last was interviewed at a later date via the video conference application Facetime. The remaining eight interviews were conducted in the Southwest region of the United States in and around the home city of the researcher. To gather the remaining participants, announcements were made for participation on multiple campuses by the leaders of university veterans programs on those campuses. A convenience sample of students was gathered. Snowballing as a sampling technique was also used to select a total of 12 participants that included three male Marine Corps veterans, three female Marine Corps veterans, three male Navy veterans, and three female Navy veterans that were attending a four-year university or had attended and completed a four-year degree during the Post-9/11 GI Bill era. The first candidates that met the selection criteria were selected to be

interviewed. Each participant signed a consent form and all participants in the study received a \$25 gift card to Amazon as compensation for participating in the interview. The interviews were conducted in a semi-private, agreed upon location. The interviews were recorded using the online application Temi and a backup recording device. The interviews were then transcribed using Temi. The researcher reviewed the transcripts for accuracy upon completion of the transcription.

Table 2

Participants' Education Models and Number of Colleges Attended

Name	Education Model	# of Colleges Attended
Amber	Resident Public Non-Profit	2
David	Resident Private Non-Profit	3
Donald	Resident Private Non-Profit	3
Hokage	Resident Private For-Profit	2
Jav	Resident Private Non-Profit	3
Jordyn	Resident Public Non-Profit	5
Kyle	Resident Private Non-Profit	4
Lynn	Online Public Non-Profit	2
Melanie	Resident Private Non-Profit	4
Melinda	Resident Private Non-Profit	2
Persephone	Hybrid Private For-Profit	1
Scott	Resident Public Non-Profit	4

The participants attend or attended a variety of educational institutions using different education models that included public, private, for-profit, non-profit, resident, online, and hybrid models, as seen in Table 2. The sample is more heavily weighted toward resident programs, with 10 of the 12 participants attending a university where the majority of their course work was taken in a classroom or lab on the campus. All but one of the participants attended multiple colleges with more than half attending more than two colleges. The majority of the participants attended community colleges or a college similar to their current education model prior to transferring to their current or final

university. However, Jordyn attended multiple for-profit universities prior to her current university and Melinda attended a public online university prior to transferring to her current university. The paths taken and the types of colleges attended by the participants in this study closely represent the student veteran population (Radford, Bentz, Dekker, & Paslov, 2016).

As seen in Table 3, the participants represent a number of racial and ethnic groups. Seven of the 12 participants (58%) are first-generation college students, which closely represents the 62 percent of the total veteran population. All of these demographics as well as branch of service and gender are outlined in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Branch	Race	1 st 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

Pseudonyms were selected by or assigned to each participant in order to maintain anonymity. A detailed overview of each participant in alphabetical order is provided below:

Amber

Amber is a veteran of the US Navy, where she served for four years. She identifies as a multiracial female and is a senior studying psychology at a resident four-year public university in the Southwest region of the United States. Originally from California, Amber is a first-generation college student. She is 26 years old and divorced with no children. Amber started school after leaving the military and initially attended a local community college before transferring to her current university. She is the President of the Student Veteran Organization at her university and works as a VA Work Study student.

David

David is a veteran of the US Marine Corps, where he served for nine years. He identifies as a white male. He is a senior, studying business at a resident four-year public university in the Southwest region of the United States. Originally from Maryland, he is not a first-generation college student. David is 32 years old and married without children and started college prior to joining the military. He spent one year at a private four-year university in the Northeast region of the United States. Upon leaving the military, he resumed college at a local community college before transferring to his current university. He is a board member of the Student Veterans Organizations at his university and works as a VA Work Study student.

Donald

Donald is a veteran of the US Navy, where he served for 10 years. He identifies as a multiracial male. Donald is a 34 year old junior, studying mechanical engineering at a resident four-year private non-profit university in the Southwest region of the United

States. Originally from Wisconsin, he is a first-generation college student. Donald is married with one child and started college prior to joining the military. He studied at two public four-year universities in the Midwestern region of the United States. He continued his education while in the military and transferred to his current university upon separating from the military. Donald works as a VA Work Study student.

Hokage

Hokage is a veteran of the US Marine Corps, where he served for four years. He identifies as a Black male. He graduated with a degree in business from a hybrid four-year for-profit university with a national presence. He is currently a graduate student at a private non-profit university in the Southwest region of the United States. Originally from South Carolina, Hokage is not a first-generation college student. He is 35 years old, married with one child and started college after separating from the military. Hokage worked multiple jobs while progressing through his undergraduate degree.

Jav

Identifying as a Hispanic male, Jav is a veteran of the US Marine Corps, where he served for 10 years. He is a junior, studying business at a resident private four-year non-profit university headquartered in the Southwest region of the United States, but with multiple campuses in other regions. Originally from Florida, Jav is a first-generation college student. He is 30 years old and divorced without children. Jav started college after separating from the military. Initially, he attended multiple community colleges outside of the region before transferring to his current university. He has worked multiple jobs while attending college and is the Vice President of the Student Veterans Organization at his university.

Jordyn

Jordyn is a veteran of the US Marine Corps, where she served for five years. Identifying as a white female, she is a junior, studying history at a resident public four-year university in the Western region of the United States. Originally from the same region as the university, Jordyn is a 34 year old, first-generation college student. She is single without children and started college after separating from the military. Jordyn has attended multiple colleges and types of educational programs before transferring to her current university. She is the President of the Student Veterans Organization at her university and works as a VA Work Study student.

Kyle

Kyle is a veteran of the US Navy, where he served for seven years. He is a senior, studying business at a resident private four-year non-profit university in the Southwest region of the United States. Originally from the same region as the university, he is a first-generation college student who identifies as a multiracial male. Kyle is 29 years old and married with two children. He spent one year at a local community college in the Southwest region before joining the military. Kyle returned to college prior to separating, and upon separation he attended a local community college before transferring to his current university. He works as a VA Work Study student.

Lynn

Lynn is a veteran of the US Navy, where she served for six years. She graduated with a degree in political science from an online public four-year university headquartered in the Eastern region of the United States. She also completed a graduate degree from a resident public university in the Northwest region of the United States. She

is originally from California and identifies as a white female. Lynn is not a first-generation college student. She is 27 years old and single without children. She started college prior to joining the military. She spent one year at a resident private four-year university in New York before joining the service. Lynn continued and completed her undergraduate degree while on active duty in the US Navy.

Melanie

Melanie is a veteran of the US Navy, where she served for four years. She identifies as a Mexican female. Currently she is a senior, studying business at a resident private four-year non-profit university in the Southwest region of the United States. Originally from Tennessee, Melanie is a first-generation college student. She is 26 years old and single without children. She started college after joining the military. She continued her studies at a community college in her home state prior to transferring to her current university. She is the Vice President of the Student Veteran Organization at her university and works as a VA Work Study student.

Melinda

Melinda is a veteran of the US Marine Corps, where she served for eight years. Identifying as a Hispanic female, she is a senior studying biochemistry at a resident private four-year non-profit university in the Southwest region of the United States. Originally from New Jersey, Melinda is not a first-generation college student. She is 28 years old and married without children. Melinda started college prior to separating from the military and transferred to her current university after separating from the military. She works multiple part-time jobs.

Persephone

Persephone is a veteran of the US Marine Corps, where she served for 10 years. She is a senior, studying business at a hybrid private four-year for-profit university with a national presence. Identifying as a Hispanic female, Persephone is originally from New York. She is 31 years old and married with four children and is a first-generation college student. Persephone started college at her current university prior to separating from the military and has worked multiple jobs while she has been a college student.

Scott

Scott is a veteran of the US Navy, where he served for four years. He is a senior, studying mechanical engineering at a resident public four-year university in the Western region of the United States and is originally from the same region as the university. Scott identifies as a white male and is not a first-generation college student. He is 27 years old and single without children. He attended multiple colleges prior to joining the military. After separating from the military, Scott continued college in Hawaii at a resident private four-year non-profit university prior to transferring to his current university. He is the Vice President of the Student Veteran Organization at his university and works as a VA Work Study student.

Themes Influencing Meaning Making for Veterans During College Choice

The interviews used for this study were structured using *College Choice Theory* as a framing mechanism and timeline. The questions used throughout the interviews were drawn from past studies that utilized *College Choice Theory* as a foundational theory. The questions explored early college aspirations, joining the military, searching for colleges, selecting colleges, factors influencing decision making, and more. *College*

Choice Theory includes three phases that happen in series and follow a timeline, which starts in high school and ends when a student decides to attend a specific university. The questions were presented along a timeline that mirrored the *College Choice Theory* timeline. In the interviews, the researcher initially explored the participants' college aspirations in high school and why each person joined the military. From there the researcher asked questions related to how they went about searching for colleges and ultimately how they chose the university they decided to attend.

Several themes emerged throughout the interview process. Through first and second cycle coding, these themes were combined and narrowed down to seven major themes that are discussed in this chapter. These themes are: student veterans' 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. Each of these themes provide an answer to the primary research question for this study. How do Post-9/11 Veterans make meaning of the college choice process? Later in this chapter, these themes are examined within the stages of *College Choice Theory* and the research question and sub-questions are examined in greater detail.

Student Veterans' Lack of Social and Cultural Capital

All of the participants lacked social and cultural capital related to higher education. This was discussed previously in the literature review for this dissertation. While 62 percent of veterans are first-generation college students and this sample closely

mirrors that percentage, the students that were not first-generation college students also lacked capital related to higher education. Both of Melinda's parents went to college and several members of her family are college graduates. However, when she was explaining her process for applying 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 were lacking general knowledge related to how their veteran education benefits would work while they were attending college or completely lacked awareness of some benefits. This exacerbates the negative impact associated with the lack of social and cultural capital related to higher education.

For example, David initially attended college directly out of high school and felt as though he was aware of the educational pathways available to him, but learned along the way that his perceptions were different than what he discovered. He said, "I didn't do much research in that regard, again, because I thought I was a shoe in for all of these things and again, it turned out not to be." While David thought that he was aware, Hokage admits that he was not as aware as he could have been at the time. He expressed, "There are different options out there. I just didn't know of the options."

Melanie expressed her lack of knowledge about the Post-9/11 GI Bill and how it worked in conjunction with the colleges. She said,

So, I've paid for classes out of pocket because I didn't want my GI Bill to run out and I didn't even know how it worked. Like if I started using it somewhere, I felt like I had to stay there. So, I've paid out of pocket because I didn't want to get behind until I found a university and I started using my GI Bill.

Melanie was not aware that the Post-9/11 GI Bill can be utilized by an individual at multiple institutions. She was not the only participant to lack a general understanding of the financial support available to veterans. Donald shared that he avoided private colleges because he was not aware of the Yellow Ribbon program. The Yellow Ribbon program is a benefit program that works in conjunction with the Post-9/11 GI Bill to address a tuition balance remaining that is not covered by the Post-9/11 GI Bill. He expressed that he did not know about this benefit during his active service and when he was initially exploring university options. He said,

I didn't actually look at private schools until I found [my current university] because every private school that I had known about that did engineering was super expensive and at the time I actually didn't even know about the Yellow Ribbon. I didn't know about, learn about Yellow Ribbon. I got introduced to it when I was looking at, at this school actually. When I learned about it during the [Transition Assistance Program]. So, before that I hadn't even, I didn't even know what Yellow Ribbon was.

The deficit of cultural and social capital in the veteran population has been discussed significantly in the literature, primarily in relationship to the large portion of the population being first-generation college students. The lack of capital expanding beyond those that are first-generation college students was noted in the pilot studies that preceded this study. In my role as observer, I noted that the staff of the military and veterans program regularly work with students who are not aware of how to access the university, nor what the application timelines are. It appears that the addition of complex military education benefits exacerbates this situation, 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

Donald expressed earlier that the Navy failed to inform him about all of the education benefits that were and would be available to him. He stated that the military did not inform him fully and completely about his benefits. He stated, “So that, I guess was... a failure, you know on the Navy’s part.” Multiple participants expressed that the resources that were available to them while they were actively serving were lacking in quality. Additionally, in 2017 the US Navy, because of budget cuts and feeling that currently serving Sailors are technically savvy and accustomed to using the internet, closed all of the Navy College offices in the continental United States (Military.com, 2016). These offices provided higher education resources for Sailors on their bases. These services are now limited to distance resources. Adding to this, often times participants felt discouraged from seeking out higher education or certain options, directly and indirectly. All of the participants either felt they were not provided guidance along the way or were discouraged from seeking higher education. This discouragement came from multiple sources. Discouragement was received directly and indirectly from military representatives, but also, for two participants, from a community college counselor and a faculty advisor at a university. For instance, Melinda shared that her assigned faculty advisor at her current university was very discouraging. She shared, “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’ success, the limited amount of quality resources,

lack of guidance, and discouragement described by these participants had a negative impact on their educational pathways.

Lynn attended an affluent high school and began college at a private university right after graduation from high school. Despite her experience and background, she discovered that she still was not prepared to select her next college and the services were limited to her on the base she was serving at when she joined the Navy and sought to continue her education. She said,

I was not really prepared. There was no resource on base besides the schools that were already there. Right. So, it's like, of course the schools that are already there are gonna, you know, try and sit you down. It felt more like a sales pitch, you know? There wasn't really anyone at my command. There was, there were no resources for like what are the best military schools online for active duty. There wasn't anything like that that I could find in my, in my google research at the time. I was kind of in a rush to get it started, so I didn't exactly take my time. It would've been nice to have more resources.

Jordyn struggle through multiple colleges and jobs after separating from the military before she found her current university. She felt lost and explained,

I don't think I knew even to ask for help or how, why, you know, because I was just at a point where I just was so sick of hitting a brick wall, like why can I not charge through this why? It was getting very frustrating.

Jordyn expressed gratitude toward the military for providing the benefits that she has, but points to the lack of guidance offered by the military as a reason for some of her struggles in higher education prior to attending her current university. She said,

I love that the military gave us, but then ask them do they need to teach us how to use it and be very straightforward and be like, Hey, listen, when you go there, these are the questions you need to ask. Give us a piece of paper so we can walk in and be like, answer this one. Good answers. One good check. That's what they should do and I'll end with that.

Similarly, Scott explained that the espoused values of the military are to seek out education while you are actively serving, but the efforts and actions of those leading do not reinforce these values. He explained,

Nobody thinks about it while they're in. So, they could care less or couldn't care less. So, there was just no reinforcement. One way or another they say yes, it's an option. There's the GI Bill. People have done it. So, you can too. But that's just words on paper.

Like Scott, Melinda explained that your job in the military takes priority. This often means that the option of attending college is limited and that espoused and practiced values are not aligned. She stated, "They don't really care if you go to school, you know, it's like demanding. You just got to focus on like the Marine Corps. So, it was kind of frowned upon."

As outlined previously, this population is lacking in the cultural and social capital related to higher education and in parallel to that are attempting to utilize perplexing benefits. This combined with a lack of guidance and discouragement during the process is concerning. The lack of guidance and discouragement within the military is reflected in the pilot studies that preceded this study and the literature. The US Navy's closure of physical education offices within the continental United States supports this finding.

Using and Seeking Out Trusted Relationships When Making College Choices

The decisions to research colleges and ultimately select a college were often based on perceived relationships of trust. When asked about 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. A great deal of trust was placed in the thoughts and input of these friends, enough to select the college they pursued. David explained, "I got so much more support from peers and non-traditional advisors than I did from anyone and you know, with a job title for it." Other times the relationship of trust was in a professor or counselor that the student was interacting with. Additionally, students found these relationships in perceived trusted voices on the campuses they were exploring. Hokage visited the campus he was considering and found trust in a counselor he spoke with. 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, the trusted relationship was represented in a Veterans Center on the campus or students that 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.

Jav was attending a community college in another region before transferring to his current university. He spoke with a friend that he had served with in the Marine Corps that expressed to him the value of the school. After that interaction, Jav moved and transferred to attend the college his friend had graduated from. He stated,

I also had a high school friend who also joined the Marine Corps who just graduated and he actually told me, hey, come by, I was able to ask him more

details. I well, hey, he's been there, done that, and that's great. So, I was able to ask him and he told me everything, how it works and I was like, dude, this is amazing... I mean definitely peer connections is huge. That probably was most of the percentage of my choosing.

Jordyn described having negative experiences at her previous colleges. She had tried multiple paths before selecting her current university. Her decision to attend her current university was based heavily on an exchange with her friend. Her friend also encouraged her to become an engaged student. She said,

So, I called my best friend and she was like, you gotta go to [this] university. Every time I talked to a veteran, they always talk about college and I'd always had trouble with veteran friendly colleges before. And so I was like, fine, I'll go. And then she goes, Jordyn, you need to do one more thing when you go there, get involved. Don't just go to class like a zombie. Get involved.

When asked if she considered exploring other colleges after speaking with her friend, Jordyn responded, "Actually I didn't. I just took my best friend's word."

Kyle initially found his trusted relationships in his community college veterans center. He said,

We were discussing colleges, universities, and [my current university] popped up that, that really did spark my interest in what do tuition expenses look like? What does the student population look like? Does the veteran population exist? And if it does, how can we get connected? And it all took off from there. It kind of exploded from there.

After that Kyle sought out another trusted relationship in his cousin. This further solidified his pathway to that school. Kyle stated,

So, I linked up with a family member of mine, a cousin of mine who was also prior Navy and he was, he was kind of like my mentor. He actually brought me over here. He said, I'll meet you there. So I drove here, he drove here, we came into the vet center here at [my current university] and we talked to, we talked to the veteran who was sitting at the front desk, picked his brain for information on tuition fees here, what are some, what are some of the site links that I could visit to gain a better understanding of what the expenses were here at [this university] and you know, what, what, what do some of their programs look like for us, some of their undergrad programs as well as if they accept the Yellow Ribbon. That was another big thing is Yellow Ribbon, you know, [this university] provides Yellow, [this university] has the Yellow Ribbon program which matches a certain percentage of tuition that the VA is willing to put out. So, once I found out that they also pay that the university also pays Yellow Ribbon, I was even more set on finding out what the true expenses would be to myself as the incoming student, the prospective student of attending here.

Melanie made the decision to move to a new location and transfer to a school that she has never heard of because of the advice of her friend. She said,

Then she's like, you should just move out here with me and like we'll get a place together. And I was like, well I can start school out here, but I had no idea where or anything and like [my current university] was her dream school and she told me like, you should apply, like you have really good grades, you'll probably get

in. And I was like, it doesn't hurt. But that was the one and only school I've ever applied to... I didn't even know what the school looked like. I mean, she was like, you have to look it up. It's so beautiful and I had no idea, like I've never seen it. So, I'm like, okay, I trust you.

The current literature related to veterans in higher education that was outlined in Chapter Two, highlights the need to create a space on campus for veterans to socialize. One of the reasons for this is to create a space where veterans can connect with peers and have open and honest discussions without the fear of being judged. It also works as a container for peer-to-peer mentorship to occur on how to be successful in college. These trusted relationships are valuable to veterans when they are on campus and, as shown above, prove to be an important influence prior to them accessing the colleges they seek out.

Significant Outside Responsibilities While Selecting and Attending College

All of the participants maintained significant responsibilities outside of class. Half of the participants are married and four of them have children. Additionally, the majority work on or off campus. Many of them work through a program that is paid for by the US Department of Veterans Affairs, called the VA Work Study program. This allows them to work in a role which is in service to veterans, often at the university's veterans center. Additionally, these participants were very engaged in the on-campus student veteran organization. These other responsibilities bring time commitment and stress in addition to the regular stress of college life. Scott 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 were present prior to attending their current university and will

remain present upon leaving or graduating. Lynn shared, “You know, I kind of anticipated, you know, the stress of, of working full time and going to school full time. That's, 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 are still responsibilities and took up a significant portion of their time.

Persephone has requirements that she must do and other things that she feels like she has to do and wants to do. Although she is no longer in the Marine Corps, her spouse is still serving. These responsibilities take up an enormous amount of her finite time while she works toward attaining her degree. She said,

So, I'm an active duty spouse. I'm a mom to four kids, two biological, two stepchildren. Not that, that really makes a difference when it comes to raising kids. Um, you know, I still have the responsibility. I try to volunteer as much as I can because I'm so passionate about veterans in transition and benefits and advocating. Um, so and obviously that's not a responsibility, but that's where my passion lies. So, I feel a sense of responsibility to stay connected to the space somehow. Um, but yeah, outside of school it's definitely family obligations. Um, most of the time that I've been in school I was still working full time. Um, so you know, the responsibility to the job. It's a lot. It is, it's overwhelming sometimes.

Although Melinda has multiple responsibilities outside of college, she undersells them in her delivery. She said,

Well I have two jobs. Okay. Um, and then school and then I'm married so I kind of have responsibilities as a wife. I don't think people realize it, but it is. Um, I guess that's it. Just two jobs. school and a wife and my dog. I don't have any kids.

Kyle is engaged with his immediate family, but also has a strong commitment to his extended family. Additionally, he is weighted with a mortgage and the other tangential responsibilities associated with owning a home and having a family. He stated,

I'm married with two kids just bought a house. So, I have, I'm, I'm, I have a mortgage that I might, may or may not be paying until the time of my death. There's always that responsibility. Other than that, I attend church on Sundays with my mother and my step dad and my brothers and sisters. So, I have the responsibility of keeping up with my family, family affairs and my wife and my kids, making sure my daughter gets her homework done. Yeah. You know, she's doing the bilingual class right now where she's, she's learning Spanish in at kindergarten level and uh, you know, so I always have to weigh out if that's the best decision for her or not. So, I have daddy responsibilities. I have husband responsibilities to brother responsibilities.

Jordyn is not married with children. However, she assumes significant roles in relationships outside of a spouse and biological children. She expressed,

I actually take care of my mom financially and I don't live with her. I pay all her bills...My best friend from the Marine Corps followed me to Colorado and I'm her only family and so her son is my Godson and so she's my family

Beyond the underselling of outside responsibilities expressed by the participants, there are also responsibilities held that are not readily apparent by the common observer.

Familial relationships that hold the same commitment as blood relationships, strong commitments to extended family, and obligations to a cause or belief, all bring with them significant commitments by these participants.

All of the participants that took part in this study fall into the category of non-traditional students. It has been highlighted earlier in this study that one of the characteristics of many non-traditional students is outside responsibilities. Given that these students are emancipated from their parents and have had professional careers as well as families of their own, the influence of these responsibilities are predictable and witnessed in other non-traditional students (Hossler, & Bontrager, 2014).

Joining the Military as a Means to Education

Nine of the 12 participants explained that they are able to go to college because they served in the military. Some described the intangible drive, confidence, and discipline that they gained while serving that allowed them to attempt to seek out higher education. For instance, Kyle shared that the military provided him the drive and perseverance 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." In conjunction with that, the tangible benefit is the reason that many are at the university they are and they would not be there without benefits like the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Vocational Rehabilitation program. Lastly, some people selected to go to college because they were not finding or attaining employment and the benefits they earned through service allow them to be paid to attend college.

Amber expressed that she could not afford college prior to joining the military and it was one of the influences that resulted in her enlisting in the Navy. Additionally, she gained confidence to try to go to college. She said,

Well the fact that they give you the GI bill, that's kind of a big kind of a big thing. I think I also knew that there wasn't going to be a way for me to go to school without me having to support it on my own. Like, so that probably the fact that I went to the military first was definitely a good thing. I thought, you know, why not, if they're paying for it then I might as well try. Then in the military, I don't know what happened, but it gave me the confidence to do that and it probably has something to do with it.

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. The Post-9/11 GI Bill is the reason that he is able to attend the university he is at now. When asked if he would be at the same private university without the Post-9/11 GI Bill, Kyle said, "No. No, no. I, I wouldn't, I, I wouldn't have wanted to accumulate all that extra debt. No, no."

David attempted college prior to joining the Marine Corps, but became disenchanted with college. He took a job after leaving the military, but faced several challenges along the way including being laid off from work. The Post-9/11 GI Bill was the reason he decided to return to college. He stated,

I've looked for a job, looked for a job, couldn't find anything for months on end. The cash I'd saved up was running out. Well, they'll pay me to go to school for using the GI bill. I guess I better start doing that, so I started school out of

desperation, but it was either that or head back to Maryland and I wasn't about to do that.

As outlined earlier, education is one of the top reasons people join the US military today. The benefits earned through service allow people that may not have been able to afford to go to college or those that did not want to be a financial burden on their families a way 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 costs for attendance. The intangible growth in areas like discipline and drive, provide confidence for veterans to seek out education. The participants in this study expressed all of these things.

Fear and Anxiety During the College Choice Process

Many of the participants expressed they gained the confidence, discipline, and drive from the military. Yet, 10 of the 12 participants expressed 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, questioning 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.

Jordyn summed up many of these points. She stated,

I didn't want to fail. And as a Marine it's a really big thing. It's one of the reasons why we never asked for help because it's a weakness and we also don't want to fail because it looks bad. There's not that type of structure anymore. And I think it

really throws us into like a washing machine and spins around and we'd get out and we're like, I have no idea what to do. I don't know where to go.

When asked if she felt fear or anxiety when she decided to return to college, Melanie expressed,

Yes, I was all of those things and still I still get anxious and I still, I feel like it's because you just don't know what's going to happen and that like, you just think of the worst thing...And I'm like, what if I'm not smart enough to be in school? Like I just took high school and just going straight into college and like what if I fail at everything? What if I'm like so behind and I'm so much older. That was like one of my biggest fears.

Like Melanie, David compared himself to traditional students at the university. Although, he felt confident in his ability, he was not sure he measured up when compared to other students attending the university. He said,

I get very scared and very, I don't know what the word is to describe it, but I guess apprehensive because I really didn't want to sit in a room full of 18 year olds that thought they were smarter than me and to be fair, many of them probably are smarter than me at least on paper... I really feel like a lot of veterans, including me at certain points really get down on themselves, uh, academically. Uh, they don't think they're good enough.

The participants were asked specifically about the emotions that they felt when going through the college choice process, because fear was a theme that emerged in the previous pilot studies. It proved to be common again in this study. Given that this population is departing a very structured system in the military and now venturing into

another system that, the previous findings in this study show, they know little about, it makes sense that there would be a fear of the unknown. As an observer, I have witnessed several veterans display anxiety when seeking out a solid pathway or specific answers at the university. This anxiety is increased when they discover that the solid answers that they are seeking do, many times, not exist.

The Influence of Location and Convenience When Selecting a College

The participants for this study came from across the nation and represented nine different states. Ten of the 12 attended or were attending colleges that are in different regions from their home region. Many expressed that they joined the military as a means to leave the area or circumstances that they were in. 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. This came 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 factor that was common. Scott simply stated, “My current university was the closest four year [university]. So it only made sense geographically and financially.” Ten of the 12 participants focused their exploration on one region or city. Sometimes their reason for this focused search was because they did not want to return to their home region. However, most of the participants had established ties to the region they were in. These ties included employment and family commitments. All of these 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, selected these programs because the

programs provided the flexibility to move and 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.”

Melinda is married and owns a home in the same region as her university. Returning to New Jersey or leaving the region where her house is to attend college was not an option in her mind. She said,

I wanted to stay local because I bought a home here while I was in and there was no way I was going to sell it or rent it because that's the only thing I have here. So, it wasn't an option for me to go away. I had to be here.

David's wife has a career and he was not willing to sacrifice her career for his higher education pursuits. He stated,

My wife has put down roots in [this county] career wise. She was working for a nonprofit that works with foster children. She is now a social worker working in adoptions and for the county... So being in [this county], in addition to being somewhere I like living, I have very tangible reasons because of my wife's profession to stay within easy driving distance of the center of the county.

Location and convenience are common factors that influence non-traditional students, as outlined previously. This finding was prevalent in the pilot studies that supported this research. The university system that I work at recently created a policy of redirection to expose applicants to other campuses and provide opportunities to attend those campuses as a student. Instead of declining some applicants admission to the impacted campus, the university is now providing some students an opportunity to attend

a different campus in the same system, although in a different location. This policy of redirection to another campus within the same system was fully implemented during this study. As an observer, I witnessed several student veterans attempting to transfer to the university I work at redirected to another campus in a different location instead of admitting or declining the student. The most common response that the military and veterans program has received from these student veterans is that they do not have the ability to relocate to a different location and are tied to this location for a variety of reasons, mostly family, employment, or owning a home in the region. The inability of these student veterans to accept admission to another university in a different location is confirming data for this theme.

College Choice Theory

Hossler and Gallaher'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 into the three phases of *College Choice Theory*: predisposition, search and choice. The predisposition stage is when the student first decides to attend college or pursue other routes that could include entering the workforce or other activities, such as military service. The search phase occurs next when 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 decides to attend. This section will present the findings within the context of the *College Choice Theory* phases.

Predisposition

All of the participants are 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 struggle academically. When they did not find initial success in college, they enlisted in the military. Scott shared his initial struggles,

I fell into a routine, which I didn't really, I was still young at the time. I believe I was between 19 and 20 at this time and I feel like it was a boring routine... I did withdraw in time. So, I got two W's this time and that was the start of my academic career. Two F's and two W's. I hadn't made any real progress in life where I should be as far as academically or even in a career and I wanted to catch up to the rest of the world and I felt like the military was an easy way to do that and I would kind of be forced to get my act together.

Three of the five that started college directly out of high school faced additional life circumstances that interfered with their college track or desired college track. Of the seven participants that entered the military directly, they 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 capital associated with successfully applying and accessing college. Hokage was accepted to college, but did not have the means available to pay for it. He said,

I got accepted to colleges and I didn't feel as though I could afford them or I didn't want to take out loans because I didn't know how I was going to pay for. It seemed like it was something guaranteed joining the military at the time. I liked

that as an opportunity for me to better myself because I wasn't disciplined. I was a knucklehead back then, a street mentality.

Melanie did not want to place the cost of college on her father and wanted to get away.

She stated,

I just wanted to get away from home and I didn't know what I wanted to do or like go to college for and also I didn't want my dad to pay for it and I knew it was expensive. And I wanted to travel. That was my number one thing and it was just sold to me. So, I thought it was like a great opportunity.

All of the participants expressed early aspirations for college. However, the means for supporting this were not clear to this population. This included both first-generation college students and students that had parents with college degrees. The impact of the lack of cultural and social capital obstructed these students early and also influenced their decision to join the military before going to college. In a presentation of ongoing research related to veterans' professional and academic pathways, Chris Cate of Student Veterans of America highlighted that when high school students declare that they are joining the military after high school their counselors stop assisting them because their post-high school path has been established (2019). For students that are lacking in capital associated with higher education, this resource is lost to them and potentially influences follow on choices related to higher education, as highlighted in the themes discovered in this study.

Search

This study focused on student veterans at four-year universities. However, all but one of the participants attended multiple colleges, with seven of the 12 participants

attending more than two college. 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, I 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 four-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 did brief research of local universities using online search engines or websites. Melanie decided she wanted to move to San Diego and when asked how she searched for her college she expressed that she used an online search engine and 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, most of the participants received guidance from trusted relationships. These relationships were a previously established relationship, a relative, or a perceived person of authority. Persephone uses 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 also 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 relationships, some making decisions to apply for and attend a university based on the guidance of a single relationship. As we discussed earlier, Melanie and Jav moved to a new city and applied for the universities they are attending, based solely on the input of a

single friend each. David discovered his university and reached out to their veterans program based on the guidance of a fellow student veteran and selected the college because of the treatment he received in the interaction with the director of the veterans program. He said, “I was walking on water to come here because of the level of care I received from the director.”

When the participants were asked if they sought out a specific educational model, most expressed that they wanted to take resident classes or did not seek a specific model. The two participants that applied for an online university and a hybrid university, sought the flexibility of these models because of their potential for traveling or moving while they were still in the military. Lynn stated,

It was really just the convenience of being able to live on base and do that degree on my computer and then knowing that I could be sent away for something like small detachments for one to two weeks, a deployment for three to six months. I didn't really know what was gonna happen, so I wasn't going to risk having to stop the education process.

More common in the participants' answers were the models or systems that they were trying to avoid. Multiple students expressed that they did not want to attend an online university and many said that they were avoiding for-profit universities. David said, “I knew I wanted nothing to do with a for-profit institution.” One participant expressed that she did not want to go to a college that was a nationally accredited institution. When asked if she knew the difference between nationally and regionally accredited programs, Lynn expressed, “I just know that [nationally accredited programs] are bad.” Connected to the trusted relationships discussed above, these students avoided these models because

someone they trusted told them to not go there, not because they understood the difference between the models they listed and others. Amber took to heart what her aunt told her when she was young. She said,

I remember my aunt was like, 'They showed us commercials on tv because people sit on their ass all day and they don't have a job. And then those are the people that they show those commercials to because they need a trade.' And so that's why I was like, I would never go to ITT Tech or any of those schools because those are for people who can't do a real college. All right. That's basically how I grew up.

The search phase for the students that participated in this study did not include an in-depth analysis of multiple programs and was heavily weighted on the input and perceived trust of others.

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 four-year degree. The participants decided on the college they wanted to attend, confirmed that it had the degree that they were seeking, and applied without a backup plan for their education. Amber applied to her university and in parallel applied for a job outside of the country in the event that she did not get accepted. She said,

I made my decision about going to [this university]. Then I think applied for a contracting job... in case I didn't get accepted and I was like, okay, well I'll just

go contracting in Saudi Arabia and then come back and then resume school when I come back because I wanted to go to [this university].

Like Amber, Kyle only applied to one university, although he was aware that there was a potential that 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.”

For the participants in this study, the decision on whether or not they were going to continue their education at a university was made prior to applying. For these participants, the scope of the choice phase of *College Choice Theory* was limited to this point. These students were not considering multiple options and comparing them to each other after being admitted. This was not an option for the participants since an application was only submitted to one institution. What I learned from this study is that the search and choice phase are blended together into one phase. This is important because it shows that *College Choice Theory* may not be the best theoretical framing for the veteran population.

Veteran Focused Advertising

In an effort to better understand the information veterans are receiving about colleges, the researcher examined the advertising material used by universities focused on potential military-connected students. This was conducted through reviewing advertising in periodicals maintained at a local Marine Corps combined base education center and library. Since the Navy no longer maintains a resident education center, the researcher was not able to assess advertising at their education centers. However, the researcher reviewed the Navy College website. There are no colleges or universities advertised on their official website. Additionally, google searches similar to those conducted by the

participants were mimicked by the researcher. Lastly, television and social media advertising were examined.

Nine different periodicals with military themes were examined at a regional Marine Corps base combined education center and library. Advertisements for 21 different colleges and universities were found in these magazines. These advertisements were placed by nine public universities, six private non-profit universities, and five for-profit universities. All of the advertisements were for online education programs at these universities, with several of them offering credit for military learning and short pathways toward attaining a degree. Two colleges offered resident courses at the education center where the periodicals were reviewed. These included one private non-profit university and one local public community college. The only other resident programs that were witnessed were in flyers related to a placement program offered by the Marine Corps.

Google searches were conducted using the following terms: colleges for veterans, colleges for military, universities for veterans, universities for military, and Navy College. When these searches were conducted the first page results included multiple lists of colleges published by a variety of organizations. Each search also produced one to four colleges or universities each, for a total of ten different institutions. These included five for-profit universities, two private non-profit universities, and three public universities. All of these colleges highlighted their distant and hybrid programs on the initial landing page when the link was selected.

During the review of periodicals on base and the online searches it was noted that the majority of the institutions were endorsed as “Military Friendly.” In reviewing the organization that provides this endorsement, I discovered that the parent company also

publishes three of the periodicals that were reviewed at the base education center and library. I also learned that a complaint on this organization was filed by Federal Trade Commissioner in 2018. This complaint included accusations that the parent company misrepresented itself as a matchmaker by connecting potential student veterans to paying customers, was not acting as an independent endorser, and was deceptive in disclosure of this information (People v. Victory Media Inc. 2018). Since this complaint was filed the parent organization has changed its name. However, it continues to provide the same products and endorsements. Advertisements by this company and another matchmaker were included in the Google search results. The other matchmaker includes disclaimers in the fine print of their website that they are partners with the colleges with which they match potential students.

During this study, the researcher noted advertisements for universities and colleges during television programming and on social media during daily use. During this period advertisements for four universities were noted that directly or indirectly advertised to veterans. These universities included two for-profit universities, one private non-profit university, and one public university. Each college focused on their distant or hybrid programs. Each of the advertisements directly or indirectly advertised to the military. The ones that directly advertised to the military expressed the convenience of their programs and offered credits for military service. The commercials that indirectly advertised to veterans expressed that they were “veteran founded” or included people in military uniforms in the advertisements.

It is troubling to learn that a complaint at the federal level has been filed against an organization that has a direct connection to the majority of the colleges with

advertisements in periodicals on a military base and is the owner of three of the periodicals reviewed. Additionally, it cannot go unnoticed that the overwhelming majority of the advertisements are for online programs, with few resident programs represented.

Conclusion

The findings from this study answered each of the research questions and sub-questions. In this section, the sub-questions are addressed first, followed by the primary research question.

The first sub-question: How do Post-9/11 veterans decide which four-year colleges and universities to consider and subsequently apply to? In this study it was determined that location or convenience, in conjunction with peer effect or trusted relationships were the primary influencers for the participants. The participants in this study lacked knowledge related to higher education and the benefits they were intending to use. They sought guidance from their peers on where to seek out their education. The input provided by these colleagues held significant capital in their decision on which university to select. Participants did verify that their major of interest was offered at the college they were considering. However, the participants simply were confirming that the university offered the major they were interested in studying, it does not appear to be a significant influencing factor. Some participants searched for universities in the region of their choice or nearby options. This was explored briefly through online resources. Few of the participants reached out to or visited a university they were curious about attending. Once the university was believed to be an institution they could attend and use

their benefits, they submitted their application. The participants selected one university to attend and applied to that university only.

The second sub-question: How do Post-9/11 Veterans decide which educational model (resident, online, or hybrid, public, private) to attend? Most of the participants did not seek out a specific educational model. The majority of the participants wanted to attend traditional brick and mortar resident universities where they could attend class in person and interact directly with their professors. Two of the participants sought out convenient online or hybrid options because of their potential for travel or moving as active duty service members. It must be noted here that all of the advertising tailored toward the military that was reviewed on base during this study highlighted online education. However, more often participants expressed that they were avoiding certain educational models, either online or for-profit institutions. The participants did not have in depth knowledge related to higher education and the different models. Those avoiding distance education felt that they were a better student when taking class in person or were told to avoid online education. The students that were avoiding for-profit universities had been told at some point to avoid utilizing those options. This information again came from a perceived trusted relationship, often a family member or friend.

The third sub-question was: In what way do emotions influence the college choice process? The participants expressed that they were fearful or anxious when they made their commitment to go to college. They also expressed that their service in the military had resulted in a shift in confidence and drive. Both those that started college directly out of high school and the ones that entered military services first experienced and shared the same emotions. Although they felt scared, the drive and confidence they garnered from

the military encouraged them to continue. For some the fear of college subsided as they progressed through their degree plans, while for others the anxiety of potential failure remained present throughout their academic experience.

The overarching research question for this study was: How do Post-9/11 Veterans make meaning of the college choice process? 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 could be used to go to college. For several, the military and subsequently college were an escape from their earlier circumstances. The common lack of social and cultural capital and lack of guidance added burden to the process. Additionally, this process was exacerbated by discouragement and misinformation along the way. Without a strong understanding of the process or knowing where to go to find quality information sources, and being scared of failing, the participants sought out perceived trusted relationships for information and guidance. These relationships were the primary contributors to the direction the participants would take in searching for and selecting a college. Given the narrow search and the commitment 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. This process was further limited due to the current circumstances of these veterans that restricted them to a specific location.

This chapter has outlined the findings from this study. The chapter began with an overview of the participants. The demographics of the participants were presented, as well as brief overviews of their background and where they are at currently in their

higher education process. Following that, the major findings were outlined in the seven themes that emerged in this study related to how veterans make meaning of the college choice process. Next, *College Choice Theory* was used to highlight how the participants as a group progressed through the college choice process. After that, the advertising purchased by colleges that focuses on the military population was examined. Lastly, the research question and sub-questions were presented and each one was answered reflecting back on the data generated from this study.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The military population is a distinctive population with a unique culture with a wide variety of experiences and backgrounds. This was highlighted in those that participated in this study. It is important to understand what factors influence veterans' educational pathways. The purpose of this study was to learn from veterans how they make sense of their decision making prior to matriculation into a four-year college or university. This study examines how Navy and Marine Corps Post-9/11 veterans make meaning of the college choice process. Within that, I assessed how this population decides which four-year colleges they consider and ultimately apply for. Additionally, I explored whether or not the participants sought out specific educational models. Lastly, given the influence of fear noted in my pilot studies, I sought to determine what, if any emotions influenced the college choice process.

Chapter Two provides an overview of the literature. The overview is a synthesis of research related to veterans in higher education throughout the decades. Additionally, I summarized the research related to college choice from the initial studies conducted on the subject to current models utilized to explore the topic. Lastly, Chapter Two critiques current seminal research related to veterans in higher education, to include the use of Transition Theory as a theoretical framework for researching this population in this context.

Chapter Three lists the research methodologies used in this study. This included a detailed outline of the data collection and analysis procedures. Additionally, I provided the reasons for the use of the qualitative methodologies.

Chapter Four describes the findings from this study. This includes a demographic overview of the participants and a short description of their background and current status. The themes that emerged from the examination of the data were presented with supporting quotations from the interviews and additional supporting data. Following the presentation of the themes, I examine the themes using the lens of *College Choice Theory*. Additionally, I presented the marketing efforts made by colleges that focus on the military. I concluded by answering the research question and sub-questions using the data from the study.

As outlined in Chapter Four, the seven themes that emerged through this study are:

- Student Veterans' 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
- The Influence of Location and Convenience When Selecting a College

These themes were weaved across all of the participants and significantly impacted their pathway through the three phases of *College Choice Theory* which include, predisposition, search, and choice.

As I analyzed the data in a variety of ways, it was clear that new data related to student veterans in higher education was emerging. It appears that the negative impact associated with the lack of social and cultural capital related to higher education is

exacerbated for student veterans in multiple ways. The first is that these students must not only have to learn how to access and succeed in the system of higher education, but also learn how complex benefits like the Post-9/11 GI Bill work within that system.

Additionally, these students lack quality guidance while they are considering their college options. Further, some of these students are receiving direct and indirect discouragement during this period. However, through their service in the military these veterans have attained means for attaining higher education through benefits like the Post-9/11 GI Bill. These students leave a known system of the military and then face an unknown complex higher education system in combination with complex education benefits. This creates a great deal of anxiety and fear of the unknown and failure. These veterans then seek out people they trust to provide guidance that was missing previously. Often this guidance is found in friends that are not experts in higher education. However, these student veterans trust these friends and give considerable weight to their input. As seen in this study, student veterans may decide to attend a college, and sometimes move to a new location, based on the input of one friend. Figure 1 provides a visual example of how the themes from this study play out from the period they join the military to the point when these veterans are making college choice decisions.

It is important to note, the participants in this study were highly engaged on their campuses. Engaged students tend to be better informed about resources available to them on their campus and how to access those resources. The participants also exercised initiative in seeking out information related to higher education and the benefits for which they were eligible. Student veterans that are not as engaged have the potential to experience greater levels of fear and anxiety.

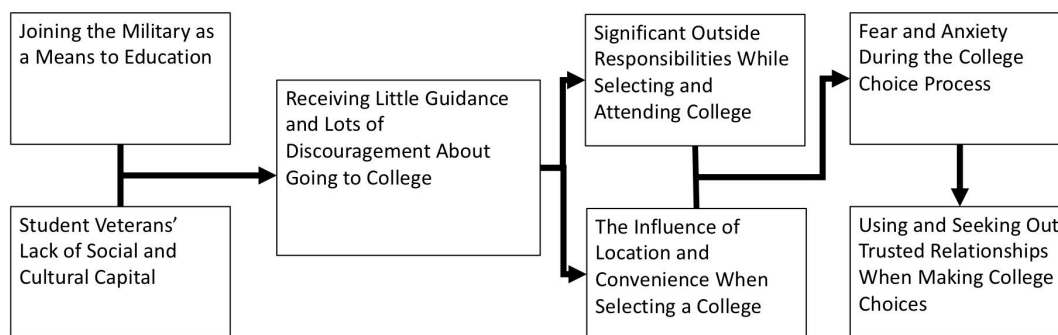


Figure 1. Study Theme Flow

Some of previous research has been reinforced by this study. Studies that analyze nontraditional students have shown that these students have significant outside responsibilities and this influences them during the selection process. This results in these students seeking out convenient options and restricting their search to one location (Hossler, & Bontrager, 2014). Additionally, recent research has highlighted that one of the top reasons people join the military is for the education benefits (Zoli, Maury, & Fay, 2015). Additionally, these themes align with some of the common factors that influence decision making when selecting a college which will be discussed further in the next section. The themes related to trusted relationships and fear are emerging topics and provide insight not previously explored with this population.

Factors Influencing College Choice

Over the decades, college choice researchers have examined the factors that influence the college choice decisions for a variety of populations. There are nine key predictors recognized in *The Handbook for Strategic Enrollment Management* for influencing 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. There were three factors that were missing as influencers in this study, these are: family income; high school attended; and cost of attendance and financial aid. Next, I discuss each influencer, then I reflect on why the three remaining factors were not present.

Peer Effect

Peer effect significantly influenced the college choice for the participants in this study. This was outlined in the using and seeking out trusted relationships when making college choices theme described previously. Multiple student veterans made the decision to apply for and attend a university based on the suggestion of a peer, sometimes without any previous knowledge of the university. Additionally, the paths taken by respected peers were emulated by participants.

Social and Cultural Capital

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

Information Sources

The *Handbook for Strategic Enrollment Management* (2014) states, “having information sources that can provide accurate college information is...associated with positive college choice outcomes” (p. 54). It can be inferred that not having quality information sources may have a negative impact on these outcomes. In this study the participants expressed and displayed a lack of information sources. This theme was witnessed in the description of deficient official military education programs, as well as the lack of knowledge maintained by the participants related to where to access quality information sources. Like social and cultural capital, this factor has a negative impact on the college choice process for these student veterans.

Personal Characteristics.

Personal characteristics have often been examined by looking at the differences between male and female students. Although this demographic was examined during this study, an obvious difference between gender was not observed. Additionally, no difference was observed between Navy and Marine Corps veterans. However, the status as a veteran appears to be a unique characteristic that influences this process, as outlined in the findings. The students shared how the drive, maturity, and confidence they gained and learned while serving in the military influenced them on their path toward attaining their higher education goals. Additionally, the emotions of fear and anxiety were common across most of the participants.

Academic Ability

Academic ability influenced the path for the participants in multiple ways. The most direct influence was on students that were not eligible for some universities because

of their grade point averages and performance in college or high school up to that point. In a more common, but less direct way, the student's negative perception of their academic ability and the fear and anxiety this induced resulted in them narrowing their searches to a single institution.

Location and Convenience

Location and convenience were significantly influential on the college choice process for the participants. Participants picked a location and restricted their search to a small region without considering universities outside of the location they selected. As outlined previously, this restriction was based on a personal, professional, or familial connection to the area. For those without a tie to the region, convenience replaced this influence. Participants striving to complete their degree on active duty or who expected to move, selected programs, like online or hybrid programs, that allowed them to travel or move while continuing their studies with the same institution.

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 were not observed factors with these participants. The participants came from families with varying incomes and socioeconomic statuses. However, as non-traditional students, the participants have emancipated from their parents and are no longer legal dependents. Although these factors did not impact the colleges they attended, family income and cost of attendance were common reasons for joining the military. The participants came from various high schools from across the nation. However, their high school did not appear to impact college choice. Cost of attendance did not impact college choice for the

participants, but it was noted that some of the students would not have selected the college they were attending if the cost to attend was not covered by military education benefits.

The seven themes and six factors contain overlap and were used to answer the research question and sub-question for this study. These are:

1. How do Post-9/11 veterans make meaning of the college choice process?
 - a. How do Post-9/11 Veterans decide which four-year colleges and universities to consider and subsequently apply to?
 - b. How do Post-9/11 Veterans decide which educational model (resident, online, or hybrid, public, private) to attend?
 - c. In what way do emotions influence the college choice process?

This study provided valuable data that was used to answer all of the research questions, and it provided insights which raise additional important questions. In the next sections I discuss the limitations associate with this study, followed by recommendations for practitioners and researchers.

Limitations

As outlined previously, this study was limited in the time length due to my work responsibilities. This short timeline required the study to employ a limited convenience sample, including only 12 participants from the Navy and Marine Corps. This sample is not representative of the veteran population, as it lacks participants from the three other military branches. Additionally, the demographic breakdown does not truly represent the veteran population in gender, ethnics, race, and more. Although multiple four-year universities were represented from multiple regions, the sample is heavily weighted in the

Southwest region of the United States and primarily resident programs where students attend most of their courses in a classroom on a physical campus.

My social identities and positionality must be named and acknowledged for how they influence my bias. I am a student veteran, first-generation college student, veterans advocate, and I lead a highly visible military and veterans program on a large public university. This guides my motivation to study this topic and influences my views and beliefs connected to it. I acknowledge this bias in connection to the subject matter.

Subjectivity is always an issue in research. The intention during this research is to use Peshkin's approach to subjectivity (1988) and do more than simply acknowledge the subjectivity, but embrace it. I used Peshkin's words to guide my efforts, "I do not thereby exorcise my subjectivity. I do rather, enable myself to manage it-to preclude it from being unwittingly burdensome-as I progress through the collecting, analyzing, and writing up my data" (1988, p. 20). As previously state, I announced my status as veteran and personal experience at the beginning of the interviews to establish a bond and create openness and comfort in the interview process. I believe these efforts created an environment of trust that the participants utilized to more quickly open up and share their experiences. However, bias and positionality cannot be ignored despite the efforts taken to minimize them.

Acknowledging subjectivity was only one method that was taken to create awareness and minimize the impact of bias. Sound interview techniques were used to ensure that I minimize my influence on the interview responses. These included not using encouraging or discouraging responses through voice or body language. Additionally, member checking was utilized with the participants to ensure the accuracy of my

interpretation of their responses and to ensure that they were not misrepresented. Since I have a strong personal interest in the topic, this was vital to ensuring that I was not being blind to data that are inconsistent with my personal views and beliefs.

This is a qualitative study and therefore is not generalizable. However, it still provides valuable and actionable data for the consumer. Donmoyer's (2000) article outlines 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 which informs future research and work as a practitioner.

This study only included the perspective of student veterans. It did not include perspectives of counselors, military leadership, and many others that the participants interacted with as they prepared for and entered their higher education experience at a four-year university. Additionally, all of the participants were reflecting on their experience, often times with multiple years separating them from the time they were considering options and making decisions related to their experience. This could have impacted the accuracy of their accounts. Lastly, it must be noted that the student veterans that participated in this study were highly engaged on their campuses. Most filled leadership roles within their Student Veterans Organization and all of them had a direct connection to the veterans program on their campus. This level of engagement is not representative of the entire student veteran population on these students' universities.

Recommendations for Practitioners

The data generated by this study can be utilized to improve or adjust practices for multiple professionals. These include, but are not limited to: community college counselors, high school counselors, college recruiters, US Department of Defense

education program leadership, and those that work in college military and veterans programs. I offer the following four recommendations for practitioners.

Recommendation One

Additional steps need to be taken to increase the depth of knowledge held by active duty service members and veterans related to the higher education systems and models, as well as how to successfully access them. Most veterans are provided tens of thousands, and sometimes hundreds of thousands, of dollars' worth of educational benefits. However, they have to seek out how to best use these benefits and the best places to seek that information are not readily obvious. Given that the majority of this population are first-generation college students and even more lack the social and cultural capital related to higher education, this lack of knowledge increases the potential for missteps along the way. The general nontraditional student population that lacks social and cultural capital related to higher education do not have to also determine how to use complex benefits like the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The combination of complex military benefits with a convoluted higher education system exacerbates this issue and makes this recommendation even more important.

The US Department of Veterans Affairs, which processes the Post-9/11 GI Bill, provides information on their websites related to this benefit and others. There is not an educational tool in place that beneficiaries must utilize in order to use the benefit. A simple online instruction could be created that must be completed prior to the beneficiary becoming eligible to utilize the benefit. This tool could explore the variety of educational models and a number of other topics related to higher education, such as accreditation and transferring from one college to another. Although this would create an additional

gateway to accessing this earned benefit, it may prevent future missteps by the users of these benefits.

Recommendation Two

Understanding that the active duty and veteran populations are lacking the cultural and social capital related to accessing higher education, it is imperative that those that are working with them in mentorship and guidance roles 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 is vital when these professionals 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 these students to make a more informed decision when selecting universities to apply for. I recommend that those professionals working in these roles receive appropriate training and guidance to better understand this information and the means for transferring this information to their constituents.

Recommendation Three

Universities and colleges that seek to conduct outreach or recruit this population should ensure that lines of communication are easily assessable and as open as possible. This is especially true for military and veterans programs on these campuses. This allows these potential students to connect with and build trust with individuals and teams on these campuses. As outlined in this study, trusting relationships carry significant weight in deciding which institutions to explore and attend. Additionally, these professionals can provide quality information to these students that may be lacking information or confused during their research of universities.

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 2, this intervention could occur early in the active duty career as a counter to the discouragement and lack of guidance all the way to the point where the veteran is making the decision on which university to apply for and attend. This type of intervention could provide the vital information many veterans are seeking during the college choice process.

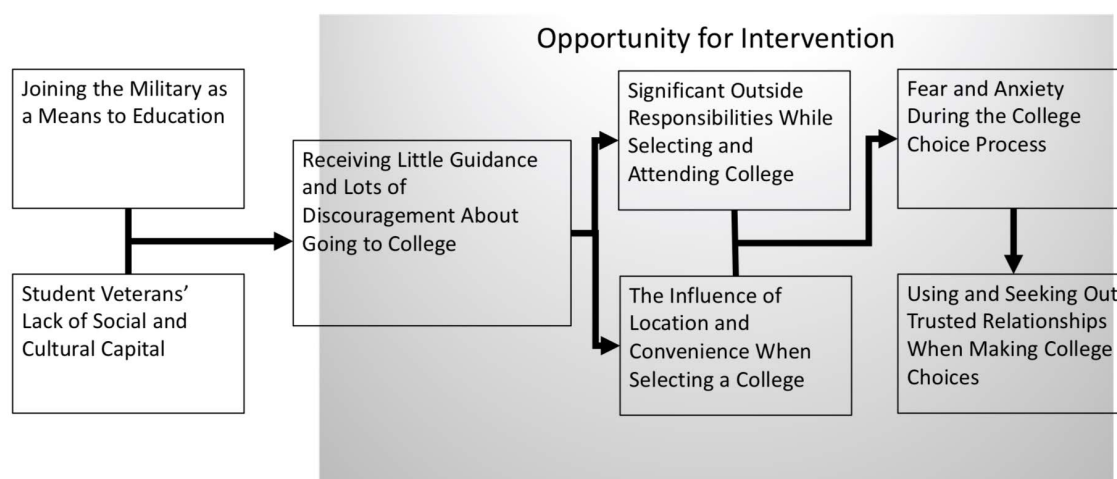


Figure 2. Opportunity for Intervention

Recommendation Four

US Department of Defense and Veterans Affairs education and transition program should address the fears that are held by active duty service members and veterans as they access and progress through higher education. By acknowledging these intangibles and how each individual's path through higher education is different, these fears could potentially be minimized. Additionally, these students hold greater self-efficacy in this

process than they may have had while serving in the military. These simple steps may potentially empower these students and build their confidence while they explore these new pathways.

Future Research

The data that was generated from this study was utilized to answer the research question and sub-questions, but at the same time generated additional questions. These new questions offer opportunities for future research to expand upon the efforts of this study.

In the late stages of this study, I discovered the dissertation titled *Understanding the College Choice Process of United States Military-Affiliated Transfer Students* completed by Emily Ives in 2017. Ives' study examined student veterans that transferred to top level research universities. This was a mixed methods study that also used *College Choice Theory* as the theoretical framework. In review of the survey that was utilized, I discovered that the majority of the seven themes that emerged through this study were not fully addressed in the instrument used in Ives' study. Although background information was asked about the participants military experience, the survey does not address the direct impact of the military system on their meaning making process.

Qualitative methodologies were utilized in this study because the topic has yet to be explored in depth and there was not enough information available to create a quality quantitative instrument. The data generated from this study could be used to create a better quality quantitative instrument, which can be utilized to continue research with the student veteran population. This instrument can be used in conjunction with qualitative methods to develop a mixed methods study or as a stand-alone quantitative study. The

data generated from this future research has the potential to be generalizable to the veteran population.

The lack of social and cultural capital related to higher education that was maintained by participants of this study is unusual given that five of the 12 participants came from households where one or both parents graduated from some level of college. Because of this, the phenomenon related to the lack of social and cultural capital cannot be solely attributed to the fact that many within the population being first-generation college students. Why these characteristics are prevalent in this population is a topic that should be explored in greater depth in future research.

Some of the students felt that they were discouraged from seeking out higher education by individuals they served with. Some of these individuals filled influential leadership positions. Additionally, it was uncovered that this was at times an unspoken and contradictory reality within the military, as leadership espoused the value of higher education and seeking it out. An important question to consider might be, what is the level of this discouragement and how common is it? This combined with the lack of guidance these students received as they were within the predisposition phase of *College Choice Theory* is problematic. Examination of this phenomenon within the military could generate valuable data that could be used to improve systems within the US Department of Defense related to higher education.

The US Department of Defense has provided educational services to active duty military for decades. As was discussed previously, the US Navy recently shut down their physical locations and switched to providing these amenities primarily through distance services. Given that the participants in this study felt a lack of guidance and some of them

specifically pointed out the poor services provided by these programs, there is a need to examine the effectiveness of these programs. Data created from this research could be used to improve services to this population while they are serving and potentially improve their level of knowledge related to higher education and the benefits they are eligible for.

Service in the military was a means to higher education for the student veterans that participated in this research. Additionally, some saw the military as a means to leaving earlier circumstances. These participants were all attending a university or had recently graduated. It can be assumed that these participants were successful in some way of attaining this declared goal. It is worth examining what the overall success rate is for those that declare these educational goals. A longitudinal study could be conducted that examines what goals people espouse when they join the military and how many are successful in attaining those goals, specifically, in this case, higher education goals. Additional research questions related to this study could include: What specific barriers prevent or limit the attainment of espoused higher education goals? What were the best practices and resources used for those that were successful in attaining their goals of higher education?

Most of the participants in this study restricted their search of colleges and universities to a specific location and did not consider institutions outside of that location. A study that examines if there is a difference between veterans that consider multiple locations and those that restrict their search to a specific location would provide greater insight to this population and likely add greater understanding of the reasons why some veterans limit their search to a single location.

This study restricted the participants to the Navy and Marine Corps, but should be expanded by including Army, Air Force, and Coast Guard veterans. Although there was not a difference discovered between Navy and Marine Corps veterans, there may be differences across the other branches of the military. Additionally, expanding this research will provide greater depth to the data generated in this study.

Although this study explored how student veterans go about selecting a university and an education model, the question of why there has been a shift in the education models utilized by veterans can be further explored. It was noted previously that many of the top Post-9/11 GI Bill processors are failing institutions or have had lawsuits filed against them. Most of these colleges are for-profit universities and online models. An option for future research includes examining whether student veterans that are attending these models are receiving a quality product in exchange for their time and benefits.

College Choice Theory was used as the theoretical framework for this study. This theory provided a lens for examining this population that is useful and has not been heavily utilized. While this worked as the theoretical framing in providing a lens for examining the populations and their making meaning process, it was discovered that the participants in this study did not progress through the search and choice phases in the same way that other populations do. In some ways, these phases were meshed together into one phase. Additionally, this population had influences that other populations do not have during the Predisposition phase. These include military systems and unique benefits. Using these data, it is worth examining the need to develop a new college choice theory for active duty service members and veterans.

Reflections on College Choice Theory

Although *College Choice Theory* had utility in this study, it may not be the most appropriate theory for attaining greater depth in how this population makes meaning of the college choice process. As stated above, this population shares the experience of the influence of a unique system, the military system. Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1974) could be utilized as a theoretical framing for examining how the military system impacts students as they exit or prepare to exit the military and enter a new, very different, system in higher education.

Bronfenbrenner developed Ecological Systems Theory to explain how the environment a child lives within influences their development. Over time it has been utilized to examine how context influences other populations besides children. Bronfenbrenner places the individual at the center of the theory surrounded by five systems, as seen in Figure 3. These systems include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

To describe the model, I place a child as the individual at the center of the Ecological System to describe the various layers of the system. The microsystem consists of the individuals and groups that the child interacts with on a regular basis. Examples include parents, siblings, friends, teachers, and more. The mesosystem is the next layer beyond the microsystem. In this system interactions occur that do not include the child, but include the interaction of those within the child's microsystem and potentially members of the child's microsystem and the layer beyond the mesosystem, the exosystem. The exosystem is the social system that are beyond the direct interaction of the child. Yet, the exosystem has the potential to have an impact on the life of the child.

These social systems could include the parents' work, media, or more. In this case, the experiences of the child's parents at work can impact the child's life and development in a number of ways. The macrosystem includes social norms as part of culture, as well as laws and rules governing society. The last system, the chronosystem, encompasses all of the systems and the individual. This system represents how all of these systems are impacted over time. These changes could be the death of someone in the microsystem or a significant change in the laws that govern the macrosystem. All of these systems make up the ecological system and have an impact on the development of the individual within this context.

The military system is unique in many ways, which is the reason that Ecological Systems Theory could provide greater insight into the college choice process and others for veterans and military members. Participants in this study explained that they knew what steps to take when they were within the military, but when they left that system the steps toward attaining success in higher education were unknown. In the military, it is very easy to identify where other military members are within their ecological model because of the uniforms they wear and the rank they hold. Outside of the military system, one is unable to determine what a person's "rank" is in the new system because people do not typically wear uniforms that identify where they are in the system. By examining how the military system impacts individuals within it, a researcher could gain greater understanding of how veterans make meaning of how to maneuver within different systems like higher education.

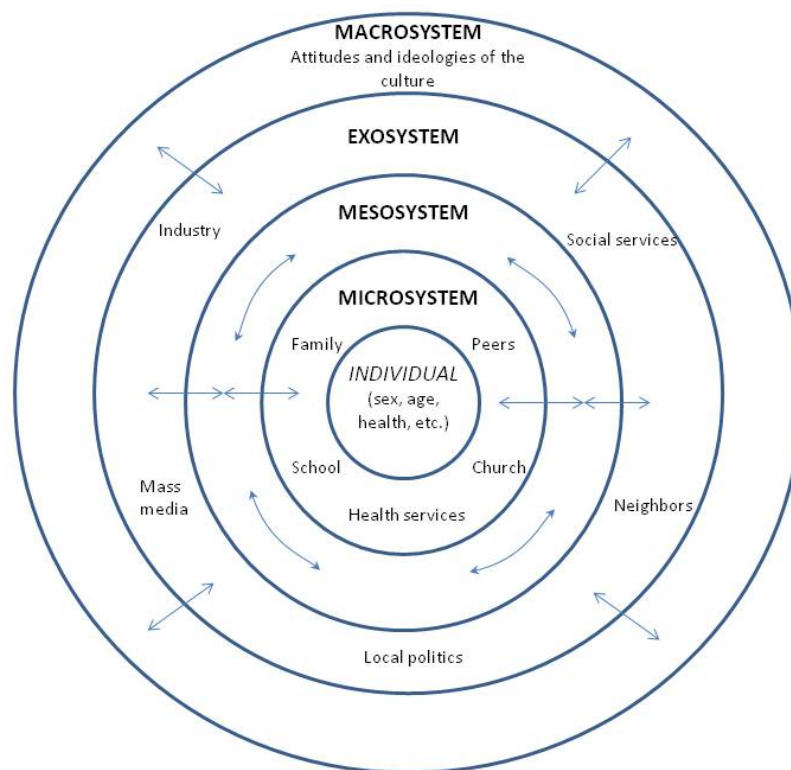


Figure 3. Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory Model (Hill, 2019)

Conclusion

This chapter began with a summary of the previous chapters. I presented a short overview of the seven major themes and six factors influencing college choice that emerged through this study, as well as a review of the research question and sub-questions that these data were used to answer. I acknowledged the limitations of this study and shared the steps taken to minimize the limitations. Next, I provided four recommendations for practitioners and professional to potentially use when working with this population. Finally, I listed ten future research ideas for academics and researchers that may have an interest in learning more about this population within the context of higher education. These research ideas included the expansion of this study, as well as the

exploration of a new college choice theory and utilizing Ecological Systems Theory to examine veterans accessing higher education.

Reflection

When I first started examining veterans in the higher education environment, I focused my research on how to best serve this population once they were on college campuses. I discovered that there was a small, but growing, pool of articles related to the needs of this population in college and recommended best practices for serving them on campuses. As I began my work as a practitioner working with veterans in this environment, I quickly realized that many of the challenges that student veterans were struggling through were rooted in the period prior to matriculation into the university. As a practitioner, I responded to this by expanding the outreach efforts of the military and veterans program. I took this action so that representatives from the university could connect with potential students as early as possible and, hopefully, address this phenomenon in a constructive way. In an effort to broaden my knowledge base, I sought out research focused on veterans prior to matriculation. Sadly, I quickly discovered that researchers had yet to study this topic in depth. Although I monitored my anecdotal experiences as a practitioner, this process did not include the rigor of designing and implementing a study that would generate data to answer the questions I had about this ongoing phenomenon. The desire to address this gap was enhanced by the predatory practices of underperforming and failing institutions that were luring veterans onto their campus, but providing them a subpar education while robbing them of their benefits and time.

This research journey started with the initial two pilot studies that I conducted prior to this study. During those studies, I discovered a number of unexpected findings. This enhanced my belief in the need to further explore this topic and resulted in this study. The data from this study has added to the breadth and depth of my understanding of this topic and is now available for other practitioners to utilize and enhance their own practices and programs that serve veterans. These data have the potential to have a positive impact on the estimated 200,000 new Post-9/11 GI Bill users per year entering higher education and ultimately preventing these students from wasting their time, efforts, and money.

While this study has provided some insight into the phenomenon of veterans accessing higher education, it has also generated additional questions. My hope is that I will be joined in exploring this topic and adjacent topics further by other academics and colleagues striving to generate data that are valuable for practitioners striving to have a positive impact on those they serve.

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Appendix A

Veterans' Decision Making Interview Guide

Demographic Survey (Pre-Interview)

Name _____

Email _____

Phone Number _____

1. What is your gender? Male Female Other**2. What is your age?**

3. What is your race / ethnic origin?

- Asian / Asian American
 Mexican American
 Native American / American Indian
 Black / African American
 Other Latino(a) / Hispanic
 White (non-Hispanic)
 Other or Multiracial:
-

4. Which branch of the military did you serve in? Navy Marine Corps**5. How many years did you serve?**

6. What is your marital status? Single Married Divorced Widow/Widower Long-Term Partner

7. How many biological or dependent children do you have?

8. If you have biological or dependent children, do they live with you?

Yes No Part time NA

7. What college/university are you attending?

8. What type of program are you participating in now?

Primarily Resident Primarily Online/Distance Hybrid

9. What year are you in college?

First-Year Sophomore Junior Senior Graduate

10. Including your current college, how many colleges have you attended?

11. What is your major in college?

12. Who were/was your primary guardian/guardians growing up?

Both parents Mother single parent Father single parent

Other _____

13. What level of education did your 1st Primary guardian complete?

Elementary school Junior high High school Some college

2-year college degree 4-year college degree Grad or professional degree Do not know

14. What level of education did your 2nd primary guardian complete?

Elementary school Junior high High school Some college

2-year college degree 4-year college degree Grad or professional degree Do
not know

Thank you for participating in this study. To protect your identity, I will not be using your real name. What pseudonym do you prefer? (*for interviews, transcripts, dissertation*)

Predisposition Stage

1. Tell me about your college aspirations when you were younger. (youth, high school...)
2. When did you decide to join the military?
3. Why did you decide to join the military?
4. When did you decide you were going to go to college?
5. Did you start college before or after you got out of the military?
6. How did your status as a veteran impact your decision to go to college?
7. What major responsibilities do you have outside of college?
8. Do you work?
9. Were you nervous, anxious, or fearful when you decided to go to college? If so, what were the causes?

Search Stage

1. Tell me about how you researched potential colleges.
2. Did you face any struggles or difficulties that you did not anticipate while you were researching colleges?
3. Who did you seek assistance from while searching for colleges?
 - Youth resources (high school counselors, teachers)?
 - Family?
 - Military education centers or representatives?
 - Military leadership?
 - Peers?
 - Third party resources?
 - Online resources?
 - College representatives? Which?
 - Other

4. Did anyone discourage you during or throughout the process?
5. Did you consider career options before selecting a college?
6. Did you consider your major before selecting a college?
7. Did you seek out specific education models (traditional, online, hybrid, private, public, non-profit, for-profit)? Why or Why not?
8. What attributes were you looking for in a college? (size, academic program, location...)
9. What colleges did you see as available for you to choose from?
10. Where did you seek out information about colleges?
11. Which colleges did you consider gathering information about? Why?
12. How did you ultimately decide on which college(s) to apply for?
13. How well do you feel you were prepared for planning for college during this period?
14. How did your status as a veteran influence the college you considered?

Choice Stage

1. Were you accepted into more than one college or university?
2. How did you decide which college/university to enroll at?
3. Why did you select the college or university you are currently attending?
4. Was this your first choice? Why or why not?
5. Did veterans benefits impact your college choice decision?
6. Did the college(s) take any actions that influenced your decision?

Appendix B

Research Participant Consent Form

For the research study entitled:
How Navy and Marine Corps Veterans Make Meaning of the College Choice Process in
the Post-9/11 GI Bill Era

I. Purpose of the research study

Derek Abbey is a student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study he is conducting. The purpose of this research study is: to better understand the factors influencing college choice decisions of veterans.

II. What you will be asked to do

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to: Participate in a private interview about your experience of selecting and applying to college. The interview will consist of 29 open-ended questions and possible follow-up questions. You will be audiotaped during the interview. Your participation in this study will take a total of 60 minutes.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

This study involves no more risk than the risks you encounter in daily life.

IV. Benefits

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand the experiences, needs, desires, and motivations of veterans as they go through the process of selecting a college or university.

V. Confidentiality

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

VI. Compensation

You will receive one \$25 Amazon gift card as compensation for your participation in the study.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not

answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

VIII. Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) Derek Abbey

Email:

Phone:

2) Dr. Cheryl Getz

Email:

Phone:

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

Signature of Participant

Date

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

Signature of Investigator

Date

Date: 4-28-2019

IRB #: IRB-2019-215

Title: How Navy and Marine Corps Veterans Make Meaning of the College Choice Process in the Post-9/11 GI Bill Era

Creation Date: 12-17-2018

End Date: 12-19-2019

Status: Approved

Principal Investigator: Derek Abbey

Review Board: USD IRB

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	Approved
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Key Study Contacts

Member	Derek Abbey	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	derekabey@sandiego.edu
Member	Cheryl Getz	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	cgetz@SanDiego.edu
