

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Factors Influencing Student Veterans' College Choices

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This study examined factors influencing veterans' postsecondary institutional choices. Individual interviews were conducted with 30 veterans separating from military service and twelve military education officials and counselors. Results indicated most veterans transitioning from the military who aspire to enroll in postsecondary education intend to enroll in community colleges. An analysis of the data generated in the interviews highlights four factors as being influential in veterans' college choices, including perception of cost and financial resources, academic program offerings, flexible scheduling, and advising received from military education counselors.

Student veterans are an asset in higher education learning environments. Student veterans are: more successful academically than other nontraditional students, are highly committed to their studies, value educational opportunities, and are resilient as they navigate their higher education journeys (Cate, *et al.* 2017; Humes 2006; Institute for Veterans and Military Families 2019; Livingston, *et al.* 2011; Shapiro, *et al.* 2015; Student Veterans of America 2016; Cooney and Elliott 2019; U.S. Department of Labor 2016; and Zoli, *et al.* 2015). Despite successful higher education academic performance and substantial economic assistance afforded through military education benefits, most veterans elect not to utilize their earned benefits to pursue higher education. Moreover, the student veterans who do utilize their ben-

efits to pursue higher education are underrepresented in four-year public and private non-profit institutions and over-represented in community colleges and for-profit institutions, necessitating further study of veterans' college choices to inform institutional strategic enrollment management (SEM) processes (Cate, *et al.* 2019; Cate 2014; Causey, *et al.* 2020; Hill, *et al.* 2019; Institute for Veterans and Military Families 2019; Hussar, *et al.* 2020, 166–170; and Zoli, *et al.* 2015).

College choice is a socially constructed selection process that influences individuals' educational and socioeconomic mobility. The college choice process is complex, requiring prospective students to utilize critical thinking skills and cultural capital to navigate the vast array of higher education options, influenced by a

wide variety of social and economic variables. Prominent models of college choice focus on traditional students and rely on theories of economic price response, status attainment, and information processing to provide context on institutional choices. Many of the theoretical frameworks and variables commonly analyzed in the college choice process ignore the combination of variables impacting critical thinking and decision-making, or underestimate the influential factors associated with postsecondary aspirations.

The complexity of the college choice process is even more pronounced when examined in the context of nontraditional and first-generation students. This complexity is especially pronounced among the veteran population where 62 percent are first-generation students, more racially diverse, and influenced by military socialization and the design of the military educational benefit system (Institute for Veterans and Military Families 2019; National Conference of State Legislatures 2014; and Vaccaro 2015). Clearly, the factors impacting veterans' college choices are too complex to be framed by traditional college choice models and singular variables. Veterans' college choices are best examined through a framework that combines multiple college choice theories, incorporating the vast number of variables that work together to influence the college choice process.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the substantial economic assistance afforded through the G.I. Bill, a disproportionate number of veteran college students appear to choose non-attendance or enrollment in community colleges or for-profit institutions rather than enrollment in four-year public or private non-profit higher education institutions. This enrollment choice itself presents numerous questions about access to postsecondary education pathways and stratification implications to educational attainment as students who begin college in public and private four-year non-profit institutions are, respectively, 27 percent and 38 percent more likely to graduate with a baccalaureate degree than students who begin in two-year public community colleges and 20 percent and 31 per-

cent, respectively, more likely than students who begin in four-year for-profit institutions (Causey, *et al.* 2020; Hussar, *et al.* 2020, 166–170).

Despite successful academic completion rates when compared to other students and substantial economic assistance afforded through military educational benefits, only 41 percent of veterans elect to utilize their earned military education benefits to pursue higher education (Cate *et al.* 2019; Cate 2014; Zoli, *et al.* 2015). This is particularly troublesome since military education benefits are commonly cited as a key motivation for joining military service (Buryk, *et al.* 2015; Molina 2015; Zoli, *et al.* 2015). Veterans' choices not to utilize their educational benefits also demonstrates that this population may not fully understand available earned benefits or may be less influenced to gain access to higher education through the availability of economic assistance. Even with the substantial number of veterans eligible for military educational benefits and the institutions vying competitively for those resources, studies examining factors influencing veterans' college choices as they transition from the military are sparse in the current higher education literature.

Purpose

This study was designed to examine the college choices of transitioning veterans in an attempt to ascertain the pattern of veterans' choices to attend institutions of higher education and their choices between two-year and four-year institutions. The study employed two overarching research questions: 1). What type of institutions do veterans plan to attend, and what are the major factors that influence their choices? 2). What types of messages do military education counselors and officials communicate about attending higher education, and how do these messages influence veterans' college choices? This research study aims to contribute to the field of higher education, enrollment management, and student affairs by providing valuable insight regarding the college choice process of veteran college students exiting the military, an important segment of nontraditional-aged college students often neglected in the research literature.

Literature Review

While six percent of all U.S. undergraduate college students report current or previous military service, veterans are underrepresented and comprise the lowest percentage of enrolled students (4.1%) within four-year public higher education institutions (American Association of Community Colleges 2019; Hill, *et al.* 2019). For-profit higher education institutions and community colleges have an over-representation and highest rate of enrolled veteran students, with 17.3 percent and 19 percent, respectively (American Association of Community Colleges 2019; Hill, *et al.* 2019). Student veterans are also 50 percent less likely than the aggregate of all college students to enroll in higher education institutions with high graduation rates (Hill, *et al.* 2019).

Institutional Type and Degree Attainment

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's *Completing College 2020* report, highlights that where students start their college work matters and influences their subsequent level of postsecondary educational attainment from any institution. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) assert that “where one begins his or her postsecondary education has a statistically significant influence on educational aspirations, persistence, and eventual level of educational attainment.” Initial enrollment in a community college rather than a four-year institution dramatically decreases the likelihood of attaining a baccalaureate degree (Grubbs 2020; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; Hussar, *et al.* 2020, 166–169). The baccalaureate gap indicates that when comparable community college students and four-year college students who desire a bachelor's degree are examined, community college students are between 11 to 19 percent less likely to earn a baccalaureate degree (Grubbs 2020; Dougherty 1992).

However, any discussion of institutional outcomes requires recognition and acknowledgement of the fundamental difference in the missions of community colleges and four-year postsecondary institutions. Community colleges are by design open access institutions, welcoming all students without regard to preparation for college-level coursework. Community colleges play a critical role in broadening access to postsecondary

education and transfer pathways, providing preparation for college-level coursework, and facilitating occupational training and skill development. There are many high-quality community colleges that provide a valuable first step and pathway to earning a baccalaureate degree. In contrast, four-year institutions often employ selective admissions criteria, carefully scrutinizing evidence of preparation for postsecondary work and likelihood for success as a condition of admission.

The overall six-year graduation rate for students who began at four-year public institutions in 2014 is 64.3 percent, with 13.2 percent still enrolled and 19.4 percent of students stopped out (Causey, *et al.* 2020). Six-year graduation rates for students who started college in four-year nonprofit institutions in 2014 is 75 percent, with 9.2 percent still enrolled and 14.1 percent stopped out (Causey, *et al.* 2020). In contrast, the six-year graduation rate for students beginning in four-year for-profit institutions in 2014 was 43.9 percent, with 13.4 percent still enrolled and 41.1 percent of students stopped out (Causey, *et al.* 2020). For students starting in community colleges in 2014, the six-year graduation rate is 37.1 percent, with 19.1 percent of students still enrolled and 40.7 percent of students stopped out (Causey, *et al.* 2020). Students who begin their college work in public and private four-year non-profit institutions are, respectively, 20 percent and 31 percent more likely to graduate than students who begin college in four-year for-profit institutions (Causey, *et al.* 2020; Hussar, *et al.* 2020, 166–169). Similarly, students who begin college in public and private four-year non-profit institutions are, respectively, 27 percent and 38 percent more likely to graduate than students who begin in two-year public community colleges (Causey, *et al.* 2020; Hussar, *et al.* 2020, 166–169). For-profit higher education institutions and community colleges also have 20 percent higher stop-out rates, more than double the percentage of stop-outs in four-year public and private non-profit institutions (Causey, *et al.* 2020).

Institutional Type and Return on Investment

Research findings indicate college should be viewed as a long-term investment (Georgetown University Center

on Education and the Workforce 2020). While earning an associate's degree from a community college yields the highest return on investment (ROI) in the short-term time span of ten years given their affordability, earning a bachelor's degree from a baccalaureate granting institution yields the highest ROI in the long-term 40-year time horizon (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce 2020). Baccalaureate degrees also produce higher post-graduation salary earnings, enabling ROI from these higher education institutions to overtake returns from most two-year and for-profit institutions, yielding a long-term net economic gain of \$765,000 to \$838,000 from attending public and private non-profit institutions, compared to \$551,000 from private for-profit institutions (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce 2020).

College Choice Theoretical Frameworks

There is not consensus among higher education scholars on a theoretical framework explaining how prospective students navigate the complex college decision-making process. A literature review identifies multiple theoretical frameworks that attempt to explain the complex college choice decision-making process prospective students experience, including economic price response, status attainment, and information processing theories. The college choice process is important because institutional selection directly impacts educational attainment.

Combined models of the college choice process recognize that socialization, psychosocial development, and cultural capital are integral components of college choice and that all of the aforementioned models, including economic, status attainment, and information processing provide important components, which can enhance an understanding of the college choice process. Hossler and Gallagher's Model of College Choice is a comprehensive combined model, integrating economic, status attainment, and information processing models into a framework for gaining more holistic insight into students' college choices (Bateman and Spruill 1996; Hossler, *et al.* 1999; Martin and Dixon 1991). Their model asserts that it is essential to examine socioeconomic,

family background, school characteristics, social, and cultural factors influencing the college choice process (Hossler, *et al.* 1999). The model frames the college choice process as three stages, including student predisposition to attend a higher education institution, the college search process, and the student's final college choice. Hossler and Gallagher's college choice framework focuses on students' predispositions and their desire to attend an institution of higher education (Hossler and Gallagher 1987).

A review of the current literature on college choice reveals many factors influence the students' decision-making processes and predispositions, including socioeconomic status and family background characteristics, students' cultural capital and habitus, socialization, secondary school characteristics, ability, and academic performance (Hossler and Stage 1992). Iloh's (2019) alternative Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories also focuses on the combination and complexity of factors that influence college decisions, highlighting the role of access. The Iloh Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories challenges the notion of student choice without consideration of privilege as well as dimensions of time, information access, and opportunity (Iloh 2019).

Students' socioeconomic status, including parental education, income, professional experiences, and family background characteristics exert a powerful influence on individuals' college choices. As parental education levels and professional experiences increase, students' aspirations to attend a higher education institution increase (Hossler, *et al.* 1999; Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; Manski and Wise 1983). Socioeconomic status and cultural capital influence students' cost consciousness and the perception of financial costs included in the enrollment decision. For example, students with limited financial resources are much more sensitive to tuition costs than students from higher socioeconomic statuses (Heller 1997). Students from lower socioeconomic strata are less likely to understand how to calculate expected costs and navigate through financial aid programs (Heller 1997). Many students from lower socioeconomic statuses simply see the college's sticker

price and do not understand that people actually pay very different amounts to attend the same institution. In contrast, students from higher income levels are not shocked by the college's sticker price because they realize that the amount is often negotiable through many funding resources.

As veterans weigh college costs and the decision to exercise financial benefits, it is also essential to consider the nature of VA benefits. VA benefits have interesting characteristics that differ from other types of aid, adding to the complexity of veterans' college choice processes. Some types of VA benefits can be saved for future use and even transferred to veterans' children and other family members designated as dependents. These special characteristics may influence price sensitivity to be more pronounced. For example, low community college tuition coupled with other sources of grant aid may incentivize veterans to postpone or avoid the use of VA benefits and influence their college choice process.

Veterans' college choices are best examined through a framework of combined college choice models because the traditional theories of the college choice process, such as status attainment and information processing models, fail to explain the complexity of veterans' college choices. Traditional theories also fail to fully explain the choice the majority of veterans make to forgo college attendance despite substantial military financial resources. Veterans are often described in the literature as coming from lower socioeconomic and working-class backgrounds, a higher proportion of minoritized identities, and lower academic preparation (Bennett 1996; Joanning 1975; MacLeod 1995). The majority of student veterans separating from the military can also be described as nontraditional aged students, having served at least one multi-year enlistment cycle. In fact, more than half of veterans using the Post 9/11 GI Bill are between the age range of 25 and 34 (Field 2008). Non-traditional aged students are even more diverse than traditional aged students in their educational motivations and expectations, student service needs, and experiences in higher education (Richardson and King 1998).

Methodology

A wide variety of research methods have been utilized to examine the college choice process, yielding diverse theoretical conceptions and conclusions about which variables influence college students' perceptions and decisions regarding higher education (McDonough 1997; Hossler, *et al.* 1999). Clearly, the complexity of the college choice process, wide array of potential influential factors, and the multiple variables working in combination mandate a careful development of a research strategy. Veterans possess special characteristics and encounter different governmental services and cultures, including military socialization, the structure of education benefits, military education policy, and a significant number of first-generation student factors that must be carefully considered in the design process. The numerous variables associated with veterans' college choices require a focused examination. For that reason, this study utilizes a qualitative research design, employing structured interviews.

A qualitative research design was selected because the research questions posed in this study asked veterans to elaborate on their educational aspirations and choices, as well as their perceptions and beliefs about the factors that influenced those aspirations and choices. Strauss and Corbin (2015) assert that qualitative research methodology is particularly powerful when a researcher is attempting to ascertain and describe the nature or meanings that individuals associate with their experiences. This research approach enabled each individual veteran's rich personal account of their own background, military experiences, and future aspirations to be captured and compared with other transitioning veterans.

This research study employed 30 semi-structured individual interviews with veterans separating from military service and eligible for military educational benefits as well as twelve semi-structured interviews with VA, military educational counselors, and officials. The veteran interview questions were carefully constructed to include mostly open-ended questions to encourage participants to elaborate on their educational aspirations, military experiences, and the vari-

ables influencing their college choices. Throughout each interview, researchers posed questions to gain a clear understanding and insight regarding the factors that influence decisions veterans made about selecting a college. The questions posed in each individual interview concentrated on five important categories, including: individual background and education characteristics, family educational background characteristics, educational aspirations (perceptions and intent regarding college attendance as well as view of military educational benefits), college choices, and reasons veterans cite as influential in their college choice process. Interviews with military and VA educational counselors employed open-ended questions on veterans' college choice processes and the educational advising these officials provided to veterans. In this research study, each interview was recorded utilizing an audio taping device and transcribed to increase data trustworthiness.

Data Analysis

Creswell (2018) states, "The process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data." After evaluating the transcriptions from the recorded individual interviews, coding was used to identify developing themes, categories, patterns within the collected data analyzing veterans' aspirations, college choice patterns, and variables influencing attendance. While this coding was immensely helpful during the data analysis process, an evaluation of published literature was also a critical component. Previous research and theoretical frameworks on the college choice process and socialization theory was instrumental in evaluating the data collected in this study and conducting a comparison of the research findings with current literature on college choice. Literature assisted in understanding common themes and patterns as well as helped to strengthen and corroborate the study's findings.

Participants and Fort Army Characteristics

The participants in this study included 30 U.S. Army enlisted personnel ranking from specialist (E-4) to sergeant major (E-9), who filed paperwork to separate or retire from the military within the following six months as well as twelve educational counselors, education officials, veteran's administration representatives. Each of the military participants had served on active duty military status for at least three years, earning full eligibility for educational benefits after separation from the military. In this study, none of the veterans interviewed possessed a baccalaureate degree, and the vast majority were first generation college students. The participants in this study were racially diverse and mostly male, representative of the composition of the U.S. Army as a whole. The interviews were conducted over a six-week time span.

This research study was conducted at one U.S. Army installation that is typical in many ways of most major Army installations in the United States. The installation provided a full-service education center typical of most Army installations in terms of the educational programs offered, educational counseling staffing, and available support services. Higher education programs available through the center included a range of institutions, from community colleges to four-year doctoral granting research universities. The installation also mirrored most other Army bases in the diversity of unit and operations. The installation is comprised of many different unit specialties and, therefore, soldiers of many different military occupational specialties (MOS). Soldiers assigned to the installation are attached to both garrison units, which traditionally offer standard work hours and limited deployments, as well as field units with unpredictable work hours and deployments. In addition, most of the veterans who participated in the study had been assigned to other installations during their service. Therefore, due to the diversity of unit representation at Fort Army and the nature of personnel assignments, groups of soldiers transitioning from other military installations are likely to possess similar characteristics as those transitioning from Fort Army.

Results

Veterans participating in this research study were asked a variety of questions to gain insight on the following overarching research questions: 1). What type of institutions do veterans plan to attend, and what are the major factors that influence their choices? 2). What types of messages do military education counselors and officials communicate about attending higher education, and how do these messages influence veterans' college choices? Eighty percent of veterans interviewed in this study expressed intentions to attend some form of higher education opportunity after separation from the military. The degree plan aspirations of the separating veterans were strikingly similar despite differences in gender, race, age, and time in service. An overwhelming trend readily emerges from the data. Twenty-one (88%) out of the 24 veterans who planned to attend an institution of higher education, stated that they planned to attend a community college, and two planned on attending a vocational training program. Only one veteran (3%) in the study planned to attend a four-year baccalaureate granting institution. The following sections describe the data associated with veterans' college choices. Four major influential factors emerged from the data concerning the choice of community college attendance: veterans' perception of cost and financial resources, program of study offerings, flexible schedules, and advising received from military education personnel.

Perception of Cost and Financial Resources

The majority of research study participants indicated they selected attendance at a community college due to financial resources. It is surprising to note that more than 80 percent of veterans selected this factor despite substantial benefits through military educational benefits. A description of veterans' beliefs about financial expenditures for college attendance is provided in the following section. For example, when a 22-year-old specialist, eligible for military educational benefits, was asked what type of institution he planned to attend, he responded:

I'm not going to go for the best, because if I decide to go on to higher education, that's the time to go for the big-wig schools. For a lower degree in general it really doesn't matter what kind of school you go to. Cost is a big factor. I have to work, so I'll probably just go to the local junior college because it's cheap and close.

In a follow-up question regarding the need to work the veteran stated:

Money is still a factor for me because the money I get from the Army is because I'll be attending school, but it doesn't have to go to school. I've always had to live with people in the Army, so getting an apartment somewhere is a big deal. I also will need the money for a truck and health insurance.

Another specialist stated:

Well, the two-year colleges are the best way to go and this is what both of my parents say as well. That way you don't have to set up a degree plan, you just get the basics out of the way cheaper. Basically to get the basics out of the way without paying much money for the basics.

When a female sergeant was asked what type of higher education institution she planned on attending she began laughing and stated:

Right now, since I already have a lot of credits out there floating from the 45 credits I got from military training at DLI. I'm going to go to a community college to save some money and put them all together for an Associates.

A seasoned master sergeant who has already earned an Associate's degree in Criminal Justice stated:

I'm looking at X Community College for when I get out for a second associates degree. They have the EMT training program I'm looking at. Low prices for courses also is definitely a factor.

Another seasoned veteran from the Midwest planning to enroll in the local community college stated, "I'm going to try to go to the least expensive place I can go to of course." An additional veteran expressed a

similar sentiment: “I’ll try to find a low-cost school and I mean cheap.”

Program Offerings

Several veterans in the sample as indicated that program offerings drove their decision to attend a community college. Although program offerings were not the primary reason for institutional selection, many of the veterans in this sample indicated an interest in pursuing a vocational or training program in a specific skill area. The following statement by a sergeant highlights the value many veterans place on practical or vocational programs of study. A sergeant interested in HVAC technology shares the following sentiments about attending a community college:

Two-year colleges prepares (sic) you better for work. It is more practical, vocational stuff. Practical is important because taking care of my family has to come first. I have a short attention span, so regular college classes would get old.

Another veteran stated:

I’m going to X Community College because they offer an Associates in Military Intelligence Operations. That’s my specialty in the Army, so I don’t think I’ll learn much, but I think the degree will be good in the job market because they are just pouring money into all the homeland security programs.

A young specialist, the only veteran in the sample selecting to attend a four-year institution stated:

I plan to go to X State [University] because they have a really good agriculture program. All my family is in that field and X State [University] is a good school. I plan to live at home to save money the first year that I’m there.

Flexible Schedules

The convenience and flexibility of community college course offerings was also noted as an influential reason for selecting community college attendance. Five veterans mentioned flexibility in class schedules as an important factor when choosing an institution. The fol-

lowing excerpts from the interviewed veterans describe the impact of flexible schedules on community college attendance. A sergeant describes the importance of flexible schedules in the following statement:

I find it hard to fit school into my work schedule. That and I spend a lot of time taking care of my kids. Community colleges in this area are really the only ones that offer classes at the times when I can actually take them. So, I would say cost and flexibility in schedules are most important.

A specialist describes a similar outlook:

Man, I’ll tell you, between juggling work and soon I’ll have reserve duty, I need to take my classes online or at least have teachers who understand when I’m out of town for awhile (sic). Two-year colleges are better for that kind of thing.

An interesting pattern evolved during the individual interview sessions, highlighting that many veterans do not fully understand the difference between community colleges and four-year baccalaureate granting institutions. There appears to be quite a disconnect between veterans’ understanding of the differences in degree offerings at community colleges and four-year institutions. For example, a 24-year-old specialist anticipating enrolling in X College, a local community college clearly indicated a lack of understanding about the type of institution he selected in the following statement:

I’m going to a fully accredited university I want a good school name behind my name that’s why I chose X Community College. Two-year colleges are like a lesser school kind of dealie, I wouldn’t go to anything like that. Once I go, I want the highest level in criminal justice.

A specialist shared the following statement regarding her choice to attend a local community college in her hometown:

I feel comfortable at X Community College and I really like that they have locations all over town. I’ll probably stay there for my bachelor’s degree as well.

Likewise, a 25-year-old sergeant stated:

I am now planning on going to X Community College working on a bachelor's degree.

However, at the time of this interview, X Community College did not offer any baccalaureate programs. Clearly, there are a number of veterans who do not understand the differences in institutional characteristics between community colleges and four-year institutions. This is particularly troubling when one considers the vast literature describing the major differences that exist in degree attainment and long-term return on investment.

Advising from Military Education Counselors

Interviews with educational counselors, education officials, and VA representatives, indicate systemic and consistent encouragement to attend community colleges rather than four-year institutions. When the Director of the Education Center was asked to describe the recommendations provided to prospective students he stated:

We steer beginning students here toward X Community College. One, because it's a good school and it's got a lot of general education courses. Its' cheap. It's a community college, so it's not going to cost a lot of money. It's convenient, you can go downtown or here on base and there's a lot of different, I'll say variety and different types of courses offered.

An experienced education services counselor commented:

Our students are lucky to have a good community college here with a lot of offerings. We like to encourage our starting students to X Community College because it's inexpensive and convenient.

Likewise, a veteran's administration representative asserted:

I think most soldiers should start at the community college. That way it saves them money and they can explore some different course areas. I went to a community college, and I was able to save a lot.

Another educational services counselor commented on the cost savings of attending a community college in the following statement:

The community college is just so inexpensive. I cringe when I see soldiers pick these high-priced technical institutes that aren't accredited. Soldiers can rack up massive tuition bills and use up all of their benefits for credits that can't be transferred anywhere. I try to sell them on taking a few courses at a cheaper school first.

When asked about the factors that influence the college choice process, an education services counselor asserted:

Most people go to X Community College because most people are first-time students and it would be foolish for us both money wise and student wise to steer them toward a school that charges [more].

A veterans administration representative stated:

We send everyone to the local community college. It would be crazy for them not to. It just costs so much less.

Clearly, many educational counselors, veteran's representatives, and military education officials recommend for soldiers to start at a community college rather than a four-year institution. In fact, every education counselor and veterans' representative interviewed in this study encouraged community college attendance and viewed community colleges as the best educational institutions for veterans due to potential cost savings.

Discussion

This study was designed to examine the college choices of transitioning veterans in an attempt to ascertain the pattern of veterans' choices to attend institutions of higher education and their choices between two-year and four-year institutions. The first research question examined in this study was: *What type of institutions do veterans plan to attend, and what are the major factors that influence their choices?* When this question of institutional choice was posed to veterans participating in this study, a dramatic trend of community college as the premier institutional selection emerged. Twenty-one out of the 24 veterans who planned to attend an institution of higher education, stated that they planned to attend a community college; two planned on attending a voca-

tional training program; and only one veteran in the study planned to attend a four-year baccalaureate granting institution.

The research findings highlight a myriad of salient issues influencing veterans' educational aspirations and college choice processes. Veterans' elaborations on their educational backgrounds, their parents' highest levels of education and occupational backgrounds, and their parents' perspectives toward college attendance reveal that 22 of the 24 veterans with college aspirations would be first-generation college students. The selection of community colleges by 88 percent of the veterans in this study is consistent with literature on the college choices of first generation college students. Community colleges traditionally enroll a disproportionate number of first generation and nontraditional aged students when compared to four-year colleges. While community colleges provide valuable access and pathways of higher education success, it is also important for potential student veterans to be informed consumers about differential outcomes in the likelihood of attaining a baccalaureate degree (Grubbs 2020; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; Hussar, *et al.* 2020, 166–169).

An additional key finding in this study is that many veterans espoused inaccurate perceptions between different institutions in higher education. An interesting pattern evolved during the individual interview sessions, highlighting that many veterans do not understand the differences between community colleges and four-year baccalaureate granting institutions. When asked to describe differences between community colleges and four-year higher education institutions, many research participants were unable to articulate any contrasting characteristics. In addition, many participating veterans reported the intention to enroll within a community college to earn a baccalaureate degree, despite the identified institution not awarding such a degree.

The majority of research study participants indicated they selected attendance at a community college due to financial resources. More than 80 percent of veterans selected this factor despite substantial benefits through military educational benefits. This finding is consistent with the price response literature that indicates first

generation college students are acutely price sensitive despite financial aid resources. Since first generation college students are traditionally responsive to tuition pricing, it is not surprising that this response to the military educational benefit allocation emerges. In addition, although program offerings were not the primary reason for intuitional selection, many of the veterans in this sample indicated an interest in the specific skills they would acquire through attendance. The convenience and flexibility of community college course offerings was also noted as an influential reason for selecting community college attendance.

The second research question examined in this study was: *What types of messages do military education counselors and officials communicate about attending higher education, and how do these messages influence veterans' college choices?* Data from the research interviews suggest that military education officials, military educational counselors, and veteran's representatives, consistently focus on institutional cost and recommend for veterans to start at community colleges rather than four-year higher education institutions. Although this encouragement may hinder veterans' probability to earn a baccalaureate degree, the advice provided by these representatives also serves an important function of steering veterans away from diploma mills and predatory institutions that seek to capitalize upon the government funding afforded to veterans. The interview findings suggest that the military education counselors who were interviewed view the cost savings as the most influential factor rather than degree attainment.

Recommendations and Implications for Practice

Findings from this study offers a myriad of implications for practice in supporting veterans' college choice processes and degree attainment. Following an analysis of the key findings in this study, three recommendations emerge as important strategies to expand veterans' consideration of the continuum of postsecondary opportunities, including those provided by four-year public and private non-profit institutions where they are currently underrepresented.

- *College and university recruitment efforts should build upon military education counseling and provide scaffolded learning opportunities* to help student veterans more fully understand the structure of the higher education system including types of degrees, differences between community colleges and four-year institutions, and the wide variety of educational opportunities available to them.

Veterans are predominately first-generation college students (Institute for Veterans and Military Families 2019; National Conference of State Legislatures 2014). Therefore, many veterans may not possess a strong understanding of differences between higher education organizations or strategies for navigating the college choice process. For that reason, it is essential for both college and university recruiters and military education counselors to provide information during formal presentations and individual counseling sessions regarding the wide variety of degrees and certifications that are available, as well as the structure of the higher education system, enabling veterans to make institutional choices that best meet their educational aspirations. Results from this study indicate increased communication of the specific practical skills derived from program offerings and availability of flexibility in program delivery are particularly compelling for veterans as adult learners.

- *Expand and increase the frequency of college and university outreach as well as educational benefit counseling throughout military service* to ensure veterans fully understand college costs and their educational benefits. Educational aspirations develop over time and are influenced by an individual's perception of postsecondary opportunities. Therefore, emphasizing postsecondary educational counseling during the military onboarding process and throughout their time of service is critical in establishing a strong plan for transition. This is particularly notable in the case of veterans since many will be first generation college students who may have limited previous exposure to higher education systems, enrollment processes, and cost structures. This may be especially salient in the

case of veterans who report not fully understanding the scope of their educational benefits.

- *College and university outreach and recruitment efforts as well as military educational counseling should include additional focus on comparing graduation rates, student persistence rates, and return-on-investment associated with types of degrees.* Interview results suggest that expanding educational counseling to include ROI can increase veteran participation in four-year colleges and universities. Resources like the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard, College Board's *College Pays* initiative or Georgetown's Center on Education and the Workforce's *A First Try at ROI: Ranking 4,500 Colleges* study on the return on investment by institution and institutional type may be particularly useful in helping inform prospective students about differentials in degree attainment and subsequent earnings (Carnevale, *et al.* 2019; Ma, *et al.* 2019).

Limitations and Suggested Future Research

There are several limitations that are inherent in this research study. These limitations include the number of veterans who participated in the research study as well as the number of data collection locations. First, this research study interviewed 30 veterans. Although the interviewees were typical in terms of educational attainment, military occupational specialties, and demographics when compared with other veterans, the findings may not be generalizable to the entire veteran population. A larger sample of veterans, veterans assigned to other military installations, or veterans who did not participate in the study may have provided different responses. Therefore, further research with larger sample sizes and multiple military installations would be beneficial. In addition, a longitudinal study posing follow-up questions would be valuable given the complexity of veterans' college choices and their development over time.

Conclusion

An analysis of veterans' educational aspirations, enrollment, and the educational advising they receive demonstrates the complexity of veterans' college choice

processes. The utilization of combined models of college choice theories provides a helpful lens for better understanding how veteran pre-disposition factors, military socialization, and the structure of military education benefits influence veterans' college choices. Four influential factors in veterans' college choices were described in this research study, including perception of cost and financial resources, program of study offerings, flexible

schedules, and advising received from military education personnel. Veterans' descriptions of the factors provide a valuable opportunity for college and university outreach to prospective student veterans as well as areas of collaboration with military educational counselors to enhance veterans' postsecondary opportunities and baccalaureate attainment.

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