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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Engagement, Decision-Making, and Community: Veterans in Higher Education

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Education

by

Brandy M. Jenner

Dissertation Committee:
Professor David John Frank, Chair
Associate Professor Thurston Domina
Assistant Professor Rachel B. Baker

2018

DEDICATION

To

my family and friends

and to my interview participants

in recognition of their help and all they have shared with me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Publications
> • Jenner, Brandy M. (Vol. 31.1, April 2019). "Student Veterans in Transition:

The Impact of Peer Community." *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*.

• Jenner, Brandy M. (2017). "Student Veterans and the Transition to Higher Education: Integrating Existing Literatures." *Journal of Veterans Studies*.

Under Review
• Jenner, Brandy M. "Veteran Success in Higher Education: Augmenting Traditional Definitions." Final Editorial Review at the *Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research*.

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Multimedia
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PRESENTATIONS

• 2018. "Academic and Social Engagement Among College Student Veterans: An Investigation Using the Beginning Postsecondary Survey." Paper presented at the *American Educational Research Association Conference*.
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• 2017. "The Impact of Peer Community on Student Veterans' Transition to Higher Education." Paper presented at the *Pacific Sociological Association Conference*.
• 2017. "Turning the Tables: Integrating Undergraduates into Research on Faculty Experience." Paper co-presented with A.K. Bonsu and S.M. Funderburk at the *Ethnographic and Qualitative Research Conference*.
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• 2016. "Status Passage and the Student Veteran: Applying Glaser and Strauss's Theory of Status Passage to Student Veterans in Higher Education." Paper presented at the *Pacific Sociological Association Conference*.
• 2016. "A Comparison of Interview Contexts and Methodological Implications: In-Person Public, In-Person Private, and via Skype." Paper co-presented with K.C. Myers at the *Ethnographic and Qualitative Research Conference*.
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Engagement, Decision-Making, and Community: Veterans in Higher Education

By

Brandy M. Jenner

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Irvine, 2018

Professor David John Frank, Chair

This dissertation investigates student veteran educational experience from a multi-methodological institutionally comparative perspective. Quantitatively, using nationally representative data, it explores student veteran academic and social engagement. Qualitatively, this work investigates student veteran educational decision-making and the role of peer communities in veteran success at colleges and universities.

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation investigates student veteran educational experience from a multi-methodological institutionally comparative perspective. Quantitatively, using nationally representative data, it explores student veteran academic and social engagement. Qualitatively, this work investigates student veteran educational decision-making and the role of peer communities in veteran success at colleges and universities.

Motivation

Despite the large numbers now enrolled in U.S. postsecondary institutions – currently over 750,000 veterans are using the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill to pursue postsecondary education (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics 2017) – researchers and practitioners still know little about what influences educational success for student veterans. In fact, we know much more about how the G.I. Bill has impacted higher education than we know about its impact on individual veterans at colleges and universities. Currently, studies show that U.S. veterans are less likely to earn a bachelor's degree than non-veterans (Cate 2013; Vacchi and Berger 2014). Veterans have a different life experience than traditional students and other nontraditional students; however, much prior research has treated these students as no different from other nontraditional students. On the contrary, some researchers have found that veterans seem to be different in meaningful ways from other nontraditional college students (DiRamio and Jarvis 2011; Durdella and Kim 2012; Molina and Morse 2015; Vacchi and Berger 2014). However, the precise quality of the veteran "x factor" with regard to educational experience and attainment is something that researchers have not yet been able to capture. Further, student veterans remain under-researched in terms of variation in experience at colleges and universities with differing selectivity, financial costs, academic and extracurricular opportunities, persistence rates, and student demographics, yet there is reason to believe that these institutional differences are particularly important for student veterans, as compared to other student groups (Persky and Oliver 2010; Rumann, Rivera, and Hernandez 2011). Additionally, although many campuses now boast that they are "veteran-friendly," there is no consensus among researchers, policy-

makers, or practitioners on what this claim entails (Vacchi and Berger 2014). Taken together, this dissertation contributes to broader literatures about college experience as well as having major implications for designing policies that will lead to increased veteran educational attainment.

Literature

The literature on student veterans in higher education is still in its infancy. This dissertation will contribute to three bodies of literature related to the study of higher education, in addition to veterans studies: (1) academic and social engagement, (2) educational decision-making, (3) peer community and co-identity organizations.

Engagement. Engagement theory highlights the importance of explicitly linking student behaviors and effective educational practice (Kuh 2001; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie 2009). Engagement has two main components: Academic and social engagement. Academic engagement refers to student interactions with faculty, staff, and peers inside and outside the classroom related to intellectual development, while social engagement relates to student interactions with peers, faculty, and staff as well as involvement in campus activities that affect personal, social, and identity development. Among traditional and (some) nontraditional college students, academic and social engagement are related to increased persistence and degree attainment, lower attrition, and more positive academic outcomes (Bean and Metzner 1985; Braxton 2000; Kuh et al. 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; Peltier, Laden, and Matranga 1999; Scott-Clayton and Rodriguez 2012; Tinto 1993). However, these relationships have not yet been investigated for student veterans. The current study represents the first institutionally comparative investigation of veteran's engagement and thus represents a meaningful contribution to both the literature on veterans in higher education and the literature on (nontraditional) student engagement in higher education.

Educational Decision-Making. Though veterans are entering a variety of types of higher education institutions, they seem to prefer public colleges and universities and to experience a high degree of success there – public colleges enroll 56% of GI Bill students and account for

64% of total degree completions among a cohort of recent student veterans (Cate et al. 2017). Models of college choice focus on socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, individual aspirations, institutional prestige, personal circumstances (i.e. family obligations, geography, etc.), and other social factors (Hill 2016; Hossler and Gallagher 1987; Smart 2006). However, the majority of the literature on college-choice is focused on traditional-aged students. Prior literature finds that adult students choose postsecondary institutions because of convenience, financial cost, and the perceived ease or difficulty of transferring (Compton, Cox, and Laanan 2006; MacAllum et al. 2007; Smart 2006). Existing literature suggests the college-choice process for veterans is likewise based on financial influences rather than institutional reputation or selectivity (Durdella and Kim 2012; Hill 2016; Molina and Morse 2015; Radford 2011; Vacchi and Berger 2014). This study will add to existing literature on veteran college-choice by examining the emphasis veterans place on academic and non-academic factors when making their choice of institution.

Research with traditional college students indicates that choosing a major is a complex and dynamic social process, rather than an isolated individual event (Holmegaard, Ulriksen, and Madsen 2014; MacAllum et al. 2007). However, there is no research on how student veterans chose their major or program of study once they enroll at postsecondary institutions. Nor is there any research on how they choose their career aspiration, beyond the idea that many will choose something directly related to their military work experiences (DiRamio and Jarvis 2011; Vacchi and Berger 2014). Since there is no research on how and why veterans make decisions about programs of study and career aspirations, this study has the power to inform future research and to add nuance to studies of nontraditional student major and career decision-making.

Peer Communities. Student veterans remain under-researched in terms of variation in experience at colleges and universities with differing selectivity, financial costs, academic and extracurricular opportunities, persistence rates, and student demographics, yet there is reason to believe that these institutional differences are particularly important for student veterans, as compared to other student groups (Persky and Oliver 2010; Rumann et al. 2011; Summerlot, Green, and Parker 2009). Peer communities and co-identity organizations are a crucial form of

3

social engagement on college campuses and research suggests that peer community is particularly important for underrepresented students (Gonzalez 2000; Guiffrida 2003; Harper and Quaye 2007; Inkelas 2004; Jenner 2017; Kuh et al. 2007; McCabe 2016; Museus 2008; Museus, Yi, and Saelua 2017). Unfortunately, nearly 40% of higher education institutions currently lack programs and services specifically for student veterans (McBain et al. 2012). Few studies investigate the role of these organizations in making a peer community and increasing veteran persistence in higher education, and there is no comparative work on these organizations. Thus, the current study will contribute to the literature on peer community impacts on underrepresented student's educational persistence and attainment.

The Three Studies

Chapter one employs quantitative methods and uses nationally representative longitudinal survey data from the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal Study (BPS:04/09) to examine whether (and how) engagement in college matters for student veteran degree attainment. Specifically, this study asks: What is the relationship between academic and social engagement and degree attainment for veterans and other military-connected students?

Chapters two and three use a qualitative approach and make use of interview and observational data collected between 2014-2017 at three different postsecondary institutions: a research university, a comprehensive university, and a community college. Chapter two investigates three interrelated questions: (1) How do veterans choose their college institution, (2) how do veterans choose their college major, and (3) how do veterans choose their post-college career aspiration? Chapter three presents a nuanced examination of peer community contexts at three different postsecondary institutions focusing on three thoroughgoing themes related to peer impacts: camaraderie, sharing information, and academic assistance.

The scholarly goals of this work are to contribute to bodies of literature related to academic and social engagement at colleges and universities, educational decision-making, and

peer communities in higher education. I also hope that this work will contribute to policy related to student veterans at the postsecondary institution level.

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Chapter 1

Academic and Social Engagement Among College Student Veterans:

An Investigation Using the Beginning Postsecondary Study

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between student engagement (both academic and social) and degree attainment among veterans in postsecondary education using the Beginning Postsecondary Study. While there is some evidence that academic and social engagement play an important role in persistence and attainment for traditional and nontraditional college students, these factors have yet to be investigated among veterans and other military-connected students. I employ multivariate linear regression to investigate these relationships. Overall, I find differences in the relationship between engagement (both academic and social) and degree attainment between veterans and non-veterans. In particular, I find that social engagement is not positively associated with degree attainment among veterans, as it is among traditional and other nontraditional students. Implications of these results are discussed.

ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG COLLEGE STUDENT VETERANS:

AN INVESTIGATION USING THE BEGINNING POSTSECONDARY STUDY

Recent reports indicate that the U.S. postsecondary system may be failing to deliver the promise of educational opportunity to some of the most deserving among us. U.S. veterans are less likely to earn a bachelor's degree than non-veterans (Cate 2013; Vacchi and Berger 2014). A recent report by the National Veteran Education Success Tracker found that, among veterans who began postsecondary education in 2009, 54% had earned any certificate or degree and that only about 20% had earned a BA six years later (Cate et al. 2017). Despite the large numbers now enrolled in U.S. postsecondary institutions – currently over 750,000 veterans are using the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill to pursue postsecondary education (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics 2017) – researchers and practitioners still know little about what influences educational success for student veterans. Although many campuses now boast that they are "veteran-friendly," there is no consensus among researchers, policy-makers, or practitioners on what this claim entails (Vacchi and Berger 2014). Better understanding what predicts persistence for veterans will allow policy makers and administrators to better create programs and policy interventions targeting veteran and military-connected students.

Among traditional and (some) nontraditional[1] college students, academic and social engagement are related to increased persistence and degree attainment, lower attrition, and more positive academic outcomes (Bean and Metzner 1985; Braxton 2000; Kuh et al. 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; Peltier, Laden, and Matranga 1999; Scott-Clayton and Rodriguez 2012; Tinto 1993). However, these relationships have not yet been investigated among student veterans. The relationship between engagement and degree attainment might differ for student veterans for a number of reasons: their educational engagement is not continuous due to military service, they typically have competing out of school responsibilities, and they may have a clear

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[1] Nontraditional student is a general term used to refer to a large group of diverse students who are older than traditional age upon entry into higher education and poses a number of other characteristics like working full-time, having dependents, and so on.

career goal and are thus less likely to want to experiment with social and academic extracurricular activities. In addition, student veterans will typically find themselves in the minority on most college campuses. Moreover, not all student veterans saw college as their first-choice life path. Because of these and other factors, recent generations of veterans are less likely to achieve a BA than either traditional college students or other nontraditional students (National Center for Education Statistics 1994). This study will shed light on the role of social and academic engagement in the veteran educational attainment disparity.

This study uses nationally representative longitudinal survey data from the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal Study (BPS:04/09)[2] to examine whether (and how) engagement in college matters for student veteran degree attainment. Specifically, this study asks: What is the relationship between academic and social engagement and degree attainment for veterans, and how does this compare between veterans and non-veterans?

LITERATURE

Engagement theory highlights the importance of explicitly linking student behaviors and effective educational practice (Kuh 2001; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie 2009).[3] In brief, engagement reflects student behaviors and institutional processes designed to affect student behaviors. Social engagement refers to student interactions with peers, faculty, and staff as well as involvement in campus activities. Academic engagement refers to student interactions with faculty, staff, and peers inside and outside the classroom that are related to intellectual development. Students choose to engage on campus for a variety of reasons, but research shows that, in general, students who do so experience benefits like increased graduation rates and

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[2] This data set is used instead of the more recent BPS:12/17 because the newer study does not include data on student engagement.

[3] The concepts of engagement and integration have frequently been used interchangeably in the literature on students in higher education (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie 2009). However, there are differences between the two concepts. For a robust discussion of the differences between engagement and integration, see Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009). In this study, engagement is the term that will be used, because it captures the nuance of both student action and institutional investment.

higher college GPAs (Astin 1993, 1984; Kuh et al. 2008; Tinto 1993, 2012; Wolf-Wendel et al. 2009). Institutional processes also effect student engagement in that there can be no engagement if there are no opportunities for engagement (ex: a student can not join a theatre club if no such club exists).

Research has revealed a number of individual level factors that are negatively related to student engagement and thus persistence in the U.S. higher education context: poor prior achievement, measured by high school grades, low SAT scores, and need for remediation in the first year of college (Astin 1993; Braxton 2000; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; Scott-Clayton and Rodriguez 2012); low SES and parental education level (Astin 1993); male gender (Astin 1993; Braxton 2000); higher age at first enrollment and at continuing enrollment (Peltier et al. 1999); and non-White race/ethnicity (Braxton 2000). Frequency and quality of student interactions with peers is also associated with engagement and persistence (Astin 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; Tinto 2012). Additionally, there are institutional factors that are associated with lower levels of college student engagement and persistence: initial attendance at a two-year institution (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991) and attendance of under-represented minority students at predominately white institutions (Braxton 2000).

Many researchers have noted the particular importance of engagement of nontraditional students into college services and campus life (Bean and Metzner 1985; D'Amico et al. 2014; Deil-Amen 2011; Gilardi and Guglielmetti 2011; Tinto 1993, 2012). In his research on persistence and attrition, Tinto (1993) found that, like traditional students, nontraditional students' informal contact with faculty, staff, and students on campus is important for persistence, but unlike traditional students, social engagement was less strongly related to persistence than academic engagement. Bean and Metzner (1985) similarly emphasize academic engagement over social engagement as the most important factor impacting nontraditional student attainment. One of the problems with this work on engagement and persisitence is that the authors base definitions of persistence and success on institutional (rather than student-centered) measures of retention; for example students who transfer or who are engaged

13

informally rather than through formal networks may be seen as under-engaged based on these measures. One of the strengths of the BPS is that it follows students through their education careers, whether they remain at their initial college or not.

Additionally, few studies investigating student engagement in relation to degree attainment are derived from large, multi-institution datasets using student level data (Kuh et al., 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is the principal source of information about the large-scale impacts of student engagement (Kuh 2001; Kuh et al. 2008, 2007). Kuh et al. (2007) found that student engagement positively affected both grades and persistence and that the general positive impact of engagement also exists for students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. However, the NSSE is used voluntarily by postsecondary institutions and is therefore not nationally representative. Unlike the NSSE, the BPS:04/09 is nationally representative and followed students even if they changed institution. Using the BPS:04/09, Flynn (2014) found that both academic and social engagement were significantly positively related to postsecondary degree attainment net of individual and institutional factors. The bulk of the studies presented here suggest that the relationship between engagement and persistence is positive, but given the limitations of the extant work on engagement and persistence, there is reason to believe that the relationship may be different among different types of college students.

Argument

Student veterans embody many of the factors previously noted as being negatively related to engagement and persistence in higher education: they are more likely to be male than female (though this has shifted in recent years), they often have poor high school academic records (though not necessarily poor standardized test scores), and they are typically older at first enrollment in college (though some enroll at community colleges prior to military service). In addition, many student veterans attend 2-year institutions for at least some portion of their time in higher education. Moreover, student veteran's engagement in college is far-removed from their high school experience. Similarly, because they are more likely than traditional students to

14

be married, have children, or live off campus, the even the presence of student veterans on college campus can not be taken for granted. However, student veterans are more than the sum of their risk factors. Not only do they have unique combinations of these characteristics, but they have also taken a different path to postsecondary education than other students and are formed by different life experiences than even other nontraditional students, older students, students with dependents, and so on.

Some researchers have found limited support for the idea that academic and social engagement matter for undergraduate student veterans (Cole and Kim 2013; Griffin and Gilbert 2015; Kappell et al. 2017; Olsen, Badger, and McCuddy 2014; Williams-Klotz and Gansemer-Topf 2017). In terms of academic engagement, frustration with meeting faculty expectations was associated with lower GPA, while feeling academically prepared was associated with increased persistence for veterans attending community colleges (Williams-Klotz and Gansemer-Topf 2017). In terms of social engagement, Olsen et al. (Olsen et al. 2014) noted veteran's social frustrations on campus and their need for improved social support. Interestingly, Cole and Kim (2013) found that student veterans are less likely than non-veteran students to have a friendly and supportive relationship with other students and to collaborate with classmates outside of class, which speaks to both academic and social engagement. However, the authors found that student veterans are more likely than non-veteran students to say they have a positive relationship with faculty members and say they feel supported by and have a sense of belonging with administrative personnel. Finally, Griffin and Gilbert (2015), and Kappell (2017) found that, among veterans, family obligations were a stronger priority than college engagement and that engagement in extracurricular academic and social activities was typically regarded as unnecessary by veterans. For veterans, academic engagement appears dependent on relationships with faculty on campus, while social engagement of any type appears to be particularly limited. However, the majority of research on veteran engagement at postsecondary institutions tends to be based on small-scale qualitative case studies, which underscores the need for additional large-scale research.

Barnhart's (2011) work with the BPS:04/06 data found that, although academic engagement was found to be a significant factor in educational persistence among two-year college students, engagement scores did not differ significantly between veteran and non-veteran students. The author found that social engagement, in contrast, had no relationship to persistence for veterans and non-veterans, but was also virtually identical for both groups. This is of note, since most prior research has found (or speculated) that veteran and nontraditional student engagement is lower than engagement among traditional students. This study sheds some light on the role of engagement, but only for veterans at two-year colleges. And, since the author aggregated different social and academic engagement variables, he was unable to tease out the specifics related to both concepts. Lastly, the author of this study relied heavily on t-tests and tests of mean difference, which fail to account for important differences within the sample and underscores the need for more sophisticated large-scale studies of veteran engagement. Clearly, additional research, particularly research that compares students across different types of institutions, is needed in order to specify the role of engagement in educational attainment.

Furthermore, differences in availability of extracurricular opportunities at different types of campuses mean that the relationship between engagement and attainment may vary by institutional type. Not all institutions have veteran's centers. However, community colleges in particular have improved in this regard since the early 2010's. Unfortunately, researchers rarely take this institutional context into account. Thus the current study represents the first institutionally comparative investigation of veteran's engagement. Additionally, veterans' frustration with their traditional student peers is well documented (Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell 2009; D'Amico et al. 2014; Rumann and Hamrick 2010; Vacchi and Berger 2014; Wheeler 2012), but this may be even stronger at community colleges where at least some traditional student peers may be less inclined to take their studies seriously. Thus, there is a need for studies that investigate engagement across institutional type to develop a nuanced understanding of the role of engagement in degree attainment for veterans.

With all these factors taken into account, one would suspect that student veterans as a

group might have low engagement during college. For example, Jones (2017) recently found that the majority of student veterans in his study of veterans at community colleges do not take part in on-campus programs specifically designed for them. The preliminary evidence points to veterans being less engaged than their traditional student peers, however this has not yet been shown in nationally-representative sample. Since engagement is associated with lower attrition and more positive academic outcomes, one might also suspect that student veterans would suffer from higher-than average attrition. That seems logical, though contested within the research literature given of a general lack of educational outcome data related to veterans (See Cate 2013); however, the role of engagement in student veteran degree attainment remains unclear.

I hypothesize that the relationship between engagement and persistence found in the traditional student population (and even in other nontraditional student populations) is not the same as that found in the veteran population. For example, it should be possible for a veteran who has a strong personal goal orientation toward attaining a BA to do so in spite of a lack of campus social or academic engagement, particularly if that person has strong support from family or friends outside of college. Of course, the same may be said of non-veterans, but I suggest that it is more likely to be true of veterans than non-veterans because of the emphasis the military places on tenacity and an orientation to "complete the mission." In addition, I postulate that the association between engagement and degree attainment may vary by type of degree earned, since opportunities for social engagement in particular are likely to differ by type of institution and that these opportunities may be different between veterans and non-veterans, since veterans often have competing priorities and are much more likely to live off-campus.

DATA AND METHODS

To examine the role of engagement in student veteran degree attainment, I analyze data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:04/09), a nationally representative dataset following a cohort of students through postsecondary education. It contains data on student demographic characteristics, academic outcomes (persistence and completion in college), and post-college outcomes. The BPS:04/09 is uniquely suited to an

examination of the patterns of degree attainment because it provides extensive institutional and student self-reported survey information from 2004, 2006, and 2009 from a nationally representative sample of roughly 16,700 students, including 375 military-connected students, entering college for the first time in the Fall of 2003.[4] Inclusion of students who are not direct entrants to postsecondary education from high school is a unique and valuable aspect of the BPS.

The present study concerns student self-reported behaviors that were designed to mimic Tinto's engagement framework as measured in the BPS:04/09. The academic engagement component variables report the frequency ("never," "sometimes," or "often") that a student (1) met with faculty informally, (2) spoke with faculty outside of class, (2) met with academic advisors, and (3) worked with study groups outside of class. The social engagement component variables report the frequency that a student participated in or attended (1) campus arts activities, (2) clubs, groups, or organizations, and (3) school sports. For both academic and social engagement variables, an index was compiled by the BPS:04/09 using an average of the scores of the answers to these questions and multiplying by 100. Thus, these indices are not actually continuous variables. In my analysis, I have constructed dummy variables for some engagement and low or no engagement based on the academic and social engagement indices in the BPS:04/09.[5] The initial 2004 student data were collected beginning in March of the students' freshman year and represents their first-year engagement behaviors.

The BPS:04/09 is a uniquely valuable dataset for the study of how engagement related to degree attainment among veterans specifically because it contains these measures of engagement. However, it must be noted that these are student self-reported, and do not reflect the full compliment of opportunities for academic and social engagement. The academic measures depend heavily on the availability and willingness of faculty to meet outside of class.

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[4] This represents about 2% of the BPS sample, which is roughly similar to the percentage of veterans in the freshman class of 2003.

[5] For both indices, but especially social engagement, there is a strong skew toward the left ("never"). In constructing the dummy variables for social engagement, no engagement is equivalent to a student having marked "never" on all social engagement activities. In constructing the dummy variables for academic engagement, low engagement is equivalent to a student having marked "never" on three of the four activities.

Additionally, sports, arts, and club activities are not the only possible sources of engagement for college students. Additionally, the engagement variable fails to take into account student visits to different campus centers, within which they may have valuable interactions with staff and students: for example the career center, the international student center, the LGBT center, and the veterans center. The social engagement index also fails to make any distinction between "participating in" and "attending" various activities, though being a member of a sports team surely confers different benefits than simply attending a game or match. Though the dataset fails to capture the full range of student involvement on campus, it is still a powerful tool to investigate the relationship between engagement and attainment on college campuses.

First, I compared traditional college students with student veterans, to get a better idea of the differences between these groups of students. However, there are many ways in which veterans may differ from traditional and even other nontraditional college students. In order to enable comparisons between students who were similar on many measures but differed with regard to veteran status, I next limited my sample to students who were at least minimally nontraditional but not maximally nontraditional (i.e. those who had between one and six of the NCES's index of seven nontraditional student risk factors[6]).[7] Since social and academic engagement are vital variables of interest for this study, I used listwise deletion for students with no 2004 engagement data in constructing my analytic sample. This strategy decreased my veteran sample size by about 40 students or roughly 10% overall. Although this loss of students is significant, the importance of having data on the dependent variables of interest ultimately outweighed the decreased N.

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[6] As per the NCES, nontraditional student status is based on the presence of one or more of seven possible nontraditional characteristics: delayed enrollment, part-time attendance, being independent of parents, working full time while enrolled, having dependents, being a single parent, and being a recipient of a GED or high school completion certificate.
[7] It should be noted that I have run my statistical models with different specifications of the sample based on nontraditional risk factors. In particular, I have run the model with an even more limited risk factors sample (risk factors 2-5 instead of 1-6) and have found similar results using this smaller sample.

My initial sample of veterans and traditional college students was comprised of 340 veterans and 8855 traditional college students, for a total sample of 9195 students. The initial sample was limited to traditional students (those with 0 nontraditional student risk factors) and veterans (with any number of nontraditional student risk factors) who had 2004 engagement data. See Table 1.1 below for descriptive statistics of the initial sample population.

Table 1.1 Descriptive Statistics: Veterans and Traditional Students

	Veterans	Traditional Students
Respondent is Male	76%	43%
Respondent is White	63%	71%
Age	27.61	18.33
Parent Education Level is AA or Higher	46%	68%
Risk Index and Nontraditional Indicators 2003-04	2.89	0.00
Student Expects to Earn BA or Higher	80%	96%
Total Financial Aid 2003-04 (Includes VA/DOD)	$2,540	$7,774
Average College GPA	3.05	2.95
Student has GPA of 2.0 or Below	14%	12%
Student has GPA Above 3.0	54%	51%
Lived On-Campus During 2003-2004	15%	58%
Student's 1st Postsecondary Institution was a 4-year	31%	76%
No 2004 Academic Engagement	59%	27%
Some 2004 Academic Engagement	41%	73%
Low 2004 Social Engagement	68%	28%
Some 2004 Social Engagement	32%	72%
Any Degree Earned by 2009	38%	70%
BA Earned by 2009	18%	60%
N	340	8855

Student veterans and traditional students in the initial sample differed substantially with regard to most of the factors shown above. Some of the most notable differences were age (with veterans nearly a decade older than traditional students), on-campus residence, initial attendance at a 4-year college (veterans were less than half as likely as traditional students), academic and social engagement, and degree attainment (with traditional students twice as likely to earn an AA and more than three times as likely to earn a BA as veterans).

However, veteran and non-veteran nontraditional students are much more similar to each other than veterans and traditional students. My second analysis sample of nontraditional students consisted of 6192 students, 279 of whom were veterans or military-connected students (including 66 reservists, 40 active duty service members, and 173 veterans) and 5913 of whom

were non-military-connected students. All students in both samples were first-time college freshman in the fall of 2003 and had persisted through their first term in order to be surveyed in the Spring of 2004. Selection of control variables was informed by Tinto (1993) and Bean and Metzner (1985), and include pre-college student characteristics (such as gender and parent's highest degree) as well as first-year student characteristics (such as age at first enrollment and first-term GPA). All students with 2004 engagement data and who had risk factors between 1-6 were included in the second analysis sample. None of the students had missing data on the chosen covariates, hence there was no need to address missing data. See Table 1.2 below for descriptive statistics of the second sample population.

Table 1.2 Descriptive Statistics: Veteran and Non-veteran Nontraditional Students

	Veterans	Non-Veterans
Respondent is Male	76%	40%
Respondent is White	59%	60%
Age	30	24
Parent Education Level is AA or Higher	41%	43%
Risk Index and Nontraditional Indicators 2003-04	3.49	2.46
Student Expects to Earn BA or Higher	76%	82%
Total Financial Aid 2003-04 (Includes VA/DOD)	$1,995	$3,437
Average College GPA	3.10	2.90
Student has GPA of 2.0 or Below	13%	17%
Student has GPA Above 3.0	55%	47%
Lived On-Campus During 2003-2004	5%	10%
Student's 1st Postsecondary Institution was a 4-year	22%	26%
No 2004 Academic Engagement	66%	54%
Some 2004 Academic Engagement	34%	46%
Low 2004 Social Engagement	78%	68%
Some 2004 Social Engagement	22%	32%
Any Degree Earned by 2009	35%	37%
BA Earned by 2009[8]	12%	15%
N	279	5913

Based on previous literature, I hypothesized that engagement should be either unrelated or less significantly positively related to veteran students' attainment than traditional students' attainment. Since veterans are at such a different stage in the life course, the reasons that academic and social engagement are positively associated with persistence and success for traditional students may not apply. Additionally, I hypothesized that veteran engagement will

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[8] Since my sample only contains students with at least one nontraditional student risk factor (i.e. students who are at least minimally nontraditional students) they have, in general, lower education attainment than traditional students.

also be unrelated or less strongly positively related to degree attainment than even other nontraditional students.

I test these hypotheses by employing multivariate linear regression[9] utilizing a fully interacted model in which military service is interacted with all variables. Since students are not clustered within individual institutions in the BPS, rather than using institution fixed effects, I have included characteristics of a student's first college or university (including institution state, percentage of student receiving federal grants at the institution, and whether the institutions was designated as a Hispanic-serving institution) in the regression as well as institution type fixed effects to account for variation across different types of institutions.[10] All analyses are weighted using the BPS:04/09 "WTA000" weight, to correct for sampling bias in the data. A general regression equation can be found below:

Attainment = α + $β_1$ student characteristics + $β_2$ (student characteristics*veteran status) + $β_3$ academic engagement + $β_4$ (academic engagement*veteran status) + $β_5$ social engagement + $β_6$ (social engagement*veteran status) + $β_7$(institutional characteristics) + $β_8$ (institutional type fixed effects) + ε.

FINDINGS

First, I examined differences in the relationship between academic and social engagement and degree attainment among student veterans and traditional college students (results in Table1.3). Put another way: does veteran status moderate the relationship between student engagement and educational attainment? As there are few analyses of this type in the extant literature, this comparison provides a useful starting point.

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[9] I present the results from linear models in this paper because they are easier to interpret. Since my outcome is binary, logistic regression is the preferred method; however, I have run the logistic models and the results are qualitatively similar (in terms of both sign and significance) to those presented in this paper.
[10] This is based on the initial postsecondary institution's Carnegie Basic Classification and includes 33 unique institutional types based on institutional sector (public, private, for-profit), urbanicity (rural, suburban, urban), and degree granting type (Associates, Bachelors, Masters, etc.), among other factors.

Table 1.3 Regression Predicting Educational Atainment for Veterans and Traditional Students: Comparison Between B.A. Attainment and Attainment of Any Postsecondary Degree, Using 2004 Engagement.

	Any Degree in 2009	BA in 2009
Some 2004 Academic Engagement	0.0056 (0.0154)	0.0277* (0.0140)
Some 2004 Academic Engagement * Veteran	0.1031 (0.0727)	0.1058+ (0.0553)
Some 2004 Social Engagement	0.0371* (0.0166)	0.0472** (0.0147)
Some 2004 Social Engagement * Veteran	-0.1725* (0.0730)	-0.1140* (0.0548)
Constant	0.6585*** (0.1470)	0.2686* (0.1172)
N	9,195	9,195
R-squared	0.222	0.366

Note. I estimated a fully interacted model with a number of demographic and education controls (Gender, Race, Age, Parent Education Level, Nontraditional Student Risk Factor Index, Highest Degree expected, Total Financial Aid, GPA, Student Residential Status, as well as First Post-secondary Institution Level, State, Sector, Percentage of Student Receiving Federal Grants, Hispanic-Serving Status), all of which I interacted with military status. Estimates include student's first postsecondary institution type fixed effects.

In general, students who earn a BA are more likely to be engaged, both academically and socially. The most significant differences in the relationship between engagement and attainment between student veterans and traditional are found among BA earners. As we would expect, academic engagement is positively related to BA attainment. For veterans, it seems that academic engagement, at least at the BA level, may have an even more positive relationship with degree attainment, though this relationship only approaches significance. In terms of social engagement, we also see a positive association between it and degree attainment, among traditional students who earned any degree or certificate and BA earners. However, the relationship between social engagement and degree attainment is statistically significantly different ($p < 0.05$) for veterans than for traditional students, as predicted. Social engagement is not positively related to completion of an AA or BA among veterans; instead, social engagement is negatively related to degree completion and approaches, but fails to attain, statistical significance. There are important differences between the populations of student veterans and traditional college students, as indicated by both existing literature and the descriptive statistics presented in Table 1.1. However, in order to discern whether these differences are due to

veterans' nontraditional status (and concomitant demographic factors), it is necessary to compare

them to other nontraditional students.

In the next model (Table 1.4), I examine differences in the relationship between academic

and social engagement and degree attainment among veteran and non-veteran nontraditional

students.[11] The coefficients that test my hypothesis about the differences in the relationship

between and success for veterans and non-veterans are the interaction terms related to academic

and social engagement: some 2004 academic engagement * veteran and some 2004 social

engagement * veteran.

Table 1.4 Regression Predicting Educational Atainment for Veteran and Non-Veteran Nontraditional Students: Comparison Between B.A. Attainment and Attainment of Any Postsecondary Degree, Using 2004 Engagement.

	Any Degree in 2009	BA in 2009
Some 2004 Academic Engagement	0.0423* (0.0178)	0.0207+ (0.0111)
Some 2004 Academic Engagement * Veteran	0.0500 (0.0806)	0.0918 (0.0574)
Some 2004 Social Engagement	0.0570** (0.0205)	0.0318* (0.0130)
Some 2004 Social Engagement * Veteran	-0.1780* (0.0799)	-0.0895+ (0.0538)
Constant	0.2928*** (0.0636)	0.1324** (0.0473)
N	6,192	6,192
R-squared	0.098	0.202

Note. I estimated a fully interacted model with a number of demographic and education controls (Gender, Race, Age, Parent Education Level, Nontraditional Student Risk Factor Index, Highest Degree expected, Total Financial Aid, GPA, Student Residential Status, as well as First Post-secondary Institution Level, State, Sector, Percentage of Student Receiving Federal Grants, Hispanic-Serving Status), all of which I interacted with military status. Estimates include student's first postsecondary institution type fixed effects.

Again, in general, academic and social engagement are significantly positively related to

both any degree attainment and BA attainment for non-veterans, though the relationships are

weaker at the BA level. Interestingly, the relationship between social engagement and degree

attainment (at both the AA and BA level) is statistically significantly different ($p < 0.1$) between

veterans and among non-veteran nontraditional students. For veterans, social engagement is

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[11] During robustness checks, I introduced a quadratic terms (quadratic of both academic and social engagement) into the equation to test for non-linearity, but this was not statistically significant.

negatively related to degree completion and approaches, but fails to attain, statistical significance. Finally, it should also be noted that the predictive value of the model for students who complete a BA is double that of those who complete any degree (R-squared around .20 versus around .10 respectively). This may be because, in general, the student pathways leading to a BA are less varied than the student pathways to an AA degree. Additionally, the predictive value of the model for the nontraditional student population is also lower than for the traditional student population, which may be expected as nontraditional students are more varied than traditional students.

The idea that social engagement is less relevant to degree completion than academic engagement (particularly for nontraditional students) is supported in the extant research literature. However, I find that both academic and social engagement are indeed related to degree attainment among nontraditional students at the BA and any degree levels. Interestingly, I find that social engagement appears more strongly associated with degree attainment than academic engagement. However, as predicted, engagement does seem to be less strongly associated with educational attainment for veterans than for both traditional and nontraditional students. The relationship between social engagement and degree attainment is significantly different for veterans as compared to non-veterans. Academic engagement seems to matter a small positive amount for all students, whereas social engagement matters differentially: for non-veteran nontraditional students the relationship between social engagement and degree attainment is positive, whereas it is neutral or negative for veteran nontraditional students.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to better understand the relationship between academic and social engagement and degree attainment of veterans and other military-connected students. This study expands the literature on academic and social engagement and student persistence through the case of student veterans, and provides a nuanced examination of the relationship between engagement and degree attainment in higher education for a particular subgroup of students. My findings come in contrast to previous literature, which emphasizes the significant positive role of

social engagement in degree attainment among a variety of students. Instead, I find that social engagement is, at best, unrelated to BA degree completion and, at worst, negatively related to educational attainment among student veterans. Thus, veteran status does indeed moderate the relationship between student engagement and educational attainment.

However, these findings may be due in part to the conceptualization of engagement measures contained in the BPS:04/09. The construction of the indices using student self-reported behavioral frequency measures was intended to be theoretically aligned with Tinto's academic and social engagement categorization. However, the academic measures in particular have been constructed such that academic engagement is just as likely to be the result of institutionally mandated communication with faculty as student self-directed academic engagement behaviors. Many highly engaged students speak with faculty outside of class, meet with advisors, and work with study groups, however so too do non-engaged students (many of whom may be incentivized to engage in these behaviors because of academic probation or similar status). This makes it difficult to tease out differences in mandated academic engagement and self-selected academic engagement. Further, as social, identity, arts, and athletic student organizations often have a faculty advisor, there may be some bleed-over between the social and academic engagement variables. Additionally, the majority of the sample reported low or no social engagement, though this is largely consistent between veterans and non-veterans.

The role of social engagement in particular is quite different between veteran and non-veterans degree completers. This phenomenon has several possible explanations. One explanation would be that social engagement activities, while potentially enriching for non-veterans, provide a distraction from degree attainment for veterans—particularly as their time on campus may be limited due to competing priorities. Veterans, by virtue of their military service, tend to be both team-oriented and service-oriented. However, it is no secret that veterans, like other older students, often need remediation both in content and study-skills when they enter higher education after military service. It is possible that veterans who are active on campus put too much time and energy into these activities to the detriment of their studies. However, if this

is the case, it would be paradoxical, as veterans in my sample had higher GPAs on average than non-veterans (among both traditional and nontraditional student populations), and a larger percentage of veterans had GPAs above 3.0 than their non-veterans nontraditional peers (55% versus 47%). Similarly, one would not expect to find these types of differences between veterans and other nontraditional students, who may also need remediation.

Another explanation is that the veterans who are highly socially engaged did not intend to complete a degree and are instead using their education benefits (and accompanying housing benefits) to "take a break" after military service before getting a job that does not require a certificate or college degree. While it is true that a slightly smaller percentage of veterans than non-veteran nontraditional students expect to earn a BA (76% versus 82%), both groups expect to earn a college degree at a high rate. Thus, this possible explanation is unlikely.

Finally, the findings may be explained by looking at a similar case – the experiences of students of color at predominantly white institutions (PWI). For students of color at PWIs, interactions within their cultural community may be positive, while interactions with the wider campus community may have a negative effect. For example, Gonzalez (2000) notes that for Latinx students at PWIs, social interactions on campus often conveyed messages of devaluation and exclusion. Similarly, Braxton (2000) suggests that low graduation rates among racial/ethnic minority students might be due in part to their inability to find membership in the cultures and subcultures of PWIs. Finally, Guiffrida (2003) found that ethnic student organizations offer a critical venue for both social involvement and establishing connections with faculty members. Since most higher education institutions can be described as "majority civilian" rather than "majority veteran/military," these studies have particular relevance for facilitating veterans engagement on campus. Today, young adults are much less likely to have a friend or family member serving in the U.S. armed forces than any time within the past century, a phenomenon known as the "military-civilian gap" (Pew Research Center 2011), which means that veteran status is becoming a "minority" identity. Thus, social interaction may serve to highlight veterans differences from other students on campus, rather than their similarities.

It should be noted that veterans enrolling in college for the first time in the fall of 2003 represent the earliest wave of the current generation of veterans. Thus, colleges and universities may not have had infrastructure in place to best serve these students. The vast majority of colleges and universities that offer services to veterans and military personnel report having sharply increased these provisions since September 11, 2001; yet, in 2009, the final follow-up year for the BPS:04/09, only about half of colleges and universities had programs and services specifically designed for military service members and veterans (McBain et al., 2012). Additionally, at the start of the unpopular Iraq war, student veterans may have dealt with additional interpersonal challenges on campus, which may have affected their persistence. Even now we can think of veterans and military-connected students as nearly always being in the minority in terms of past cultural experiences—even among other nontraditional students—much like students of color on majority white college campuses. Sadly this means that, as for many students of color, student veterans may be better off when they limit their social engagement on campus.

However, a growing body of research suggests that co-ethnic organizations can positively contribute to the experiences and outcomes of racial/ethnic and other minority students (Braxton 2000; Gonzalez 2000; Guiffrida 2003; Harper and Quaye 2007; Inkelas 2004; Kuh et al. 2007; Museus 2008; Museus, Yi, and Saelua 2017). I postulate that these positive outcomes experienced by students of color who interact with co-ethnic organizations may be generalizable to many marginalized and nontraditional students, including student veterans participating in veterans' organizations. Co-identity organizations have yet to be studied in relation to student veterans, yet many colleges and universities have centers for veteran student services. Currently, about 62% of institutions of higher education have programs and services specifically for student veterans (McBain et al. 2012). Within the 62% of institutions that offer programs and services for veterans, 78% of public four-year institutions reported having a designated veteran/military student organization, while 52% of private not-for-profit four-year institutions reported having such organizations (McBain et al. 2012).

Additional qualitative studies investigating student veteran engagement, which are able to capture more than what is measured in large datasets, are desperately needed in order to determine whether the negative role of social engagement in degree attainment can be mitigated by participation in co-identity organizations. Considering the numerous benefits of bachelor's degree attainment, both to individuals and to society, and the historic positive economic impact of large numbers of veterans earning a BA degree, researchers, policy-makers, and higher education professionals should be invested in improving the educational attainment of veterans and in transforming institutions to promote this goal.

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Chapter 2

Veteran Educational Choice: Institutions, Majors, and Career Aspirations

ABSTRACT

This study investigates student veteran educational decision-making; specifically it examines institution choice, major choice, and career aspiration among these students. With regard to educational decision-making, there are some reasons to expect veterans to fit smoothly into the nontraditional college student mold (they are, after all, a subset of this population) and other reasons to expect veterans to depart from it (veterans have a different life experience than even other nontraditional students). With regard to institutional choice, veterans appear similar to other nontraditional students, in that they value proximity over prestige. In terms of choice of program of study, however, veterans appear more similar to traditional students, in that they value fostering personal interests and talents as well as developing marketable skills. Finally, with regard to career aspiration, veterans are unique; their military service has given them both job experience, which they may choose to build on or not, and has also instilled in them an orientation toward service that continues to effect their decision-making processes long after their military service.

VETERAN EDUCATIONAL CHOICE: INSTITUTIONS, MAJORS, AND CAREER ASPIRATIONS

Thanks to draw-downs in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere veterans have been entering higher education in large numbers for the last few years, and are continuing to do so. About 200,000 veterans entered higher education for the first time in 2015 and many more have returned to higher education as continuing students after military service (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics 2017). Veterans have a different life experience than traditional students and other nontraditional students; however, much prior research has treated these students as no different from other nontraditional students. On the contrary, some researchers have found that veterans seem to be different in meaningful ways from other nontraditional college students (DiRamio and Jarvis 2011; Durdella and Kim 2012; Molina and Morse 2015; Vacchi and Berger 2014). However, the precise quality of the veteran "x factor" with regard to educational experience and attainment is something that researchers have not yet been able to capture.

Though veterans enter many types of higher education institutions, they seem to have a slight preference for large public colleges and universities and to experience a high degree of success there – public colleges enrolled 56% of G.I. Bill students and accounted for 64% of total degree completions among a cohort of recent student veterans (Cate et al. 2017). However, about 75% of all college students are enrolled at public universities, which means that veterans are underrepresented at these institutions. According to the same study, veterans earned associate degrees within 5.1 years on average and bachelor's degrees within 6.3 years on average, longer than the average traditional student (Cate et al. 2017). Though we now have some information about what educational choices veterans make, we still know little about how veterans are making choices about college. To remedy that gap, this study investigates three interrelated questions about how veterans navigate higher education: (1) How do veterans choose their college institution, (2) how do veterans choose their college major, and (3) how do veterans choose their post-college career aspiration?

LITERATURE

With regard to educational decision-making, there are reasons to expect veterans to fit smoothly into the nontraditional student mold and reasons to expect veterans to depart from it. Below, I explore research related to institutional choice, major choice, and career aspiration among college students, with an eye toward differences that may exist for student veterans.

Institutional Choice

Currently, around 90% of high school students indicate that they expect to attend college (Domina, Conley, and Farkas 2011; Goldrick-Rab 2007; Rosenbaum 2011). However, we know that only around 30% of students will earn a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Many factors contribute to this paradox, but choice of initial postsecondary institution is particularly under examined within the literature. Schneider and Stevenson (2000) coined the term "the ambition paradox" to refer to students with high ambitions for a bachelor's degree who choose (for a variety of financial, personal, and structural reasons) to begin college at a two-year institution, where they are unlikely to earn such a degree. Clearly many students at community colleges plan to use the degrees they receive there in pursuit of a BA. However, we know that many will fail to transfer to a four-year institution. Unfortunately, students from upper SES backgrounds are more than twice as likely as students from middle- and low-SES backgrounds to initially attend a four-year, rather than a two-year college (Dickert-Conlin and Rubenstien 2009; Goldrick-Rab 2006; Hoxby and Turner 2013). Many students who enter two-year colleges never complete a program, transfer to another postsecondary institution, or attain a degree or credential (Baker 2016; Crosta 2014; Goldrick-Rab 2010; Long and Kurlaender 2009; Scott-Clayton 2011). This may be due to the fact that students from socioeconomically disadvantaged family backgrounds are less likely to possess a clear sense of how to negotiate college and, when these students encounter multiple pathways and options with regard to institutions, courses, programs of study, and so on, they may be making uninformed (and unassisted) educational choices that lead to lower levels of educational attainment.

Models of college choice focus on socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, individual

aspirations, institutional prestige, personal circumstances (i.e. family obligations, geography, etc.), and other social factors (Bergerson, Heiselt, and Aiken-Wisniewski 2013; Espinoza, Bradshaw, and Hausman 2002; Hossler and Gallagher 1987; Smart 2006). However, the majority of the literature on college-choice is focused on traditional-aged students. Prior literature suggests that adult students enter college to get a better paying job, advance in their current job, support themself after a life event, and gain general knowledge (Compton, Cox, and Laanan 2006; MacAllum et al. 2007). MacAllum et al. (2007) found three factors associated with adult student college-choice: convenience, financial cost, and the perceived ease or difficulty of transferring (at two-year institutions). Notably, institutional reputation and availability of majors or program of study are not cited as important factors considered by adult students within this literature.

Existing literature suggests the college-choice process for veterans is likewise based on financial influences rather than institutional reputation or selectivity (Durdella and Kim 2012; Hill 2016; Molina and Morse 2015; Radford 2011; Vacchi and Berger 2014). Interestingly, Durdella and Kim (2012) find that proximity—a vital consideration for many adult students entering college—was not a major factor in veteran's choice of postsecondary institution. However, Radford (2011) found that military-affiliated student's main considerations in deciding where to attend college were: location (79%), affordability (54%), program of study (53%), personal and family reasons (35%), and finally reputation (31%). Similarly, Steele et al. (2010) found that convenience and proximity to social support systems (typically friends or family) were the most significant factors in a student veteran's choice of college.

However, college-choice may be more nuanced than a merely financial decision. Steele et al. (2010) argued that institutional choice among the veteran community varies according to institutional subgroup and intersecting identities. They found that non-academic factors such as location, flexibility of course offerings (rather than the course offerings themselves), and services for nontraditional students were important to veterans who enrolled at two-year colleges, but that academic factors, such as program of study and institutional reputation, were important to

veterans who enrolled at four-year institutions. Finally, Molina and Morse (2015) found that the best predictors of whether a veteran enrolled in a two-year institution versus a four-year institution were the highest math course attempted in high school and the veteran's personal educational expectations. This study will add to existing literature on veteran college-choice by examining the emphasis veterans place on academic and non-academic factors when making their choice of institution.

Major and Career Choice

Currently, there is no research on how student veterans chose their major or program of study once they enroll at postsecondary institutions. Nor is there any research on how they choose their career aspiration, beyond the idea that many will choose something directly related to their military work experiences (DiRamio and Jarvis 2011; Vacchi and Berger 2014). However, recent research with traditional college students indicates that choosing a major in college is a particularly complex and dynamic social process (involving formal and informal information networks), rather than an isolated individual event (Holmegaard, Ulriksen, and Madsen 2014; MacAllum et al. 2007). Baker's (2018) study of major choice among a group of California community college students found differences by gender and ethnicity in major-choice (among pairs and clusters of majors the students considered). In particular, female students as well as white and Latinx students were most likely to consider majors unrelated to each other, rather than disciplinary clusters of similar majors, when making decisions about their programs of study. However, little is known about *why* students choose specific majors and consider similar or disparate sets of majors. Additionally, in terms of the financial impacts of college on career choice, Rothstein and Rouse (2011) found that taking on student debt causes graduates to choose substantially higher-salary jobs and reduces the probability that students will choose lower-paid "public interest" jobs. Since there is no research on how and why veterans make decisions about programs of study and career aspirations, this study has the power to inform future research and to add nuance to studies of nontraditional student major and career decision-making.

Argument

The National Veteran Educational Success Tracker report tells us that 54% of veterans who entered higher education in 2009 completed a postsecondary degree or certificate by 2015, but neither mentions where these students began their educational journeys (for those who transferred) nor why they chose their initial higher education institution or major (Cate et al. 2017). We do know that veterans in this recent cohort were likely to earn a degree or certificate in business-related fields (27%), STEM-related fields (14%) and health-related fields (10%). They are also most likely to graduate from large public higher education institutions, at both the two-year and four-year level (Cate et al. 2017). However, we do not yet know if there is a link between college choice, major choice, and occupational aspiration, nor whether these links differ in any systematic way between students at two- and four-year colleges or at private, public, or proprietary institutions.

Researchers expect the way veterans navigate higher education to be different than traditional students because of their age and life experiences. But, prior research is ambiguous on whether to expect veterans to differ from other nontraditional students with regard to how they navigate college. In short, the existence of a veteran "x-factor" is, thus far, unclear. Thus, one of the main contributions of this study is to discern whether veterans navigate higher education in ways that are similar to or different from other nontraditional students.

METHODS

This study takes place at three higher education institutions. Santa Maria City College[1] (SMCC) is a medium sized public two-year college. Orange State (OS) is a large public master's level university. The University of California, Palms (UCP) is a large doctoral granting public research university. All three institutions are located within the same general area in southern California and all have the potential to draw from the same pool of potential students. Among these three institutions, OS is notable for its close proximity to a VA hospital, which may

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[1] Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper in order to protect confidentiality of individual participants and the institutions.

partially explain why it has a high proportion of students with disabilities (and students with the most severe disabilities) in my sample. In contrast, though SMCC had the highest proportion of veterans with disabilities in my sample, the most common disability was a 10%-30% disability rating for tinnitus or post-traumatic stress. All three institutions have formal Veterans Centers and all three institutions are proximate to a number of military installations. Table 2.1 below contains demographic information of the participants by institution.

Table 2.1 Participant Demographic Information

	SMCC (22)	OS (15)	UCP (18)
% Male	73%	70%	70%
% Female	27%	30%	30%
Average Age	27	33	31
% White	45%	40%	44%
% Black	5%	7%	6%
% Latinx	50%	30%	22%
% API	0%	20%	17%
% Students with a Disability	73%	67%	33%
Branch - Army	11	8	7
Branch - Navy	4	4	5
Branch - Marines	5	1	3
Branch - Air Force	1	2	3
Branch - Coast Guard	1	0	0

The primary data for this investigation were interviews with student veterans and ethnographic observation, which took place at each institution's Veterans Center and at institutionally sponsored veteran events. Interviews are ideal for gathering data on an individual's thought process around institutional choice, major choice, and career aspiration because they allow students to talk through their options and be prompted about their decision-making in a way that neither survey data nor observation alone would allow. Overall, over 100 hours of observational field notes were recorded, and interviews with 55 student veterans across the three institutions were conducted. Veteran participants were recruited through paper volunteer recruitment sheets and emails sent by the Veteran Resource Center. Interviews took place between Spring 2014 and Spring 2016 at all three institutions and were conducted either in-person (either in a quiet public space or in a private office on campus) or electronically (via

Skype). The main question asked of all interviewees was: "Can you please share with me your pathway from enlisting in the military through becoming a student at your current institution?" This question typically elicited a robust narrative from the participant, although I used periodic prompts to obtain additional information.

Each veteran in this study represents a case of college-related-choice (of institution, major, and post-college aspiration), thus I concentrated my interview questions around recalling specific moments of choice for participants. In particular, the moments of high school graduation and military-discharge were highly salient. When asked about these moments, students often described feelings of confusion and being "at a loss." When confronted with these types of answers, I prompted students for more information. For example, I asked students to share their personal story from enlisting in the military to enrolling at their current institution, and then prompted the student to tell me more about why they left the military, what their thought processes were regarding leaving the military and entering school, how they chose their current educational institution, and what their plans were when they entered higher education (and what they were at the time of interview).

I hypothesized that, since there were demographic and experiential differences in the student veterans at each institution, their college-related decision making processes might also differ by institution. Student veterans attend various types of postsecondary institutions and there is reason to believe there are institutional differences[2] as well as differences in the types of veterans that attend a specific institution type along theoretical and empirical axes. In my sample, there was little difference in the gender or ethnicity of participants at each institution, with the exception being a higher percentage of Latinx students at SMCC and a higher percentage of Asian students at OS and UCP. In terms of military branch, SMCC had the largest number of Marine veterans, while UCP and OS had comparatively higher populations of Navy and Air Force veterans.

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[2] Note that this work takes place at public nonprofit institutions, but that participants in the study may have previously attended for-profit colleges and/or private colleges before going on to attend non-profit public colleges.

FINDINGS

This section discusses student veteran's choice to enter the military, enroll at their current postsecondary institution, choice of major, and choice of career aspiration.

Choice to Enter the Military

The vast majority of veterans in this study moved directly from high school to the military, without first enrolling in college or entering the labor force. Thus, their motivations to enter the military are relevant to this study because, although each participant eventually enrolled in college, many chose the military over college or joining the work-force at the moment of high school graduation. These military motivations represent some of the reasons a student did not initially choose college. The most common motivations for joining the military among all 55 participants were: to gain funds for college or other endeavors (23), a general interest in the military (15), improve life direction in general (15), not being "ready" for college (11), having a friend/family member in the military or a familial military legacy (9), and patriotism (6). Most participants (as suggested by the motivations to enlist above) said that they planned to serve in the military for only a certain number of years, and many of these intended to pursue education upon separation from the military.

Choice of Postsecondary Institution

Upon separation from the military, the information students received about their educational benefits differed widely, with those separating most recently having received the best information from their service branch (as military-civilian transition programs have improved over time).[3] However, at best this information usually covered types of benefits and eligibility, rather than either specific or general information about higher education institutional type, programs of study, and how to enroll at a college or university.

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[3] The Transition Assistance Program provides information, tools, and training to ensure service members and their spouses are prepared for the next step in civilian life whether pursuing additional education, finding a job in the public or private sector, or starting their own business (See Military.com n.d. for more information)

Student veterans in this study chose their first postsecondary institution after military service in a variety of ways. Foremost, location was a major factor for many participants. Many veterans at each institution explicitly mentioned location in response to the question, "How did you choose your current or initial (for those who transferred) postsecondary institution?" At OS, 40% of interviewees mentioned location, at SMCC, 50% of participants did so, and at UCP 55% of participants cited location as a main factor in their choice of postsecondary institution.

For a large number of participants, having a friend who was planning to go to school in a particular location or at a particular institution was a major factor in their college choice. This is particularly true at the community college level. SMCC students Steve, Mercedes, and Shaun all told specific stories about having a friend who encouraged them to enroll at SMCC. Steve said, "My best friend from [deployment area] is from California... He'd always talked about how it was like this heaven on earth… and when [he] transferred to SMCC, I transferred with him." Shaun, who is originally from Texas, met his wife, who was from Southern California, during his time at Camp Pendleton and when Shaun was discharged from the military due to injury, the family moved to be close to his wife's parents and his friends from military service. He then chose to enroll at SMCC both because it was geographically proximate and because he had "heard good things" about the Veterans Center at SMCC. Jo, a student from UCP said that he ended up at UCP because he had a friend who was living in the area who also attended the university and that, "To be completely honest with you, I didn't do any research about any school. I applied to one school, which was UCP." Additionally, particularly for those students at OS, the proximity of a VA medical center was also a factor in their decision. For example, two of the students I spoke with at OS mentioned that they had been to the VA at OS before they enrolled or transferred there and it was something that made the school more attractive to them. Similarly, because many participants transitioned from active-duty military service into the military reserves, proximity to a military base was an important factor. Dan, a student at UCP

spoke about this in our interview: "Because I was still- I was still active duty, living down there. That's why I went. [SMCC] was the nearest available school."

Diego, another SMCC student, mentioned both location and availability of program of study as important factors in choosing an institution: "I looked for the closest college which was [SMCC]. I made sure they had some nutrition classes and the degree [I wanted], which they did... That's how I came here. From here I'm planning to transfer to [OS] because they offer a Bachelor's in Nutrition." As Diego's remarks demonstrate, for some students, a school's reputation and the availability of certain majors or programs of study was also a factor in their choice of institution. This was more likely to be true of students at OS and UCP, but overall only 9 students from the full sample of 55 student veterans mentioned program availability or institutional prestige and reputation as a factor in their institution choice. Additionally, the one student from SMCC who mentioned program availability, Miguel, said that having a friend who was already in his desired program at SMCC was also a major influence. Alan, a UCP student and Army veteran, related an especially poignant story about how he chose his institution:

> In the military you have to put down a place where you want to get buried if you get killed. The cemetery that I put down... I chose it because it had a view of the Pacific Ocean... I thought if I ever got out of the military, I was going to move [there]. ... I was trying to figure out, "What am I going to do? Am I going to get a degree in finance or something like that?" My buddy said, "I think I want to do International Studies." Then he said, "I heard [UCP] has got a pretty good program over there." ... [UCP] just seemed like a logical choice for me. I thought, "What if I went to Stanford or Harvard?" which I knew if I really tried, I could have gotten in if I wanted to, but I figured, "No, I like it here. I like what's happening here."

This excerpt speaks to the idea that veterans may also desire to be invested in their local communities, which is a contributing reason that many chose their courses of study and career aspirations (which will be discussed in the next section).

Most participants mentioned applying to only one or two schools, and few interviewees mentioned doing research on a specific school or range of schools that they might apply to. This contrasts with the popular storylines about college choice among traditional students, and especially that upper and middle class students today apply to numerous institutions. Jane, an OS student, was one exception. In our interview, she mentioned being interested in attending film

school and doing online research on both film and video game design programs in the larger Southern California area but that she ended up at OS because, "I was finding out about how military educational benefits work. [The schools I researched were] all private schools, so they're not completely paid for… I was just doing the calculations of how much I would owe out of pocket afterwards. It's like, 'I don't want to risk that.' Then that's when I started looking at state colleges." Though Jane did research on a large number of schools and programs, she ultimately enrolled at OS (after a year at a local two-year college) because of cost and convenience.

Overall, veterans in this study used location/proximity, (perceived) affordability, and social and community networks to narrow their college search to just one or two institutions. This may seem similar in some ways to how traditional and nontraditional students choose their institutions. However, the factors that effect ideal location, such as the availability of a VA hospital nearby and proximity to military bases contribute to the veteran "x-factor."

Choice of Program of Study

In this study, students often entered an institution with only a vague idea of their major and either formally declared a major or switched majors after taking a few classes; an experience not unlike that of many traditional college students. The chief reasons participants cited for selecting their current major or program of study were to gain marketable skills (13), to make use of their pre-existing skills and military experience (13), to help others and give back (9), and because of a general interest in a particular subject (7).

Overall, most of the student veterans interviewed in this study had declared majors in the Physical/Biological Sciences, Engineering, and Math or in the Social Sciences. Students at UCP were very likely to major in the Physical or Biological Sciences, Engineering, and Math, at 10 of the 18 veterans interviewed. Students at SMCC were also likely to major in STEM fields; while student veterans at OS were much more likely to major in Social Sciences. Table 2.2 contains a breakdown of majors by institution and discipline.

Table 2.2 Participant Major by Institution

	Majors (Includes Double Majors)			
	SMCC (22)	OS (15)	UCP (18)	Total (55)
Arts & Humanities	0	1	0	1
Physical/Biological Sciences, Engineering, and Math	8	2	10	20
Social Sciences	5	8	6	19
Professional (Degree)	6	2	4	12
Professional (Certificate)	3	0	0	3
Undeclared/Unspecified	0	2	0	2

However, it should be noted that there are additional differences not captured by this table. For example, at SMCC six of the students majoring in Physical/Biological Sciences, Engineering, & Math were in nursing, kinesiology and nutrition programs. In contrast, at UCP, six of the students majoring in Physical/Biological Sciences, Engineering, & Math were in engineering programs and an additional two were pre-med—fields which are likely to lead to substantially higher earning careers.

Students at UCP were particularly likely (over 50%) to cite economic, skills-related, and military-experience-related reasons for choosing their majors. However, UCP students were also more likely then students at SMCC and OS to have had highly specialized military occupations (ex: military intelligence, mental health specialist, nuclear engineer, and special operations forces), which undoubtedly contributed to their desire to make use of previous experience. Michelle spoke about this in our interview:

> Before the Navy I had no idea that I liked turning valves and starting pumps and making things work… It's like, okay, well I think I'm going to go with mechanical engineering… I already have experience in mechanical engineering… I'm very much a visual learner and a kinesthetic learner. You can totally see piping. You can see where the flow is, you can see where the flow of energy is going. But with piping, you can hear it, you can read the meter.

Michelle went on to mention that she would prefer to work with nuclear energy (which she had experience with in the military) but that she would also be interested in solar and wind energy. Michelle was a particularly interesting case because, even though her major and eventual career aspiration related directly to her military experience, she still experienced a period of uncertainty upon separating from the military and choosing her next steps. She said that, in the military,

"Nobody really told you, 'Oh, since you're a mechanic, maybe we recommend mechanical engineering,' or nothing like that. They never said like, 'Hey, a degree in this might be better than a degree in that depending on these skills that you have.'"

First-generation students, whether veterans or civilians, are more likely to face uncertainty in choosing a major and (among veterans) may be especially likely to rely on their previous experiences when doing so. When asked about his major Marco, a first-generation student who served as a dental technician and was the sole pre-med student I spoke with at OS, said, "I was a little hesitant… No one in my family is really in the medical field. I didn't know what to expect, but I ended up really liking it. I like the technical aspect of it, and also the interaction, the social aspect and making a difference in people. Yeah, so it was interesting at first, but I moved in like every specialty in dentistry and I learned everything that I could." Sergio, a first-generation student at SMCC, also chose his major because of his military experience, having been a military police person and working toward a degree in criminal justice. However, it's also likely that veterans who aspire to a job that is very similar to their military specialization don't go to school to get a degree and instead transition directly into the civilian labor force.

In contrast, some students cited an interest in STEM-related majors, but detached from a specific career path. Instead, these students focused on a subject that was interesting to them and cited their interest as the main factor in the choice of major or program of study. This was particularly true of the veterans at OS – among both Physical/Biological Sciences major and Social Science majors. For example, Lyle, an OS student majoring in Geography, cited a life-long interest in science and mentioned that he wanted a change from his military occupation driving tanks. Mariah, an OS student double majoring in Art and Business, also mentioned her childhood interests when asked why she chose her programs of study: "I've always done art, you know, like since I was a kid. When I was a kid, just drawing because that's what I had access to… but business, that's practicality." For Mariah, a major should be something that both

engages personal interests or talents and is also "practical" in that it is likely to lead to marketable skills or broad job prospects.

Despite the G.I. Bill education benefits that are available to veterans, some students mentioned feelings of anxiety about the financial costs of education. This concern drove some of these students to focus specifically on jobs that they considered marketable or in-demand. Lawrence, a student at UCP was particularly concerned about this among the students at the four-year institutions. In our interview, he said, "There was always a problem with student loans. That's probably been pretty prevalent I think over the past decade or so. I'm looking at there are people who can't pay off their student loans and you look and it's probably because they're not getting degrees that will get them jobs." When asked to sum up why he chose a major in electrical engineering, he quickly replied, "stability and pay." Lee, another UCP student, when asked why he chose to major in computer engineering, answered, "marketability." In addition, veterans with dependent children were also likely to say that their choice of major or program of study was motivated by a desire to earn a certain wage or to provide job security. Isaac, a UCP student on the verge of graduation with a child on the way at the time of our interview, said that he hoped his engineering major would help provide both money and stability for his new family, as well as an opportunity to stay in his local area near well-regarded public schools.

Finally, some of the veterans interviewed mentioned the desire to help or give back when talking about both their choice of major and their career aspiration. For example, William, an OS student, and Tony, an SMCC student, both cited a general desire to help people and benefit society at large when asked why they chose to major in child development. Additionally, Jane (an OS student) cited her personal emotional state upon separation from the military and desire to "reconnect" with humanity after service as a factor in her choice to major in acting:

> I don't know. I was feeling a little inhuman at the time. I think the military made me feel very disconnected and that I was not human or something, so I thought acting would help open me up and get in touch with inner feelings or emotions or just know how to blend in with people better. You feel kind of dead to everybody, like not invested in other people's concerns or sympathetic, at least for me. ... The people that are in acting or the theater degree have that personality type of warmth and openness and acceptance. I thought it would help that I was surrounded by that to, I don't know, make it easier for me to reconnect.

49

For Jane (and surely for others) choosing a major in acting was part of a type of rehabilitation from some of the more traumatic parts of her military service. These narratives counter the flawed assumption that individuals enter the military because of an affinity for violence or destruction with evidence that individuals enter the military for an incredibly wide array of motivations, including a desire to help, give back, and nurture.

The veteran "x-factor" in choosing a major relates to the veteran's military experience. Unlike other older nontraditional students, veterans often anticipated a change in employment (having enlisted in the U.S. military for a specific contract term) long before the change occurred. Additionally, their previous work experience may not have been in a field they ever desired to work in (having been partially dictated by test scores at the time of enlistment). Veterans in this study also showed a strong desire choose a major that would allow them to help others and to rebuild themselves after military service.

Choice of Career Aspiration

Beyond typically cited reasons for choosing a career (money, security, lifestyle, personal interest or talent, etc.), which accounted for roughly 1/3 of responses, there were two streams of participant response that deserve further attention: helping motivations and the idea that participants "just fell in" to a career aspiration. Helping motivations were not distributed equally among participants at all institutions, instead they skewed toward the "lower prestige" institutions: SMCC (41%) OS (30%), and UCP (22%).

Among those who cited a desire to help or give back as a motivating factor in their career choice, participants mentioned both a desire to help in general and to give back to specific communities, including the larger veteran community. I have written elsewhere about the general orientation to giving back that I have found through talking with veterans about their career aspirations (Jenner, forthcoming). One particularly illustrative excerpt came from Robert, an SMCC student:

> Ever since I was a kid, I grew up in a bad neighborhood and I remember most of my neighbors sold drugs, did drugs, or were violent criminals and I remember that they would always use derogatory terms towards police officers and whatnot. When

something happened, police officers were the first ones to call. I'm like, "wow that's kind of cool" you know what I mean? They hate these people but these are the first people they call when they need help. That's what I want to do.

Similarly, Oliver, a UCP pre-med student, said, "I joined the Navy with the intent and became a medic corpsman in particular that seemed to speak to my desire of wanting to help people, that kind of thing. My mom had had cancer for a long time so that probably played into it in some subconscious level. ... I gained a lot of experience with medicine with people being sick, people being injured, all that kind of stuff and I realized that I actually liked that and that's actually what caused me to get out of the military and try to go back to college." Oliver's comment demonstrates how the orientation toward helping was evident both in his decision to join the military and his choice of major and aspiration to pursue medicine.

Additionally, several of the veterans I spoke with mentioned a desire to enter a career that would allow them to help or give back to the larger veteran population, and specifically to work with the VA (an organization that is often seen in a negative light within veterans' communities due to bureaucratic inefficiencies). Diego and Mike, students from SMCC and UCP respectively, both mentioned their own experiences with the VA as a factor in their desire to work within that system – in Diego's case as a nutritionist and in Mike's case as a counselor. Abby, an OS student who was previously a human resources specialist in the Army, gave a particularly eloquent accounting of how her military service and existing ethics of care combined to produce her career aspiration:

> Before I separated, about a year and a half prior to separating [from the military], I started looking into colleges, what I wanted to do, what I wanted to be. I'm actually a sociology major, criminal justice minor and I'm actually going for my masters in social work to work with veterans. … The more veterans that I encountered, the more veterans I was helping [through working at the Veterans Center]… I think when I began working there was when I really decided that that's where I wanted to work. It was a matter of you're walking to and from your office to the restroom or to the cafeteria. You always encounter a veteran who needs help. Everyone just started coming to me and the more people that came to me I just realized why don't I do this? It's not something that seems like work, it's not like it's taking much effort or time, it's just something that comes naturally.

For Abby, the desire to give back and help her fellow service members and veterans began even before her separation from the military and she was able to parley this desire into a work-study

position at the OS Veterans Center and an aspiration to earn a master's degree in social work to continue helping and giving back to the veteran community.

In contrast, when asked about their career and post-college aspirations other participants mentioned a career but noted that they "just fell into it." Lyle, an OS student majoring in Geography, said, "Urban Planning is just a field I fell into. Taking Geography classes, some of which involved planning, it seemed like a natural evolution into the professional world." Lyle, who is still in the Army Reserves, began college with a general interest in science and geography, but no clear career goal. He entered an internship with a local city planning office after his junior year at OS, enjoyed it, and is now planning to work in that field. Isabella, an SMCC student, said that she "had no idea" about a career goal upon separating from the military. She related some of her thought process at the time during our interview: "I knew I was interested in photography and Culinary Arts, but I never looked into it… I started coming to school here [at SMCC] and they didn't have Culinary Arts, so a career counselor put me into just Liberal Arts. One of my first courses, it was actually my very first class, it was psychology, intro. I was fascinated." Since our interview in fall 2015, Isabella has transformed her interest in psychology into a career path and has transferred to a four-year institution where she is working toward a career as a counselor specializing in military and veterans issues.

Clark, an OS student and Navy veteran, explicitly connected his desire to help with his prior military service, but noted that the affordances of the G.I. Bill were what made it possible for him to stumble upon an opportunity that led to his passion:

> I was kind of bored. I was on the GI bill, so I didn't have a job during the semester. So I just did something that was on the weekends… So I tutored some kids, and I was tutoring them in math. I was like, "This is really fun, I really liked this." ... that's why I chose Psychology, I wanted to help people. That was one big reason. That's why I wanted to go into teaching. ... And I think it does connect with the Navy a little bit, because with the Navy you have this mindset of, "All these jobs, you're doing it for America." You've got to have that patriotic ... with other jobs, like Carl's Jr., you don't have that kind of mentality, you know?

Like Lyle and Isabella, Clark had no clear career goal in mind when he entered college, but a general orientation toward helping. And, like Lyle, the G.I. Bill's educational provisions

provided him with both the time and opportunity to pursue his personal interests and translate them into a career that would allow him to continue to serve society.

An orientation toward service and helping others is the crux of the veteran "x-factor." This examination of post-college aspirations highlights the fact that one of the most important aspects of how they navigate higher education is through the lens of service to others. It is this orientation that differentiates veterans from other students, both traditional and nontraditional.

In choosing a career, a major, and a postsecondary institution, veterans vary widely. However, their military experience is one linking characteristic. Military experience affects their choice of institution (through geographic constraints post-service and exposure to locations near military bases), major (directly through military job experience), and career aspiration (through an orientation toward service and giving back). However, military experience is not the only factor, nor in many cases the main factor, in veterans' educational choices. Like nontraditional students, veterans are likely to attend a college or university that is geographically proximate to them, or one that has a positive reputation in a particular program of interest. Like traditional students, veterans are likely to pursue a major that is either interesting to them or that leads to marketable skills and good job prospects.

DISCUSSION

Military choice making is obviously unique to individuals who served in the military, though it does lend insight about what these students value. For many participants in this study, helping or giving back provided a primary motivation for enlistment and also informs their choice of post-military and post-college aspirations. Other participants enlisted specifically to gain funds so that they could eventually pursue higher education. This demonstrates the strong commitment and goal-orientation that some veterans have toward education, even prior to college attendance.

Institution choice among veterans pursuing higher education, on the other hand, is very similar to institution choice among nontraditional students, in that they tend to value location and (a distant second) availability of educational programs, rather than institutional prestige,

institutional type, and on-campus opportunities. Unfortunately, there is a pervasive idea among my interviewees at least, that veterans must begin their postsecondary education at a community college. Jane, an OS transfer student, explains it well: "since I had taken college courses while I was in the military, finding out that I can't just go straight to a university, so then I decided to go to a community college in the area." The idea is that because many individuals in the military take some kind of college level courses during service, that they are disqualified from initially attending a 4-year school. This is, of course, not the case. However, veterans want their military experience to "count" for them in some way, because it is an important part of their experience and identity, and one of the ways this happens in through receiving educational credits for military service experience. Yet, trying to make these experiences count educationally may actually be setting them back rather than expediting their degree progress. This emphasis on making military experience "count" often lands veteran at certain institutions, where admissions staff may be more familiar with evaluating and crediting military experiences. For many of the participants, starting out at a community college means that they will take longer to achieve the bachelor's degree (with transfer) and may exhaust their benefits before reaching their educational goals.

The major choice process among student veterans is quite similar to traditional and other nontraditional students, in that it is usually either a field that the student finds personally interesting or hopes will provide marketable skills. Veterans may, in fact, be more likely to choose a major that they find interesting since they may view their G.I. Bill benefits as providing them with "free" education and time to figure out what they want to do. Additionally, those veterans discharged because of injury may, in particular, need the time to discover a new passion. However, one area that we would expect to find differences between veterans and other students is that they should have more financial support, by virtue of the G.I. Bill, and thus be less concerned with the immediate financial rewards of a particular career. However, this was not the case.

Post-college aspiration choice is more unique among student veterans. Traditional students fall along a career aspiration continuum from knowing exactly what they want to do, to not knowing at all. Older nontraditional students often have a very specific goal in mind for (re)entering higher education. Veterans, of course, fall at various points along this continuum as well. However, unlike traditional students, their military service experience has given them insight into both a specific job (the one they performed in the military) as well as instilling in them strong ideas about the importance of local, national, and international service. This can most easily be seen in their career aspirations – which tend to be either targeted directly at helping professions or, when asked directly about their aspirations, demonstrate a belief that their chosen aspiration will allow them to give back either generally or to veterans specifically in some way.

There were also obvious institutional differences in the sample. Overall, UCP students were the most likely to have highly specialized military experience, major in STEM-related fields, and consider pay and marketability in choosing both college major and career aspiration. Students at OS were the most likely to major in Social Science fields, the most likely to cite helping and giving back as reasons they chose their major or career, and the most likely to have been injured during their military service (67%). Students at SMCC vary the most, likely because they are the students who will feed into the other two institutions (as well as choose not to continue their education beyond the AA or certificate level). Overall, family background did not seem to differ significantly between the two-year population and the four-year population of veterans. However there seemed to be SES differences between the OS and UCP populations, though further research is needed to see if this is a systematic difference or an incidental one. The most obvious commonality is that students at all three institutions were likely to have considered geography and location as the main factor in choosing their postsecondary institution.

This study contributes to literature on college choice processes through a nuanced examination of student veteran education choice making. It provides additional support for existing research citing proximity and convenience as key factors affecting veteran's choice of

postsecondary institution. However, it also confirms a potentially concerning issue among this group of students: veterans (largely) do not consider institutional prestige and program availability when choosing a college or university. This article also serves as an important contribution to the empirical veterans studies literature, as we know little about both what educational choices veterans are making and how they do so. It also builds on previous literature regarding the connection between institutional selection and class mobility, but with a novel population as veterans are in a unique position with regard to national policy and financial support for college access. This study suggests that veterans choose their programs of study and career aspirations in ways that are largely similar to traditional students—either nurturing personal interests or developing marketable skills—but also finds that veterans' existing orientations toward service and helping contribute significantly to their major and career choices.

This study succeeded in finding a veteran "x factor" that differentiates these students from others in higher education. It is made up of specific proximity considerations (such as the location of VA hospitals and military bases as well as existing social networks), concerns when choosing a program of study (due to the time-bound nature of previous military work experience), and career aspiration motivations (most importantly, incorporating notions of service and helping others). Though veterans are not a monolithic group and there were notable differences in this study's participant sample, these considerations were found throughout the study in relation to all aspects of educational decision-making.

Finally, one major gap that still exists in the literature is investigating differences between those veterans who choose to enroll in college post military service and those who do not do so. Obviously all participants in this study chose to enroll in college, as that was a criterion for inclusion in the study. In addition, all participants used G.I. Bill education benefits at some point in their higher education careers. However, only 55% of military-connected college students use their G.I. Bill benefits (Radford et al. 2016). This may be because some veterans exit the military with job-ready skills and experience. Future researchers should seek

out those veterans who have not used their educational benefits and investigate their career-related decision making processes upon separation from the military.

CONCLUSION

Veterans are entering colleges and universities and making educational decisions that will affect their future, yet researchers and college administrators know little about how these students actually make educational decisions. In terms of postsecondary institutions, majors, and career aspiration, this study finds that veteran's educational decisions are complex and nuanced—at times their choice-making processes resemble traditional and other nontraditional students while at other times they appear completely unique. This study finds that, while military veterans sometimes appear to conform to the larger population of non-traditional students, they are unique with regard to several aspects of educational decision-making, indicating the existence of a veteran "x factor" with regard to navigating higher education. Given military educational benefits that are designed to both increase educational attainment among this group and help them readjust to civilian society, the findings of this study regarding veteran choices of institution, major, and career aspiration, have bearing on the study of social mobility.

Practically, this study indicates that veterans need more information and assistance from the U.S. military regarding types of postsecondary institutions and programs of study, something the military has already improved upon since many of the participants in this study ended their service. Additionally, based on the findings of this study, four-year colleges and universities should also shoulder some of the burden of reaching out to veterans to educate them about their educational options. Further, admissions personnel at four-year institutions clearly need more training on how to evaluate military experience for credit. Two-year admissions personnel seem to have both expertise and concrete policies in this area, which may be inducing veterans to attend these institutions over four-year colleges and universities. The same can likely be said of private non-profit institutions, though that is beyond the scope of this study. Four-year institutions could benefit from integrating the policies and expertise already in place at two-year institutions. Finally, higher education researchers and administrators would do well to

incorporate notions of service and helping into both future research on veterans and existing institutional policies, orientations, and information directed at veterans. This is the heart of the veteran "x-factor" and must not be ignored. Currently we underestimate veterans' capacity for care and the importance of service as a lifelong motivation for them. Correcting this oversight could have strong implications for increased veteran educational attainment at the bachelor's degree level and beyond.

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Chapter 3

The Affordances of Veteran Peer Community: Camaraderie, Information, and Academic

Assistance

ABSTRACT

This study examines the specific affordances of peer community contexts at three different postsecondary institutions. Much research on student veterans in higher education focuses on the challenges that these students often experience when transitioning from the U.S. military to colleges and universities; while little prior work has emphasized the resources and strategies that veterans employ to navigate these challenges. However, researchers of nontraditional and underrepresented students in higher education have recently begun to focus on the ways in which peer communities and student co-identity organizations can positively contribute to educational persistence and attainment. In this study, I provide a description of the veteran peer community at each institution prior to delving into the three thoroughgoing themes related to peer impacts (camaraderie, sharing information, and academic assistance). Implications for different types of postsecondary institutions are discussed.

THE AFFORDANCES OF VETERAN PEER COMMUNITY: CAMARADERIE, INFORMATION, AND ACADEMIC ASSISTANCE

In 2015, about 200,000 veterans enrolled in postsecondary education for the first time, a little over half of whom are pursuing their undergraduate degrees (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics 2017). However, student veterans remain under-researched in terms of variation in experience at colleges and universities with differing selectivity, financial costs, academic and extracurricular opportunities, persistence rates, and student demographics, yet there is reason to believe that these institutional differences are particularly important for student veterans, as compared to other student groups (Persky and Oliver 2010; Rumann, Rivera, and Hernandez 2011). Additionally, low reported rates of bachelor's degree attainment and high rates of dropout and stop-out among returning veterans are areas of serious concern to researchers, policy-makers, and higher education professionals (Cate, Lyon, Schmeling, & Bogue, 2017).

About 40% of higher education institutions currently lack programs and services specifically for student veterans (McBain et al. 2012). Few studies investigate the role of these organizations in making a peer community and increasing veteran persistence in higher education, and there is no comparative work on these organizations. This study aims to fill that gap by using case study methods and acknowledging that individuals are embedded within communities, which are shaped by larger institutional contexts. The current study presents a nuanced examination of peer community contexts at three different postsecondary institutions. The affordances of each institutional peer community (in terms of camaraderie, and academic and non-academic information sharing) depend on certain features of its context. Thus, I provide a description of the peer community at each institution prior to delving into the three thoroughgoing themes related to peer impacts.

LITERATURE

Veteran Success and Persistence

Student persistence in higher education is closely linked with quality of the college experience, thus many researchers have begun to conduct studies aimed at understanding why

some college students succeed and others do not (Bean and Metzner 1985; Kuh et al. 2008; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Tinto 2012). According to the National Survey of Student Engagement, the most common reasons students leave college are: financial concerns, personal concerns (e.g. family issues and physical or mental health), academic reasons, and campus climate and culture (National Survey of Student Engagement 2016).

Many researchers cite the transition in social context from military service to higher education as one of the major obstacles to degree attainment; among these, challenges related to social interactions, making personal connections, and managing social assets and deficits are the most frequently cited (Olsen, Badger, and McCuddy 2014; Schiavone and Gentry 2014; Wheeler 2012). Additionally, Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey and Harris (2011) found that veterans have generally had less exposure to political and ideological diversity than traditional college students, which means that adjusting to a diverse college environment may represent an additional challenge. For student veterans, the transition to higher education involves a fundamental shift from a social context in which military cultural norms are widely known and shared, to a context with few military peers and a preponderance of individuals with little understanding of military culture, a phenomenon referred to as the "military-civilian gap" (Pew Research Center 2011). This normative social distance increases veterans' feelings of isolation on campus and may lead to higher rates of stop out and drop out among this population.

In addition to cultural challenges, student veterans face practical challenges as well. The Post 9/11 G.I. Bill provides 36 months of education benefits including tuition and fees, monthly housing allowance, and stipend for schoolbooks and supplies. However, despite the financial benefits granted by the G.I. Bill, many studies of student veterans have found that financial difficulties impact student veterans and can serve as a catalyst for them to leave their programs of study (Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell 2008; McBain et al. 2012; Radford 2009; Schiavone and Gentry 2014; Vacchi and Berger 2014; Wheeler 2012). Many student veterans come from first-generation and/or from low-income backgrounds, consequently financial challenges present significant obstacles for these groups as

higher education has become proportionally more expensive. However, both first-generation and low-income students have been shown to be averse to taking on loans to cover the cost of education, which has a measurable effect on their choice of college institution and pathway (Burdman 2005). This has the effect of concentrating student veterans in inexpensive institutions like community colleges, where persistence and degree attainment are generally lower. However, community colleges, by virtue of serving comparatively large numbers of student veterans, often have more robust services and veteran peer communities than other types of higher education institutions.

Though most veterans begin higher education at community colleges, researchers have found differences between veterans at different types of institutions. One study of veterans at four-year colleges and universities points to academic self-efficacy as a factor with bearing on academic success that is under-explored among student veterans (Williams-Klotz and Gansemer-Topf 2017). This study also found differences in veterans' GPA by institutional mission (public versus private), but no differences by gender and ethnicity (Williams-Klotz and Gansemer-Topf 2017). Another comparative study of veterans at different types of institutions (a community college, a comprehensive university, and a private liberal arts college) found no differences in student engagement in high impact educational practices by institution type, but that veterans' "mission-orientation"[1] and competing priorities limited their participation in these practices at institutions of all types (Kappell et al. 2017). Unfortunately, as this review represents a near-census of institutionally comparative work regarding student veterans, researchers still know little about how students fare in different higher education institutional contexts. However, within institutions, there is strong evidence that peer community plays a role in student persistence and success, particularly for students of color and others who may embody a "minority" identity within the campus community.

Peer Community and Co-Identity Organizations

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[1] Military personnel are nearly always aware of the mission with which they are tasked (See Veterans Affairs n.d. for more information).

Peer communities are a crucial form of social engagement on college campuses and research suggests that peer community is particularly important for minority students. McCabe's (2016) work on peer relationships and outcomes identifies three types of students based on their interactional style: tight-knitters, compartmentalizers, and samplers. McCabe describes the tight knitters as having a highly supportive fictive kinship quality to their peer relationships and finds that the group is characterized by a strong sense of community, freely shared information and resources, and social control exerted among friends. In McCabe's (2016) sample, these students were mostly Black and Latinx, likely because these students needed support to overcome feelings of isolation as members of a "minority" group on campus. Both high and low achieving students belonged to the tight knitters group, but high achievers had "academic multiplex ties," friendships that provided students with multiple forms of academic assistance including emotional support, intellectual engagement, and instrumental assistance, rather than segmenting friendships and sources of assistance.

Additionally, a growing body of research suggests that co-identity organizations can positively contribute to the experiences and outcomes of diverse students, particularly students of color (Gonzalez 2000; Guiffrida 2003; Harper and Quaye 2007; Inkelas 2004; Jenner 2017; Kuh et al. 2007; Museus 2008; Museus, Yi, and Saelua 2017). Co-identity organizations refer to any organization, institutional safe-space, or student group that is centered around one or more aspects of identity, such as race/ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender, ability/disability, age, or veteran status (See Jenner 2017). Ethnic student organizations have been found to provide college students with a positive environment for the transition to higher education because they serve as a safe space for cultural familiarity, cultural expression and advocacy, social involvement, feelings of belonging on campus, and opportunities for cultural validation (Gonzalez 2000; Guiffrida 2003; Museus 2008; Patton 2006). Similarly, organizations for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students have been found to increase the comfort of these students on campus and to lead to positive identity development and empowerment (Stevens 2004). Drawing on this literature, Summerlot, Green, and Parker (2009) contend that veteran co-

67

identity organizations are not only an important starting point for student veterans who are new to campus, but they may also provide veterans with their most meaningful out-of-class connection on campus, contributing to improved persistence and attainment. It is clear that, co-identity organizations produce many positive experiences and have the ability to positively affect education outcomes for students transitioning to higher education; however, there is little research on veterans organizations and the role they play in these students' educational experiences.

Argument

Although prior literature provides valuable insight, it is limited by a focus on challenges to veteran educational persistence rather than the strategies these students use to persist toward degree attainment. Several previous studies of student veterans in higher education indicate that connecting with peers (particularly peers who have military experience) may be an important aspect of the college experience (Ackerman et al. 2009; Jenner 2017; Jones 2013; Kappell et al. 2017; Olsen et al. 2014; Rumann and Hamrick 2010; Ryan et al. 2011; Wheeler 2012), yet little research investigates these relationships specifically and intentionally. In contrast, a recent quantitative study found that although peer relationships may increase student veteran feelings of comfort at an institution, they appear to have little impact on academic outcomes (Williams-Klotz and Gansemer-Topf 2017). However, veteran peer communities have yet to be the intentional focus of rigorous qualitative research. Additionally, though there is a burgeoning body of literature about veterans' experience in higher education, thus far there is no research on the role that peer relations and peer community can play in increasing persistence and educational success among student veterans.

McCabe's (2016) description of peer communities as webs of friendships that provide social and academic support to college students could also describe an ideal community of any type of college students, including student veterans. However, there is very little research on the actual structure and every-day activities of veteran communities. It is possible that veterans engage in the kinds of peer relationships that provide social and academic support, but it is

equally possible that there may be unique features of the support veterans provide each other. Additionally, given differing institutional contexts at the wide variety of colleges and universities veterans attend, there is a clear need for studies of an institutionally comparative nature. Thus, the focus of this study is on veteran peer relations at different types of institution.

METHODS

This study employs case study methods to illuminate the experiences of student veterans at different institutions of higher education by developing a detailed description of three institutional settings and then comparing and contrasting features of the cases using cross-case analysis. Analysis is guided by the conceptualization of each institution as a case[2] of veteran peer community. In this analysis, individuals are seen as being embedded within communities that are meaningfully shaped by specific institutional contexts. This study began with the broad idea of investigating how student veterans make sense of their overall educational persistence. Through initial observation, it became apparent that peer community played a significant role for many veterans, particularly at the community college where data collection began. Thus, I sought out comparison institutions (and communities) to further investigate the role of these communities and determine whether the role of campus organizations and communities in veteran persistence differed by institutional type.

Study Context

Data for this dissertation was collected at three different public higher education institutions in California. Santa Maria City College[3] (SMCC) is a medium sized public two-year college. Orange State (OS) is a large public master's level university. The University of California, Palms (UCP) is a large doctoral granting public research university. SMCC and UCP are in suburban communities while OS is in an urban community of southern California and all three institutions are within 100 miles from Camp Pendleton, a Marine Corps Base, and are

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[2] As Yin (2014) notes, a case can have many cases. In my case study, each institutional context represents a single case, although each student can also be thought of as a case.

[3] Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper in order to protect confidentiality of individual participants and the institutions.

proximate to other military installations including Edwards Air Force Base, Fort Irwin (an Army training center), and the many Naval and Marine Corps facilities in San Diego. Because of their locations and contexts, and the fact that many veterans choose to remain near bases after service, each institution has the potential to attract many student veterans from the same basic pool of individuals. Institutional comparison allows for differences across educational contexts and in types of student who select into the different institutional levels. Significant characteristics of the three sites are summarized in Table 3.1 below.[4]

Table 3.1 Characteristics of the Institutions

	SMCC	OS	UCP
California Public Institution Level	Community College	California State University	University of California
Approx. Undergraduate Enrollment[5]	38,000	32,000	24,000
% Transfer Students	N/A	13%	7%
Average Age of Students	25	23	21
% Female	51%	56%	54%
% White	13%	20%	16%
% Black	2%	4%	2%
% Latinx	66%	38%	27%
% API	11%	23%	46%
In-State Tuition & Fees per Year	$1,500	$6,500	$15,000
Persistence Rate (Fall 1st year - Fall 2nd year)	52%	81%	92%
Approx. Number of Veteran Students[6]	400	600	> 50
Veteran Center	Present	Present	Present
Veteran Student Organization	Present	Present	Present

Recruitment and Participants

Each of the three institutions in this study had both an established Veterans Center and a Veteran Student Association. The Veterans Center at each site was indispensible in recruiting participants for interviews, and the bulk of observations took place at each institution's Veterans Center, Student Association, or through a separate event or activity associated with the Veterans Center. Because each Veterans Center maintains an email list of all veterans currently using G.I.

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[4] These numbers are representative of each institution in the 2016-2017 school year.
[5] Approximate numbers are used in order to further anonymize the institutions.
[6] The number of veterans, service members, and dependents utilizing their G.I. Bill benefits to attend this institution during the previous calendar year. This includes both undergraduate and graduate students at applicable institutions. However, because some veterans will have exhausted G.I. Bill benefits either before transfer or before BA completion while others will have not yet begun to use their benefits until after transfer, the statistics presented here do not fully represent the veteran populations at each institution.

Bill benefits at the institution (in actuality this is often an email list of all who have used benefits within the last year) I was able to solicit participants from a wide sample of student veterans. In exchange for this access, I agreed to share the results of my research with each Veterans Center at the conclusion of the project.

Veterans were recruited through emails sent by the Veterans Center at each institution and through paper volunteer recruitment sheets at each Veterans Center. The majority of the student veterans in all three sites served during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, were male, and had 100% Post 9/11 G.I. Bill benefits, however there were differences in the veteran sample at each institution. The typical student veteran at SMCC served in the U.S. Army or Marine Corps, had at least one combat deployment, was in his mid 20s, was White or Latinx, was married or dating long-term, and had a disability rating (ranging from 100% to 10%, but typically around 30% due to Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), or another so-called "invisible" disability). In contrast, student veterans at OS and UCP were a bit older, more likely to have served in the Air Force or Navy (though there was still a large number of U.S. Army veterans), less likely to be married/partnered or have children, and less likely to have disability benefits (and to have a lower disability rating if disability is present). Participants at UCP were significantly less likely to have a disability than students at the other two institutions. Participants were more likely to be Latinx at SMCC and more likely to be Asian or Pacific Islander at OS and UCP. Participants at all three sites were overwhelmingly male, with only about 30% of my interviewees at each site being female. Participant demographics may be found in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2 Participant Demographics

	SMCC (22)	OS (15)	UCP (18)	Total (55)
% Male	73%	70%	70%	71%
% Female	27%	30%	30%	29%
Average Age	27	33	31	30
% White	45%	40%	44%	43%
% Black	5%	7%	6%	6%
% Latinx	50%	30%	22%	34%
% API	0%	20%	17%	12%
% Students with any Disability	73%	67%	33%	58%
Army	11	8	7	27
Navy	4	4	5	12
Marines	5	1	3	9
Air Force	1	2	3	6
Coast Guard	1	0	0	1

Data

Data for this study include both observational and interview records. At all three institutions, participants responded to a call for interview participants sent out to the email list of student veterans by the institution's Veterans Center between Spring 2014 and Spring 2016. Participants were interviewed in one of three contexts: face-to-face in a semi-public space (typically in a coffee shop or a quiet location on campus), face-to-face in a private space (typically an office on the campus in question), or via Skype in a private space (usually the participant's home). All participants were offered a choice of interview contexts and told that interviews would be scheduled at a time of their choosing.

I began each interview by asking the student to identify various demographic characteristics (including age, branch of military service, marital and parental status, ethnic and racial affiliation, and gender). The main question asked of all interviewees was: "Can you please share with me your story of enlisting in the military through becoming a student at your current institution?" This typically elicited a robust narrative from the participant, during which I asked prompting questions like: "Have you encountered any special challenges or benefits as a student veteran?" "How would you describe your fellow veterans at your institution?" and "Do/How do you think your identity has changed from being in the military to being a student?" To close each interview I asked a two-part question designed to both elicit information and return the

72

participants to a positive state of mind after sharing potentially triggering information: "Would you like to share your favorite or proudest memory from military service and your favorite or proudest moment from your education this far?" Interviews were semi-structured, audio recorded, and ranged from 22-125 minutes, with 52 minutes being about average.

My role at each institution's Veterans Center was solely as an observational researcher and not as a participant. I observed at the Veterans Center on weekday mornings and afternoons during fall and spring terms during the 2013-2014, 2014-2015, and 2015-2016 school years. The average duration of observations was 1-2 hours. During observations I took a combination of hand-written and typed field notes, which include researcher comments. Observations document both talk and behavior of student veterans and staff members within the spaces. These observational field notes, in turn, formed the basis for analytic memos, which were used to aggregate and condense data related to student veteran persistence and the emerging importance of peer community.

In terms of trustworthiness, I triangulate between data types (observation and interview) and participant types (those who may be more active in the peer community and those who may be less active). However, because of the way participants were sought, I do not have access to undergraduate students who have not used their G.I. Bill benefits at their current institution. This certainly affects my findings, particularly with regard to self-selection of study participants. At the community college level, savvy students may elect to pay out-of-pocket and save their benefits for use at the most expensive institution they expect to attend, which is likely to be a 4-year institution[7]. Conversely, some students spend more time at community colleges and have already exhausted their benefits before enrolling at a 4-year institution. Both of these types of students are likely to be absent from my sample. Thus, there is likely to be institutional variance in the participant sample: at the four-year level, students in the sample are likely to be those savvy students who actively planned and managed use of their G.I. Bill benefits.

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[7] I have explored this phenomenon in other work. See Jenner (Forthcoming) for a more robust discussion.

I also performed periodic member-checks during interviews – asking a question in the form of "Some of the veterans I've talked to mentioned (x), what are your thoughts on that?" – in order to get a sense of agreement or disagreement and to solicit new details related to an emergent theme. Respondent validation allows me to deal with potential issues of internal validity. The measures mentioned above ensure a high level of trustworthiness and credibility for my study and my conclusions.

Student veterans attend various types of institutions and there is reason to believe there are institutional differences[8] as well as differences in the types of veterans that attend a specific institution type along theoretical and empirical axes of prior experience, engagement, and aspiration. Thus, being able to speak with and observe veterans at different types of institutions also strengthens the trustworthiness of the overall findings.

FINDINGS

Peer Community Contexts

Although all three institutions had both a Veterans Center and a Veteran Student Association, each institution was unique in its combination of resources and services geared toward student veterans.

The Veterans Center. The Veteran Resource Center spaces varied widely among the three institutions. The Veterans Center at SMCC, for example, was a large open space with tables and computers for visiting veterans to use as well as a front desk (typically staffed by two student workers) and offices for various staff members (including a counselor from Veterans Affairs, a Veterans Upward Bound coordinator, a certifying official, and the Veterans Center director). During my fieldwork at SMCC the Veterans Center moved from an older building to an entirely new space built specifically to house the center. It had glass doors and windows as well as coffee and snacks available. In initial field notes, I described the center as lively and casual, the kind of place where impromptu conversations and study sessions were the norm and music often played.

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[8] Note that this work takes place at public nonprofit institutions, but that participants in the study may have previously attended for-profit colleges and/or private colleges before going on to attend non-profit public colleges.

The Veterans Center at OS was also in a newer building, though in a fairly peripheral location within the campus. The OS Veterans Center also had an open space for veterans to congregate, a view of the outside, free coffee and a TV that was often playing popular shows, and one computer for student veterans to use, as well as a front desk (staffed by 1-2 student workers) and offices for the center's director, certifying official, and VA counselor. During initial observations at OS, I noted that the Veterans Center seemed like a comfortable, if underused, space. The Veterans Center at UCP was the smallest of the three and was comprised of a very small open space (containing one loveseat, a small table, and a mini-fridge) bordering the front desk (staffed by one student worker) and the office of the director/certifying official. The Veterans Center at UCP had no windows and was located in a difficult-to-reach area of the student center. During fieldwork, I witnessed the UCP Veterans Center director attempt to find a new location for the office on multiple occasions.

Participants shared that they learned valuable things while "hanging out" at SMCC's Veterans Center and that they sometimes visit the office just to gather information. Sergio said, "you have to hear things through the grapevine. … If I wouldn't have ever came in here and spoke to some of the people from the Veterans Center, I don't know where I'd be," and many other participants at SMCC echoed this sentiment. Though I observed little of this behavior, a few of the veterans at OS also described the Veterans Center as a place where veterans can find each other: "It's a container where they [veterans] can say, 'Okay, cool. Well, hey this is what I went through' and resources get exchanged and the people that aren't part of the conversation, they can hear it and they'll go, 'That's a good point. I'm gonna put that in my notes. Cool.' Then you have this happening and then we are not so alone anymore as vets" (Cornelius). While the veterans at both SMCC and OS saw the Veterans Center as a space for casual interaction, the UCP Veterans Center tended to serve solely functional ends.

The veterans at UCP primarily view the Veterans Center as a place to go only when a problem arises, not to hang out with other veterans or gather information. Lawrence said, "I haven't used it very much. When I started I think something happened with my paperwork so I

got paid a little bit late. After that I didn't really have any problems with it. I just go there and certify my results. That's pretty much it;" similarly Thibaut mentioned that he only goes to the Veterans Center "for the bureaucratic stuff." UCP students often mention the Veterans Center from their previous institution (often a community college) with a note of nostalgia. For example Isaac contrasted the Veterans Center at his community college with UCP's Veterans Center during his interview:

> I hung out there [previous institution] all the time. They had a nice little veterans' center, I guess. It was just like a little office that had a couple rooms, but it was cool. Veterans would go there and do their homework, and there was free snacks for us. That was nice. That's where I learned more about some benefits. They told me about disability in there, so that's how I applied for disability... I don't feel the veterans' center here [UCP] was as good as [previous institution]. I don't know if you've been to the veteran's office, but it's like- It's small. It's just like you go there when you need to get stuff done. It wasn't like, at [previous institution], they had rooms where you can hang out, rooms to do homework. I wish they had something like that. I think they should have that on every campus.

Isaac's comments highlight the importance of a casual social atmosphere to the non-bureaucratic functions of the Veterans Center.

In addition to gaining knowledge while hanging out, veteran student-workers (if present) at the Veterans Center are in a unique position to share knowledge. The VA's work-study program allows full-time (or ¾-time) students to be employed at a number of veterans organizations including campus Veterans Centers (Veterans Affaris n.d.). These students have successfully navigated the bureaucracy of both the G.I. Bill and their institution – at least well enough to know about the work-study program and complete an application for the job – and are well-positioned to learn about new policies, challenges, and resources and to inform others of these. Consequently, student workers at the Veterans Center are in a perfect position to share knowledge, resources, and experiences gained through their successful navigation of the bureaucracy of both the VA and their institution. Steve, a student-worker, summarized the general attitude of the student-workers at SMCC's Veterans Center in our interview: "I'll go above and beyond to help [other veterans] out. I think that's the right thing to do, because it was so hard for me when I did get out [of the military], trying to find these resources and put them together myself." Miguel, a non-student-worker who was pursuing a certificate in fire

technology, noted the crucial role that student-workers play in enrolling student veterans at the institution and keeping them there: "I remember I was talking to Alejandro over the phone, I was like, 'I have no idea what to do man, I just got out [of the military], can you help me out?' He was like, 'I'll be more than happy to.' I showed up here [at the Veterans Center] and they helped me out so that's why I'm here now… It's awesome because it's a veteran helping out a veteran. I appreciated that a lot and I had a lot of trust in them too." Similarly, Jane, a student worker at OS described having to figure out her G.I. Bill benefits for herself and being able to pass that knowledge on to her veteran peers: "I enjoy helping other veterans get their benefits and explain it to them because I hope that I can explain it to them better than what was to me so they can get a good grasp on it from the talk. … It's kind of the camaraderie, to be there for your brothers and sisters, to make things more efficient because if everyone has the right information off the top, then they're not wasting all their time and education not knowing what they're doing." Thus, there may be academic payoffs, as well as personal ones, to peer service. Given the complexity of VA bureaucracy, these remarks highlight the importance of having fellow student veterans capable of translating administrative language and recommending approaches based on experience.

However, there were differences in the student-worker populations between the three field sites. SMCC had, by far, the most robust group of student workers. Each term SMCC employs 8-10 veterans as workers. One administrator at SMCC's Veterans Center said that he thought of the student-workers as "leaders of veterans on campus" (Field notes, February 2014) and that this conception influenced the student-worker hiring process. At SMCC, only the most successful student veterans were chosen as student workers. OS employs around six student workers each term, but these were roughly evenly split between veterans and dependents. Jane said that when she first enrolled at OS, most of the student-workers were veterans, but that more recently the balance has shifted so that the workers are disproportionately likely to be dependents rather than veterans. UCP, the smallest veteran center of the three, employs about three student workers, all of whom are dependents rather than veterans. This is likely the result of having

proportionately fewer veterans at the institution, though one interviewee felt that it might be because civilian dependents are perceived as easier to work with as compared to veterans. However, civilian dependents tended to be younger and had no direct service experience, which made them less relatable for the student veterans and might negatively impact the potential for camaraderie building within the space.

The Veteran Student Association. During this study, I was fortunate to be able to interview all of the current (and several of the previous) leaders of the Veteran Student Association at each campus. Particularly where the Veterans Center was smaller or in a less-desirable part of campus, these less-formal organizations served as an important meeting place for participants. Isabella, the founder of the SMCC Veteran Student Association spoke about the strong connection between the Veterans Center and Veteran Student Association at her institution, and about how both organizations foster the camaraderie that is characteristic of SMCC's veteran community:

> I had so much going on, but Lacy [a past Veterans Center student-worker], she immediately saw because just being a female, she is a mother too, veteran, she understood what it was like to be in my shoes. Without me saying a word. Because of her, I got my benefits right away. The Veterans Center offered me a job right away... It was because of the center that honestly I'm not one of the homeless in the corner asking for money. .... I made good friends here. I used to come to the Veterans Center every single day. I became real close friends with Lacy and all the guys that worked here… [in the Veteran Student Association] we just feel really strong bonds. All that we had in the military… if I need money because my housing allowance hasn't come in, I know you'll hook me up. Just that kind of trust and we still have that. I have a friend I know, she is in the middle of [finding] housing. She is staying with me and I met her in the club. It's definitely, we borrow each other's trucks for moving. We have barbecues together and it all started because of the club.

Similarly, Lyle, president of the OS Veteran Student Association said that he joined the Veteran Student Association because, "I feel that because I am in a physical and mental state to help, I have to stay involved and help my generation of vets. I also stay involved in hopes of building similar bonds, like the ones I relied on so much during my active [duty] time. I feel that if I need that support system, other veterans need it too." Oliver, organizer of veterans' events at UCP and teaching assistant for the veteran orientation course, echoed the idea that veterans stay involved

to combat feelings of isolation, but notes that veteran-centered events and spaces are particularly

important at UCP where the veteran community is more fragmented:

> It felt very isolating... At UCP we have more veterans than we had at my community college but I know fewer of them because everyone's so spread out... I've never made a friend in the Veterans Center. I've seen veterans walking around the campus. I can spot them and it's like, "Oh hey, are you a veteran?" He's like, "Yeah, how'd you know?" Other people can spot them. I've made friendships through those kind of dynamics but never through the Veterans Center.

Many other students mentioned feelings of isolation, particularly on the OS and UCP campuses.

The role that camaraderie can play in combating these feelings is discussed in the next section.

Camaraderie Combats Isolation

The interviews were littered with references to feelings of isolation on campus and a

general loss of camaraderie that students feel upon separating from the military. However, these

references often came cheek-by-jowl with talk about how meeting and interacting with other

veterans on campus ameliorates these feelings of isolation and loss, as seen above.

Camaraderie and trust have different implications in the contexts of military service and

higher education, and this change can increase feelings of isolation. While college students can

usually count on each other to take notes and when working together on a group project, service

members in combat situations regularly trust their peers with their lives. Student veterans are

accustomed to living in a situation where high levels of trust and camaraderie are prevalent and,

like other first-time college students, many have never had to live on their own. The campus

context may also require veterans to develop more individualized agency. Steve summarized

these shifts in our interview: "You have to develop your own schedule [in college]. You have to

say, 'Okay, my roommate's not going to wake me up if I don't wake up for PT in the morning. I

have to get myself up for class. If I don't go to class, then I'm not going to pass, I'm not going to

get paid, I'm not going to pay my bills… I was so used to having a structured life for my 21

years. I was like, 'Well, all right, this will be interesting.'" This excerpt illustrates the sense of

loss of camaraderie that individuals commonly feel when they separate from the U.S. military,

though many of the participants said that the Veterans Center and Veteran Student Association

help them find a renewed sense of camaraderie. For example, Lucas remarked that he enjoys

spending time at the Veterans Center because "it's just like old times," in contrast to the rest of campus, which he avoids except to attend class. Mary similarly described the Veterans Center as a "safe-haven" for veterans; while Tony described it as a "decompression chamber" where veterans can "be one with [their] people." These comments affirm the findings of existing literature in identifying co-identity organizations as a space for community building and recovery from isolation as a minority.

In contrast, though the OS Veterans Center is well-staffed and has a space for veterans to hang out, students often describe feelings of isolation and little contact with other veterans on campus. For example, Abby said "I feel alone, not in the sense of I'm all alone, but in the sense that you don't see many veterans there [on campus]." Marco expressed a similar sentiment in our interview: "I really haven't made any connections with any vets on campus. For the most part I blend in. A lot of people probably don't know that I was ever in the military or anything unless it somehow comes up." Mariah described feelings of isolation and disconnection on campus, with both her veteran and traditional student peers, but then spoke about working harder to connect with other veterans on campus to ameliorate these feelings: "There's gonna be a meeting [of the Veteran Student Association] like on Thursday. It will be like my first time actually trying to go to a veteran's group meeting. … I remember trying to talk to some groups, including like a LGBT social group, that was, I don't know, it felt off to me, but then when I talked to the veteran, I felt comfortable. ... I mean, basic things like his confidence and he was looking me in the eye when he talked to me." Interviewees are quick to note these instances of camaraderie with other veterans when they occur, but unfortunately it appears the exception rather than the rule at OS. Even when another shared minority identity is present (ex: LGBT), veterans experience social distance from their traditional student peers.

At UCP, as previously noted, the Veterans Center is not a site of veteran peer community contact. Thus, peer community at UCP is less robust and less formalized than at the other institutions. However, this means that veterans at UCP feel the loss of camaraderie perhaps the

most poignantly. Oliver, a UCP student, gave an eloquent example of both the pervasive sense of

camaraderie in the military and its loss during his interview:

> One of the differences between a veteran interacting with another veteran versus a veteran interacting with a civilian or two civilians interacting or whatever is the degree of how we look out for one another. … When we're standing in line, you stand in formation… We would all stand shoulder to shoulder and there's a time before a muster before we get called to attention. Let's say we have to be there at 7am. We'll all be there of course a little early. We'll be there at 6:45 or 6:30 whatever it is but that gap in time between when we actually show up and when we actually have to be there, that's not just idle time. We will chat and we will talk about how drunk we got last night or we will share stories or whatever it is or just complain. Usually we bitch and moan all the time. … In the military, especially the marines, there was also affections. … We're just mustering for some administrative thing and some guys has his collar up just because he rushed to get into his [camouflage] in the morning or something like this. The guy behind him, nobody can see it, except the guy behind him and the guy behind him won't tap him on the shoulder and say, "Hey man your collar" or he might do that but he's more likely, especially in the marine corps, to just flip it down… Fixing each other. If a backpack is unzipped if we're going somewhere, a backpack is unzipped or a rifle is dirty or someone didn't get a haircut or something like this. All these things get nitpicked on each other so that by the time [Gunnery Sargent] or whatever arrives at whatever time and nitpicks you, he has a lot less to nitpick because everybody has their collars down, everybody has their boots bloused, everybody has their rifles not only clean like they did that morning or the night before but they also have them shined up. Everyone's oriented the same way and kind of prepares us for the rest of the day. There's no analog that I've ever experienced in civilian life. There's nothing like it. If anything the opposite. Especially being pre-medical student. Everyone is looking to pull you down. ... There's no camaraderie. We're 30,000 individuals. There is no team. I'm team oriented when I get into a group I'm like, "Okay, this is my team" and it's not a common thing I think with non-veterans. ... It's a big thing. It's a big thing that I had in the military that I no longer have. There's a sense of loss there, but I pick it up a little bit when I'm with another veteran.

This example is illustrative of the experiences of teamwork, camaraderie, and solidarity that

many veterans had during military service. At the same time, Oliver points to a key difference

between the military and higher education: competition. Transitioning from an atmosphere of

teamwork to one of competition may cause veterans to feel a sense of loss. And, many veterans,

particularly those who don't have children or close family, look for this on campus.

Some of the participants go so far as to establish (or continue from military service) a sort

of fictive family relationship with other veterans on campus – often referring to each other as

"brother" specifically or as "family" in general. For example, at SMCC one of the very first

things I noticed during fieldwork was the typical greeting from a student-worker to a student

entering the Veterans Center: "Hey brother, how can I help you?" The student-workers can often

be heard using this terminology with other veterans, both those they already know and strangers.

Overall, student-workers at all institutions were much more likely to be observed using "brother," "sister," or other family language or to do so during interview. Jane and Abby, two female veteran student-workers from OS, exemplified this behavior. Jane used family terminology when describing why she enjoyed working at the Veterans Center: "It's kind of the camaraderie, to be there for your brothers and sisters, to make things more efficient because if everyone has the right information off the top, then they're not wasting all their time and education not knowing what they're doing… It's like a pay-it-forward thing." Similarly, in our interview Abby mentioned that seeing other veterans on campus is "always like meeting family." However, like other participants at OS, neither Jane nor Abby had met many other veterans on campus, which is perhaps why these interactions stand out as noteworthy. Interestingly, both Jane and Abby expressed a desire to use their degrees (Theatre and Sociology/Social Work) to either to raise awareness about the struggles some veterans face or to help returning veterans directly.

These interactions and feelings of camaraderie are particularly important as veteran participants typically drew stark contrasts between themselves and "traditional" students. Entering higher education involves a shift in the individual's context from one in which the military identity is widely known, appreciated, and shared to a context featuring fewer military peers and more individuals who may have a less nuanced understanding of the student veteran experience, as well as a host of shifts related to the social norms of each context.

For example, participants discussed differences in norms related to respect in the military context and the higher education context. Around two thirds of the participants mentioned frustration with their traditional student peers' lack of respect, and this was fairly consistent across campuses. For example, Isabella (a SMCC student) said "putting up with [other students'] disrespect" makes her angry and she has occasionally shouted at classmates who watch videos online and fall asleep during class. Similarly, Rick another SMCC student, found it difficult to "deal with their talking and Facebook and disrespect." Jo, a student at OS, said, "It's just respect, and it's those things that drives me crazy. Especially in class when people [traditional students]

82

are talking back to the teachers, or they're on their phones, and sitting right in front of the teacher. It's like, "Really?" I just want to... turn into sergeant again. 'What's going on? You can't do that.'" These daily frustrations with traditional students served to highlight veterans own normative social distance.

Many students at all three campuses emphasized differences between veterans and traditional students in interactional style, values, prior life experience and life stage, and other aspects. Veteran participants, particularly those who are older even than the average veteran at their institution, regularly identify their traditional student peers as "kids" during both observation and interviews and say things like:

> It's the problem when you come to [college] and you're [with] a bunch of 19 year old kids and you're in your late 20s maybe 30. It's just awkward. Outside the veterans you don't really relate to anybody (Mike, UCP, 30 years old)
> ------
> These kids don't want to study. (Monique, OS, 45 years old)
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> I walk into class and I'm like, "Am I going to be the oldest guy here?" Absolutely. I think that's one of the things I'm like "oh man. I'm going to go on and there's going to be a bunch of kids and am I going to be able to relate to the class in general or people?" (Rosalinda, SMCC, 37 years old)

Age-related social distance exacerbates the effects of military-civilian gap. Lee (UCP, 31 years old) went into detail about this disconnect in our interview:

> I generally try to stay away from most of the student body, just because I don't necessarily agree with a lot of the opinions in those protests that are always going on... My main concern was more political, I guess. So the branches tend to be slightly more conservative than you know, most of the college student life culture. And among the branches, the Marine Corps tends to be very conservative and Republican. So we tend to hear horror stories about veterans going back to school, and having one particular opinion on either the Iraqi conflict, or anything like that, just getting shut down by the professors and you know, after seeing some of the demonstrations on Berkeley's campus, things like that, I can't say that all of that was entirely unfounded concern.

In addition to highlighting feelings of social distance, Lee's comments illustrate how veteran's feelings of dissimilarity from traditional college students can result in them feeling both less safe and less engaged on college campuses.

This difference in contextual norms means that student veterans may resist integration into the wider campus community because they do not want to be seen by others as a typical college student – who the participants see as disrespectful and lazy, two characteristics that are

83

directly opposed to those valued within a military context. While this strategy preserves valued identities, integration into campus community is shown to positively impact persistence and attainment. When asked if there was anything that could be improved about the overall veterans services at the institution, students at both OS and UCP commonly mentioned improving the peer community and increasing opportunities for veterans to interact with each other as the primary area of improvement. In addition to increasing their social engagement on campus, these veteran peer networks are central to the sharing of information that veterans need to navigate academic and VA bureaucracies.

Sharing Information Combats Bureaucracy

Students in the sample often described instances where they either shared knowledge with another veteran or had knowledge shared with them by a veteran peer. This sharing of knowledge usually occurred in the Veterans Center or Veteran Student Association, though not always. Typically the knowledge shared was related to navigating the bureaucracy of the VA, G.I. Bill, or college.

When individuals from all service branches transition out of the military there is a Transition Assistance Program (TAP) that helps inform veterans about services and benefits. However, many of the veterans in this study said that they had no help or information before transitioning back to civilian life, and those who did mention the TAP course were roughly evenly split on whether it was a valuable resource or a waste of time.[9] Cornelius related his experience with TAP during our interview: "So the guy or gal would come in and say, 'Okay, so your medical benefits or the VA or educational benefits, blah, blah, blah, blah and oh, by the way, I can go into detail about these or you can leave for lunch an hour early. Who has questions?' Of course no one raises their hand." Michelle had a slightly better experience, but also remembers the program as less-than-helpful regarding educational information: "I went because I had to go… Nobody real told you, 'Oh, since you're a mechanic, maybe we

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[9] It is worth noting here that most of my participants separated from the military prior to 2014, when TAP was re-vamped. Similarly, many of the worst transition experiences are from those participants who were discharged many years ago.

recommend mechanical engineering,' or nothing like that. They never said like, 'Hey, a degree in this might be better than a degree in that depending on these skills that you have or whatever.'" Mike related a similar experience regarding information about benefits in TAP: "It was literally 2 days and both days they taught you how to make a resume. Then in the last day, they brought in a job fair day and they brought in like 4 different cops, 2 truck drivers. Those were your options out of the Marine Corps. It was a joke." With this lack of information about benefits (particularly educational benefits) upon discharge, veterans face a need for information.

Participants experienced the G.I. Bill as a complex document that makes provision for many different types of benefits, several of which bear on education and training programs. One of the ways that the Veterans Center helps students is through the transmission of knowledge about the G.I. Bill and how to make good use of benefits. This knowledge is largely transmitted between students (including student-workers), with Veterans Center student-workers acting as intermediaries in the knowledge transfer between Veterans Center staff and other student veterans. For instance, Noah, a program coordinator, told David, a student worker who was then applying to colleges, that he should contact the Veterans Affairs Office at a particular school because the office could often admit student veterans through a "special admit" without going through the normal admissions process. David was later observed sharing this information with another veteran prospective transfer student, in his capacity as a student-worker (Field Notes, December 2015). This type of information is crucial to improving a veteran's chances of enrolling at a four-year institution.

Sharing of information helps students navigate the bureaucracy of the college and the VA system in the initial shift from military service member to college student. Abby, an OS student, described having a hard time transitioning from the military to higher education. Luckily, she met other veterans who could share information and help ease the transition, "someone always had a little bit of information and helped me gather my entire life together." Similarly, Michelle, a Navy veteran at UCP, related how Mike, a veteran of the Marine Corps at UCP, helped her and other veterans when they transferred to UCP:

When I first got there [UCP] he was kind of like the 'papa bear' of everybody. He's the one taking everybody under his wing and just showing them the ropes of how to do college like, 'Did you take your assessment test?' Counselor advice, but peer wise, and he was super helpful that way. … It really depended on Mike. … I feel like he really cared about everybody's well being when it came to being a veteran and being happy; being able to survive through college.

This sharing of knowledge about how to navigate bureaucracy is particularly helpful in the absence of a comprehensive Veterans Center. It is worth noting here that Michelle, Mike, and several other veterans at UCP all transferred from the same community college. In our interview, Mike described how he failed courses when he first attended community college after separating from the Marines and attributed his eventual academic success to both the community college Veterans Center and to his decision to start helping other veterans: "I have a little theory about like how guys make it out of junior college. Try to help somebody else. … When I went to [previous institution] they didn't have a veteran center, they didn't have anything. The center is a big deal where guys can go and study and hang out with each other because, when I was studying by myself it was harder. ... When the school finally built a Veteran Center through all the veterans staff it just helped a lot because then you're among your peers." Sharing information helps veterans solve practical problems at the same time as it builds peer community.

Savvy use of benefits is a necessity, particularly for veterans who have dependents as well as for those who have educational goals beyond an associate or bachelors degree. However, how educational benefits are used plays a large part in a veteran persistence and can tell us a lot about what they value. For SMCC students who have spouses and children, success is being able to support loved ones while going to school, typically for a limited amount of time, while they pursue a course of study that leads directly to a career. For single and/or childless SMCC students, savvy use of benefits means weighing short- and long-term costs, and minimizing total "out of pocket" costs.[10] Student-workers at SMCC always asked new students at the Veterans Center what kind of benefits they had before deciding how best to help them. For example, I saw student-workers advise other veteran students to exhaust their Montgomery G.I. Bill educational

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[10] I have written at length elsewhere about these phenomena and how definitions of success may differ for this specific student community. See Jenner (Forthcoming).

benefits—an older program that service members paid into in order to receive benefits upon discharge—before beginning to use the more comprehensive Post-9/11 G.I. Bill educational benefits, in order to "get the most out" of them (Steve; Field Notes, January, 2014 & February 2015). Strategic use of benefits is particularly important at the community college level, since it is less expensive than other types of institutions. In fact, many participants from OS and UCP report not using benefits until they transferred to their current four-year institution.

However, the best use of benefits isn't always clear and veteran peer community was crucial to the circulation of information about savvy benefits use. Many of the participants at all institutions describe making early "mistakes" and "wasting" benefits by not using them in a savvy manner, and go on to describe either realizing this through their own trial and error or receiving information from other veterans about how to use benefits strategically. Jane, Lyle, and Richard (all OS students) all described figuring out how best to use G.I. Bill benefits alone. During our interview, Jane said:

> I didn't use my G.I. bill when I first went to the community college. Here in California, it was only 20 some bucks a credit. It was really cheap. I was getting unemployment, and I didn't want to waste my G.I. bill. I wanted to make sure that it paid for my entire Bachelor's degree, whatever it ended up being, so I knew that I needed to do at least a year on my own. … I worked it out for myself.

Although student veterans like Jane can and do succeed, receiving information from other veterans can cut down on the trial and error involved in strategic benefits use, helping veterans get the most out of their hard earned educational benefits.

The students at UCP, though the Veteran Student Association and informal veteran network, appear to be particularly effective in sharing and receiving information about G.I. Bill benefit-use strategies. Lee, for example, mentioned that he spoke to other student veterans in his engineering courses about their strategies for using G.I. Bill benefits, since he only had about one term of benefits left upon transfer to UCP. Through these communications he found out about

87

the VA's vocational rehabilitation program.[11] Isaac also found out about the vocational rehabilitation program through "word of mouth" by asking other veterans about their experiences. Isaac said, "There's so many benefits available to veterans that we do not know about. I still don't know about some of the benefits I'm sure I'm entitled… A lot of vets don't know about Voc-Rehab. I didn't know about it, and I would have been paying … getting student loans if I wasn't using Voc-Rehab right now." He then went on to mention a strategy that veteran student-workers at SMCC had previously described, whereby a veteran who has nearly exhausted their Post 9/11 G.I. Bill educational benefits transitions to the vocational rehabilitation program before the Post 9/11 benefits run out, which allows them to receive a greater housing allowance than the vocational rehabilitation typically provides. This strategy illustrates the complexity of the bureaucratic systems that student veterans navigate and why information networks among veterans are so important for educational success.

This strategic benefits use was particularly important for veterans who anticipated pursuing graduate study. Frank, an SMCC student who aspired to transfer to a four-year institution and then pursue graduate study, said that he had carefully planned out his G.I. Bill benefits use and hoped to have 9 months of educational benefits left at the end of his undergraduate education, in order to pay for a one-year M.B.A. program. Chloe, an older veteran who rarely came to the SMCC Veterans Center, said that she only used benefits at SMCC during her first year of school, and had since decided to work part time to pay for school and save her remaining benefits for study at a four-year institution and to pursue an M.A. degree. Clark, an OS student in his senior year, mentioned talking to other Navy veterans during the transition from military to education and how that informed his G.I. Bill benefits-use strategy: "I talked to some guys and I wasn't doing the G.I. Bill at first. I had a bunch of money saved up, and then I used unemployment insurance to kind of pay for things… I wanted to make sure I had enough [benefits] to finish. I took a few semesters off. And it actually worked out perfectly, because I

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[11] This program allows veterans who have a service-connected disability rating of at least 10% from VA to continue to receive financial assistance in pursuing training or education (including at the graduate level) related to a specific employment goal.

still have basically three semesters left. To get my teaching credential, that's all I need." By using their benefits strategically to pay for the highest-cost portions of their education, these veterans decrease the likelihood that they will stop out or drop out for financial reasons. In this way, limits on the G.I. Bill maybe of benefit to veterans, because it causes them to take seriously and plan for their educational journey. However, those who fail to plan may be more likely to deplete their educational benefits without attaining a degree. Additionally—while receiving information had practical rewards—giving information often came with intrinsic rewards for student veterans. Alan, a UCP veteran who created a veteran-focused charity and has begun graduate study, said that he enjoys mentoring other veterans and giving them advice about how to make their benefits last through graduate education and that giving back to other veterans is one of his chief motivators in life.

It is important to note that I interviewed at least one student employed by the Veterans Center at each institution, thus the findings presented here may represent an ideal case of sharing knowledge rather than a typical case. Qualitative assessment of veteran work-study programs at campus veterans centers could shed light on whether this kind of interaction is an inherent feature or a side effect of such programs. In addition to sharing knowledge about the complex bureaucratic systems they encounter, veterans also use their peers for academic assistance.

Academic Assistance Combats Obstacles to Education

Helping others (often other veterans in particular) was a prevalent theme in the interviews, and there were two principal areas in which this help occurred: academic help and tangible help. These occurred primarily through Veterans Center contact between veteran peers or, where the Veterans Center was less robust or a less-desirable space, through informal networks that the veterans either constructed themselves or that were constructed through participation in veteran events and student organizations.

Unsurprisingly, leaving the U.S. military and entering college led many of the veterans to note a transition into a more academically oriented identity. Typically, this took the form of moving from seeing oneself as a poor student (based on high school experiences) to a self-

concept as a good student (based on college experiences or aspirations). Mercedes spoke openly about her prior academic difficulties and anxiety about coursework at SMCC: "In high school it was like climbing Mt. Everest, so I knew when I came back [to school] it was going to be like that and then times 10, and it was pretty difficult adjusting at first because you have all these classes because you're trying to meet the requirements as a full-time student, and that's pretty overwhelming." Notably academic anxieties were most common at SMCC. Nearly all of the students at SMCC reported poor high school performance, in many cases bordering on dropout. Five participants at OS (30%) and four participants at UCP (22%) also reported poor academic performance in high school, as opposed to fourteen participants at SMCC (64%). Students at UCP were, as expected, the most likely to report good or excellent academic achievement in high school. Additionally, men were overrepresented among both those who reported poor prior academic achievement and those who reported excellent prior academic achievement.

SMCC was the only one of the three schools that had a formal peer tutoring system. However, all three of the sites also had informal peer tutoring and study groups, albeit to different degrees. In addition to providing space for socializing, SMCC's Veterans Center is a site of peer tutoring, which provides a sense of camaraderie as well as much-needed academic remediation. Rick, a Veterans Center student worker in the nursing program is particularly well known for helping other students with science classes, and other workers have been observed taking time to tutor fellow students informally in the Veterans Center's lounge area. Diego, a non-student-worker who was new to the college and being tutored informally by Rick, echoed this sentiment during an informal conversation: "At the Veterans Center these guys [peer tutors] really take care of you," to which Rick, who was working at the front desk at the time, responded "Yeah, we take care of our own" (Field notes, March 2014). Mercedes, a student-worker, spoke about why peer tutoring is so important to the veterans at SMCC: "You might not understand how to do it on your own, but there's so many other veterans [at the Veterans Center], you can simply ask them, and they'll tell you because they've gone through the same thing. You don't seem like a weirdo." This approach allowed Mercedes to avoid admitting gaps in knowledge to

administrators, instructors, or her traditional student peers, limiting her disclosure to other veterans with whom she was comfortable because they, presumably, had similar academic experiences.

Overall, over half of the participants at SMCC engaged in some type of peer tutoring at SMCC. Sergio, an Air Force veteran who was not a Veterans Center student-worker, was one of the few participants I spoke with who served as a formal peer tutor in a program designed to refresh new SMCC student veterans' skills in math and reading in order to help them place out of remedial courses during their first term. This type of program is particularly impactful for veterans returning to education. Since veterans have typically been outside of the education system for at least four years when they decide to enroll at SMCC, many have forgotten the skills that they learned in high school—particularly math skills. Helping new student veterans earn the highest possible scores on the math and English placement tests at SMCC is one way that the Veterans Center and other veterans help these new students avoid using their G.I. Bill benefits on remedial courses that will ultimately not count towards their degrees. When he enrolled at SMCC, Sergio initially tested into the lowest math class, despite being an engineering major, because he didn't remember high school math at the time of the placement test. He described these classes, and the benefits he used to enroll in them as "wasted." Now he works to help other veterans avoid doing the same.

Unfortunately, at OS and UCP, veteran were much less likely to report helping or being helped by each other in this manner because the institutions simply are not set up for it. Hank and Jackie, two exceptions to this rule, were observed on numerous occasions studying and hanging out together at the OS Veterans Center, however they were the only observed examples of this behavior at OS or UCP. When asked about it, Hank said that he and Jackie had met in an introductory general education course and had since begun to enroll in courses together in order to use each other for academic support. At UCP, Isaac and Mike were the only students who reported sharing academic help with other veterans. In his interview Isaac mentioned studying primarily with his traditional student peers because, "although they're not as motivated and

91

focused as my veteran friends, they're still good students." Isaac said that he does study with other veterans on occasion, but usually as part of a larger group of students in the engineering major. Mike mentioned studying with other veterans in our interview, but said that these veterans were students in similar subjects who attended other four-year institution but who Mike knew from community college. Of course, students who have succeeded in transferring to four-year institutions, particularly more prestigious institutions like UCP, are less likely to need academic assistance then their peers at community colleges. Still, this study found evidence that participants at four-year institutions desire both the academic support and the sense of community that peer tutoring programs and study groups foster.

DISCUSSION

All of the strategies presented above (camaraderie, sharing information, and academic assistance) help student veterans combat dropout. However, the role of veteran community and of the Veterans Center differed substantially by peer community context and institutional type.

Camaraderie combats isolation by allowing veterans to "be one with their people." Like McCabe's (2016) work on peer relationships in higher education I find that students who occupy a minority position on campus –in this case student veterans – are often beset by feelings of isolation and they use a variety of strategies to combat this. However, in contrast, this study did not find that establishing fictive kinship relationships and sharing academic assistance were utilized equally by veterans on the three campuses. Only veterans at SMCC, the institution with the most robust veterans services and, arguably, the highest level of institutional commitment to student veterans, were able to make use of these strategies. The students at OS and UCP were unable to do so due to a lack of veteran peer community. However, the strong desire for peer camaraderie on the part of veterans at OS and UCP did lead these veterans to establish informal networks when possible to share valuable information among peers.

Sharing information combats bureaucratic barriers directly by allowing veterans to learn from the experience of their peers. In this study, the peer communities at SMCC, OS, and UCP all demonstrated evidence of veterans sharing information with their peers. However, among

veterans, sharing information through peer communities takes on forms that are novel when compared to the existing literature. Since student veterans must navigate both the bureaucracy of their educational institution and of the VA, it is not surprising that sharing strategies for navigating these systems represents the bulk of shared information. Due to a strategic use of veteran student-workers as peer role models, the students at SMCC were in the best position to share and receive information from peers.

Academic assistance combats obstacles to education by merging camaraderie and information sharing into powerful protection against academic failure. Unfortunately, this sophisticated strategy was not equally present on all three campuses in this study. Only SMCC, with its comprehensive Veterans Center and strong veteran peer community, had the right combination of physical space and communal ethos resulting in veterans helping each other academically. Perhaps because of their age, participants in this study were less likely to share academic assistance than those in previous literature on peer communities; however, the evidence from this study remains mixed. On one hand, student veterans may be more prepared for the academic challenges of higher education (due to being older and thus more able to find strategies and resources on their own) and on the other hand they may be less prepared (due to long absence from the academic context). More research into institutional differences in academic preparation of student veterans pursuing higher education is still needed.

One limitation of this work is that some student veterans actively distance themselves from the Veterans Center and the community of veterans. Although most participants identify with the Veterans Center quite strongly and use the center regularly, there were students who did not do so (often because they associated it with the larger VA system). This means that the current study (and most qualitative studies of veterans to date) looks not so much at the benefits of peer community for veterans as it does look at benefits of these for veterans who choose to engage with the peer community. One task for future researchers is to find a way to connect with student veterans who distance themselves from other veterans on campus and explore the reasons they do so and whether they have different models of navigating college.

CONCLUSION

Peer communities play a vital and under-researched role in veteran persistence and success, through creating camaraderie and sharing information and assistance. However, institutional commitment to veterans and the number of veterans at each institution are often linked and combine to produce veteran centers that are very different in character and serve veterans differently. In this analysis, it is the community college, rather than the four-year institutions, that has created the most robust community for student veterans. While this may serve a protective function for student veterans at community colleges—where persistence is lower than in the general student population—it may leave the needs of veterans at four-year institutions unmet. For students at the margins (those students who do not need the full compliment of academic and social supports but who are unlikely to reach their full educational attainment potential unaided) like many of those at OS and SMCC, institutional commitment and community context matter. In the current institutional policy context, this means some middling student veterans will never transfer to four-year institutions and some who do transfer to these institutions will ultimately founder there, due to lack of community support.

Table 3.3 Student Preparation and Community Context by Institution

Institution	Student Prior Preparation	Community Context
UCP	Strong academic preparation	Weak community assistance
OS	Middling academic preparation	Middling community assistance
SMCC	Weak academic preparation	Strong community assistance

In order for four-year institutions to attract and retain veterans (beyond those who will "make it on their own"), they would be well advised to adopt some of the characteristics of community colleges, at least with regard to veterans. In particular, underutilization and non-strategic use of the veteran work-study program hampers the development of a strong peer community. Additionally, attention to the physical space of the Veterans Center is necessary in order to make it a place where sharing of information (both academic and non-academic) can happen.

Finally, for student veterans pursuing higher education, alienation from social context is separate from academic outcomes. The peer community functions to help veterans adjust and

make peace with the overall college context, which enables the possibility of academic success, but does not ensure it. Veterans are then at risk of double alienation with regard to the burden of their past academic experience and possible fears about not fitting into the social context. A robust veteran peer community, which makes good use of casual information networks, student-workers and mentors, and tutors (formal and informal) is a powerful tool that institutions can harness to increase veteran educational attainment.

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CONCLUSION

This dissertation examined student veteran experience and engagement at colleges and universities using a multi-method approach. The greatest contributions of this dissertation is that it made use of both quantitative and qualitative institutional comparisons to bring student veterans into focus. Findings from the three studies provide both a general and nuanced perspective on student veterans in higher education.

The first study found that engagement operates differently for student veterans than for other nontraditional students, and that a high degree of involvement is, counterintuitively, associated with decreased veteran educational success. The second study found that veteran educational choice-making is different than other groups of students and, perhaps unsurprisingly given the greater resources that community colleges often invest in veteran services, that many veterans have their best academic and social experiences at community colleges rather than at four-year institutions. The third study found that peer communities play a vital and under-researched role in veteran educational success and that these communities provide camaraderie, sharing information, and academic assistance, all of which are strategies that help student veterans combat dropout.

On the surface, tensions emerged between the findings of the first and third studies. While the first study found a negative association between engagement and veteran attainment, the third study found evidence that reinforced the vital role of social engagement in veteran educational attainment. However, these findings are not as disparate as they might first appear. The first study examined social engagement in a way that glossed over the nuances of this construct and likely failed to measure the vital point of engagement that was the focus of the third study: the Veterans Center. Additionally, the third study's findings support the findings of the first study in that the reason interactions within the Veterans Center and Veterans Student Organization are so vital is that they combat the isolation experienced by veterans on the campus at large.

Limitations

Within each study, specific limitations of the work have been identified. As previously noted, there are several limitations related to the measures used by the BPS:04/09. In particular, although the construction of the BPS engagement indices was intended to be theoretically aligned with Tinto's academic and social engagement categorization, the academic measures in particular have been constructed such that high academic engagement is just as likely to be the result of institutionally mandated communication with faculty as student self-directed academic engagement behaviors. The social measures may be similarly flawed in that social, arts, and athletic organizations often involve faculty contact outside the classroom – something designed to be captured within the academic engagement measures rather than the social ones. This makes it difficult to tease out differences in academic engagement and social engagement. Similarly, the majority of the sample reported low social engagement, though this is largely consistent between veterans and non-veterans. Finally, the small sample of veterans in this data places some limits on its generalizability, these conclusions are certainly transferable to both research on nontraditional student populations at large and specific veteran populations. However, the data used in study one was collected prior to (and just following) the passing of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, which means that researchers should be thoughtful in applying these findings to studies of current veterans.

In the qualitative studies, one significant limitation is that some student veterans actively distance themselves from the VRC and the community of veterans. Although most participants identify with the VRC quite strongly and use the center regularly, there were students who did not do so (often because they associated it with the larger VA system). This means that the current study (and most qualitative studies of veterans to date) looks not so much at the benefits of peer community for veterans as it does look at benefits of these for veterans who choose to engage with the peer community. Additionally, many veterans choose not to enroll in college post military service. All participants in this study chose to enroll in college, as that was a criterion for inclusion in the study. In addition, all participants used G.I. Bill education benefits

at some point in their higher education careers. However, a substantial minority of military-connected college students do not use their G.I. Bill benefits.

Though the qualitative studies were both institutionally comparative, they were designed to be exploratory rather than broadly generalizable. However, the findings of these studies may be generalizable in that analytic insights may certainly transfer to the study of other types of college students and to veterans in other postsecondary settings. Additionally, the thick description of cases presented in the qualitative chapters will also allow case-to-case transfer to veterans both inside and outside of educational settings. This study enhances current levels of understanding of veteran student experience through a wide-ranging purposive sample of institutional types, which also allows the cases presented to be generalizable to other types of nontraditional students. Finally, it is the author's hope that the findings presented here with regard to student veterans will be transferable to both higher education researchers and practitioners in terms of their implications and directions for future research.

Scholarly Implications

Taken together, these three papers contribute to broader literatures about college experience and persistence Chapter one demonstrates that the association between engagement and degree attainment is not a simple one and that practitioners would do well to acknowledge that increasing student veteran engagement may not be sufficient to impact postsecondary success. These findings also add to critiques of Tinto's model indicating that engagement may not always be positive for underrepresented college students. This work highlights possible similarities between veterans and other underrepresented students and points to future research on the differential function on social engagement for these college students.

Chapter two provides additional support for existing research citing proximity and convenience as key factors affecting veteran's choice of postsecondary institution; however, it also confirms that veterans (largely) do not consider institutional prestige and program availability when choosing a college or university. Veterans separating from the U.S. military need more information and assistance regarding types of postsecondary institutions and

programs of study, and the burden of this additional assistance falls on both the U.S. military itself and postsecondary institutions. Most importantly, this study identified the veteran "x factor" that has eluded researchers for so long. I found that specific proximity considerations (such as the location of VA hospitals and military bases as well as existing social networks), concerns when choosing a program of study (due to the time-bound nature of previous military work experience), and career aspiration motivations (most importantly, incorporating notions of service and helping others) were unique to student veterans and unlike the considerations and strategies used by either traditional or nontraditional college students.

Chapter three demonstrates that peer communities do indeed positively impact success for veterans as they do for other groups of diverse college students. I found that creating and re-creating the camaraderie that the felt during military service, as well as establishing formal and informal networks for sharing information and academic assistance help student veterans persist toward their postsecondary goals. However, the role of veteran community and of the Veterans Center differed substantially by peer community context and institutional type, which indicates the need for future comparative research on peer communities at different types of postsecondary institutions. The findings of this study also affirm that while peer communities can functions to help veterans adjust to the overall college context, this enables the possibility of academic success but does not ensure it.

Policy Implications

Chapters two and three both contain several important policy implications. The findings of the second study indicate that admissions personnel at four-year institutions need more training on how to evaluate military experience for credit, in order to attract student veterans. Similarly, the third study found that, as veterans place high value on their military experiences, having admissions staff who are versed in how to award college credit for military experience may also serve to induce highly-qualified veterans to attend these institutions directly after military service without first attending a community college. With regard to student veterans and their organizations, four-year institutions may need to adopt some of the characteristics of

102

community colleges if they want to attract, retain, and graduate veterans in large numbers. In particular, misutilization of the veteran work-study program and inattention to the physical space of the Veterans Center may hamper the development of a strong peer community at some institutions. Finally, based on this the findings of chapters two and three, higher education administrators would do well to incorporate notions of service and helping into existing institutional policies aimed at veterans.

Future Research

First, additional qualitative studies investigating student veteran engagement, which are able to capture more than what is measured in large datasets, are desperately needed in order to determine whether the negative role of social engagement in degree attainment can be mitigated by participation in co-identity organizations. Further, through these studies, it has become apparent that co-identity organizations do not operate similarly within different institutional contexts. Along these lines, one task for future researchers is to find a way to connect with student veterans who distance themselves from other veterans on campus and explore the reasons they do so and whether they have different models of navigating college. Future researchers should seek out those veterans who have not used their educational benefits and investigate their career-related decision making processes upon separation from the military.

Additionally, higher education researchers would do well to incorporate notions of service and helping into future research design when working with veterans and similar types of students who have extensive prior life experience. Currently we underestimate veterans' capacity for care and the importance of service as a lifelong motivation, thus many of our assumptions about veteran's character and motivations may be incorrect. Finally, future research must follow veterans longitudinally to investigate the long-term impacts of their engagement (both in general and within peer communities specifically) and educational choices (including the decision not to enroll in higher education and make use of G.I. Bill benefits post-service).