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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Understanding the College Choice Process of
United States Military-Affiliated Transfer Students

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements of the degree Doctor of Education

by

Emily Joanne Ives

2017

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Understanding the College Choice Process of
United States Military-Affiliated Transfer Students

by

Emily Joanne Ives

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Mark Kevin Eagan, Co-Chair

Professor Linda P. Rose, Co-Chair

This study examined the college choice process of transfer student veterans who are currently enrolled in a public research university. The research presented in this dissertation utilized both quantitative and qualitative strategies to identify key factors in students' college choice process. This study focuses on the following two research questions: What are the demographic, military, and educational characteristics of veterans who have transferred to a public research university, and what factors do student veterans, who have transferred to a research university, identify as influential in either supporting or hindering their efforts to apply to and ultimately decide to enroll in a public research university. The study was conducted in two phases, the first being an email survey followed up by a second phase which included in-person interviews with a subset of the surveyed population. The data were analyzed using Hossler and Gallagher's three-stage model to understand and explain the college process of the military-affiliated transfer student

group. The findings of the research indicate that the demographic, background, and military experiences of sample participants were similar to those of national studies of the student veteran population. In addition, the findings of the research indicate that military-affiliated transfer students attending public research universities value academic factors over non-academic factors in their college search process, which differs from previous studies focusing on transfer student veteran populations.

Keywords: veterans, transfer students, college choice, military-affiliated students, public research university

The dissertation of Emily J. Ives has been approved.

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2017

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are several people who deserve recognition for their efforts in helping me complete this dissertation. First, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my committee chairs Dr. Linda Rose and Dr. Kevin Eagan, who have provided a healthy balance of challenge and support throughout my research and writing processes. Dr. Rose, your guidance, motivation, and willingness to edit numerous drafts of this work provided me with the continued determination to complete this dissertation. Dr. Eagan, your insight into research methods and survey analysis helped me find clarity in areas when I was lost. Without both of your guidance and persistent help, this dissertation would not have been possible.

I would like to thank my committee members Dr. Patricia McDonough and Dr. William Summerhill. Dr. McDonough, thank you for graciously sharing your expertise regarding college choice. Dr. Summerhill, thank you for always encouraging me to find my inner Sergeant Major, to help continue to push to me to progress throughout this process. Thank you both for your endless help, generous advice, support and encouragement during the study.

In addition, I would like to express my gratitude to my parents, family, friends, and colleagues who have provided me with continuous love, encouragement, and support throughout the years. First and foremost, my parents, Debi and Neil who have always encouraged me to pursue my educational goals and who have made many sacrifices to help make those dreams come true. To my brother Garrett, who helped keep me grounded and laugh at myself during stressful times. To Jonathan, for his constant faith in me and for his shoulder for support. And to my wonderful friends and colleagues who have always encouraged me. Thank you all!

Finally, a grateful thank you to not only the military veteran participants in this study but all past and present service members who answer the call to serve and defend our country.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

By 2020, more than five million post-9/11 service men and women will have left the United States military (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2013). These transitioning veterans will be leaving their military careers behind and adjusting to life as civilians. In an effort to honor their service, reduce veterans' post-military unemployment rate, and support the transition of veterans to new careers, the United States government provides qualified veterans with financial support for pursuing postsecondary education (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009; Greenberg, 1997; Mettler, 2005; Serrow, 2004). As veterans consider educational options in preparation for joining the civilian workforce, many find themselves attending community colleges because of the ease of access and nominal tuition fees these schools offer (A. Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Horn, Nevill, & Griffith, 2006).

For veterans who are transitioning to a civilian career and hoping to gain financial security (Persky & Oliver, 2011), earning a baccalaureate degree is becoming increasingly important (Fisher & Hourt, 2006). Unfortunately, the transfer rates from community colleges to 4-year universities are dismal. Four out of five (81.4%) students who enter a community college state that their ultimate educational goal is to earn at least a bachelor's degree; however, only 11.6% of students accomplish this goal within 6 years (Baum et al., 2013).

In response to poor these transfer rates, some states, such as California, Texas, and Florida, have developed outreach programs and admissions agreements to help create stronger pathways for their community college students who want to transfer to a 4-year institution (Handel, 2011). Unfortunately, no such program has been designed specifically with the veteran population in mind.

Veterans account for four percent of the undergraduate student body population nationwide (National Conference of State Legislators, 2014; Radford, 2009). In order for 4-year colleges and universities to better reach student veterans, it would be useful for these institutions to know more about those veterans who do succeed in transferring from community colleges to 4-year schools. Therefore, this study sought to understand the factors that student veterans who had successfully transferred from community colleges to the University of California (UC) described as important in their decision. For the purposes of this study, the terms *veteran* and *military-affiliated students* are used interchangeably to refer to individuals who themselves have served or are serving in the United States Armed Forces.

Foci of the Study

This study examined student veterans who have transferred successfully from a community college to a public research university. It explored (a) students' background (demographic, military, and community college) experiences, (b) the characteristics associated with student veterans' transfer university search and choice, and (c) how veterans navigated the college choice process. The goal of this study was to better understand student veterans' transfer experience in an effort to increase the transfer rate of student veterans to public research universities. A second goal was to help higher education professionals identify additional ways to support student veterans' consideration of and transfer to a public research university. Finally, this study sought to identify common experiences or themes that were present among successful transfer student veterans attending a public research university with the hope that common characteristics or areas of support could be shared with prospective transfer student veterans looking to attend a public research university.

Significance of the Problem

Given the downsizing of the military, it is likely that service members with eligibility for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits will begin utilizing their earned benefits by enrolling in higher education institutions (Abel, Bright, & Cooper, 2013). With economic issues and educational benefits being two of the main reasons why service members enlist in the military, it is anticipated that there will be an increase in veterans applying to colleges and universities (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). A study of student veterans' experiences related to the transfer process from a 2-year community college to a 4-year research university is important to provide veterans, community colleges, and research universities with information about the criteria used by student veterans to choose a 4-year institution to which they will transfer and what factors contribute to student veterans' successful transition to their new institutions (Molina, 2015).

Background of the Study

Veterans as an Underrepresented Population

Veterans are an underrepresented population who need support to enter university life as non-traditional students (Moon & Schma, 2011; Richardson & King, 1998; Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughley, & Harris, 2011). When veterans leave the military, many find themselves having difficulties transitioning from their military life to their new civilian life (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Bauman, 2009, Brito, Callahan, & Marks 2008; Church, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Glover-Graf, Miller, & Fremann, 2010; Lifton, 1992; Rumann, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). The experiences individuals undergo while serving in the Armed Forces are often life altering and can bring forth new challenges for universities

(DiRamio et al., 2008; Lifton, 1992). Some of the more common challenges that universities face are related to veterans' physical and mental health, as well as their social needs.

College Access

In order to understand how veterans navigate the transfer process from a 2-year institution to 4-year public research university, it must first be understood how veterans make decisions about accessing college. With the Post-9/11 GI Bill offering a lucrative resource supporting veterans' access to higher education, student veteran enrollment in colleges and universities in the United States is expected to grow (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015a) an additional 20% by 2020 (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015b). As more veterans enroll, colleges that hope to ease their transition to higher education will need to become more aware of the issues veterans face. The three main challenges that veterans typically experience (and will likely continue to experience) when considering postsecondary educational opportunities include: aggressive recruiting strategies by for-profit universities (Sander, 2012), transitional issues from the shift from military life to civilian life (Rumann, 2010), and understanding the college search process (American Council on Education, 2009). The issues were explored further in this study as a means to understand how these challenges have impacted veterans attending 4-year public research universities.

Why Transfer?

Student veterans have many choices when it comes to higher education. They can consider schools that are public or private, for-profit or non-profit, 2-year or 4-year. Although all of these options are possible, most post-9/11 student veterans begin their higher education at a community college or for-profit university, with few directly entering a 4-year institution to complete their bachelor's degree (Field, 2008; Sewall, 2010). This path is taken because of

community colleges' open admissions policies, nominal tuition fees, and wide variety of course offerings.

An example of the difference in admission requirements for direct-entry (freshman) students compared to transfer student is presented subsequently. At the time of this study, the UC's basic admissions requirements for freshman students were:

1. Complete a minimum of 15 college-preparatory courses (a-g courses), with at least 11 finished prior to the beginning of your senior year.
2. Earn a grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or better (3.4 if you're a nonresident) in these courses with no grade lower than a C.
3. Meet the examination requirement by taking the ACT Plus Writing, the SAT (taken prior to March of the prior academic year) or SAT with Essay (taken March of the prior academic year or later) by December of your senior year. (Regents of the University of California, 2017a, p.1)

At the time of this study, the UC's basic admissions requirements for transfer students were:

1. Complete the following 7-course pattern by the end of the spring term prior to fall enrollment at UC: two transferable courses in English composition; one transferable course in mathematical concepts and quantitative reasoning; four transferable college courses chosen from at least two of the following subject areas: arts and humanities, social and behavioral sciences, or physical and biological sciences.
2. Complete at least 60 semester (90 quarter) units of UC-transferable credit.
3. Earn at least a 2.4 GPA in UC-transferable courses (2.8 if you're a nonresident).
(Regents of the University of California, 2017b, p. 1)

Given the freshman and transfer admission requirements listed previously, the transfer pathway is often easier for veterans. The UC confirms this on their website, stating, “most veterans who enroll as undergraduates have transferred to the institution by way of a California Community College” (Regents of the University of California, 2015, para. 1).

Transfer Process

A 2010 report sponsored by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) found that 33% of college students will transfer during their educational pursuit; however, much of the literature on college choice and the transfer process is based on the experiences and challenges of traditional students. Most of the literature on student veterans has focused on transition from the military to a community college, not the transition from community college to a 4-year institution (Bauman, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, 2010). This literature does not consider the multiple pathways students take to attend college and does not account for students whose goal is an advanced degree rather than a certificate or associate’s degree. The limited research that does exist on the experiences of students who transfer from a 2-year institution to a 4-year institution does not typically consider the military experiences and non-traditional student experiences of veterans. One theme that does emerge in this literature is how often students who transfer from a 2-year to a 4-year college mention the encouragement and advice they received from faculty or other mentors (Packard, Tuladhar, & Lee, 2013).

Transfer Transition

Colleges and universities play an integral role in facilitating a smooth transition for transfer students (Poisel & Joseph, 2011). Some 4-year colleges and universities have implemented programs and policies aimed at better supporting the transfer process, but none of

these efforts has targeted veterans specifically (Handel, 2011). Some 4-year college and universities have addressed transfer challenges by developing articulation agreements, which ease the transfer process by having a community college and a 4-year institution agree on the courses at the community college that the 4-year institution will count toward transferring students' bachelor's degree. These agreements give aspiring transfer students confidence that the courses they take at the community college will ultimately count toward their bachelor's degree (Grites, 2012; McDonald, 2012). Although steps towards easing the transfer process like this are beginning to be implemented, they lack specific attributes from which veterans can benefit.

Previous studies have found that a major challenge veterans face is the fact that colleges often do not understand veterans' military training, which is reported in the form of the Joint Service Transcript (JST). This disconnect presents itself in student veterans' process of completing their admissions applications, which requires veterans to report all coursework taken after their high school graduation. Veterans are often unsure whether the college to which they are applying will accept their military coursework as meeting the academic requirements for admission (Cook & Kim, 2009; Persky & Oliver, 2011; Zaiger, 2009). Organizations such as the American Council on Education (ACE) have created guidelines to help colleges and universities evaluate military transcripts and award credit for prior learning (American Council on Education [ACE], 2015). However, not all college and universities accept all of the ACE's recommendations for evaluations and awarding credit from a veteran's JST. This inconsistency makes it difficult for student veterans to understand their eligibility for admission to a university.

Some colleges and universities have begun to develop programs to provide outreach to 2-year students. These programs provide community college students with information about the transfer process and assistance in the application process, supporting students from

underrepresented backgrounds including first generation college students, low-income students, and students of color (Handel, 2011). Although some student veterans identify with the aforementioned backgrounds, many do not; therefore, these programs fail to address many of veterans' specific transitional needs.

Challenges Faced by Transitioning Veterans

Some veterans may experience social, financial, and health challenges that can create additional difficulties when entering colleges and universities (ACE, 2009). Veterans often experience social challenges as they attempt to relate to more traditional college classmates. Multiple studies have noted that veterans find it difficult to interact with other students as a result of differences in their life experiences and levels of maturity (Bennett, 2000; DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Many veterans have much more life experience, with extensive traveling and interactions with people from diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann, 2009). Veterans also cite the challenge of transitioning from military life to student life. In the military, veterans were given much more responsibility and leadership roles than they tend to experience as a university student (DiRamio et al., 2008). Although this process begins when the veteran leaves the military, Bauman (2009) found that the transition continued during the student matriculation experience. Although these experiences arguably make veterans better adapted to new environments, a vast difference in perspective from their non-veteran counterparts can make integrating difficult.

Some veterans may also suffer from health issues connected with their military service that provide additional challenges to their success as students (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2012b, 2013). These may include psychological issues (Burnam, Meredith, Tanielian, & Jaycox, 2009; Caplan, 2011; McDonald, Beckham, Morey, & Calhoun 2009; Reynolds, 2009;

Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008), cognitive impairments (Caplan, 2011; Elliot, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Moon & Schma, 2011), and physical health issues (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). A large proportion of the wounds that service members of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts experience are *invisible wounds*, meaning a casual observer would not be able to identify them as they are cognitive or psychological in nature (Burnam et al., 2009; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2013) reported that approximately 31% of the 4.3 million veterans of the Global War on Terrorism have received some type of injury from their service. In addition, another 11% of veterans are diagnosed with poly-trauma (multiple diagnoses) as a result of their service in the Global War on Terrorism. Moreover, colleges are reporting an increase in the prevalence of mental health issues among student veterans (Reynolds, 2009). Caplan (2011) noted that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) are signature injuries as a result of the Global War on Terrorism. Veterans who suffer from such cognitive impairments may face difficulties in academic settings. Specifically, veterans with such impairments may find that their conditions affect their concentration, retention of course material, and cognitive function (Caplan, 2011; Elliot et al., 2011; Moon & Schma, 2011). These impairments often affect their success in classes and ability to form social connections.

In addition to social and health challenges, many veterans express concerns about financing their education (Childress, 2010; Cook & Kim, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Nelson, 2009). Federal financial support for education is available to veterans as a benefit of military service (GI Bill). Veteran education benefits are limited to 36 continuous months for the typical veteran and can be used at a 2-year or 4-year institution for vocational, undergraduate, or graduate studies (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015c). With the exception of severely disabled or wounded veterans, the time limits placed on using these benefits may mean that

veterans' benefits expire before they complete their degree requirements. Given these constraints, many student veterans are faced with the choice of completing their degree while taking on part-time jobs and acquiring student loans, or finding full-time employment at the cost of not completing their degree (DiRamio et al., 2008).

Addressing Educational Disparities between Veterans and Non-Veterans

Recent studies have found that, by 2020, 60-65% of jobs in the United States will require postsecondary education or training, with 35% of those jobs requiring at least a baccalaureate degree (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2014; Matthews, 2012). Among adults over the age of 25, veterans' rate of attending some college or earning an associate's degree (36.9%) is substantially higher than that of non-veterans (28.3%). However, the proportion of veterans who have earned a bachelor's degree or higher (27.2%) is slightly less than their non-veteran counterparts (30.3%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). This juxtaposition further supports the assertion that veterans face additional obstacles as they transition from community college to higher education.

Purpose of the Study

With more than half of the job opportunities in 2020 being projected to require postsecondary education and approximately one-third of those jobs being projected to require a baccalaureate degree (Carnevale et al., 2014; Matthews, 2012), more must be understood about how veterans make decisions as they transfer from a community college to a 4-year research university. Currently, there appears to be a disconnect between community colleges and 4-year institutions regarding the transfer experiences of student veterans. A better understanding of student veterans' experience may help streamline the process for them and optimize the efforts put forth by community colleges, 4-year universities, and the VA. The purpose of this study was to examine the transfer process of veterans who successfully made the transition from a

community college to a public research university. This included their experiences with transfer support while in community college, the criteria they used in their search and choice of a transfer institution, and the individuals who influenced their pursuit of higher education.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the demographic, military, and educational characteristics of veterans who have transferred to a public research university? To what extent do these characteristics vary by student veterans' branch of service and current military status?
2. What factors do student veterans, who have transferred to a research university, identify as influential in either supporting or hindering their efforts to apply to and ultimately decide to enroll in a public research university? To what extent do these factors vary by student veterans' branch of service and current military status?

Overview of the Research Methodology

Research Design

This mixed methods study utilized a combination of an original online survey and follow-up face-to-face interviews. The study included 150 participants in the survey portion and a subsample of 20 participants for the interview portion.

The population included student veterans who had successfully transferred from a community college to pursue a baccalaureate degree at one of the eight UC system institutions, all of which are public research universities. UC San Francisco was not invited to participate in the study as they do not award baccalaureate degrees, nor do they admit community college transfer students seeking a baccalaureate degree. Additionally, UC Merced was not invited to

participate in the study due to the small sample size of veterans (less than 10) at Merced and the university's concern with anonymity.

An email request was sent to the campus Certifying Official and/or Veteran Coordinator requesting his/her support in the study. Once support was granted, the survey was registered through each campus's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Upon receiving permission from each campus IRB, a follow-up email was sent to the to the respective Certifying Official and Veteran Coordinator containing the IRB approval, instructions for survey participants, and a request to forward the survey to their undergraduate military-affiliated transfer students. Each campus was provided a unique survey link so the response rate could be tracked. The campus Certifying Official and Veteran Coordinator then forwarded the study invitation and survey link to his/her campus's undergraduate military-affiliated transfer student population. Multiple emails were sent by the campus Certifying Official and Veteran Coordinator to help increase the response rates.

The survey was composed of three main sections. The first part of the survey included questions about participants' demographic and military service characteristics. The second part asked students about their community college experiences; specifically, students were asked to rate the services, support, and guidance they received while attending community college. The last section of the survey asked participants about their search process when looking for a transfer institution and their choice process when selecting which transfer institution to attend. The results from the quantitative phase were used to help inform the questions asked in the second, qualitative phase of the study.

At the end of the survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a 45-60-minute follow-up interview regarding their college choice experience. The responses to this question were un-linked from the survey. In an effort to be able to follow up with

interviewees more directly, outreach to willing interviewees occurred at the campus whose survey respondents demonstrated racial/ethnic diversity, diversity of branch of service, and diversity with respect to military status. Twenty military-affiliated transfer students were interviewed regarding their college choice experiences.

The interviews served as a way to further investigate these findings and provided additional information about military-affiliated students' college choice process. Specifically, interviewees were asked to describe the role that non-academic factors, such location and proximity to family, and academic factors, such as the university's reputation, played in their decisions. In addition, interviewees shared stories of how a combination of personal ambition and the encouragement they received from others influenced their college choice process.

Research Sites and Participants

This study examined the experiences of student veterans who transferred from a community college into one of the bachelor's degree-granting campuses of the UC system. The study focused on students who transferred from community colleges because, in California, this is the most common pathway from the military to a 4-year institution. The study focused specifically on those who transferred into research universities because these institutions have strong graduation rates and employment outcomes.

Studying the experiences of students who transferred into public research universities in California has several advantages. California has two million veterans living in the state, and over 70,000 veterans attend California Community Colleges, offering implications to a large population of potential transfer students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Additionally, the coordinated structure of California's Master Plan provides defined pathways for students to transfer from the state's community colleges into 4-year institutions (UC Office of the President,

2007). The state also serves as a convenient context given the author's relationships with directors of centers for student veterans at the UC campuses. Finally, there is a substantial disparity between the number of veterans in the state community college system and the number of veterans in the UC system. The consideration of these four factors and the aforementioned research questions will provide a baseline to better understanding the veteran transfer process.

All students within the UC system who met the following criteria were invited to participate in the study:

- Registered undergraduate student at a UC institution.
- United States military veteran who had self-identified on the on the UC undergraduate admissions application, received priority registration as a result of their military service, used veteran education benefits, or had self-identified with the campus veterans services office.
- Transferred to a UC institution from a community college.

Originally, veteran students at all of the UC campuses were invited to participate; however, less than five students from three of the campuses responded, (UC Berkeley [UCB], UC Irvine [UCI], and UC Santa Cruz [UCSC]); therefore, these three sites were dropped from the analysis. The final sample consisted of from military-affiliated students at UC Davis (UCD), UC Los Angeles (UCLA), UC Riverside (UCR), UC Santa Barbara (UCSB), and UC San Diego (UCSD).

Significance of the Study

It is hoped the findings of this study will guide changes that will support military-affiliated students and facilitate their transfer from community colleges to public research universities. The target audiences for this study include military-affiliated individuals themselves

and higher education professionals (community college faculty, staff, and admissions employees at transfer institutions) who are committed to helping veterans with this transition. It is hoped that this study helps public research universities attract more transfer student veterans by understanding the experiences of previously successful military-affiliated transfer students attending public research universities. In addition, findings from this study can augment national level data regarding how veterans choose a college, as data on this topic are scarce (Taylor, Fry, & Oates, 2014). Several national organizations may be able to use the findings of this study to help provide additional information that assists with these transitions.

Public Engagement

The results from this study can be used to engage higher education administrators regarding both the facilitation, of and impediments to, the successful application and enrollment of undergraduate veterans at the UC. Presentations will be made about the findings and suggestions for practice and policy to audiences at both the UC and California Community Colleges (CCCs). These presentations will be made to campuses leadership teams, Veteran Coordinators and Certifying Officials, Transfer Admissions and Outreach Staff, UC Office of the President, and CCC Foundation Student Affairs Staff. These departments and divisions are involved directly with outreach to and admission of student veterans. Administrators will be able to use the findings and recommendations to help support a framework of successful transition of student veterans from a community college to a public, 4-year research university.

The findings from this study will be shared at veterans' educational conferences. The Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education NASPA and American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Veterans Conference is an annual conference that brings together researchers and practitioners from higher education to share best practices and innovative ideas

to support student veterans. Additionally, the results of this study will be shared with higher education and policy professionals affiliated with national organizations that are interested in supporting student veterans' success (i.e., Association for the Study of Higher Education [ASHE], American Council on Education [ACE] Military and Veteran Students Leadership and Advocacy Team, NASPA Veterans Knowledge Community) in order to disseminate information on advocacy and factors that veterans find helpful in supporting their college choice process.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter examines relevant literature on student veterans in higher education. First, the chapter reviews the historical background of veterans in higher education, introducing relevant education benefits and legislation that have supported military-affiliated students' access and success in higher education. Then, this chapter reviews current data pertaining to the college-going military-affiliated population's background and military characteristics. Next, this chapter reviews existing literature regarding supports and services in higher education, as well as college choice factors. Finally, the conceptual frameworks and theories that have informed the development of this study are presented.

Historical Overview of Veterans' Access to Funding and Higher Education

The United States higher education system and the United States Armed Forces have a rich history of mutual support. Although financial compensation for service-connected injuries dates back to 1636, it was not until 1924 that the federal government began providing financial assistance to transitioning veterans, and not until 1994 that veterans received financial support specifically for higher education (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2010b).

World War Adjusted Compensation Act of 1924

After the end of World War I, veterans who were discharged from the United States military were given very little support in their transition to civilian life. At that time, discharged military members received a train ticket to their residence and an allowance of \$60 to support them until they found employment. During the Great Depression, some United States military veterans found themselves in difficult times, just as many others did. At that time, Congress attempted to pass the World War Adjusted Act of 1924 (commonly known as the Bonus Act), which provided veterans with bonuses that were calculated according to the number of days of

their military service; however, the majority of needy veterans did not actually receive those funds until approximately 1944. In fact, a group of disgruntled veterans marched to Washington, D.C. in 1932 demanding their bonuses, but they were turned away and did not receive their bonuses until several years later (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2010b). As a result of the hardships that were felt by the World War I veterans, President Franklin D. Roosevelt endeavored to avoid making similar mistakes to those of his predecessors and instead provided support to military veterans who were leaving the service; this included, for the first time, educational benefits.

Post-World War II Education Benefits

Federal support for veterans' pursuit of higher education began officially on June 22, 1944 when President Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill of Rights (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Thelin, 2004; U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2010b). This legislation provided not only resources to facilitate veterans' assimilation into civilian life but also training and postsecondary education for a new cadre of students that would diversify universities' enrollments, which historically had included only individuals from more affluent families (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Thelin, 2004). The impact of the G.I. Bill on higher education was significant, as it provided an opportunity for veterans to access higher education (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Shaw, 1947) and encouraged their attendance by paying for tuition and other enrollment fees (Smole & Loane, 2008). This educational benefit led to increases in enrollment among veterans and unparalleled changes in the diversity of the college student body (Atkinson, 1949; Justman 1947; McDonagh, 1947; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). In 1947, almost half (49%) of the national college-going student body was made up of veterans ("GI Bill Turns 62," 2006; U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2016b). In response to these

changes in access and diversity within the higher education system brought about by the post-war legislation, colleges and universities proposed institutional changes to meet the needs of student veterans. These changes included the introduction of new programs and services that were customized to meet the needs of military veterans. Some of these services included academic advising, counseling, employment placement, and forgiveness of student loans (Cardozier, 1993).

Following the passage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, the United States continued its support of veterans throughout future military conflicts, including the Korean, Vietnam, and Persian Gulf Wars (U.S Department of Veteran Affairs, 2010b). Through the Readjustment Assistance Act of 1972, U.S. higher education institutions experienced another increase in the number of veterans enrolling (Angrist, 1993); however, given that this period of enrollment growth in higher education among veterans occurred during a time of economic downturn and post-Vietnam conflict, student veterans had few outreach or support programs available to them (Figley & Leventman, 1980). The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 was the first of many future legislative acts that would provide benefits to members of the United States Armed Forces.

With the intention of continuing the legacy of education and home loan benefits provided by the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, Congressman Gillespie V. Montgomery issued a revamped version of the G.I. Bill in 1984 (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2010b). This legislative act continued financial support to service members and veterans throughout the next 17 years. It was not until September 11, 2001, however, that the United States government would begin to think about introducing a more generous veteran education benefit (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2010b).

In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, recruitment for the U.S. military increased and plans were developed to deploy soldiers to Iraq and Afghanistan. In an effort to keep the benefits associated with the G.I. Bill current to meet the changing needs of the veteran population, a 2008 revision was enacted to account for the rising costs of college tuition (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2010b). After 8 years of the United States' military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, an educational benefit available to any veteran who served a minimum of 90 days of service after September 11, 2001, was passed on August 1, 2009 (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015c).

This bill provided more robust financial support to veterans pursuing higher education. The Montgomery G.I. Bill pays veterans a set amount of money that is based on the number of enrolled units, whereas the Post-9/11 GI Bill pays veterans' in-state tuition and fees and provides them with a stipend for housing, books, and supplies (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2016a). For example, if a full-time undergraduate student enrolled in UCLA for the fall quarter of 2016 had 100% eligibility, the Montgomery GI Bill would pay an allowance of \$1,789 per month directly to the student for his/her education and housing expenses. In contrast, the Post-9/11 GI Bill would pay all of the student's tuition and fees (\$12,705), provide a monthly housing allowance of \$2,449, and allocate \$1,000 a year to the student for books and supplies (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2016a). The Post-9/11 GI Bill is regarded as the most supportive education benefit since the creation of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act.

The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill provided its veteran beneficiaries with increased access to higher education by covering in-state tuition costs and fees at public higher education institutions, a monthly housing allowance that accounted for fair-market rent near the college campus (U. S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2014; "Welcome to the GI Bill," 2014), and a book stipend

(Griffin & Gilbert, 2012). As of November 20, 2011, 600,000 veterans had utilized their Post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits (Flavin, 2011), and more recent figures put the total at over one million veterans (Zoroya, 2013). This figure is expected to increase as the drawdown of military forces continues. As suggested by historical evidence from the last 7 decades, the United States has a long history of supporting its military veterans in furthering their education, and higher education institutions should expect to see an increase in the veteran population on their campuses in the coming years.

Overview of Current Legislation Supporting Military-Affiliated Students in Higher Education

Legislation regarding educational benefits for those serving during the war in Afghanistan, which began shortly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, provided educational benefits to service members during enlistment and after separation. Several legislative changes have improved access to post-secondary education for military members and veterans. In addition, several legislative acts also began holding higher education institutions accountable for providing services and support veterans and service members. These acts are described subsequently.

The military's Tuition Assistance program supports students' educational aspirations by offsetting the educational coursework for service members during their off-duty hours. This benefit allows veterans to pursue their educational goals in a degree program while serving in the armed forces. Each branch of service (Air Force, Army, Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard) outlines its own policies for the amount of financial support paid to students for their college expenses ("Military Tuition Assistance," 2017). Although service members can receive tuition assistance while serving in the military, this opportunity is not a reality for all service members.

For instance, if a service member's off-duty hours are spent in a combat zone without access to hot meals and a room with walls, the likelihood of access to a computer with Internet is slim. In essence, military Tuition Assistance is not a program that is physically accessible to all service members.

Executive Order No. 13,607 (2012) was enacted to provide military-connected individuals with information and support to protect them from attending colleges with poor graduation and employment outcomes. This legislation required that higher education institutions do the following: communicate transparently about costs of attending their institution, provide veterans with an educational plan, develop a single point-of-contact at the institution, and create veteran-friendly and non-predatory recruitment and financial policies (Victory Media, 2015).

Only a few years later, on May 15, 2014, the Department of Defense (DoD) decided that all higher education institutions wishing to accept tuition assistance for active service members must comply by the regulations set out by the DoD (Victory Media, 2015). These regulations reviewed each institution's accreditation, programs/services for military students, and recruiting strategies to ensure that the institution was supportive of military student success.

This policy expanded with the enactment of the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (also referred to as the Veterans Choice Act), which sought to improve access and quality of care of United States Armed Forces veterans. With the passage of time this act brought about significant changes to the access, quality, capacity, and length of claims and care for veterans by Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) and non-VA providers of healthcare (Victory Media, 2015). In addition to improvements in healthcare for veterans, this legislation sought to address issues within the VA administration that overlooked, concealed, and denied care for many veteran patients. In 2014, the Veterans Health Administration was found to

have neglected care for 35 veterans, which resulted in their death (Daly & Tang, 2014). This legislation also brought about two major improvements to education benefits for student veterans. The first was the expansion of the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship (Victory Media, 2015). This scholarship—which pays full in-state tuition and fees, a monthly housing allowance, and a book stipend to children of service members who died in the line of duty—was extended to also include surviving spouses of service members who lost their lives in the line of duty (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015d). The second change was the provision that colleges and universities approved to receive Post-9/11 G.I. Bill and Montgomery G.I. Bill benefits must waive out-of-state tuition fees for veterans and their eligible family members if the veteran has separated from the military within 36 months (Executive Order No. 13,607, 2012). By providing additional financial support to spouses of veterans killed in the line of duty and eliminating the out-of-state tuition costs for recently separated veterans attending a public institution, the affordability of public higher education for military-affiliated widows and out-of-state veterans changed (Executive Order No. 13,607, 2012). These financial supports removed financial barriers and provided additional access to populations that may have been intimidated by the financial cost of higher education. These changes significantly improved the college choice options for veterans enrolling in higher education institutions.

Veterans in Higher Education

Enrollment Trends

Current enrollment patterns within the higher education system suggest a significant increase in the representation of veterans on campus. As the United States has scaled back troops in the Middle East, colleges and universities have seen a 25% increase in military veterans enrolling in higher education institutions since the introduction of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill (Moon

& Schma, 2011; Sewall, 2010; Strawn, Draper, Rothenberg, & Goodman, 2009). Among veterans enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities, 43% begin at a 2-year institution; this figure exceeds veterans' enrollment rates at public 4-year institutions (21%), private 4-year institutions (14%), and private for-profit colleges (13%; Ryan et al., 2011).

Several national studies have found that military-affiliated students differ from their college peers. The National Survey of Student Engagement (2010) found that service members and veterans are less likely than non-veterans to attend research-intensive doctoral granting universities; the survey also found that service members and veterans are more likely to attend public institutions than private ones. Another large national survey, the Millions Records Project, found that more than three out of four student veterans (79.2%) enroll in a public higher education institution, as opposed to a private higher education institution (Cate, 2014). This project, a public-private partnership with the Student Veterans of America, the United States Department of Veteran Affairs, and the National Student Clearinghouse, studied almost one million student veterans who used the Montgomery G.I. Bill or the Post-9/11 GI Bill between the years of 2002 and 2010. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 2007-08 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) found that the majority of military undergraduate students attended a public 2-year institution (43%), with the second most common type of institution attended being a public 4-year institution (21%; Radford, 2011). Another study found that veterans attend college at a higher rate than non-veterans but lag behind non-veterans when it comes to completing a bachelor's degree (Holder, 2011). These studies provide additional insight into the challenges veterans encounter in the period between enrolling in an institution and earning a bachelor's degree.

Data suggest that these national trends have also emerged in California. The CCC system is the largest public higher education system in world; annually, it serves more than 2.1 million students. Of that population, over 66,000 are identified as veterans or service members of the United States Armed Forces (California Community College Chancellors Office, 2015). One of the missions of the CCC is to serve as the pipeline for community college students to transfer to a 4-year university. The population of veterans and service members enrolled in the 4-year public higher education system in California includes approximately 6,000 California State University undergraduates (California State University, 2015) and 1,000 UC undergraduates (University of California, 2015).

What are the Background Experiences of Military-Affiliated Students?

The following sections identify three clusters of variables that are related to college choice: (a) demographic characteristics, (b) military experiences, and (c) expectations about college and initial enrollment characteristics.

Demographics

The following section highlights demographic characteristics previous researchers have noted among individuals seeking post-secondary education (Pulley, 2013), including military-connected undergraduates (Molina, 2015). These include gender, race and ethnicity, age, parents' education, marital status, and family income.

Gender. According to the 2007-08 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (Radford, 2011), 73% percent of military-undergraduates identified as male. More recent studies have found that although they are underrepresented in the military, female veterans are more likely than male veterans to enroll in higher education. Specifically, the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Surveys found that in the years between 2002 and 2009, female veterans were more

likely than male veterans to have completed some college education. Similar findings were reported by the 2015 U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey. Women veterans were more likely than men to have enrolled in higher education (44.3% versus 36.5%), earned baccalaureate degree (20.7 versus 15.9), and earned an advanced degree (13.8 versus 10.7); National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2015). A more recent report of student veterans contradicts these findings.

Race and ethnicity. Race and ethnicity are significant determinants of who chooses to join the military, and of which veterans pursue higher education. Historically, Black youth have had a higher enlistment rate than their White and Hispanic counterparts. With the increase in Armed Forces post 9/11, the proportion of Blacks enlisting in the military has decreased, while the rate of enlistment of Hispanics and Latinos has increased by almost 17% (Segal, Thanner, & Segal, 2007; United States Department of Defense, 2011). Various studies of military-affiliated students have found non-White enrollment to be around 35-45%. According to 2011-12 report by the United States Department of Education's NCES NPSAS, 37 % of veterans, 48% of active duty personnel, 47% of reservists, and 40% of National Guard members identified as racial/ethnic minorities (U.S. Department of Defense, 2011, 2013). For the purposes of this calculation, racial/ethnic minorities included those who identified as Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, or other/multicultural background.

Military Characteristics

The following sections highlight military characteristics of veterans at universities. These include deployments and service-connected disabilities, as they are generally the most delineating factor between an individual who has served in the military and a civilian.

Deployment. Deployment can be a disruptive, life-altering transition (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Cate (2014) found that deployment is a factor that can prolong or delay student veterans' completion of their education. Military-affiliated students differ in their number of deployments and exposure to combat. According to the 2008 DoD Survey of Health-Related Behaviors in Active Duty Military Personnel, since September 11, 2001, 55% of military personnel have been combat deployed one or more times. Of those deployed, 25% deployed one time, 16% deployed two times and 15% deployed three or more times. The branches of service with the highest rates of combat exposure are the Army (42%) and the Marine Corps (27%; Wells et al., 2010).

Disability. Studies have found that approximately 20% of service members returned from Iraq with a mental health problem (Hoge, Auchterlonie, & Milliken, 2006). Similarly, the U.S. DoD Task Force on Mental Health (2007) found that returning service members report significant depression, alcohol abuse (24%), and anger problems (43%). Similarly, the U.S. DoD Task Force on Mental Health found that deployments longer than 6 months and multiple deployments contribute to an increase in mental health issues. In his national study of student veterans, Cate (2014) found that service-connected disabilities can prolong or delay student veterans' completion of their education.

What are Military-Affiliated Students' Experiences in Higher Education?

Research on the re-entry challenges faced by veterans in higher education continues to grow but is affected by several important limitations. Most researchers who have sought to understand the military-to-higher education transition have limited their investigations to students' first institution, which is often a community college (Durdella & Kim, 2012; Field, Hebel, & Smallwood, 2008). This focus neglects the growing number of military students who

experience a second transition, when they transfer from community college to a 4-year institution. Further, much of the literature on veterans in higher education addresses student veterans as a whole (Heath, 2011; Hoge et al., 2004; Lum, 2009; Shackelford, 2009). Such studies lump together active-duty personnel, reservists, and veterans, and thereby ignore important differences across the sub-classifications of military-connected students.

Researchers most often focus on the challenges student veterans encounter with respect to transitions of identity. Rumann and Hamrick (2010) conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with six students who were transitioning from military service in a combat zone to life at a large, public, 4-year university in the mid-western United States. Their participants included three national guards and three reservists; of these, five were males and one female. The authors found that these students were concerned about disclosing their veteran identity and regulating their emotions, specifically citing their temper as a concern. Participants in this study also described challenges in developing or reigniting friendships with peers. Although this study underscores the challenges to transitioning into higher education, these veterans also shared some positive feelings, such as sensing that they were more mature than their peers and that their military service and experiences provided them with enhanced motivation to complete their college degree.

DiRamio et al. (2008) interviewed 25 students who identified as veterans, reservists, or members of the National Guard who were enrolled in one of three institutions in the Northern, Southern, and Western regions of the United States. The researchers utilized Schlossberg's four-stage transition theory as a framework to describe military students' experiences as they transitioned from military service to post-secondary education. The authors identified 16 themes in the students' interviews, which were used to create a set of recommendations to institutions

for supporting their student veterans. These recommendations included: developing staff and faculty trainings to explain student needs, developing ways to support student veterans, identifying the veteran population instead of relying on students to self-identify for services, and continually monitoring and assessing outcomes for student veterans. Although this is regarded as one of the seminal studies on the transitions of military-connected students post 9/11, it does not include the experiences of combat veterans, thus weakening its generalizability. By not including combat veterans, DiRamio et al. may have overlooked a sub-population who may experience challenges with physical and mental health issues such as PTSD, severe depression, or TBI (Mowatt & Bennett, 2011; Schell & Marshall, 2006; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). These health issues can significantly impact a combat veteran's transition.

Stalides (2008) analyzed the blog postings of seven student veterans and found several indications of their difficulty returning to civilian life. In these blogs, student veterans described feeling isolated on campus and finding it difficult to adapt to the social norms of the civilian culture. On the positive side, Stalides, like Rumann and Hamrick (2010), found that these students felt that their military training had made them more disciplined in regard to schoolwork than their non-veteran classmates.

How Do Military-Affiliated Students Experience College Choice?

College Choice Models

Given the various economic and social benefits associated with attending a 4-year institution, a number of studies have examined the efficacy of various strategies aimed at improving retention and completion for non-traditional and underrepresented students at 4-year universities. By contrast, far fewer studies have considered student veterans' approaches to

selecting a college, and even fewer have examined these decisions among veterans transferring from a community college to a 4-year institution.

The process an individual undergoes to pursue higher education is called the *college choice* process. During this process, students first decide to pursue education and then identify colleges or universities that meet their needs. Next, they complete admission requirements, complete a college application, and gain admission to one or more institutions. Finally, students select an institution to attend to complete their bachelor's degree.

Researchers have developed various models to describe a student's college choice process. Early models, dating back to 1920, were limited to factors such as college attendance and personal financial growth (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). As research has progressed, several contributing factors have been added to these models. Higher education administrators employ these models to help recruit and enroll top students. Depending on the factors it considers, a college choice model is usually considered to fall within one of the following conceptual approaches:

- *Economic*: Focuses on the cost-benefit analysis of attending college (Becker, 1993; Perna, 2006).
- *Psychological*: Focuses on how characteristics such as personality, motivation, maturity, and personality/character influence students' college choice (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988).
- *Sociological and environmental*: Focuses on the influence of social phenomena (race, socioeconomic status [SES], opportunity, institutional prestige) on where to attend higher education (Bourdieu, 1986; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006).

- *Organizational and interactional*: Focuses on how institutional and environmental characteristics shape a student's decision of where to enroll for college (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; McDonough, 1997, 1998; Perna, 2000).

Although each of these college choice models has its own distinct focus, some theorists have combined models to create frameworks that are more inclusive. One of the most well-known of these is Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage college choice model. This model, developed to describe traditional students, outlines three main stages that individuals move through when making a decision on where to attend college: predisposition, search, and choice. Predisposition is the stage where individuals decide whether they would like to pursue postsecondary education. Several personal characteristics of individuals' identity (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, SES, first generation college student) have been found to influence their decision to pursue postsecondary education. During the second stage, search, individuals who have determined that they would like to pursue postsecondary education search for institutions that meet their individually defined criteria and goals. The third and final stage is choice, during which individuals determine which institution they will attend. This determination is not only an individual choice but also an institutional choice, as the individual must also be offered admission.

Although Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model was based on the experiences of high school students' choice patterns as they entered higher education, there is little evidence to argue that this process does not also apply to transfer students. Several theorists have added to Hossler and Gallagher's model. McDonough and Antonio (1996) defined three basic approaches used to study the college choice process. These three approaches are derived from social psychology, economics, and the sociology of status attainment. Each of these approaches looks at different

factors that influence students' college choice process. Social psychological studies, the first approach, consider three main factors: "Impact of academic program, campus social climate, location, cost of college, and the influence of other students on prospective students choice; Students' self-assessment of their fit at their chosen college or university; and cognitive stages of college choice" (p. 6). Economic studies, the second approach, view students' college choice as an investment decision and identifies three main assumptions:

Students strive to maximize the benefits while minimizing the costs of their college choice decision; Students have all of the information they need to make an informed college choice decision; and Student make a logical college choice decision based on the information they obtain and receive during their college choice procession. (p. 6)

Sociological status attainment studies, the third approach, analyze students' social status and its effect on their college choice decision (McDonough & Antonio, 1996). Unlike the first two approaches presented, the sociological status attainment approach requires that inequities in college success be examined to better understand students' college choice decisions. With the aforementioned approaches, McDonough and Antonio (1996) found that students select their higher education institutions based upon various criteria, including but not limited to: financial aid, student peers influence, students' guidance/college counselors, institutions' selectivity, institutions' prestige, reputation of academic program, institutional size, SES, location, and race.

Perna's (2006) college choice model integrates the economic, psychological, sociological, and organizational/interactional factors and McDonough and Antonio's (1996) approaches. Perna offers a comprehensive model that categorizes the most influential factors in students' decision of whether and where to attend college: social, economic, and policy factors; higher education; school and community; and habitus (demographic characteristics, cultural

capital, and social capital). Like Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, Perna's model describes three main stages. In the first stage, individuals assess their interest in pursuing higher education and the resources available to them to do so. In the second stage, individuals weigh the costs and benefits of pursuing college. The last stage is the student's college choice decision.

Rational Choice Framework

In addition to Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model, the rational choice framework was used to provide a context to understand military-affiliated students' decision-making process. The rational choice framework has previously been applied to understanding college choice; it draws specifically on economic and sociological frameworks (described in the previous section) to better understand college students' decision-making (Hearn, 1984; Iloh & Tierney, 2014; Jackson, 1982; M. Tierney, 1983). This framework assumes that individuals are motivated by their wants and needs, which are called *preferences*, and that individuals develop their own preferences after taking into account barriers and limitations that could be experienced as a result of a decision (Carling, 1992; Heath, 1976). Although a seemingly simple process, this calculation of developing preferences means that individuals may take into account multiple perspectives before making a decision (W. Tierney & Venegas, 2009).

The rational choice framework has been used to understand student behaviors in college choice. According to this perspective, students who are considering higher education collect as much information as they need in order to make an informed decision about which school to attend. The rational choice perspective assumes that by doing so, individuals attempt to maximize their advantage/gain and minimize their disadvantage/loss (Herrnstein, 1990; Yu, 2011). A number of critics have pointed out that this perspective focuses exclusively on motives that are narrowly individualistic and perhaps even selfish; it does not take into account the extent

to which decisions may be influenced by less self-centered consideration (Iloh & Tierney, 2014; Scott, 2000).

Rational Choice Theory and Veterans' Choice of College

One of the limitations of rational choice theory is that it is insufficiently specific (Ulen, 1999). A student could be making a rational choice if he/she decides, based on his/her assessment of costs and benefits, to attend the least expensive college that he/she can find, the one closest to home, or the one that will confer a degree in the least amount of time. Conversely, a student could be making a rational choice if he/she decides, based again on his/her assessment of costs and benefits, to pursue a far more expensive and time-consuming program of education that will eventually (over the course of 20-30 years) pay off in higher earnings, a more prestigious occupation, and perhaps more satisfying work. Both choices might be considered *rational*; the theoretical framework does not predict which choice the average college-bound veteran is more likely to make. For the purpose of this discussion, *rational choice* was interpreted as predicting that student veterans will choose which college to attend based on such short-term considerations as cost and convenience and not such longer-term considerations as the likelihood of getting into a desirable graduate program or a wished-for career, or learning more about a subject of consuming personal interest. Prior research suggests that rational choice theory, construed in this narrow, short-term sense, does indeed predict the choices made by many students, including those affiliated with the military (Durdella & Kim, 2012; Levine & Cureton, 1998).

Military-affiliated students say that their top considerations in deciding where to attend college were: location (79%), affordability/cost/financial (54%), program/major/coursework (53%), personal/family reasons (35%), and reputation (31%; Radford, 2011). This study also

found that nonmilitary students were more likely than military students to indicate that the institution's reputation was important to them, although these differences were not statistically significant. Similarly, Radford (2009) found that the criteria used by veterans in their college choice process are, in order of priority, cost, location, program or coursework offered, personal or family factors, and reputation. Two years later, Radford (2011) found that location was the primary reason veterans selected the college they were attending, followed by program/course offerings, university connection, and reputation. Sewall (2010) found that convenience and proximity to social support systems (personal or family) were the most significant factors in a student veteran's college choice.

The college choice process for non-traditional students, which includes student veterans, may differ from that of traditional-aged students (Broekemier, 2002). Several studies have found that non-traditional students are likely to attend college for one or more of the following reasons: to advance in their current job, to earn a better paying job, for financial support post-graduation, and to develop their current knowledge (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). Scholars of non-traditional student college choice have found that convenience, quality, service, and cost are the main criteria that students use when selecting a post-secondary institution (Digilio, 1998; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Richardson & King, 1998).

Elder, Wang, Spence, Adkins, and Brown (2010) and Wang, Elder, and Spence (2010) suggested that individuals who served in the military and come from disadvantaged backgrounds are at an academic disadvantage when they enter college. Although these studies did not directly address student veterans' college choice process, they do suggest one reason why student veterans, many of whom come from non-traditional backgrounds, may be less inclined to seek out colleges with a reputation for being academically demanding.

These findings on non-traditional students are consistent with research on student veterans' college choice. Durdella and Kim (2012) studied student veterans' college choice and found that non-academic factors, specifically finances, were more important to veterans during their college choice than academic-related factors like institutional reputation and selectivity. Similarly, McNealy (2004) found that student veterans' college choices were centered on financial decisions, thus leading students to select a community college over a 4-year university.

These studies—which point to the higher priority of location, cost, and proximity to family, and the lower priority of academic reputation—certainly appear to be consistent with previous studies' findings on how student veterans make rational college choices. However, this picture changes under closer examination.

College choice may be more nuanced than a merely financial decision. Steel, Salcedo, and Coley (2010) argued that college choice among the veteran community varies according to veteran subgroup. They found that although non-academic factors such as location, flexibility of class schedules, and services for non-traditional students were important to students who enrolled in community colleges, academic factors, such as degree programs/major and institutional reputation, were important for veterans who enrolled in public 4-year institutions. Molina (2015) found that the best predictors of whether a veteran enrolled in a 2-year college versus a university were the highest math course attempted in high school and the veteran's educational expectations.

The limited literature on how students decide where to transfer from a community college is also relevant. Felts (2008) found that transfer students' first semester GPA, transfer GPA, transfer hours, completion of college algebra, and completion of freshman English positively predicted students' likelihood of completing a bachelor's degree. Anderson (2013) found that

students' academic background (level of math and science completed), parents' level of education), and engagement with transfer staff, faculty, and individual coursework positively influenced their intention to transfer.

Transfer students

Most of the literature regarding students' college choice has focused on the first college students attend. The decision to transfer from a community college to a 4-year institution, which is the most common path for student veterans, may entail different considerations. Students may have varied reasons for transferring to a 4-year institution, yet little is known about how students choose where to transfer. Some researchers, such as Townsend (2008), studied transfer students' college choice process and found that students use many of the same factors that they did in selecting their first institution as they do when selecting their transfer institution. This could be the case for veterans, however there is limited data on military-affiliated students' college choice in general.

Felts (2008) researched transfer student baccalaureate attainment by using a two-group path-analysis method to understand the factors that predict a student's likelihood to enter higher education through a community college or a 4-year university and successfully graduate with a bachelor's degree. Felts found that transfer students' first semester GPA, transfer GPA, transfer hours, completion of college algebra, and completion of freshman English positively predicted students' likelihood of completing a bachelor's degree. Similar to Felts, Guardarra (2015) found that interaction with faculty and staff was a common experience that influences Latina/o transfer students' likelihood of completing a bachelor's degree. Guardarra sought to understand the cultural, psychological, and social experiences that influenced Latina/o transfer college choice to attend a 4-year university.

Like Guardarra (2015), Anderson (2013) also studied students and their experiences in the transfer college choice process. Anderson studied a sample of adult community college students with the goal of finding information about the influence of student engagement of students' aspirations to pursue a degree in a science, technology, engineering, math (STEM) field. The mixed methods study found that students' background (level of math and science completed, number of hours worked, distance from college to home, parents' level of education), and engagement with transfer staff, faculty, and individual coursework positively influenced their intention to transfer. Collectively, these studies on transfer students' college choice have a limited scope and do not specifically address student veterans as members of their population.

Conclusion

This study adapted existing college choice models to analyze the factors influencing why student veterans who transfer from a community college ultimately decided to enroll in a public research university. This study sought to benefit universities and veterans alike. Universities will benefit from understanding the contributing factors that veterans associate with college choice, and this study strove to offer recommendations for how research universities can improve outreach and recruiting strategies for veterans enrolled in 2-year institutions. Current studies on college choice focus heavily on studying the college choice processes of traditional students. This study builds upon this foundation and broadens the focus to include a non-traditional student population. Framed by the empirical research and college choice models reviewed in this chapter, this study sought to expose the factors that influenced student veterans' decision to transfer from a community college to a public research university, the challenges these students encountered during the transfer process, and their experiences transitioning into the 4-year institution.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This research focused on the factors that supported and hindered student veterans' efforts to apply to and enroll in a public research university. Specifically, this study examined how these students' demographic, military, and previous education experiences play a role in the college choice process.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study.

1. What are the demographic, military, and educational characteristics of veterans who have transferred to a public research university? To what extent do these characteristics vary by student veterans' branch of service and current military status?
2. What factors do student veterans, who have transferred to a research university, identify as influential in either supporting or hindering their efforts to apply to and ultimately decide to enroll in a public research university? To what extent do these factors vary by student veterans' branch of service and current military status?

Research Design

The research design in this study was based on a mixed methods approach operating from a pragmatic worldview. A pragmatic worldview is one that perceives the world as problem-centered and seeks real-world implications related to the findings (Creswell, 2014). This study used a combination of a quantitative approach (specifically, the analysis of survey results) and a qualitative approach (the analysis of semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of participants) to understand the profile of student veterans who transferred from a community college to a public research university and identify the factors that supported or hindered their efforts.

The survey results allowed for the examination of student veterans' demographic characteristics, their military service, and their community college transfer experiences. The survey results were also used to explore the resources that veterans used when they were deciding whether to transfer, as well as the factors that influenced their choice of where to apply and, ultimately, where to enroll. Quantitative analyses allowed for an examination of differences across categories of military experience, branches of service, and demographic characteristics. In contrast to the interviews, the quantitative portion of this study allowed for the inclusion of a larger (and possibly more representative) sample of student veterans, which enhanced the potential for generalizing the findings to a larger populations of student veterans who transferred from community colleges to public research universities.

The qualitative portion of this study consisted of interviews with student veterans who indicated on the survey their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. Qualitative research typically involves an in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences (Merriam, 2009). The qualitative portion of this study explored more deeply the college choice process and the experience of student veterans who transferred from a community college to a public research university. This exploration enriched the quantitative findings, providing greater opportunities to investigate and understand why or how certain factors resonated in student veterans' decisions.

In summary, the use of mixed methods provided both breadth (quantitative) and depth (qualitative) to a topic that has previously been explored either exclusively qualitatively or exclusively quantitatively.

Sample

The sample for the survey portion of the study was drawn from the population of student veterans who were currently enrolled in nine campuses of the UC system. It included student

veterans who were affiliated with all five branches of the military: the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard.

Identification of undergraduate student veterans enrolled at UC institutions were verified by Veteran Certifying Officials and Veteran Program Coordinators, who work directly with the student veteran population. Campuses can identify their student veterans via multiple methods. First, campuses can identify their student veterans based on submission of a DD-215/NOBE (to be coded for priority enrollment or certified for veteran education benefits) at the institution. Student veterans can also self-identify in the common system-wide admissions application. They may self-identify to the campus by visiting one of the campus's student affairs offices and asking to be added to the automatic emailing list of student veterans. Additionally, veterans may join an institution's Facebook group for veterans to be included in opportunities for this population. By working with the Veterans Certifying Officials and Veteran Program Coordinators at each of the participating institutions, veterans were identified and invitations to participate in the study were distributed to as many undergraduate student veterans as possible. Although all student veterans at each institution were invited to participate in the survey, the following criteria were used to determine whether survey respondents met the conditions necessary for inclusion in the quantitative analyses and subsequent interviews:

- Registered undergraduate student at one of the eight UC institutions
- Self-identified as a United States military veteran to the campus Certifying Official or Veteran Coordinator/Director
- Transferred to the institution within the past 36 months from a community college

Research sites

The original research plan was to study student veterans at nine campuses of the UC. These nine campuses are part of the larger 10-campus public university system of higher education; nine of these institutions award bachelor's degrees. However, one of those campuses (UC Merced) had a current enrollment of fewer than 25 undergraduate student veterans, and therefore it was excluded. Three additional sites (UCB, UCI, and UCSC) were dropped from the analysis because very few students (fewer than five) attending those institutions responded to the survey. The sites that were included in the study were UCD, UCLA, UCR, UCSB, and UCSD.

In Fall 2015, the UC enrolled 61,848 new undergraduate students, 18,173 of whom were incoming transfer students. In fall 2014, this system of higher education had an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 1,300 undergraduate student veterans. Five campuses are located in a suburban setting and three institutions are situated in more urban settings. All but one campus has the designation of a land-grant institution.

Campuses within the UC were chosen because of their:

- Convenience and accessibility;
- Common application system for undergraduate students;
- Inclusion in the largest state system of doctoral research universities in the U.S.;
- Compliance with best practices for military and veteran success such as the Veterans Choice Act and DoD Memorandum of Understanding;
- Enrollment of at least 25 undergraduate student veterans; and
- Acceptance of student veteran transfers.

This study focused on public institutions because, according the Veterans Choice Act, all public higher education institutions must offer veterans using GI Bill benefits an in-state tuition

rate. By choosing campuses that offer a similar in-state tuition rate, the study removed much of the variation student veterans may otherwise have experienced with respect to tuition and fees. Examining student veterans who enroll in research universities provided a sample of students attending institutions with more selective admissions criteria and with reputations for strong graduation and employment outcomes. Finally, including only institutions that accept transfer students and currently enroll in least 25 undergraduate veterans guarded against the likelihood of having very small sub-samples (i.e., fewer than five cases) at any individual campus.

Research Design

Data for this study were collected using both a survey and semi-structured interviews. A survey link was disseminated to prospective participants in the first week of January; three follow-up emails were sent in late January to early February to increase survey participation. In early March, contact was made those survey respondents who indicated that they would be interested in participating in a follow-up interview to set up a mutually agreeable time.

Quantitative Phase

Sample. The IRB at each participating institution was informed about the study and paperwork that was necessary to register this study was completed. Once approval was received, an email was sent to each campus Certifying Official and Veteran Coordinator, requesting distribution of the survey via email. Students who identified their status as a United States military veteran, active-duty service member, reservist, or member of the National Guard at each participating institution received a unique link to complete the survey via email. Also, a written letter with a flyer was emailed to the Veteran Center at each of the institutions. In the letter to the Veteran Center, a request was made that the poster be placed in the office. Follow-up contact was made with the Veteran Coordinator and Certifying Official at each of the participating

institutions, asking them to send three follow up emails. A posting on the Facebook groups and pages for each of the participating institutions pages was created that was relevant to desired sample population. An incentive was provided for students who took the survey. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they would like to enter their name and email in a drawing for one of three \$100 Amazon gift cards. The decision to be enrolled in the drawing was voluntary. Finally, students were asked if they were willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview about their experiences.

Data. An original, online survey instrument was used to collect data on student veterans' demographic characteristics, military experiences, and perspectives on the transfer process. Designing a unique survey instrument included the variables necessary to answer the study's guiding research questions (Engel & Schutt, 2012). The survey, which is presented in Appendix A, took approximately 25 minutes to complete and consisted of 40 questions. Specifically, the questions solicited: demographic, education, and personal information; the criteria participants used in their decision about where to apply and, subsequently, which university to attend; and what resources they used to navigate the transfer process for successful matriculation to a 4-year public research institution.

Analyses and key variables of interest. To examine the characteristics of student veterans transferring from community colleges in the aggregate, the survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics; these included measures of central tendency (means and standard deviations) and frequencies. Students' characteristics were compared across branches of service and across current military status, using analyses of variance (ANOVAs). As noted previously, military branch included the following categories: Air Force, Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. Current military status was conceptualized as either "active" (active-duty, reservist,

and National Guard) or “non-active” (veteran, retired). ANOVAs were used to determine whether there were statistically significant relationships between participants’ demographic characteristics (race/ethnicity, gender, parents’ education) and either their military branch or their current military status.

To examine student veterans’ reasons for transferring to a public research university, two pairs of sub-scales that distinguished between “academic” and “non-academic” factors were created. One pair of scales assessed the degree to which students said that they considered various factors when they were deciding where to apply; the second pair assessed the degree to which students said that they considered various factors when they were determining their preferred university to attend. The academic scales assessed the degree to which students considered such factors as the university’s overall reputation, the availability and quality of particular majors, the quality of the faculty, the degree to which the school facilitated the application process (for example, by accepting transfer credits from the student’s community college), and the school’s reputation for placing graduates in more advanced graduate programs. The non-academic scales assessed the degree to which students considered such factors as the school’s location, its cost and the financial assistance it provided, and availability of campus housing. The distinction between academic and non-academic factors was important because, as noted in the previous chapter, a substantial body of previous research found that most student veterans are more influenced by non-academic factors; however, some research has suggested that the sub-set of students who apply to public research universities may be influenced more by academic considerations. To compare the importance of the academic and non-academic scales, the difference in participants’ scores with paired-samples t-tests was analyzed. ANOVAs were

applied to test whether participants' scores on the academic and non-academic scales differed depending on their background, branch of service, or current military status.

Qualitative Phase

Interviews. Following the survey phase of the study, 20 students who completed the survey and indicated a willingness to participate in a semi-structured interview were questioned. To incentivize the students to participate in the interview, a \$20 Amazon dollar gift card was offered to compensate interviewees for their time. A purposeful sampling strategy was chosen to acquire diversity amongst participants who had served in different branches of military and were from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. All of the interview participants were selected from UCLA. The rationale for this choice was partly based on convenience, due to the fact that other potential interviewees were widely scattered across the state, and partly based on the fact that the pool of interview volunteers at UCLA offered the widest variation in ethnicity and branch of service. A semi-structured interview was used that allowed the interviewer and the respondents to pursue a list of predetermined questions while at the same time allowing the conversation to follow topical trajectories that arose organically and seemed appropriate given the larger interests of the study (D. Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). This semi-structured approach to interviewing allowed the flexibility to explore whatever issues came up in the conversations, while providing sufficient structure to ensure that respondents' experiences could be compared. An additional reason why this type of interviewing seemed appropriate was the limited availability of the participants to engage in multiple interviews due to myriad academic, personal, and professional demands on their time (Bernard, 1988).

The interviews took place in a mutually agreeable location on the college campus where the participants were enrolled. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was audio-

recorded with the individual's permission. The qualitative portion of the study further explored the experiences of veterans and their college choice process related to transferring from a community college to a public research university. Key areas of the interview protocol examined student veterans' motivation to enroll in higher education (and for some, to leave the military), characteristics important to their transfer institution search and choice process, types of support they received throughout this process, and the degree to which they felt that supports they received had any impact in their decision to transfer to UCLA. Findings from the analysis of the survey data helped refine the interview protocols, enabling the researcher to ask more targeted questions.

The preliminary stage of the research design included field-testing the survey instrument and interview protocol using a convenience sample of student veteran alumni. Five student veteran alumni reviewed the questionnaire and interview protocol and provided feedback on both instruments. The major findings from the field-testing were:

- **High School Performance:** High school performance questions, such as the SAT or ACT score question may be hard for transfer student veterans to accurately answer and should not be included.
- **Military Experience:** Additional questions should be added to the military experience section of the survey, including questions about military occupation specialty and deployment locations of each participant.
- **Interviews:** Further investigation of students' college choice process should only be pursued if there was a low response rate to the survey.

After refining the two instruments based on feedback from field-testing with student veteran alumni, data collection was initiated. The survey was administered via email before

beginning the interview process, which allowed the researcher to gauge the response rate. The survey had to be completed before interviews were conducted. The primary factors (related to a student's predisposition, search, and choice) of the survey helped signal where to probe most deeply in the interviews.

Data analysis. Interviews focused on the factors that supported and hindered veterans' efforts to apply to and choose to attend a public research university. In order to examine factors that supported and hindered student's efforts to apply and choose a public research university, analysis of the interview transcripts was performed by identifying, defining, and coding text for relevant concepts and themes. The concepts and themes that were pursued included the desire to attend college, supportive individuals, military influences/experiences, and important characteristics in transfer college search and choice. After coding the transcripts, the information from the interviews was compiled into one data file; the researcher then compared the commonly coded themes to identify patterns. To address the second part of this research question, the researcher conducted an investigation of how veterans' answers differed, depending on their military branch and current military status. In order to examine the factors that supported students' efforts to choose and apply to a research university, the data from the different subgroups of military branch and current military status were compared (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Finally, the descriptions were integrated to create a broad view of the themes and experiences of students by military branch and current military status.

Ethical Issues

In order to address relevant ethical issues, this study provided a consent form to all survey and interview participants, which included information about the study. The consent form assured participants that responses to the survey and interviews would remain confidential.

Additionally, all data collected from this study were stored off campus on a password-protected computer. Also, interview participants were assigned pseudonyms. No identifiable information shared in a survey or interview not shared, further concealing the participants' identities.

In the email that was sent to survey participants, the researcher was identified as both a scholar and an employee at UCLA. Goals for this study were shared in the initial request for participation. Participation in the study was voluntary and it was emphasized that responses would be kept confidential. The role of the interviewer was to serve as a student advocate, event planner, and information facilitator, not to assign grades, certify students for enrollment, or provide mental or physical health counseling to students. As a result, the of the researcher was clearly separate from her role as an employee.

In this research study, there was a positive bias towards veterans, as the researcher had been working as an advocate for veterans in higher education for over 3 years. In addition, the researcher had a personal connection to the military, as both her grandparents served in the military and one cousin currently serves in the military. The personal and professional connection to individuals with a United States military connection may have brought a positive bias towards the research. However, every effort in the survey and interview protocol was made to develop neutral language to hide any bias. In addition, the interviewer addressed any potential civilian (non-military person) bias by disclosing their non-military status prior to the interview. Having never served in the military, the researcher did not have firsthand experience of military service and made sure that the survey protocol used military-friendly language that carefully addressed potentially sensitive topics, such as physical and mental health issues.

Validity and Reliability

Issues of reliability and validity were considered in the development of the survey. Reliability describes the consistency of measures and ratings/scores collected during research. Validity determines whether the research truly measured what it proposed to measure. Validity is important to a research study because it impacts the dependability of the collected data, the statistical analysis, and ultimately the results and findings of the study. In addition, the internal validity of a study needs to be determined. Internal validity is the congruence between the study results and real-world experiences (Creswell, 2009). In summary, both reliability and validity were considered in this study.

Reliability. To assess the reliability of the academic and non-academic scales that were created, Cronbach's alpha was used. The conventional standard is that if Cronbach's alpha is greater than .7, the scale is considered to have acceptable reliability (Agresti, 2014). The likelihood of creating a scale that would have acceptable reliability was increased through an examination of the instrument through field-testing, peer review, and faculty review.

Validity. One way to determine the validity of a study is through field-testing (Creswell, 2009). To ensure validity of the study, a field test of the protocol was used with five undergraduate student veteran alumni who meet the criteria of the study, but who would not be participating in the study when the survey was administered. In addition to the field-testing, the survey protocol was examined by both a subset of cohort peers and faculty advisors. This additional review of the protocol ensured that there was content validity of the instrument.

The validity of this study was assessed via member checking. Once the interviews were completed, interviewees were asked to confirm that accuracy of their responses to the interview questions. A review of the responses to the questions was made to verify that the interviewees

interpretation to the question was answered without leading to any bias by the interviewer. Peer debriefing was used as a method to help bring additional validity to this study (Creswell, 2009).

Summary

This study was developed to allow the researcher to explore the college choice process of veterans who transferred from a community college to a public research university. Data were gathered via the combination of an online survey, completed by 150 student veterans at six campuses in the UC system, and semi-structured follow-up interviews with a sub-sample of 20 participants at UCLA. Analysis of data followed the methods outlined in this chapter. The following chapter will present a summary of the study's findings.

Chapter Four: Results

Chapter Four presents the research findings and data analysis of this study. To gain a better understanding of how student veterans transfer from community colleges to research universities, a mixed-methods study was conducted using a survey and follow-up interviews. The sample for both was deliberately limited to veterans who had transferred from a community college to an undergraduate program at a UC in order to focus on this common route for undergraduate military-affiliated students. The first phase of the study surveyed student veterans about their college choice process, background characteristics, and matriculation experiences. The second phase of the project collected data from a subset of survey respondents via individual interviews.

A total of 150 military-affiliated students participated in the survey. The response rates by campus was as follows: UCD (22%), UCLA (29%), UCR (35%), UCSB (20%), and UCSD (23%). Of these, 20 military-affiliated transfer students were selected for follow-up interviews. All of those interviewed were currently enrolled at UCLA. The decision to limit the interviews to students at UCLA was based on several criteria: high response rate, ability to more directly follow up with students who expressed interest in participating in the interviews, convenience (some of the other campus has limitations to in-person access for the scope of the study), and the fact that the sub-sample located at UCLA was more diverse among race/ethnicity, branch of service, and military status than the other campuses.

This chapter begins with a description of the participants' demographic and military backgrounds, based on information collected in the surveys and that the interviewees shared in their interviews. Next, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage college choice model (predisposition, search, and choice) is used to help organize the material in this chapter. This

model created an effective way to analyze and report the data for this study and provided a framework for presenting the students' responses regarding their college choice process. This chapter concludes with a look at the participants' personal reactions to the college choice process.

Background Information

The research participants consisted of 150 military-affiliated transfer students attending UCD, UCLA, UCR, UCSB, or UCSD and a sub-group of 20 military-affiliated transfer students attending UCLA. On-campus interviews were conducted with the sub-group of 20 students.

Demographic Characteristics

This information gives the reader a better understanding of the composition of the student population that was sampled for the study.

Survey. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample from the survey. Overall, participants in this study were similar to the national population of military-affiliated students (Cate, 2014; Queen & Lewis, 2014; Radford, 2009; U.S. Department of Defense, 2013). However, they were found to differ from the non-military affiliated student population in the UC in that they were substantially more male, non-White, and older.

The proportion of men (78%) was nearly quadruple the proportion of women (22%) in the sample, which aligns with national statistics suggesting that women account for 21-27% of student veterans enrolled in U.S. colleges (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015a). In contrast, the proportion of female students in this military-affiliated sample was substantially lower than the proportion of females among non-military affiliated students. Across the UC system, women accounted for 49% of transfer students in the years 2015-2017 (University of California, 2015).

The sample was also very similar to the national population of military-affiliated students in terms of ethnic background. The proportion of students in this sample who identified as non-White (that is, African-American, Latino, Asian, or Other) was 59.6%; nationally, 60% of all student veterans are non-White. However, the sample differed from national figures with regard to the representation of particular racial/ethnic groups. African American students accounted for only 1.3% of the survey respondents, which represents a fraction of the 18% of all student veterans who identify as African American. Among the five campuses, the sample drawn from UCLA stood out as being disproportionately non-White (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Survey Respondents

		UCD <i>n</i> = 27	UCLA <i>n</i> = 36	UCR <i>n</i> = 28	UCSD <i>n</i> = 43	UCSB <i>n</i> = 16	Total <i>n</i> = 150
Sex	Male (%)	66.7	83.3	82.1	79.1	75.0	78.0
	Female (%)	33.3	16.7	17.9	20.9	25.0	22.0
Race	Asian (%)	0.0	11.4	3.6	14.0	6.3	8.1
	Black or African American (%)	3.7	2.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3
	Hispanic or Latino (%)	11.1	37.1	21.4	20.9	12.5	22.1
	Multi-Racial (%)	0.0	14.3	10.7	2.3	0.0	6.0
	White (%)	81.5	34.3	60.7	60.5	81.3	60.4
	Other (%)	3.7	0.0	3.6	2.3	0.0	2.0
Age	20-24 (%)	3.7	11.1	7.1	11.6	0.0	8.0
	25-29 (%)	40.7	47.2	25.0	46.5	37.5	40.7
	30-34 (%)	33.3	30.6	42.9	37.2	25.0	34.7
	35-39 (%)	11.1	8.3	7.1	0.0	25.0	8.0
	40-44 (%)	7.4	2.8	7.1	0.0	0.0	3.3
	45-49 (%)	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.3	12.5	2.0
	50 and over (%)	3.7	0.0	10.7	2.3	0.0	3.3
Marital Status	Single (%)	33.3	52.8	28.6	41.9	37.5	40
	Unmarried, living w/ partner (%)	7.4	16.7	21.4	18.6	18.8	16.7
	Married (%)	48.1	19.4	35.7	37.2	12.5	32
	Separated, divorced, or widowed (%)	11.1	11.1	14.3	2.3	31.3	11.3

The sample was found to be similar in age to the population of military-affiliated students across the country. Nationally, as of 2012, 45.9% of undergraduate students who received

veteran education benefits were between the ages of 24 and 29 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014); in the sample, 40.7% were between the ages of 25-29.

Finally, participants in the study were less likely to be married compared to the national population of student veterans. Prior research has found that student veterans who attend higher education institutions are more likely than other students to be married and have children (Field, 2008). About a third of the participants in this study were married (32%), which is substantially lower than the national average of 47% (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014).

The relationship between participants’ background and military characteristics.

One of the central questions for this study was whether there are any systematic differences in students’ demographic characteristics when disaggregated by their branch of service or current military status (whether participants are still on active service or not). By disaggregating data, this study was able to explore potential differences in experience of those who are still serving versus those who are not serving. Table 2 provides these details. The following discussion summarizes the few statistically significant findings.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Survey Respondents by Branch of Service and Military Status

		Male <i>n</i> = 115	Female <i>n</i> = 32	<i>X</i> ² <i>n</i> = 147	White <i>n</i> = 86	Non-White <i>n</i> = 56	<i>X</i> ² <i>n</i> = 142
Current Military Status	Active (%)	100%	0%		78.6%	21.4%	
	Non-Active (%)	79.7%	20.3%		53.9%	46.1%	
Total				4.16			18.43
Branch	Air Force (%)	74%	26%		68%	32%	
	Army (%)	76%	24%		67%	33%	
	Coast Guard (%)	25%	75%		75%	25%	
	Marine Corps (%)	90%	10%		30%	70%	
	Navy (%)	76%	24%		69%	31%	
Total				10.43			17.44

Gender. There was a statistically significant relationship between gender and branch of service. Specifically, the proportion of men was significantly higher in the Marine Corps than in the other services: $X^2(1, N = 147) = 4.16, p = .035$. Three of the five branches had a gender split of roughly 75% men and 25% women, but the Marine Corps sample had a significantly higher proportion of men (90%).

There was also a statistically significant relationship between gender and military status. Students with a non-active military status included those who identified as veterans or retired. All student veterans reporting an active status (100%) identified as male; however, 79.7% of inactive student veterans identified as male. The relationship between gender and military status was statistically significant: $X^2(1, N = 142) = 4.16, p = .03$.

Race. Participants in the Marine Corps were significantly more likely to be non-White (70%) than were those in the rest of the sample (30%) compared to each of the other four branches, which had a majority of student veterans identifying their race/ethnicity as White. The relationship between race and branch of service was statistically significant: $X^2(1, N = 147) = 17.44, p = .001$. The racial composition of students by military status did not significantly differ between those with active versus inactive statuses: $X^2(1, N = 142) = 18.34, p = .176$.

Parents' level of education. Military-affiliated students' parents' education level was collected in order to measure first generation college student status. For the purposes of this study, a first generation college student was defined as a person neither of whose parents attended college. First generation student status provides readers with an understanding of the students' cultural capital with respect to navigating the college application process and adjusting to college life. Overall, 42.8% of the survey participants identified as first generation college students. Half (50%) of the students with an active military affiliation are first generation college

students, while the numbers are slightly lower for non-active students (41.9%). Close to one third of participants in the Air Force (33.3%), Marine Corps (32.5%), and Navy (42.9%) are first generation college students, whereas more than half of the respondents in the Coast Guard (75%) and Army (51.2%) are first generation college students.

Interviews. The following section explores the major themes that emerged from follow-up interviews with 17 male and three female participants. All 20 were enrolled full-time at UCLA. As noted earlier, UCLA was chosen as the single site for interviews partly as a matter of convenience and partly because the sub-sample at this campus was the most diverse in terms of participants’ race/ethnicity and branch of military service. A purposeful sampling strategy was employed to select interviewees from diverse demographic and military backgrounds. Twenty of out of the 36 students that responded to the survey participated in the interviews. The distribution of participants selected for interviews was roughly comparable to that of those who answered the survey (see Table 3). Table 4 describes the demographic characteristics of each of the interviewees.

Table 3

Comparison of Interview Participants and Survey Participants

		Interview Participants <i>n</i> = 20	UCLA Survey Participants <i>n</i> = 36	All Survey Participants <i>n</i> = 150
Sex	Male (%)	85.0	83.3	78.0
	Female (%)	15.0	16.7	22.0
Race	Asian (%)	5.0	11.1	8.1
	Black or African American (%)	0.0	2.8	1.3
	Hispanic or Latino (%)	50.0	36.1	22.1
	Multi-Racial (%)	15.0	13.9	6.0
	White (%)	30.0	36.1	60.4
	Other (%)	0.0	0.0	2.0
Age	20-24 (%)	15.0	11.1	8.0
	25-29 (%)	45.0	47.2	40.7
	30-34 (%)	25.0	30.6	34.7
	35-39 (%)	15.0	8.3	8.0
	40-44 (%)	0.0	2.8	3.3
	45-49 (%)	0.0	0	2.0

	50 and over (%)	0.0	0	3.3
Branch	Air Force (%)	20.0	16.7	13.0
	Army (%)	20.0	22.2	28.1
	Coast Guard (%)	5.0	2.8	2.7
	Marine Corps (%)	35.0	33.3	27.4
	Navy (%)	20.0	25.0	28.8

Table 4

Summary of Interviewees' Demographic Data

Name	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Age
Jacob	Male	White	20-24
James	Male	White	30-34
Mark	Male	White	25-29
Jeffrey	Male	Hispanic or Latino	35-39
Andrew	Male	Hispanic or Latino	25-29
Mitchell	Male	White	25-29
Brent	Male	White	25-29
Gloria	Female	Hispanic or Latino	30-34
Alan	Male	Hispanic or Latino	25-29
Paul	Male	Hispanic or Latino	20-24
Simon	Male	Hispanic or Latino	30-24
Richard	Male	Multi-Racial	35-39
Matthew	Male	Hispanic or Latino	25-29
Jamie	Male	Hispanic or Latino	35-39
Sean	Male	Multi-Racial	35-39
Connor	Male	White	30-24
Anna	Female	Multi-Racial	20-24
Mary	Female	Multi-Racial	30-34
Jason	Male	Asian	25-29
Dennis	Male	Hispanic or Latino	25-29

Military-Service Characteristics

Table 5 summarizes the military characteristics of the sample, indicating that all five branches of the military were represented. It was somewhat surprising to see such a high percentage of students identifying as Marines (27.4%), as this is the second smallest branch of the military. One possible explanation could be the proximity to the major west-coast Marine Corps base, Camp Pendleton, which is within 100 miles of three of the five participating institutions. Similarly, the Naval Base in San Diego (one of the largest Naval Bases of the United

States Navy) may account for the disproportionate number of participants at UCSD who are affiliated with that branch of the service.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for Survey Respondents by Military Status and Branch

		UCD <i>n</i> = 27	UCLA <i>n</i> = 36	UCR <i>n</i> = 28	UCSD <i>n</i> = 43	UCSB <i>n</i> = 16	Total <i>n</i> = 150
Current Military Status	Active (%)	16.0	11.1	7.4	9.5	12.5	11.0
	Non-Active (%)	84.0	88.9	92.6	90.5	87.5	89.0
Branch	Air Force (%)	28.0	14.3	7.4	11.6	0.0	13.0
	Army (%)	40.0	22.9	33.3	18.6	37.5	28.1
	Coast Guard (%)	8.0	2.8	0.0	0.0	6.3	2.7
	Marine Corps (%)	8.0	34.3	29.6	32.3	25.0	27.4
	Navy (%)	16.0	25.7	29.6	37.2	31.3	28.8

Almost all (89%) of the survey respondents listed their current status as inactive: veteran or retired. This figure deviates from the 75% of inactive military-affiliated students reported by the U.S. Department of Education (Molina & Morse, 2015). Of the 11% who had an active military status (Active-Duty, Reservist, National Guard), 50% of those students were in the Army.

Most of the participants in this study (78.8%) deployed at least once during the military service. More than half (63.4%) deployed two or more times during their military service. Of those who were deployed, 54.9% deployed in direct support of combat operations.

Military-affiliated students who have been deployed one or more times differ in some important ways from veterans who have never been deployed. For instance, 71.3% of military-affiliated students who had been deployed one or more times reported having a service-connected disability. Essentially, half (55.4%) of the sample identified as having a service-connected disability. This finding is significant because these students are entering post-secondary education with disabilities that were acquired during their military service. Because

this is a service-connected disability and the sample population is current students, it can be assumed that this disability did not impact students' academic performance prior to their enlistment in the military. The three most commonly reported disabilities were physical/mobility-related issues (68.5%), psychiatric/psychological-related issues (56.3%), and sensory-related issues (47.8%).

Almost all of the students (94.5%) received some federal military benefits to fund their education. The most commonly used federal military education benefits were the Post-9/11 GI Bill (65.6%), followed by Vocational Rehabilitation (23.4%) and other military-affiliated benefits (e.g., Tuition Assistance, Montgomery GI Bill Active Duty, and Montgomery GI Bill Selective Reserve). All of these funding sources provide different levels of financial support. Some funding sources have specific requirements and caps (see literature review for in-depth description), creating differences in funding sources and support. Post-9/11 provides funding to support the full cost of tuition and fees (at in-state student rate), an annual book and supplies stipend, and a monthly housing allowance (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2017). Vocational Rehabilitation is a job-training program that provides funding for veterans who have been determined to have a service-connected disability and a possible employment handicap. Vocational Rehabilitation can provide educational support as a way to train veterans to become employable (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2017). Vocational Rehabilitation provides tuition and fees; a school parking pass; required books, materials, and supplies (no limit); and a basic housing allowance (\$500 if the recipient has exhausted GI Bill; if the recipient has not exhausted GI bill, then the housing allowance is determined by the zip code of the education institution that recipient attends). Tuition assistance provides active duty members financial assistance to pay for tuition expenses (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2017). Each branch

of service creates its own yearly maximums, which range from \$4,000-4,500 per year (“Military Tuition Assistance,” 2017). The Montgomery GI Bill Active Duty (MGIB-AD) provides active duty members a monthly education benefit to reimburse them for their tuition and fee expenses (funding ranges from \$377.25-1,857, depending on years of enlistment and number of enrolled academic units) taken during training of once they have fulfilled their minimal service obligation. In order to be eligible for MGIB-AD, the active duty member must have paid \$100 per month for 12 months. The Montgomery GI Bill Selective Reserve (MGIB-SR) provides reservists with a monthly stipend to support their educational expenses (funding ranges from \$92.25-369 per month, depending on number of enrolled academic units; U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2017).

A few students (5.5%) did not use any federal military benefits to fund their education costs at their respective UC institutions, and instead relied solely on more traditional forms of financial aid. On the survey and in their interviews, students mentioned two reasons for not using military benefits to fund their education: exhausting the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the desire to save the benefit for graduate school. One student, Connor, noted that throughout his undergraduate student career, he had used federal financial aid to finance his baccalaureate degree. With aspirations to attend graduate school, Connor learned that there are fewer grant and scholarship funding sources for graduate school than baccalaureate degrees. Reflecting back on his decision to defer use of his GI Bill to graduate school, Connor said “I would have been screwed if I were to use my GI bill to pay for my undergraduate degree. Graduate school is much more expensive than a bachelor’s degree.” With a desire to attend law school, professional school tuition can be upwards of \$20,000 more than a baccalaureate degree. Thus, his decision to delay using the GI Bill for a costlier degree was justified.

Predisposition

To understand how military-affiliated students navigated the college choice process, one must understand students' attitude toward attending college, commonly referred to as predisposition. During the first stage, predisposition, students make the decision to continue or not to continue their education after higher school. In this study, interview participants were asked about when they first started thinking about going to college. Next, students were asked about individuals who recognized their aptitude and ability to attend college and encouraged their decision to pursue a baccalaureate degree. Two themes emerged from this inquiry: (a) development of aspiration to attend college, and (b) influence to pursue college. The following section will explore these themes concerning the participants' predisposition towards college.

Development of Aspiration to Attend College

A strong theme that developed through these interviews was that of the military-affiliated students' aspiration to go to college. Thirteen of the 20 (65%) students said they always knew that they wanted to go to college. This aspiration or ambition to attend college can be seen as a predisposition to college.

First thoughts of college. Some of the military-affiliated students couldn't identify a specific time during which they started thinking about college, but always knew that they wanted to attend college. Jeffrey said "Straight from high school I knew I wanted to go to college." As a former foster youth whose legal guardian had liquidated his college savings (from a part-time job in high school), Jeffrey knew that he needed to figure out a way to achieve his goal of attending college. Jeffrey decided that "the military was the means of getting away and providing the funds to go to college." As a result, Jeffrey enlisted in the Navy and took every opportunity that he was afforded while in the service to take higher education courses. Gloria said that she always knew

that she wanted and was expected (by her parents) to go to college. As a first-generation college student and daughter of immigrant parents, she noted that her parents clearly communicated that she was expected to attend college. As the oldest child in her family, Gloria felt pressure to set a good example for her siblings, and thus had to go to college. She said that she remembers her parents telling her, “You need to go to school. This is just what you need to do. School is the way out, the way to get ahead. You need to go to school.” Concerned about how to finance her higher education and succeed academically, Gloria sought out the military as a means to support her desire to pursue higher education. When she walked into a recruiting office, she was surprised to hear the Army recruiter tell her, “If you enlist now, we’ll add on and pay for school for you. You get to go to a duty station for 2 years and then you will go to LPN (Licensed Practical Nurse) school.” Similarly, Mitchell said that upon graduation from high school, his options were limited. He looked at a few universities because he knew that he wanted to eventually go to college, but at the time, he said, “I felt like I should take some time off...get some life experience, and then prepare myself to pay for college in the military.”

For others, their desire to attend college stemmed from specific experiences that happened early in their lives that led them toward the direction of pursuing a college education. Mary’s desire to attend college stemmed from experiences in her childhood. Mary said, “Since probably about 5 years old, I always wanted to be a doctor. I always wanted to work in emergency medicine.” As an avid watcher of *Doogie Howser*, her desire to become a doctor stuck with her. When high school graduation neared, one of Mary’s friends told her if she joined the Navy, the military would pay for medical school. Knowing that the cost of medical school was high, Mary visited her local recruiter and asked the question for herself. Mary described the conversation as a short one: “So, I talked to the recruiter and all I asked them was if they could

pay for medical school. They told me, ‘Yes.’ I signed up, and that was it.” Mary joined the Navy to help achieve her goal.

Unlike Mary, James’s desire to pursue higher education stemmed from realizing that those who had a bachelor’s degree could have more opportunities compared to those without. James was at his mother’s workplace, a local community college, and a professor walked in asking for assistance. James’ described his mother as an intelligent woman who was hard working and knowledgeable, yet never graduated from high school. A specific experience that solidified James’ desire to attend college:

This professor walks into my mom’s office. This professor is someone who didn’t know anything about what was going on ever. The guy was completely clueless. I asked my mom, I just didn’t get it, I was, “Why in the hell is he doing teaching and got this great job making all this money, but all he really does is come in and say, ‘Linda, do your thing.’” She’s like, “You see that piece of paper on the wall? That’s why. He’s got the degree. I don’t have the degree, so he gets the job.” That was so fucked up to me. It was so fucked up, like the knowledge doesn’t ... Anyway, I had this chip on my shoulder about all that. I was like, “No, value me on my educational merit.” In the back of my mind, I always felt judged, like my intelligence was judged based on how much education I’d accomplished. That was one part of it. I felt like people didn’t respect or wouldn’t look to see how intelligent I was unless I had that to show for it.

It was then that James knew he had to get a college degree. Unfortunately, James did not perform well academically in high school. At the age of 17, with his mother’s signature, he joined the Air Force. The Air Force would provide James the structure, discipline, and opportunity to prepare for his journey to higher education.

The remaining seven out of 20 (35%) of military-affiliated students left high school without a specific plan to attend college in the near future. All seven of the interviewees shared that at the time of high school graduation, they lacked the maturity and discipline needed to attend college. Matthew said “I didn’t do so well in high school. I wasn’t studious enough for college. I wasn’t mature enough for a job, so I actually made the most mature decision... I decided to join the military.” Similar to Matthew, Jamie knew that college was not for him, at least not after high school. Jamie said

I knew fairly early in my high school career that I wasn’t going to go to college. I didn’t know anything about it at that time. Nobody in my family had been to college. We didn’t know anything about it. To me, it was this weird place that white people go to make money. I couldn’t tell you the first thing about admissions, the cost, or anything. It just didn’t interest me...so I joined the military.

Although initially this group did not want to attend college, through their military and post-military experiences, the students became less averse to the idea of attending college and decided to attend college.

Military’s Support for Education

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the United States Armed Forces and American higher education had a long history of mutual support. This long history transcends benefits for those who have finished military service by also including offering opportunities to obtain higher education while serving in the military. For example, service members who are required to be fluent in a foreign language as part of their military job often are sent to higher education institutions as part of their military training. For others, higher education was not formally part of their military training, but was promoted as an opportunity for off-work hours.

In the interviews, five students (25%) mentioned less personal support that was provided by the military. Connor, a Marine Corps veteran who served as a Linguist, was required to attend the Defense Language Institute to learn Arabic for the first year and a half of his enlistment. He said:

I tried to get through that [Defense Language Institute Arabic coursework] as fast as I could.... That [Defense Language Institute] program gives you an Associate if you complete the GEs [General Education classes] on your own, which you can CLEP [College-Level Examination Program] out of. As a good test taker. I just showed up and took five tests and got an associate's degree.

Connor's pursuit of higher education was a job requirement. For linguists, this was typical. For other service members, the opportunity to take college classes was an incentive to enlistment. Gloria, an Army veteran who served as a medic (Medical & Dentistry) said that at the time she enlisted, "The Army threw in, 'Hey, if you enlist now, we'll add on and pay for school for you. As a bonus. You get to go to duty station for 2 years and then you'll go to LPN school.'" However, this wasn't the case for all service members in the medical field. Jason, an Army veteran who also served as a medic, was not offered LPN school during his enlistment. However, Jason felt that the training that he was given as a medic helped prepare him for higher education. Although the courses did not count toward transfer units, he recalls the skills he learned that he thinks helped him get to where he is today, at UCLA. As a medic, the training required that he

Memorize, and read, and go over [material taught in the classes]. The classes reinforce recall, short-term memory, and repetition all the time. They always had us compete and they always had us do things faster, more efficient, not mistakes. I think that primed me for college.

Although these classes were not community college accredited courses, they did prepare him to pursue higher education in the future.

Finally, there were others (25%) who were able to take community college classes while employed by the military. Often these student veterans had more predictable work hours at the time of their enrollment in the community college courses. Anna, an Air Force veteran who served as a Medic (Medical & Dentistry) and was stationed in a hospital stateside, said:

After the first 2.5 years [of military service], I was...able to enroll into a community college outside [of the Air Force base]. I had to get approved through the base education office...and took community college classes for...three semesters. I received a lot of encouragement from all of my supervisors to attend community college classes after work.

Anna received support from her supervisors and the base education office to pursue higher education. Her clear start and end time from work allowed her to schedule academic classes in her off-hours. The clear on and off times of work was not the case for individuals whose jobs had less strict on and off shifts. The irregular schedule created one barrier to taking college classes.

Of those interviewed, 55% said that they were unable to take college-like courses while in the military. Jamie, a Marine Corps veteran who served as a machine-gunner (Combat Arms) said, “As an infantry man you don’t have a lot of opportunities just because it’s so high tempo, you’re constantly deploying, you’re constantly in the field, you’re constantly doing something.”

Alan, a Marine Corps veteran who served in the Infantry (Combat Arms), said:

I didn’t really have a lot of education experience in the Marine Corps. I was in the infantry so most of our training was physical training or learning about weapons and tactics. We really didn’t go into classrooms. I honestly didn’t even have time to enroll in

any kind of online courses because you're always training. I didn't really have a lot of experience with education [in the Marine Corps].

Although higher education was promoted within the military, the logistics around actually taking classes was a critical barrier to some students taking classes while in the military. Simon, an Army veteran who served as a Human Intelligence Collector (Intelligence) said that while he was stateside, there wasn't any time to take classes. "There was really high turnaround in the sense of deployments. We're constantly training, constantly moving around so it was difficult to take online courses or taking classroom courses."

As mentioned previously, some veterans did not have access to continuing education opportunities while in the military. Although continuing education is not the primary goal of the military, taking academic coursework would have allowed student veterans to get a jumpstart on identifying their post-military interests. The skills that service members learn in the military (leadership, team, organization, flexibility, work ethic, ability to work under pressure, etc.) are helpful in academia and the workforce; however the ability and opportunity to take college classes would also help transition military-affiliated individuals to civilian life. The next section of this chapter will discuss students' decision to leave the military to pursue higher education.

Leaving Military Service

Seventeen out of 20 (85%) students decided to leave the military to pursue opportunities that wouldn't have been possible had they continued to serve. For example, Connor's decision to leave was a result of his change in duties following a promotion. His new role meant he would no longer support and mentor junior enlisted service members, an aspect of his job that he valued highly.

I was happy, I mean I still loved the Marine Corp. I wasn't jaded or anything like that. I was doing well, too. I was just checking off stuff that wasn't on my to do list anymore. It's just all the accomplishments I was.... None of it was what I set out to do. I mean, I made it farther than I wanted to make it and I was positive that the next rank was just not for me. I knew it. The further you got away from the troops the more your work becomes policy and inventory.... I was happy on the teams. One of the reason I got out was getting off the teams. I was happy working with Junior Marines.

Like Connor, Dennis too felt a loss of connection with the military. Dennis, enlisted in the Air Force hoping to travel the world, learn languages, and learn from other cultures. After being sent to language school, Dennis did not pass his proficiency test. Consequently, he was placed into a job that was neither challenging, nor what he had hoped to do in the Air Force.

Mentally-wise there wasn't really anything going on for me. I was just bored out of mind the whole time. I think I made good friends and socially it was an amazing experience. I got to meet people from different parts of the country that would never happen otherwise. I got to see other people's perspective in life and politics, etc., culture, you name it. That was good for me. I appreciated that. College was my end goal, so I fulfilled my study, and decided pursue college.

Like Connor and Dennis, Jason left the military after seeing his military career become stagnant. He was on his final deployment when he made up his mind to leave the Army.

I was already thinking about leaving because I was seeing myself get into that groove that everybody else in the military was getting into where they join and they let the wave just take them to the next thing. I felt like, okay, this is great and I'm sure I can be platoon

sergeant of any unit one day, of any medical unit one day, but I wasn't really sure if that's what I really wanted.

Jason was looking for something more. He wanted to be intentional about his decisions, and not just follow the leaders. As a medic, Jason had worked with doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals. His desire to become a nurse and be able to make intentional decisions about his career further solidified his desire to leave the military and pursue a bachelor's degree.

Less commonly shared was the story of students leaving the military due to an injury or medical retirement. Two out of 20 (10%) participants specifically cited injury as the reason that they left the military to pursue higher education. Mitchell was medically retired prior to finishing his contract. Despite being medically retired, Mitchell saw this as an opportunity to fulfill his desire to attending college. Mitchell explained:

I always knew I wanted to go to college. I just knew I needed some time, to kinda just get myself straightened out. Figure out what I want in life. Certainly, I really looked forward to the educational benefits, which is why when I enlisted, I made note that education is important to me.

Like Mitchell, Simon left the military due to an injury. Similarly, Simon also reflected back on his experience leaving the military, noting that after being injured in two deployments, "coming back, having more surgeries, I decided that's enough. I think I am going to leave." The decision to leave the military due to injuries and medical retirement was not the norm for most participants; however, it is one that should not be overlooked when reviewing reasons for leaving the military.

One participant, a current reservist, had an active military status. His response to this question was not collected as he has not left the military.

As these findings make clear, military-affiliated students had various reasons for leaving the military. For some, the encouragement and support to pursue a higher education was jumpstarted by encouragement by a senior leader in the military, while others received their support later on.

Influence to Pursue a Baccalaureate Degree

For some, it was through the encouragement of an individual that the military-affiliated students began to see that they could achieve bigger and better things, and that a college degree could provide more opportunities. When discussing their interest in pursuing a baccalaureate degree and the college choice process, many of the interviewees mentioned the encouragement they received from someone else: a colleague or senior officer in the military, a professor or counselor at their community college, or a friend or a family member back home. For a few, an internal motivation drove these students to begin to see that college was for them.

Encouragement from military personnel. Five (25%) of those interviewed noted that this encouragement came from a senior military officer or a military base educational counselor. Anna, who served as medic, said “I got to work with PAs and doctors. I got a lot of encouragement from my supervisors to take community college classes. They encouraged me to do school outside of work, like a lot.” While taking classes, Anna met with a counselor at the base education center who reviewed her GPA and coursework and further encouraged to begin applying to schools, including UCLA. The base education counselor said “Oh, you can start applying to schools right now.” Anna felt that the support from the military officers that she worked with, as well as the military base educational counselor, helped affirm her desire to pursue a baccalaureate degree.

Like Anna, Gloria too found support within the military to pursue her baccalaureate degree. Gloria said,

Because my job was medical, I always ended up working with other people whose job was also medical and were supporting of my education. They were like, “Yeah, you need to go to school.” And on [the base], there is huge education center where college professors would come on base to teach classes in the education center, so that we could take classes while on base.

Although Anna and Gloria both worked in the medical field while in the military, this experience of have superiors who supported their education was not unique to the medical field. Simon, who worked in the intelligence field said, “My unit highly valued education and promoted it. I don’t know when they expect you to do this but they’re always pushing for online courses or just courses whenever you have time available.” Simon thought that although he found balancing his military responsibilities with his desire to pursue education difficult, he always found support in pursuing a college degree.

Although Anna, Gloria, and Simon all explicitly received encouragement to pursue higher education and support when doing so, few students shared having such a direct conversation with their military superiors about pursuing higher education as Brent had. Brent recalled being called to his master sergeant’s office on his second deployment. At the time, Brent was excelling in his job, but was worried that something was wrong. Brent told the story this way:

My senior master sergeant was like, “Get in here.” I thought I was in trouble for something. He was like, “You know what? We just need to have a talk-to-talk, you and me, first-name basis. We don’t need our uniforms or rank or anything.” He goes, “Why

are you in the Air Force?” I was like, “Because I love it. This is great. I get to fix airplanes. I get a steady paycheck. This is awesome!” He’s like, “You’re smarter than this and you need to get out and go to school. You need to do something bigger and better with your life.” I was like, “No. This is everything. It’s so easy. I just go to work, I get paid. What more do you want?” He started talking to me, he’s like, “You’re going to hit a point when you’re going to say this is all I’ve done, and you’re going to want to start doing more. You’re going to look and see that education is really where everything is at, because no one can ever take your education away from you. They can take your pay, they can take your benefits, they can take everything, but they can never take your education, and right now, you’re a [expletive] mechanic, but you can’t take this with you.”

This experience was pivotal in supporting Brent’s desire to pursue a baccalaureate degree. Brent had always wanted to go to college, but delayed his entry and joined the military after high school graduation. Brent said, “I didn’t know what I wanted to be when I grow up. I don’t want to go to college and just waste my life and my time.” The conversation with his senior master sergeant was the first step of many that led Brent to leave active-duty service and start attending a community college.

For some people, the encouragement was less explicit. There was talk about college and for some, their command would make accommodations if they were to pursue education. For fewer students, they were pulled aside explicitly and told that they needed to do more than the military. For others, this explicit encouragement came later, from community college staff and faculty.

Encouragement from community college staff and faculty. For others, the encouragement to pursue a baccalaureate degree came after they left the military and started at a community college. Survey participants found support from multiple sources at the community college: professors (75%), staff members (40%), and community college transfer centers (40%). Alan said that the Veteran Services staff member at his community college “really pushed me to do good and look for universities that I could transfer to.... She was really good at motivating me” to apply to highly selective colleges and universities. Alan sought the support of community college staff to help guide his post-military career. Similar to Alan, Paul said that the veteran-specific counselor at his community college encouraged him to think about applying to several different colleges and universities and helped him develop academic plans to meet their admissions requirements. “Without, her I would not know what classes to take, and all of the schools that I could apply to.” Paul’s comment speaks to the power that individual staff or faculty members can have over students’ thought processes about their educational and career trajectories.

Dennis said that he was encouraged by two community college professors who had taught previously at UCLA and agreed that it was a great institution. Dennis was swayed by one professor’s argument regarding competing for a job after college, as he remembered the professor saying, “You know, when you’re handing in a resume, they’re going to see two applicants: UCLA, Cal State Long Beach. They’re going to go with UCLA.” Richard said that one of his community college professors continually checked in with him regarding his transfer plans and encouraged him to “apply to Berkeley and Stanford,” she told him that he “had what it takes... and [that he] should go for the top.” Richard said that conversation “lit a fire in my ass. Not only because she challenged me, but it was the recognition that she thought I could be that

caliber student.” Richard hadn’t considered applying to some of the most prestigious universities in the state, let alone the country. As a Marine Corps veteran who was stationed out of Camp Pendleton and attended community college in San Diego, Richard knew he was smart, but lacked the confidence to consider himself as the caliber of student that would attend a public research university. The challenge that he received from a professor inspired him to reach higher and pursue top research universities.

As mentioned previously, for some students, the encouragement to pursue higher education and a baccalaureate degree was supported by an influential individual. For others, that support was not as memorable or direct. It was the internal ambition that they can remember exciting and igniting their drive to pursue a bachelor’s degree.

Personal ambition. Although many of the people interviewed pointed to the encouragement they received from others, there was also a substantial group (30%) who made it clear that their ambition came from within themselves. Mitchell said that he always knew that he wanted to go to college. Since middle school, “I knew I needed some time, to kind of just get myself straightened out; figure out what I want in life.” Similarly, once Jeffrey learned about college, he knew that education would provide him the opportunities that wished for, as a former foster youth. Jeffrey said,

Once I learned what a college was and what it represented and how it was basically a possibility to break out [of the foster care system] and create your own way in life, find success despite where you are, you have a way of going there, that’s when I knew this is what I had to do

For Jeffrey and Mitchell, the personal motivation to attend college was something that they had always wanted for themselves. In their case, it was an opportunity to change their previous circumstances and begin life on their terms.

For some, the strong desire to achieve a bachelor's degree developed as a result of experiences and events that happened while in the military. Simon, an Army veteran, said, "It was after I was injured that I decided, you know what, I got to start looking at other things. I'm not going to be able to stay as long as I'd like in the military. I got to be realistic here. So, I'm looking at schools when I get back."

Simon always wanted to attend higher education, but felt that he needed some time to mature before pursuing his baccalaureate degree.

Some mentioned that their decision to leave the military was connected to a desire to do something bigger with their lives. Sean said that throughout his service he observed higher-ranking Non-Commissioned Officers and concluded, "I knew that I didn't want to end up there. I knew I needed to push myself [to get a baccalaureate degree]." Matthew, a Marine Corps veteran, said:

I knew that I wanted to do something bigger. I knew that the military and the Marines was a really big decision but there were some instances in my first deployment where there were personal and eventful to me, that I felt like I had to make a bigger impact on people. I remember coming back from a deployment just doing a lot of reflecting and just thinking about stuff and I said, "Well, maybe I'll just get out and just go to school?" I didn't put a whole lot of thought process to it, but I was pretty confident that I was going to get out. It was good decision overall to do that because what ended up happening was it actually motivated me knowing that I was going to get out.

Like Matthew, Connor got to a point in his career where he was doing well and loved the Marine Corps, but felt, “I was just checking off stuff that wasn’t on my to-do list anymore. It’s just all the accomplishments.... None of it was what I set out to do.” At that point, Connor knew that the next rank was not something he was interested in obtaining. Having already earned an associate’s degree while in the Marine Corps, Connor decided to apply for college. Similar to Connor, James, said,

I knew I wanted a job. I knew that I’m in a very entrenched kind of career field in [the military]. I wanted to be broader. I wanted to have more opportunities. I don’t want to have a ceiling, so I knew that, for me, the job opportunity was going to be important in terms of going forward and that the way to attain that was through going to college.

In short, the encouragement and support to pursue a college education from family and friends, military supervisors, and community college staff and faculty was influential to military-affiliated students’ pursuit of a baccalaureate degree. These individuals helped develop the conviction within the military-affiliated students to attend college.

Search

As noted earlier, community colleges are often the first landing spot for recently discharged veterans who are interested in pursuing their education. In California, community colleges are required to admit any applicant who is a California resident and has earned a high school diploma or equivalent (California Community College Chancellor’s Office, 2012). In the United States, about half of all bachelor’s degree holders spend at least some time at a community college (National Student Clearinghouse, 2012).

Several aspects of each of the participants’ lives supported their objective to attend college. Their backgrounds, military experiences, and influential family and community

members not only developed their college aspirations but also began to develop their aspirations toward attending public research universities (e.g., the UC schools). This section describes how military-affiliated students navigated through the college search process, the second stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice process.

College search is the process by which students begin to consider various different higher education institutions. During this process, military-affiliated students decided which type of institutions they wanted to consider (public, private, non-profit, for-profit) and what services and support were important to them in an institution. For the purposes of this study, the search process as it relates to transfer college choice is reviewed.

Three major themes emerged as particularly important to the search process of the military-affiliated students in the study. These were (a) institutional characteristics, (b) source of information, and (c) community college transfer support. The following sections provide insight into these themes.

Institutional Characteristics

Additionally, important to investigating the sources of information that military-affiliated students use in their college search is the institutional characteristics that these students look for when seeking out transfer institutions. The findings from the study indicate that academic and non-academic institutional characteristics can attract or deter students during their college search process. For the military-affiliated students in the survey and interviews, certain institutional characteristics proved to be more highly rated than others in their reflection on their college choice process.

Participants in the study were asked to rate the importance of a wide variety of factors that might have influenced their college search process (Table 6). These factors included some

that spoke to the academic quality of the institution (such as its overall prestige, the quality of a particular major, the reputation of the faculty, and the availability of internships) and others identified non-academic qualities (such as cost, location, and the availability of campus housing). The highest rated factor was college major ($M = 3.49, SD = .70$). Almost every survey respondent (91.2%) reported that that college major was “essential” or “important” to his/her college search. The factors they rated the lowest were the availability of campus housing ($M = 1.89, SD = 1.14$), closeness to family ($M = 2.18, SD = 1.15$), and whether the school was a residential or a commuter campus ($M = 2.05, SD = 1.13$).

Table 6

Top Factors that Influence Military-Affiliated Students College Search

Variable	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
College Major	135	3.49	0.70
Location	135	3.04	0.97
Prestige	135	2.86	0.88

The survey results indicated that academic considerations were more important than non-academic factors among participants when searching for a transfer institution. The salience of academic considerations was also evident in the interviews. All but three interviewees (85%) reported they were influenced chiefly by the academic quality of the institution, citing overall prestige, perceived quality of the faculty, and the availability of a particular major as particularly critical considerations. Interview participants provided insight into the survey findings. Particularly, the interviews revealed insight into how major, location, and prestige played a role in students’ college search. The following sections highlight interviewees’ insights into these highly valued institutional characteristics.

Major. Nearly every surveyed student (91.2%, $n = 135$) reported that college major was essential or very important to his/her college search. Similarly, 90% of the interviews indicated

major availability as an important factor in their selection of which institution to attend. For the students who indicated that their major was important in their search phase, the simple offering of that major was what students cited as important to them when looking at transfer institutions. For example, Anna said that all of the schools that she applied to “had the general linguistics sort of major that I wanted to study. Major was probably the biggest factor when I was applying to schools.” Major appeared very important for Ava’s search process. Similarly, Connor, an International Development Studies Major, said that his major program is only offered by 10 colleges in the country, and thus major was a very important factor in his college search. From the start, these were those 10 schools were the only schools he considered. Mark took a similar approach to Connor and Anna. As a Religion Studies major, Mark was looking for a particular critical perspective to be taken in institutions that he would consider attending. Mark said:

It’s not a common program. I want to specialize in East Asian religions, of course, so again, when I was doing my general search, these religious universities, they were Christian based or I felt in some of their courses in other areas of religion was influenced or based in the Christian viewpoint. I wanted a neutral academic study. Even if it’s from my own religion, you need more critical eyes turning on religion.

As a result, Mark was not interested in many of the religiously affiliated schools because they did not offer the perspective he wanted to use when approaching the study of religion. This meant that major and the specifics related to the teaching of the major were important to him in his college search.

Location. Although the survey results indicated that participants rated academic factors as more important than non-academic factors, this does not mean that they were completely indifferent to such considerations as the university’s location, in-state tuition benefits, and

proximity to family. These other variables (university's location, in-state tuition benefits, and proximity to family) were identified as proxy for location, as they all address the location-specific aspects of students' college choice decision. Specifically, when asked about the importance of location in their college choice decision, many survey participants felt that the location of campus was very important or essential in their search (73.3%, $n = 135$) for a transfer institution.

Some survey participants considered location important to their college search process because they wanted to live in a major metropolitan city. Sean said that when he opened up *US News and World Report*, he found that UCLA was "consistently ranked in the top 25.... I told myself, 'You know, I am going to a competitive school in southern California, where I want to live. I'm doing the right thing.'" For Sean, his heart was set on Southern California. Having been born, raised, and trained in California, he saw few reasons to leave. Connor, who was raised in New York and stationed at Camp Pendleton, explained that he sought out institutions in Los Angeles because he "wanted to see what it was like to live in Los Angeles." Similar to Connor, Brent had also been born and raised outside of California. The desire to explore Los Angeles made attending college in the city attractive. Likewise, Brent said:

I grew up in South Dakota, so it was kind of like I fell in love with San Diego after I had been there a couple times. My friend was like, "Look, LA is very similar to San Diego. It gets a little hotter, but the city is always moving and going, and there's so much to do there." One of my mentors told me, the location is everything, and your life outside of school is just fantastic.

Excited about the social opportunities outside school, Brent investigated the city and the multiple transfer institutions that could serve as his new home while pursuing a baccalaureate

degree. Like Connor and Brent, Mark grew up outside of California (in the South). Like some other interview participants, Mark noted the importance of location in selecting his institution more out of respect and consideration for his family's ties to the area. He said:

I've lived all over the place. So, I don't really care about location so much. While my wife though, she's always lived in Los Angeles, so it was important, and then of course you lived in San Diego for 2 years. Fell in love with the city. It was really a combination of the two. 'Cause I didn't want to take her away, 'cause I didn't know how she would react to it.

Mark's comment introduced the importance of family considerations; this was another recurrent theme in the interviews and also mentioned in the survey. Seven out of the 20 interviewees mentioned that UCLA's proximity to family and friends was an extremely important or very important factor in their decision. Alan, who grew up in Orange County, said that, "Proximity to family, my family lives an hour south" was an important item in his college choice. Similarly, Sean, who grew up in the Inland Empire, said,

I wanted to stay in California. I applied to USD and USC. Everything was more geared towards Southern California. I applied to Berkeley. That was probably the furthest I applied away. Even then, I really didn't even consider going to Berkeley. It was just too far. I needed to make sure that I was south of Fresno, because I never want to have to commute that far again to see my family. Santa Barbara probably would have been the furthest out I would have gone. Having that support system of family and friends close is just ideal to me.

Similarly, James said, "Family played a role. I haven't been this close to my mom in a decade and a half." Richard confirmed the importance of being close to family:

It's just being away from my family, and especially when my father was dying, the ability to be here, closer than any other universities. I would've been really upset with myself if I would've been up north, not being able to drive down. Yeah, to drive down when my dad was dying. That would've sucked.

The university's location encompassed more than just its physical location in the state of California and the proximity to family; there were also financial benefits to students who had established residency in the state. Another factor interviewees (30%) noted was influential in their college choice process was their potential classification as residents or non-residents. Mitchell said, "There's no point in moving elsewhere when I gained California residency, and have to pay more money out of pocket." Dennis concurred, "I definitely wanted to stay in California because as a Californian you have more money pretty much to go to school." Connor explained his rationale for staying in California:

I was committed to the UCs because they were affordable. They fit into my plan of not using my GI Bill, so it was pretty apparent to me that I had to go to a state school.

California's got the best state schools by far. I just knew I could afford it. It was the best bang for my buck.

Alan also said that cost and affording college was part of the criteria he used in his college search process. He said, "I looked at financial aid, I looked at cost" to understand what his financial responsibilities would be as a student. Like Alan, Andrew said,

Now that I have my personal GI Bill, I can go back to school. I applied for financial aid at my community college and while I was completing the application, I didn't realize how much money the state of California gives you. So I didn't even have to touch my GI

Bill for that first year. I was like, if I could have just found a way to get out here sooner I would have been doing this a long time ago.

As a resident of California, independent student veterans often are eligible for state financial aid. The state financial aid program, the California Grant, awarded by the California Student Aid Commission, often provides tuition funding for students who are residents and meet the income requirements. As a result, some students may be able to use the Cal Grant Aid, along with other scholarships and grants, to pay for their undergraduate degree, and thus defer the use of their Post-9/11 GI Bill to graduate school.

Prestige. Like major, prestige was an academic factor that most students considered in their college search. In the survey, a quarter (25.9%) of respondents indicated that prestige was an essential factor in their college search process, and more than a third (40.7%) of respondents indicated that prestige was a very important factor in their college search. In the interviews, 18 out of 20 (90%) referred to institutional prestige as a factor in their college search process. The following examples identify the thoughts of two students who discussed prestige in depth.

James shared that during his search process, he looked at the prestige of colleges and universities. With more than 10 years of military service and a strong desire for civilian employment after graduation, James said, “Prestige, right, wrong, fair, not fair, that plays some weight, its perception regardless of reality sometimes.” James’s desire to attend a prestigious institution loomed large in his mind. For other students, prestige was one of many factors they felt were important. A good example of this was shared by Connor. During Connor’s search process, he not only looked at major (as only 10 schools offered the program), but also, within those 10 schools, he looked at academic prestige. He was specifically attracted to the UC schools that offered his desired major. Connor shared, “California’s got the best state schools by far. I

was motivated by prestige but finances were a huge part of it. I was not willing to go to a private school for a bachelor's." In addition to the criteria that students used in searching for transfer institutions, the sources of information that they used to learn about the transfer requirements and process also provide context to understanding military-affiliated students' college choice process.

Sources of Information

Military-affiliated students used various sources of informational resources used to help inform and guide their search for a transfer-institution. These sources of information included person-to-person interactions (community college transfer center, community college veteran center, college fair, friend or family member) and sources of information that did not involve a person-to-person connection (internet, advertisements) Table 7 compares the importance of various sources of information on which military-affiliated students in this study relied as they went through the process of choosing a college. As the table indicates, students' top three sources of information were the Internet, community college transfer centers, and community college veteran centers.

Table 7

Sources of Information about Colleges as Reported by Survey Respondents

	To a Great Degree (%)	To Some Extent (%)	Not at All (%)
Community College Transfer Center (<i>n</i> = 138)	33.3	40.7	25.9
Community College Veteran Center (<i>n</i> = 138)	21.5	31.9	46.7
Advertisements (<i>n</i> = 133)	2.3	13.8	83.8
College Fair (<i>n</i> = 136)	3.8	18.0	78.2
Internet (<i>n</i> = 138)	68.1	25.5	6.7
Friend or Family Members (<i>n</i> = 135)	17.4	27.3	55.3
Military Education Program (<i>n</i> = 135)	0.0	19.4	80.6

Internet. The Internet was the highest rated source of college information in both the survey and the interviews. According to the survey results, 68.1% of participants reported that they used the Internet to a great degree and 25.5% of participants reported that they used the Internet to some extent when seeking out information to learn about the requirements and process for applying to a UC institution. Similarly, all respondents (100%) shared that they used the Internet as a way to learn about requirements and process for applying to a UC institution.

Andrew not only shared that he used the Internet as a source of information to learn about the requirements and process for applying to UC institution, but also spoke a bit about what he looked for on each of the websites. Andrew described his search process, saying, “I would go to the actual school’s website and the program department to see what kind of classes I need [to for my major]. I also used the assist.org to help figure out which classes matriculated with which classes.” Similarly, Mark shared that he would look at several different websites to learn more about the campuses when searching for information about higher education institution options. Mark said: “I utilized the Internet on my own [to learn about the universities]. I would go to university websites, as well as ranking websites to figure out the academic rankings for departments, as well as overall university rankings.” Mark seemed to use the Internet early in his search phase, whereas Andrew used the Internet as a guide to ensure he understood a college’s requirements.

Not all of the interviewees were as methodical in their Internet searches. Jason described his Internet searches in a different way. He shared that the majority of his Internet searching consisted of “I mean, a lot of creepy Internet stalking as much as I could, just forms and goofy crap like that but, obviously, I had to be careful with all that, trust your sources and whatnot.”

Although this was a different approach from Andrew's, Jason's use of the Internet to learn about transfer requirements and process proved effective.

Further analysis on the use of Internet to learn about transfer requirements and processes was performed to identify possible relationships between demographic and military factors and the use of the Internet. An analysis of variance found that men ($M = 2.69$) were more likely than women ($M = 2.59$) to report using the Internet as a source of information to learn about the requirements and process of applying to a UC institutions; $t(136) = 2.59, p = .011$. A series of independent sample t-tests found no consistent relationship between race, gender, branch, or military status and the various sources of information associated with students' choice search.

Community college transfer center. In addition to the Internet, the next highest rated source of information used to support military-affiliated students college search was community college transfer centers. The survey results found that 33.3% of participants reported using their community college transfer center to a great degree, and 40.7% of participants reported that they used their community college transfer center to some extent when seeking out information to learn about the requirements and process for applying to a UC institution. Similarly, 17 out of 20 (85%) of students said that had used their community college transfer center at some point to seek out information to learn about the requirements and process for applying to a UC institution. Dennis noted that the transfer center was helpful in preparing him to transfer and answering all of the questions he had about the process. Dennis said:

I went to the transfer center to help me with applications. I had a counselor tell me what classes to take while at my community college. [If I had questions] as far as getting specialized help to fill out the application, I just went to the center and they helped.

Like Dennis, Jacob shared that he went to his campus's transfer center and found them helpful, but believed that he likely underutilized their services. Jacob said:

I didn't really make an effort, I guess, to search out lots of resources. I went to our transfer center at [name redacted for privacy] Community College, but I never went with them on any campus tours or anything. I definitely could've done that. Thinking back, I don't know why I didn't. That probably would have streamlined my transfer process.

As a reservist, Jacob shared that he didn't spend as much time in the transfer process seeking out information about requirements as he did looking for information about financial aid and scholarship opportunities at each of the institutions to which he applied.

Unlike Dennis, not every student gave his/her community college transfer center rave reviews. Sean shared that his community college gave more support to students who sought to attend a California State University, a public teaching institution, rather than the UC institutions, the public research universities. Sean said:

The transfer center there is great if you want to go to a Cal State, but if you want to go to a UC then you have to do a little bit more legwork on your own. You have to stay on top of the ball and just make sure you're on the right path, because they're not going to do it for you. They're really geared on getting you to go to Cal State.

The stories shared by the interviewees shared different experiences with campus transfer centers.

Further analysis on the use of community college transfer centers to learn about transfer requirements and processes was performed to identify possible relationships between demographic and military factors and the use of a community college transfer center. A series of independent samples t-tests found no consistent relationship between race, gender, branch, or military status and the various sources of information about students' choice search.

Community college veteran center. Similar to the community college transfer centers, community college veteran centers were also one of the top-rated sources of information used to support military-affiliated students' college search. The survey results found that 21.5% of participants reported using their community college veteran center to a great degree and 31.9% of participants reported using their community college veteran center to some extent when seeking out information to learn about the requirements and process for applying to a UC institution. Eleven out of 20 interviewees (55%) reported using their campus veteran center to learn about the requirements and process of transferring to a UC institution.

Alan shared the importance and inspiration that the Veteran Service Coordinator provided to him during his time in community college. Alan said, "The Veteran Services Coordinator really pushed me to do good and look for universities that I could transfer to." This support helped Alan continue working toward his goal of transferring to a 4-year institution and obtaining a baccalaureate degree. Although not a counselor, the Veteran Service Coordinator promoted the importance of transfer through the Veteran Center at his community college. In contrast, Paul attended a community college that had a dedicated counselor for veterans. Paul mentioned the importance of his community college veteran center in supporting his gathering of information about transfer requirements and the transfer process. Paul said:

[My community college] had a veteran-specific counselor. She is a counselor that just deals with veterans, so she has a smaller pool of students and more time to focus on them.

She was very useful with helping me plan my classes and transfer.

Paul emphasized how great it was to have a counselor specifically dedicated to supporting the student veteran community and how it supported his successful transfer from a community college to a 4-year university. Like Paul, Simon shared that his community college veteran center

was staffed with its own assigned counselor, who helped students with academic planning and support to transfer. Although he did much of his research about transfer requirements on his own, he did share some information about the opportunities available to students at the student veteran. Simon said that a student could:

Walk in and make an appointment with the counselors and they knew the GI Bill. They were really familiar with it. They knew everything that I needed to do to help me pick classes and...I kind of didn't need them for the counseling portion.

Conclusion. Overall, these findings suggest that military-affiliated students rely on content experts and official publications to learn about the requirements and process of applying to UC institutions, rather than potentially biased sources of information, such as advertisements and military education programs. Military-affiliated students greatly utilized the Internet to gather information about transfer requirements and the transfer process. Next, military-affiliated students use their community college's transfer center and veteran centers for guidance and support through the transfer process. These findings can help inform higher education administrators on how this sub-population of military-affiliated students gathers and searches for information about their future transfer institution.

Community College Transfer Support

But the Internet used much more than other resources. Participants in this study, all of whom had followed the transfer pathway, reported the ways in which their community college advised and assisted them in transitioning to a 4-year institution. More specifically, respondents evaluated the helpfulness of their community colleges' assistance with planning their community college courses, understanding the transfer process, and applying to a UC campus. On the survey, all of the questions that addressed community college transfer support received a

majority (67-73%) of positive ratings (a rating of outstanding or satisfactory) by military-affiliated transfer student survey respondents. Respondents reported outstanding or satisfactory experiences with their community college experience in regard to their access to materials that provide information about transfer requirements (73%) and access to advisors and counselors (72%). The items that received the lowest percentage of outstanding or satisfactory rankings were the community colleges' assistance in planning community college coursework to meet the needs for admission to a public research university (67%), understanding transfer requirements (67%), and understanding the transfer process (68%). Although there were very slight differences in how participants rated these different types of assistance, none of these stood out as significantly high or low. A Community College Transfer Support Scale was created from the seven questions regarding students' community college experience ($n = 142$, $M = 2.94$, $SD = .85$, Cronbach's alpha = .945). The relationship between students' scores on this scale and various measures of their background were tested; however, none of these results were statistically significant.

Choice

Choice is the final stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage college choice model. During the choice phase, students decide which college they should attend. During the choice phase, students evaluate remaining set of colleges and universities where they have received admission and make the final decision college choice decision. Two topics emerged as important to the choice experience of military-affiliated students in this study:(a) institutional characteristics and (b) degree aspirations. The following section provides insight on these factors affecting the participants' final choice of university.

Institutional Characteristics

As discussed in the search phase, institutional characteristics were influential during military-affiliated transfer students' final college choice. Survey participants were asked about the factors that influenced their decision about which college to attend once they were admitted. Participants rated academic reputation ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.07$), quality of faculty ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.12$), and quality of major ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.08$) as the most important considerations in their decision of where to transfer once they received their offers of admission (See Table 8). Survey respondents ($n = 134$) reported quality of major (85.9%), academic reputation (81.4%), and quality of faculty (76.1%) as factors that were extremely important or important to their final college selection. In contrast, factors that were rated as least important included whether the college was near a military base ($M = 1.49$, $SD = 1.06$), proximity to a VA ($M = 1.83$, $SD = 1.25$); availability of sports ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 1.26$), and cultural opportunities on campus ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.28$) or near the campus ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.24$). Survey respondents ($n = 134$) reported lower levels of importance with those non-academic factors. Specifically, whether the college was near a military base (7.6%), near a VA (13.6%), availability of sports (12.8%); cultural opportunities on (15.1%) or near the campus (14.3%) as extremely important or important to their final college choice, all which are non-academic factors.

Table 8

Top Factors that Influence Military-Affiliated Students' College Choice

Factor	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Quality of Major	134	4.29	1.08
Academic Reputation	134	4.27	1.07
Quality of Faculty	134	4.03	1.12

Major. College major was one characteristic that was sought out in students' college choice decisions. College major was the top-rated factor that military-affiliated students used to

make their final college choice. The survey results found that more than half (57.5%) of participants reported that major was an extremely important factor used to make their college choice and more than a quarter (28.4%) of participants reported that quality of their major was very important to their college choice. Similarly, 16 of out of 20 (80%) of interviewees shared that academic major was influential to their final college choice. The best example that stands out comes from Gloria, who described her perspective on the importance of using major as factor in her transfer institution. Gloria's thoughts expanded on why major was an important item for her college choice:

The experience that I wanted to get, pursuing my major. I know that the field that I'm in is super competitive and eventually I was thinking, "Okay, what do I want to do with political science after I just have a bachelor's? What kind of job do I want to get?" And so I know that UCLA has this huge department, not just political science, but it's called Urban Education in the masters and education that they have here. So that was a big factor, because I was thinking long-term, what do I want to do with my degree? And I was thinking, what kind of ideology does that school represent to me that I want to learn about?

For Gloria, college major was important in her choice process because she had a specific career field in mind. Gloria pursued a major that was connected to a larger field of study, Urban Education. With the goal of becoming a teacher, choosing a major that would allow Gloria the opportunity to have a wide variety of educational opportunities, including the option to obtain a master degree with one additional year of coursework, attracted her to the degree and this institution.

Academic reputation. Similar to quality of major, academic reputation was another highly rated factor that veterans shared as influential on their college choice. The survey results found that more than half (57.5%) of the participants reported that academic reputation was an extremely important factor used to make their college choice and nearly a quarter (23.9%) of participants reported that the school's academic reputation was very important to their college choice. Similarly, all but two of the 20 interview participants (90%) indicated that the institution's academic reputation was important in their final selection of a transfer institution.

Once students were admitted to the institution, academic reputation appeared to be an influential item in their college choice. Dennis shared, "Number one, UCLA had a good academic reputation. That's one of the reasons why...[and] they had a good program as far as my educational goals." For Dennis, the reputation of UCLA's academic department was a deciding factor in his final college choice. Similarly, he had UCLA alumni (who were former professors in Dennis's desired field) confirming his decision to decide on which institution to attend with academic reputation in mind, telling him that "reputation was important" and that it was "a good school to go to." Other students shared similar stories, while less direct about specifically academics, still encouraged students to consider UCLA's reputation. Alan said that several of his family and friends told him, "You have to go to UCLA, it's a prestigious school, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity." Alan knew they were right and that he could not pass up the opportunity to attend UCLA, and that UCLA's academic reputation was part of what had built the prestige of the university. Sean, who was looking to obtain a baccalaureate degree from an institution that would academically prepare him for law school, also said, "I knew that [rankings and prestige] was important to go to a good law school...I was starting to lean towards

that route.” He said that other institutions respect the academic reputation of UCLA, which he thought might give him an edge when applying to law school.

Quality of faculty. The survey results found that close to one half of participants (42.5%) reported that the quality of the institution’s faculty was an extremely important factor used to make their college choice and a third of participants (33.6%) reported that the school’s quality of faculty was very important to their college choice. Although quality of faculty was highly ranked in the survey, the interviewees did not mention the transfer receiving institutions’ faculty in their interview.

Choosing Among UC Institutions

During their choice phase, some students are admitted to more than one institution. These students must make a final selection that determines which institution to attend. Findings from the institutional characteristics section of the survey found that academic reputation, quality of faculty, and quality of major were the three most highly rated institutional factors in students’ final college choice. Additional findings were uncovered during interviews, when participants who were admitted to more than one UC institution were asked how they decided to attend UCLA over the other UC institutions. For nearly all of the interviewed students (90%), their decision to attend UCLA over the other institutions was due to academic factors, such as desire to attend a school on the quarter system and a strong reputation in their desired career field. When asked about why he chose UCLA, Mitchell said, “I decided not to attend Berkeley due to their frequent protests/riots both on and off campus. I felt UCLA would be an atmosphere with less risk/distractions that would allow me to focus on my academics.” For Michael, his decision to attend UCLA over UCB was due to this desire to take classes in a fast-paced environment, the quarter system. Michael said,

It just came down to personal choice as far as academic climate. I expected academic experiences, and with that I ruled out Berkeley, mostly due to a desire to utilize the quarter system, which I felt would be better for my personality. I get a little bored through the semester system.

Other students cited UCLA's prestige as their final deciding factor. Richard said

UCLA's hospital is the third ranked hospital in the nation at the time and the "Best in the West". I was like, "I want to get in to the medical field, being at the university with the best hospital in the west side of the nation, I'm going to go there." That was the top decision of why I chose UCLA."

Similarly, Alan said that the prestige and his long-time desire to attend the university were the deciding factors that tipped him to choose UCLA over the other UC institutions. Alan said "UCLA was my first choice since I was 8 and the academic reputation and my long-held dream were the reasons I chose UCLA." In addition to the institutional characteristic mentioned in the previous sub-sections related to choice, students again cited academic factors as helping them select UCLA as their choice institution among the rest of the UC schools.

Influences on Choice

As mentioned earlier, some students shared how individuals and publications served as sources of information that influenced their final college selection. Survey respondents rated that influences from faculty (58.2%), family (55.3%), friends (38.3%), and a community college counselor (34.6%) were extremely important or very important in their college choice. As Table 9 further indicates, overall, participants in this study rated their interactions with faculty as having the most influence on their decision to attend their current institution. This influence was shared by some interview participants, most notably by Mark and Dennis, whose quotes have

been shared previously in this chapter, citing their community college faculty members (some who were also former UCLA professors and alumni) as influential in their college choice. This finding is not surprising, as many studies have found that faculty members are extremely influential in students' success (Astin, 1993; Lampion, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979, 2005; Wilson, Gaff, Dienst, Wood, & Bavry, 1975).

Table 9

Sources of Influences on College Choice

Source	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Family	134	2.70	1.65
Friends	133	2.07	1.36
Faculty	133	2.93	1.30
Community College Counselor	134	1.93	1.30
College Guide	134	2.49	1.50
Military College Guide	134	1.31	0.76
University Website	134	2.49	1.31

A series of independent samples t-tests found no consistent relationship between either race or gender and the various influences on students' choice of college.

Degree Aspirations

For many participants, the university's overall reputation and the quality and availability of a specific major were related to their hope that undergraduate education would prepare them for further graduate and professional programs. Many survey respondents indicated that they sought to pursue higher education beyond that of earning a baccalaureate degree. Nearly two thirds (65.4%) of the survey respondents indicated that the highest degree they wanted to earn was a graduate degree (master's, doctorate, or professional). The degree aspirations variable was re-coded by collapsing values to three categories: bachelor's degree, master's degree, or doctorate degree. Bivariate correlations were run to see if any of the influences on college choice significantly related to students' degree aspirations. This analysis found a modest but consistent

negative correlation between degree aspirations and their use of any military-affiliated support. There was a modest negative correlation between the degree aspirations and the degree to which participants said they were influenced by their friends and family; $r(129) = -.184, p = .037$. This was the only statistically significant correlation between the degree aspirations variable and any of the participants' sources of advice or information that participants.

The interviewees shared some additional information regarding their academic aspirations. Half (50%) of those interviewed noted that they were aware of the institution's reputation for preparing students for graduate and professional programs and that this was an important factor in their decision. Nearly three-quarters (75%) of the interviewees indicated that they hoped to obtain a graduate or professional degree and half indicated that the opportunity to attend a university whose graduates were admitted to desirable graduate and professional schools was an important factor in their final college choice. Richard, for example, always knew that he wanted to attend medical school. He chose UCLA because,

I want to get in to the medical field; being at the university with the best hospital in the west side of the Mississippi would allow me access to opportunities and experiences in the medical field, which would make me a competitive candidate for medical school.

Attending an institution that offered professional development opportunities in the medical field was important to Richard. Similarly, as mentioned previously, Sean said that he wanted to obtain a law degree. One of his community college professors said, "Get into one of the good schools that you can get into. That'll definitely help translate into going to law school." Richard and Sean are only two of many students in this study who shared the desire to attend graduate school. For those students, obtaining a baccalaureate degree was the next step in the getting closer to earning a graduate or professional degree.

Further Statistical Analysis of Academic and Non-Academic Influences of College Choice

Throughout military-affiliated students' college search and choice process, the presence of academic influences was cited often in the surveys and interviews. The researcher felt further investigation regarding the academic and non-academic influences during the search and choice was necessary in better understanding students' college choice. The following section seeks to understand the suggested larger pattern with this study: participants seemed to indicate that their choice of college was influenced more by academic factors than by non-academic factors.

To test whether this assertion was true, scales were created that distinguished between academic and non-academic reasons for choosing a college. As noted earlier, the distinction between academic and non-academic factors was important because a substantial body of previous research has found that most students are more influenced by non-academic factors; however, some research has suggested that the sub-set of students who apply to public research universities may be influenced more by academic considerations.

An item was considered academic if it addressed:

- The reputation of the school, its faculty, or a particular department/major
- Something that was related to academic policy or whose main purpose was to facilitate students' admission or progress toward their degree
- The likelihood that graduating from this school would help a student gain admittance to a desirable career or graduate program
- The quality of academic facilities or supplementary programs that would enhance the student's education
- The quality of academic guidance that the school provided

A questionnaire item was considered non-academic if it was:

- Unrelated to the school's academic quality (such as its proximity to a VA hospital, or its cost)

Four scales were created: an academic and a non-academic scale composed of items that addressed participants' college search process, and an academic and non-academic scale composed of items that addressed their choice of college once admitted. The two academic scales are similar, as are the two non-academic scales. For several reasons, the four scales were left separate (rather than collapsing them in to one academic scale and one non-academic scale). The first reason was that it was unknown whether the academic or non-academic factors were relevant in both students' search and choice. That being said, keeping the scales separate allowed the search process and choice process to be tested independently of each other. The second reason for not combining the scales was that the search process was scored on 4-point Likert scales, whereas those that addressed college choice were scored on 5-point scales.

All of these scales had high inter-item reliability, with Cronbach's alphas $> .60$. The distribution of scores was examined for each scale; none appeared to violate the assumption of normality. The four scales were:

- Search Process:
 - *Academic Scale* ($\alpha = .843$): prestige of university, major/academic offerings, helpful staff, amount of transfer credits awarded, graduation rate, job placement, employment post-graduation, ease of admission process, time to finish undergraduate degree, flexibility of class schedule.
 - *Non-academic Scale* ($\alpha = .609$): location of campus, proximity to family and/or friends, total cost to earn a degree, tuition assistance at university, friendliness

towards military and veteran personnel, on-campus and family housing, residential vs. commuter campus.

- College Choice:
 - *Academic Quality* ($\alpha = .887$): overall academic reputation, quality of faculty, quality of academic facilities, graduates admitted to desirable graduate & professional schools, graduates secure employment in their chosen field, faculty are accessible to students, students receive individual guidance and attention, availability of internships and practical work experiences, availability of major that interest you, quality of majors of interest to you, college ranking
 - *Non-Academic Quality* ($\alpha = .812$): comfortable and friendly campus community, campus safety, quality and availability of on-campus housing, out-of-pocket cost of attendance, general campus setting, campus is located in a specific city or area of interest, campus is close to home, racially and ethnically diverse student body, prominent intercollegiate athletics and school spirit, on-campus cultural and recreational opportunities, off-campus cultural and recreational activities, proximity to a military base, proximity to a VA hospital.

The hypothesis that participants placed greater emphasis on academic factors than on non-academic factors was tested via two paired sample t-tests. The first of these compared participants' scores on the two scales that assessed their search process. Participants on average weighted academic considerations more heavily ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.63$) than non-academic considerations ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 0.60$); $t(137) = 5.55$, $p < .001$) in their college choice process. These results suggest that academic considerations have greater salience than non-academic factors for student veterans when searching for a transfer institution. An ANOVA tested whether

scores on the academic and non-academic varied by branch of service or current military status but found no significant differences across the five branches.

The second analysis compared participants' scores on the two scales that assessed their reasons for choosing a college once they had been admitted. Participants rated academic quality ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.84$) as more important than non-academic quality ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 0.75$); $t(134) = 16.87$, $p < .001$. These results suggest that academic considerations have greater salience than non-academic considerations. An ANOVA tested whether scores on the academic and non-academic varied by branch of service or current military status but found no significant differences across the five branches.

A final set of analyses examined whether there was any relationship between the sources of information that participants used and the factors that influenced their choice of a college; this resulted in a surprising and striking finding. Significant correlations were found between participants' use of their community college Veterans Office and Employment Fairs and their scores on all of the scales that measured both academic and non-academic reasons during both their search and their choice phases of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model. Additionally, there was a significant correlation between participants' use of their friends and families and scores that measured academic reasons during both the students' search and choice (see Table 10).

The correlations in Table 10 suggested that interacting with people (all sources of information but the Internet and advertisement) resulted in at least one positive significant correlation (with the exception of the transfer center). These findings suggest person-to-person interactions prompted student veterans to identify particular factors that were important to them in searching for and ultimately choosing a college. This finding speaks to this population of

student veterans' value of human connection and support, specifically as it relates to the search and choice process.

Table 10

Correlations between Sources of Information and Measures of Academic and Non-academic Reasons for Choosing a College

	<u>Search Process</u>		<u>College Choice</u>	
	Academic Scale	Non-academic Scale	Academic Scale	Non-academic Scale
Community College Transfer Center	0.136	0.243	0.157	0.163
Community College Veteran Office	0.368**	0.266**	0.220*	0.304**
Advertisements	0.116	-0.075	0.166	0.129
Employment Fairs	0.215*	0.118	0.212*	0.227**
Internet	0.036	-0.081	0.076	-0.108
Friends/Family	0.204*	0.197*	0.100	0.182
Military Education Program	0.311	0.094	0.188*	0.237**

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

Conclusion

The most important findings that emerged from the quantitative portion of the study is that veterans who transfer from community colleges to a UC campus give stronger consideration to academic rather than non-academic factors when searching for colleges and selecting the institution in which they ultimately enroll. On the whole, these students say that they received a satisfactory amount of assistance from their community college advisors in going through the transfer process.

There were differences among the participants in this study. Those who had degree aspirations beyond a bachelor's degree, as measured by how much education they hoped to receive, transitioned and moved away from the military to align themselves with the civilian

world. Finally, those who used strategies that required person-to-person interactions in seeking information rated their ultimate choice of a university highly.

Chapter Five: Discussion

For those who have served in the military, reintegrating into civilian life can be challenging. The transition from service member to civilian is not only a change of livelihood; it is also a change in nearly every aspect of life. For those who decide to pursue college education after their military career, the college they choose may impact their career, home, family, community responsibilities, and more. Most veterans attend a community college, but little is known about how and why student veterans choose to attend public research universities. This chapter provides a discussion of this study's findings related to college choice and the supports that veterans need in order to succeed. The following sections provide an overview of the three stages of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model, key findings, limitations, recommendations for future research, recommendations for practice, and a reflection on the study's process.

Overview of the College Choice Process

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage college choice model was used to understand and explain the college choice process of military-affiliated transfer students attending public research universities. Hossler and Gallagher's three-stage (predisposition, search, choice) model is a widely-cited model used to analyze students' college choice processes (Martin & Dixon, 1991; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990; Perna, 2000, 2006).

The first stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model is predisposition. In the predisposition stage, students develop the desire to attend college (Paulsen, 1990). Several researchers, including Hossler and Gallagher, found SES and interpersonal influences (parents and peers) were indicators of students' aspirations to attend college (Martin & Dixon 1991; Paulsen 1990). The affordability of college and students' ability to pay for higher education

creates barriers to accessing college. More than half (65%) of the 20 interview participants said they always knew that they wanted to go to college, which they knew would provide them with post-high school success. Due to financial and personal reasons, these students chose to join the military before pursuing a bachelor's degree. Hossler and Gallagher found that students from low SES backgrounds are less likely to attend college than students with high SES status.

In the search stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, students begin seeking out information regarding specific colleges and universities (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Martin & Dixon, 1991; Paulsen, 1990). During this second stage, students begin to place value on the characteristics that they desire in a college or university; this will help them make a list of schools that they would like to attend. For traditional students, the search process begins in their sophomore year of high school and concludes during their senior year when they apply to a higher education institution (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). For military-affiliated students, the search process for their transfer institution began when students were in the military concurrently taking college classes or while attending community college post-military service. The search stage concludes when students submit their applications to their colleges (Paulsen, 1990).

The final stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model is the choice phase, when students receive notification from institutions indicating their admission status and make the final decision of which institution to attend. During the final decision process, students may approach the process by using a psychosocial, economic, or sociological status attainment lens. For the purposes of this study, the economic approach was used to understand students' final college choice decision. Rational choice theory was used to understand how this study's participants made their final decision to attend a public research university. The rational choice perspective

assumes that students make decisions based on criteria that maximize their advantage/gain and minimize their disadvantage/loss (Herrnstein, 1990; Yu, 2011). By using this theory, the study was able to better understand how and why students chose factors related to their college search.

Previous studies of traditional-aged students' college choice found that students rate major availability and quality of faculty as being very important in making their college choice (Canale, Dunlap, Britt, & Donahue, 1996). Studies have found that non-traditional students and adult learners cite non-academic factors as being most influential in their college choice. Levine and Cureton's (1998) study of adult learners found that convenience (proximity to home and work, flexibility of class offerings), service (helpful staff, timely response from staff), and cost were rated as the most important factors in the college choice decision. These studies support previous college choice studies of student veterans, which found that financial influences were important (Duderella & Kim, 2012; Field, 2008).

Discussion of the Key Findings

Research Question One

What are the demographic, military, and educational characteristics of veterans who have transferred to a public research university? To what extent do these characteristics vary by student veterans' branch of service and current military status?

The first research question investigated the demographic and military backgrounds of military-affiliated transfer students who were attending a public research university. The survey data revealed that the military-affiliated students were more or less similar, demographically, to the national military-affiliated student population.

Demographic and military background. Overall, the findings from the survey indicate that demographically, this sample of military-affiliated students attending UCD, UCLA, UCR,

UCSB, or UCSD were similar to populations found in national studies of military-affiliated students. The sample population was similar to the national sample in terms of gender, ethnic background, and age. The sample of survey respondents differed from the national sample when comparing the population of married military-affiliated students. Although nearly half (47%) of military-affiliated college students nationwide report being married, just under one-third (32%) of this study's participants reported the same. National studies found the population of married military-affiliated students (47%) to be higher than this study (32%; Field, 2008).

The military service experiences (including branch of service, deployments, and service-connected disabilities) of the survey participants were comparable to the military experiences found in national studies (Cate, 2014). A surprising finding was the outsized percentage of Marine Corps veterans in the survey sample compared to the other branches of service. As the second smallest branch of service in the military, it was surprising to find that 27.4% of the survey respondents served in the Marine Corps. Importantly, this disproportionate share of Marines in the survey sample likely connects to the proximity of UCLA, UCSD, and UCR to the major Marine Corps base on the west coast.

This study's interviewees were disproportionately non-White when compared to national studies of military-affiliated students (Cate, 2014; U.S. Department of Defense, 2013). This finding may be associated with the site, as UCLA provided the most racial/ethnic diversity among the participating institutions.

Pre-college characteristics. This study's survey and interview questions asked students to share their community college transfer experiences. Almost three quarters (72%) of survey respondents rated their access to an advisor while in community college as outstanding or satisfactory, and two-thirds (67%) rated their course planning, understanding of requirements

(67%), and understanding of the transfer process (68%) as outstanding or satisfactory.

Subsequent tests revealed no statistically significant differences across these four satisfaction items. These findings were not statistically significant; however, the interviewees provided some insight on these findings. Some (35%) of the interviewees shared their frustrations with not correctly understanding some of the courses needed to fulfill their transfer requirements and difficulty with course planning due to military obligations.

In addition to students' rating of resources offered at the community colleges, students were also asked about sources of information they used to help inform their college choice process. The highest rated source of information was the Internet. According to survey responses, men were more likely than women to use the Internet as a source of information for their college choice process. Conversely, university advertisements ranked as the least-used source of information. These findings help to better understand how these students gathered their information about transfer institutions.

Research Question Two

What factors do student veterans, who have transferred to a research university, identify as influential in either supporting or hindering their efforts to apply to and ultimately decide to enroll in a public research university? To what extent do these factors vary by student veterans' branch of service and current military status?

The second research question addressed the factors influencing students' decision of where to enroll and drew from analyses of both quantitative and qualitative data. Three primary findings emerged with respect to college choice: participants prioritized academic factors over non-academic factors in their college search and choice, mentors as particularly important in supporting and reinforcing their academic abilities, and the military promoted the pursuit of

college classes. Analyses of both quantitative and qualitative data provided evidence to support each of these three findings.

Priority of academic factors in military-affiliated students' college choice.

Participants in the survey and in the interviews indicated that academic factors such as the university's overall reputation, the quality of a particular major, and the availability of internships had great salience in their search and choice of college as opposed to non-academic factors such as the cost of the university, its location, or how easy it was to transfer their community college credits.

This does not mean that participants in this study completely excluded non-academic factors in their college choice processes. Of all of the non-academic factors, only location of the institution ranked among the top three factors in either students' search or choice processes. Interview participants provided further insight into the importance of location, as they shared that this factor also encompassed financial and family factors, which likely serve as a proxy for location. Interview participants who cited importance of location mentioned that a particular campus would allow them to stay close to their families. For some students, their prior military service had made it difficult to see their family (parents, aunts and uncles, cousins) regularly. Others explained that, as their parents aged, living and attending college close to their parents to provide needed care and support factored into their ultimate decision.

In addition to location, students also shared that there were financial benefits that they considered in their college choice process. For example, six out of 20 interviewees (30%) mentioned that the reduced cost for residents of California played a major part in their decision. The Post-9/11 GI Bill provides tuition funding up to the cost of the maximum in-state tuition rate. If military-affiliated students were to move out of state and attend a public institution, they

would have been considered an out of state student and be held responsible for paying the institution's supplemental non-resident tuition fee (not covered by the GI Bill). With the recent updates to the Veteran Choice Act, active duty students and recently separated veterans (who enroll in higher education within 36 months of leaving military service) should no longer have concerns regarding residency classification and the financial burden of paying tuition at the out of state rate. Because this study was performed before the most recent updates to the Veteran Choice Act (see Chapter 2), GI Bill users who are active duty or who were not aware of this provision may have considered paying out of state tuition as a factor in their college choice. Military-affiliated transfer students may now not have to worry about their residency classification, as their GI Bill now waives such fees.

Although non-academic factors were rated as less important in this study, previous research on military-affiliated students has consistently cited that non-academic factors were most important in veteran students' college search and choice, emphasizing cost, location, and proximity to family (Dudrella & Kim, 2012; McNealy, 2004; Radford, 2009; Sewall, 2010; U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2010a). Although rated as less influential in the search and choice process than academic factors, non-academic factors (location, cost, and proximity to family) rated important in this study were consistent among those rated important in previous veterans' college choice studies. However, the current study focused on transfer students attending public research universities, whereas previous studies included only 4-year university students.

Personal ambition and the encouragement of others. A second theme that emerged from the interviews was the mixture of personal ambition and the encouragement of others. Seventy percent of the interviewees mentioned a friend, a superior officer, or (less often)

someone at their community college who said, in effect, “You’re better than this—you can aspire to more.” As Richard said, recalling a conversation with a community college professor who encouraged him to apply to Berkeley, “That lit a fire in my ass. Not only because she challenged me, but it was the recognition that she thought I could be that caliber student.” Similarly, Brent recalled a sergeant who pushed him to consider attending college, telling him, “Hey, you can do better. You can do better.... You’re capable of so much more.” Many other interviewees had similar stories to tell about someone who told them that they were different and should aspire to more than their current goals.

It would, however, be a mistake to conclude that community college advisors planted new seeds of educational ambition in military-affiliated students. Instead, more than one-third of interview participants made it clear that they had held such aspirations for quite some time. For some, this took the form of recognizing that the military, which offers pathways to promotions, would not be enough.

While some veterans wanted to attend a research university, the details were less clear about how to be academically qualified and competitive for admission to a public research university. Many of these students (85%) already had educational and career goals that exceeded possibilities available in the military. Instead, these advisors validated the legitimacy of students’ aspirations and encouraged students to pursue those aspirations. They told students that they could achieve more than an associate of arts degree, and sometimes they helped pave the way for students to apply to 4-year institutions. Overall, these findings describe the predisposition stage of students’ college choice.

Higher education access in the military. A third finding concerns the quality of assistance that participants received in the military and in their community colleges. As

described in the previous section, advisors and mentors in both the military and the community college provided encouragement, validation, and guidance about how to seek a 4-year degree. Another piece of this story related to the challenges participants faced in trying to take classes while serving in the military. Although nearly all (90%) of the interviewed students mentioned that education was “promoted” in the military, 55% of the interviewees mentioned how difficult it was to actually find the time to take college classes while in the military. Participants shared that most of their training in the military was either tactical or physical, and others noted the fast pace of military life constrained opportunities to take classes while actively serving.

Conclusion

Although participants in this study mirrored the demographic background and military experiences of the national population of student veterans (Cate, 2014; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2015), this study offered new insights about the college search and choice process of student veterans not previously found in studies on this population. Specifically, student veterans in this sample prioritized academic considerations over most non-academic factors in searching for and choosing a college, which represents a departure from previous research (Dudrella & Kim, 2012; McNealy, 2004; Radford, 2009; Sewall, 2010). This study’s respondents place a high value on attending a public research institution because of its prestige, high graduation rates, and high employment of graduates’ post-graduation. The majority of this study’s respondents said they sought a professional career path and regard attendance at a public research university as the next step in preparing them directly for a career or attending a graduate or professional school.

Limitations

This study had several limitations that need to be considered. The first and most notable limitation was the low response rate (mean of 20%) from five campuses and the lack of participation from three sites. UC Berkeley, UC Irvine, and UC Santa Cruz were not included in the findings because fewer than five student veterans responded to the survey at each of those campuses. Additionally, timing of the survey in January 2017 meant that it overlapped with several other campus-wide surveys, likely leading to survey fatigue among participants in the target sample. In general, the low response rate confers limited generalizability to this study's findings and results.

Another limitation was related to the survey itself. The survey was developed for this study, allowing a large number of questions to be asked. As a result, the face validity of the survey was unknown/limited. The survey was piloted to military-affiliated transfer student alumni before being administered to the survey participants to help address the limitations on validity. Upon coding the interview data, it became clear that the survey excluded several relevant domains about student veterans' experiences searching for, selecting, and transitioning to their new 4-year institutions. Specifically, it would have been helpful to have more direct questions about students' predisposition for college to compare to the interview findings.

Another limitation relates to the interviewees' identification of prestige as an important institutional factor in their college choice. Inherently, UCLA is a prestigious university, therefore the interviewees' emphasis on prestige is likely heavily influenced by the fact that only UCLA students were interviewed. This limitation should be taken into consideration when reviewing the findings.

The sampling method used to recruit interviewees also incurred limitations to the study. Interviewing students from one institution limits perspectives on student choice for attending other public research universities. Similarly, interviewing a sample size of 20 students does not provide breadth of perspective, which limits the understanding across military-affiliated transfer student college choice.

This study relied on the perspectives of military-affiliated transfer students; it did not ask community college counselors or UC admissions officers for their perspectives on factors that support or hinder military-affiliated students' transfer college search and choice. Community college counselors may have additional perspectives on factors that play into military-affiliated transfer students' college choice; admissions officers at public research universities may have valuable insights into the military-affiliated applicants with whom they work during their outreach and admission process.

Finally, this the survey and interview protocol of this study had limited piloting. Additional piloting of the survey and interview protocol may have been able to address some of the previously mentioned limitations, including the survey length.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings reported here suggest a number of areas that might require more detailed investigation. As noted previously, this study focused on a subset of military-affiliated students who successfully transferred from a community college to one of the participating UC institutions. It would be useful to compare this group with the much larger group of similar students who did not apply to a research university. Further studies could look into what factors distinguish those who complete the transfer process to a research university from those who do not. Factors could include a combination of demographic variables, academic and non-academic

factors influencing the decision of where to apply and where to enroll, and such psychological factors as the students' academic ambition and academic self-confidence.

Additional studies could consider comparing the college choice process of military-affiliated transfer students to that of other non-traditional transfer students. Specifically, the study should seek to determine whether military-affiliated students experience a distinct pathway when transferring to a 4-year institution with respect to support and guidance from family, faculty, community college counselors, and other mentors. Additionally, such a study could have a broader scope regarding the ultimate choice of institution to determine whether the choices of where to enroll among military-affiliated students are distinct from the choices made by other transfer students.

Another opportunity for research involves looking at the possible impact of service-connected disabilities and other health-related experiences on veterans' college choice. This study found that a substantial portion of the sample reported service-connected disabilities. These students are returning to school with a new obstacle to face. Future studies could examine how these disabilities affect military affiliated students' plans for education beyond the community college level.

In contrast to previous research, this study found that student veterans did not emphasize non-academic factors in their choice of where to transfer. A different picture may emerge if studies compare the population of military-affiliated students who do and do not succeed in transferring to research universities. In particular, future research should investigate the impact that financial concerns and the universities' location have on students' college choice. Specifically, future studies should identify what line items for veterans create a fiscal obstacle when attending higher education. These findings would allow higher education institutions to

develop funding resources that could attract students to institutions that students might perceive as too costly. Additionally, if funding gaps exist, potential amendments to financial aid and the GI bill could be proposed to remedy the funding gap.

In addition to future research opportunities on non-academic factors, further investigation should look into encouragement, self-confidence, and academic ambition. This study found that those who successfully transferred to research universities pointed to the influence of others in helping them feel that they were special and had what it took to succeed. Future research should investigate whether this sort of encouragement, and the academic ambition and self-confidence it may foster, are part of what separates those who transfer successfully from those who do not. Additionally, an infographic was developed to provide highlights of this study and help promote discussion about military-affiliated student's college choice by higher education administrators. See Appendix C.

Recommendations for Practice

The results of this study have several implications for future professional practice. The recommendations can be used by higher education professionals or military-affiliated students attending a community college. Each constituency group can benefit from these recommendations as they go through and/or support a student going through the college choice process.

Higher Education Professionals

Like many other community college students, military-affiliated students need comprehensive and consistent guidance upon entering community colleges to help prepare them to explore, plan, and meet their post-military academic and career objectives. It is likely that the people who are going to have the most impact on whether or not military-affiliated students

transfer to research universities will be community college counselors. Many of these recommendations need to be made before the student begins applying to the public research university. In general, a coordinated effort across community college transfer centers, community college veteran centers, and UC admission offices should take place in order to address supporting military-affiliated students' college choice process. An advisory board composed of community college students, transfer center counselors, and veteran center counselors, along with UC military-affiliated students, admissions officers, and veteran center coordinators, should take place to develop a streamlined process of supporting students' college choice. Higher education professionals, especially counselors in both community colleges and public research universities, may benefit from these recommendations:

- **Prioritize Counseling and Support Services for Veterans on Campus:** Given that most student veterans begin their college careers at community colleges and the national emphasis on creating veteran-friendly support and policies, many community colleges have done well to identify and support the needs of their military-affiliated students. Community college veteran centers should (if they do not already) employ a full-time counselor to support veterans transferring to a baccalaureate granting institution. With diverse life experiences and sources of academic credit (military, other academic institutions), the transfer requirements and processes can be more difficult for military-affiliated students. A counselor specifically dedicated to supporting transfer to baccalaureate granting institutions would help military-affiliated students throughout the transfer process. Additionally, community colleges should invest in making their campus Veteran Center a one-stop shop for student veterans. As previous research indicates, veterans have additional needs beyond

academics. These may include tutoring, disability services, benefits certification, and transfer-preparation. At a Veteran Center, students will be able to easily access a variety of services in one location and staff can collaborate with other campus resources for veterans.

- **Recognize Military-Affiliated Students as a Strong Pool of Potential Transfer**

Students: Community colleges, specifically community college counselors, play a critical role in military-affiliated students' college search and choice after leaving the military. For many military-affiliated students, community college is their first landing spot after leaving the military. The advice and guidance that students receive from community college counselors regarding their educational plans and goals is crucial to these students' ultimate college choices about their institution, and specifically marketing these sessions to student veterans. This study provides evidence to suggest that community college counselors should intentionally ask students about their higher education and career goals, in order to assess how a public research university may be a good fit for student veterans. However, community college transfer centers and UC admission offices can also help support the work of community college counselors. Transfer centers can reach out to student veterans and share information about transfer pathways, the transfer process, and courses needed to meet admission requirements at institutions. UC admission offices can support the community college counselor's efforts by offering informational sessions

- **Continue/Consider Creating Academic and Career Plans with all Military-**

Affiliated Students: Community college counselors should meet with all new military-affiliated to discuss the students' academic and career goals. This discussion

should include an explanation of career fields that are in high demand and what those career fields require in terms of education and development. In addition, community college counselors should discuss the students' military service experiences. By doing so, they will be able to help support the students holistically and advise students on navigating the university system. Additionally, by obtaining a fuller picture of the student, community college counselors can help develop an education plan with the students, with the end goal of transferring to a public research university. This practice is done at many community colleges; however, some of the study's findings suggest that the service could be improved.

- **Speak to Military-Affiliated Students Desire for High Quality, Career-Focused Education:** When meeting with military-affiliated students, community college faculty and staff should speak to the differences between institution types. They should teach students how to understand academic indicators such as retention rate, graduation rate, and employment rate at the institutions that they seek out. These topics should be discussed because they were found to be important to this study's participants who chose to attend a public research university. Specifically, the faculty and staff should also address cost, the long-term financial benefits of a bachelor's degree, and how students can leverage their military experiences to be successful in academia. This will help military-affiliated students, who are cost-conscious, think not only about short-term financial cost (because of limited amount of federal military education benefits), but also long-term financial gain, thus enabling them to make an informed decision about their education.

- **Speak to Military-Affiliated Students' Need for Encouragement:** This study found that many military-affiliated students cited the importance of encouragement and support they received for their academic ambitions. Community college staff and faculty should recognize the highly talented, motivated students who may need affirmation to make the next step to attend a public research university. Faculty who see students in the classroom setting are uniquely positioned to share their support to military-affiliated students. Providing in-service training or professional development opportunities to faculty and staff aimed at increasing awareness of student veterans' challenges and strengths could help faculty and staff achieve this objective.
- **Recognize the Importance of Non-Academic Factors:** Findings from this study indicated that the two most highly rated non-academic factors that influence students college search and choice were college cost and location. Community college counselors should be equipped with information about the university costs for military-affiliated students who transfer to public research universities. They should be equipped with information on the estimated annual out-of-pocket costs of college for military-affiliated students, available scholarships for military-affiliated students, and additional resources for financial support. Admissions staff members from public research institutions should work with community college counselors to provide accurate information and appropriate materials that outline these questions.

Military-Affiliated Community College Students

The following section lists recommendations that current military-affiliated community college students should consider while attending community college:

- **Meet with an Academic Counselor:** Upon the students' arrival at the community college, they should meet with their veteran counselor and transfer counselor (if different) in order to develop an academic and career plan. Military-affiliated community college students should begin to discuss their plan for transferring to a public research institution early on to ensure that their coursework will lead them to their goals. This plan should be reviewed on a monthly basis to ensure that students are meeting the plans and/or revising their plans if necessary.
- **Secure an Academic and Career Mentor:** This study found that the support provided by a mentor was instrumental in the success of military-affiliated students who transferred successfully to a public research university. Military-affiliated community college students should seek out academic and career mentors who can serve as supportive individuals with specific skill sets to help support student success. These supportive people can be community college faculty or staff, professionals working in industry, and/or family and friends who are familiar with higher education and industry careers.

Reflection

When I began my doctoral program in Education, I had a specific interest in better understanding veteran students' college choice. I was living in the state with the highest population of veterans, and over 70,000 veterans attending school at the community college level. Yet, at the most elite system of public higher education in the state, the public research universities, the population of military-affiliated undergraduate students was less than 1,000 students. At the same time, several news articles had been published about the few veterans enrolled in some of the world's most elite institutions. As a student affairs practitioner working

with student veterans, I began conversations with admission and student affairs practitioners on this phenomenon. Why were there so many student veterans in the state of California attending community colleges, yet so few at the university level? The existing data were limited. Prior to this research, I heard stories about the great support some veterans received, and yet there were other stories about what was missing as these students pursued their educational journey. I felt passionate about better understanding what was working for them, and in what ways the community college and the university systems might be deficient in providing the support they needed.

As I assembled the results from my study, I became aware of the many actors that are involved in a military-affiliated students' college choice process and successful transition to a public research university. I believe that this study has opened a better understanding of the shortcomings in the present systems, and provides groundwork for future studies and additional support that can be provided to this important student population.

Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

What is your current class standing at UCXX?

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate/Professional Student
 - If this is answered, no other questions will be answered. Survey will end.
- Other (please specify): _____

What is your current status in school: (mark one)

- Full –time student
- Part-time student
- Not currently enrolled
- N/A

What is your major? (text box)

Did you transfer to UCXX from another institution??

- Yes
 - If yes, what the institution you transferred from a:
 - Community college in California
 - Community college outside of California
 - California State University
 - Private 4-year college/university in California
 - Private 4-year college/university outside of California
 - Other University of California campus
- No
 - If no, continue survey and skip academic community college questions.

Demographic Questions

What is your sex? (Mark one)

- Male
- Female

What is your ethnicity? (Can select more than one response)

- White/Caucasian
- Black/African American
- Native American/ Alaskan Native
- Hispanic
- Asian/Asian American
- Other (please specify): _____

How old will you be on December 31, 2016?

- Under 20
- 20-24

- 25-29
- 30-34
- 35-44
- 45-49
- 50 and over

Military Experience

What branch of the military did/do you serve?

- Air Force
- Army
- Marines
- Navy
- Coast Guard
- Other (please specify): _____

What is your current military status:

- Veteran (discharged veteran NOT serving in active duty, reserves, or national guard)
- Active Duty
- Reservist
- National Guard
- ROTC, cadet, or midshipman
- Other: please specify: _____

What is your Military Occupational Specialty? (text box)

What is/was your rank? (Drop down box that is populated according to the students branch of service answer)

- If respond with Air Force on Branch of Service Question
 - Airman Basic
 - Airman
 - Airman First Class
 - Senior Airman
 - Staff Sergeant
 - Technical Sergeant
 - Master Sergeant
 - First Sergeant
 - Senior Master Sergeant
 - Chief Master Sergeant
 - First Sergeant
 - Command Chief Master Sergeant
 - Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force
- If respond with Army on Branch of Service Question
 - Private
 - Private Second Class
 - Private First Class

- Specialist
- Corporal
- Sergeant
- Staff Sergeant
- Sergeant First Class
- Master Sergeant
- First Sergeant
- Sergeant Major
- Commander Sergeant Major
- The Sergeant Major of the Army
- If respond with Navy on Branch of Service Question
 - Seaman Recruit
 - Seaman Apprentice
 - Seaman
 - Petty Officer Third Class
 - Petty Officer Second Class
 - Petty Officer First Class
 - Chief Petty Officer
 - Senior Chief Petty Officer
 - Master Chief Petty Officer
 - Force Command Master Chief Petty Officer
 - Fleet Command Master Chief Petty Officer
 - Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy
- If respond with Marine Corps on Branch of Service Question
 - Private
 - Private First Class
 - Lance Corporal
 - Corporal
 - Sergeant
 - Staff Sergeant
 - Gunnery Sergeant
 - Master Sergeant
 - First Sergeant
 - Master Gunnery Sergeant
 - Sergeant Major
 - Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps
- If respond with Coast Guard on Branch of Service Question
 - Seaman Recruit
 - Seaman Apprentice
 - Seaman
 - Petty Officer Third Class
 - Petty Officer Second Class
 - Petty Officer First Class
 - Chief Petty Officer
 - Senior Chief Petty Officer
 - Master Chief Petty Officer

- Command Master Chief
- Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard

How long were/have you been in the military (year and months)?

- Less than 3 months
- 3-6 months
- 7-11 months
- 1-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 7-10 years
- 11-13 years
- 14-16 years
- 17-20 years
- 21+ years

Have you been mobilized/deployed during your military career?

- Yes
 - If yes, which locations have you been mobilized/deployed to? (select all that apply)
 - Iraq
 - Afghanistan
 - European Command
 - Pacific Command
 - African Command
 - Central Command
 - If yes, how many mobilizations/deployments have you done?
 - 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
 - 6
 - 7
 - 8+
- No

Have you ever deployed to a Combat Zone?

- Yes
 - If yes, were you directly involved in combat?
 - Yes
 - No
- No

Do you have a service-connected disability?

- Yes
- No

(if yes) Which of the following service-connected disabilities apply to you? (check all that apply)

- Hearing and/or vision loss
- Mobility impairment
- Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Psychiatric/Psychological problems
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Other (please specify): _____ -

PREDISPOSITION

Academic Questions (High School)

What was your cumulative grade point average (GPA) in high school?

- A+ (4.0 and above)
- A (3.75 to 3.99)
- A- or B+ (3.25 to 3.74)
- B (2.75 to 3.24)
- B- or C+ (2.25 to 2.75)
- C- or less (below 1.75)

Did you graduate from high school?

- Yes
- No
 - If no, did you earn a GED?
 - Yes
 - No

Academic Questions (Community College)

Did you participate in any of the following programs as part of your admissions process? (check all that apply)

- Transfer Alliance Program (TAP)
- Service to Schools (S2S)
- Marine Leadership Scholars Program
- Puente
- MESA

What was your cumulative GPA when you transferred to UCXX?

- A+ (4.0 and above)
- A (3.75 to 3.99)
- A- or B+ (3.25 to 3.74)
- B (2.75 to 3.24)
- B- or C+ (2.25 to 2.75)
- C- or less (below 1.75)

Since you first started college, have you worked while enrolled in college?

- Yes
- No

How would you rate your knowledge and experience related to each of the following aspects of your transfer?

	Outstanding	Satisfactory	Needs Improvement	Needs a lot of Improvement	Don't know
Availability of advising and counseling about transfer requirements					
Availability of advising and counseling about transfer process					
Ease of completing transfer documents					
Assistance in filling out UCXX admission application					
Assistance from your previous institution in providing supporting documents (e.g., transcripts, test scores) for UCXX admission application					
Assistance in planning your community college coursework to meet the requirements for admission to and completion of your chose UCXX major					

SEARCH

Please rate how important each of the factors were in your college search process.

	Essential	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Location				
Tuition Assistance				
Academic Offerings				
Friendliness towards veterans and military personnel				
Helpful Staff				
Amount of Transfer Credits Awarded				
Ease of Admission Process				
Speed of Program Completion				
Prestige				

Flexibility of Schedule

Choose the top two factors that were the MOST IMPORTANT when considering where to transfer?

- Location
- Tuition Assistance
- Academic Offerings
- Friendliness towards veterans and military personnel
- Helpful staff
- Amount of transfer credits awarded
- Ease of admission process
- Speed of program completion
- Prestige
- Flexibility of schedule
- Other (please specify): _____

To what extent did you consider each of the following institution types in your search for a transfer institution?

To a great extent To some extent Not at all

Private

Public

For-profit

Community college/Junior college

Online College

Vocational

To what extent did you rely on each of the following sources of information to learn about the requirements and processes for applying to UCX? (Please mark all that apply).

- My community college transfer center
- My community college veterans office
- Advertisements
- College fair/employment fair
- Internet
- Friend or family
- Military education program
- Other: Please specify: _____

CHOICE

Please indicate how important each of the following characteristics was to **you** in deciding where to transfer.

	Not at all important	Somewhat important	Moderately Important	Important	Very Important
Overall academic reputation					
Quality of faculty					
Quality of academic facilities (library, labs, computers, etc.)					
Comfortable, friendly campus community					
Campus is safe for all students					
Quality & availability of on-campus housing					
Graduates get into good graduate & professional schools					
Graduates get jobs in their chosen fields					
Faculty are accessible to students					
Students receive individual guidance & attention					
“Out-of-pocket” cost of attendance (after financial aid, scholarships, etc.)					
General campus setting (urban, rural, beach, mountains, etc.)					
Campus is located in a specific city or area of interest					
Campus is close to home					
Availability of internships & practical work experiences					
Availability of majors that interest you					
Quality of majors of interest to you					
Racially & ethnically diverse student body					
Prominent intercollegiate athletics					
ON-CAMPUS cultural & recreational opportunities					

OFF-CAMPUS cultural & recreational opportunities
College guide ranking

Proximity to a military base

Proximity to a VA hospital or clinic

Please list any other important factors in your decision of where to enroll in college. (text box)

To how many colleges other than this one did you apply for transfer admission?

- None
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7-8
- 9-10
- 11 or more

Were you accepted to other colleges?

- Yes
 - If yes, which institutions? (text box)
- No

Based on the institutions where you applied to transfer, is this college your: (mark one)

- First Choice
- Second Choice
- Third Choice
- Less Than Third Choice

How important were each of the following in influencing your decision to attend UC XX?

	Not at all important	Somewhat important	Moderately Important	Important	Very important
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Family

Friends

Teachers/faculty

Community College Counselor

College Guide (for example, US

News and World Report)

Military College Guide (for example, Military Advanced Education)
University's Website
University's Veterans Website
Visit to Campus
Communications and interactions with campus admissions office
Communications and interactions with campus veterans office

What is the highest degree that you intend to obtain at any institution? (mark one)

- None
- Vocational certificate
- Associate (A.A. or equivalent)
- Bachelor's degree (B.A., B.S., etc.)
- Master's degree (M.A., M.S., etc.)
- J.D. (Law)
- M.D., D.D.S., D.V.M., etc. (Medical)
- Ph.D.
- Professional Doctorate (Ed.D., Psy.D., etc.)
- Other

How many years do you expect it will take you to graduate from this college?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4+
- Do not plan to graduate from this college

How easy was it to apply to this institution?

- Very easy
- Somewhat easy
- Somewhat difficult
- Difficult

Military & Background Questions

Are you currently receiving VA educational benefits?

- Yes
- No

What education benefits do you qualify for (provide a link to the VA website)? Check all that apply.

- Chapter 30 Montgomery GI Bill Active Duty
- Chapter 31 Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment

- Chapter 33 Post-9/11 GI Bill Active Duty
- Chapter 35 Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance Program
- Chapter 1606 Montgomery GI Bill Selected Reserve
- Chapter 1607 Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP)
- None of the above
- Other Tuition Assistance (please specify):_____

What education benefits are you currently using? Check all that apply.

- Chapter 30 Montgomery GI Bill Active Duty
- Chapter 31 Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment
- Chapter 33 Post-9/11 GI Bill Active Duty
- Chapter 35 Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance Program
- Chapter 1606 Montgomery GI Bill Selected Reserve
- Chapter 1607 Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP)
- None of the above
- Other Tuition Assistance (please specify):_____

What is your current marital status?: (mark one)

- Single
- Unmarried, living with partner
- Married
- Separated, divorced, or widowed

What is the highest level of formal education obtained by either of your parents? (Mark one)

- Junior high/middle school or less
- Some high school
- High school graduate
- Postsecondary school other than college
- Some college
- College graduate
- Some graduate school
- Graduate or professional degree

What is your total household income?

- Less than \$10,000
- \$10,000 to \$19,999
- \$20,000 to \$29,999
- \$30,000 to \$39,999
- \$40,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$59,999
- \$60,000 to \$69,999
- \$70,000 to \$79,999
- \$80,000 to \$89,999
- \$90,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 to \$149,999

- \$150,000 or more

Is there anything else you would like us to know about the factors that facilitated and/or hindered your experience applying to and enrolling in this institution? [open-ended]

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. The reason for this interview is to gain information about transfer student veterans' college choice process as it relates to their decision to transfer to a public research university. This interview will take 45 minutes to an hour. I have a copy of the informed consent with time that I emailed to your previously for your review. I also have a consent form to digitally record and transcribe today's interview. This interview is confidential; meaning neither your name nor information that could potentially reveal your identity will be associated with this taping. Before we begin this interview, do you have any questions about the consent form? Do I have your permission to tape this interview? (Wait for participant to sign consent form)

GREETING/BACKGROUND

- 1) Tell me a little about yourself.
 - a. Possible Probes:
 - i. (Name, where you are from, what branch of military you serve(d) in, your major of study, and how many semesters you have been at UCXX)

PREDISPOSITION

Think about the experiences and events that led you to want to pursue a degree at UCXX.

- 2) Tell me about your educational and career path after high school.
 - a. Why did you decide to join the military?
 - i. (look for references to influences of family, friends, mentors, teachers, famous people, desire to service country, financial benefits, needing structure, etc).
 - b. Tell me about your educational experience while you were in the military.
 - i. (look for references to online classes, military courses, community college of the air force, California community college, no college)
- 3) What influenced you to decide to pursue a college education? What factors guided your decision to attend UCXX?
 - a. Were there any services/support programs / individuals that assisted you to do what?? If so, please explain.
 - i. (Look for references to influences of family, friends, mentors, teachers, famous people and/or for reference to services offered by community college, 4-year institution, military, and/or non-profit organizations)
 - b. Were there any barriers that you encountered? If so, please explain.
 - i. (Look for references to influences of family, friends, mentors, teachers, famous people and/or for reference to services offered by community college, 4-year institution, military, and/or non-profit organizations)

SEARCH

So now, I'd like to shift gears a little bit and talk about your process applying for transfer to a 4-year institution.

- 4) The trends from the survey found that students most commonly cited ____, ____, and _____ as attributes student veterans were looking for in a 4-year institution. Can you tell me how this finding compares with your personal experience?
- 5) The trends from the survey found that students most commonly cited ____, ____, and _____ as sources of information to learn about the requirements and process for applying to 4-year universities. Can you tell me how this finding compares with your personal experience?
 - a. Possible Probe
 - i. Were there any services /support programs / individuals/recruiting events that assisted you? If so, please explain.
 - a. What specific services/support programs/methods of recruitment did you see the various other schools use that seemed unique or innovative?
- 6) Were there any resources that would have helped you better navigate and/ or understand the college search process?

CHOICE

The final few questions I have for you focus on how you made the ultimate choice to come here to “UCXX” University. Can you remember when you made that choice? Do you need have questions about enrolling?

- 7) How did UCXX compare to other institutions you were considering on factors most important to you? Once admitted to university(ies), how did you make the final decision to attend UCXX?
 - a. Possible Probe:
 - i. How, if at all, did military education benefits or transfer credits affect your college choice decision?
- 8) Who in your life (e.g., family, friends, colleagues, and mentors) provided input in your decision to enroll? How did you weigh competing perspectives?
 - a. Possible Probe:
 - i. The trends from the survey found that students most commonly cited ____, ____, and _____ as factors that influenced their choice regarding which 4-year institution. Can you tell me how this finding compares with your personal experience?
- 9) Now that you have started your college career, how do your expectations of UCXX compare to your experiences in class and on campus? Where has UCXX exceeded expectations, and in what ways has the campus fallen short?

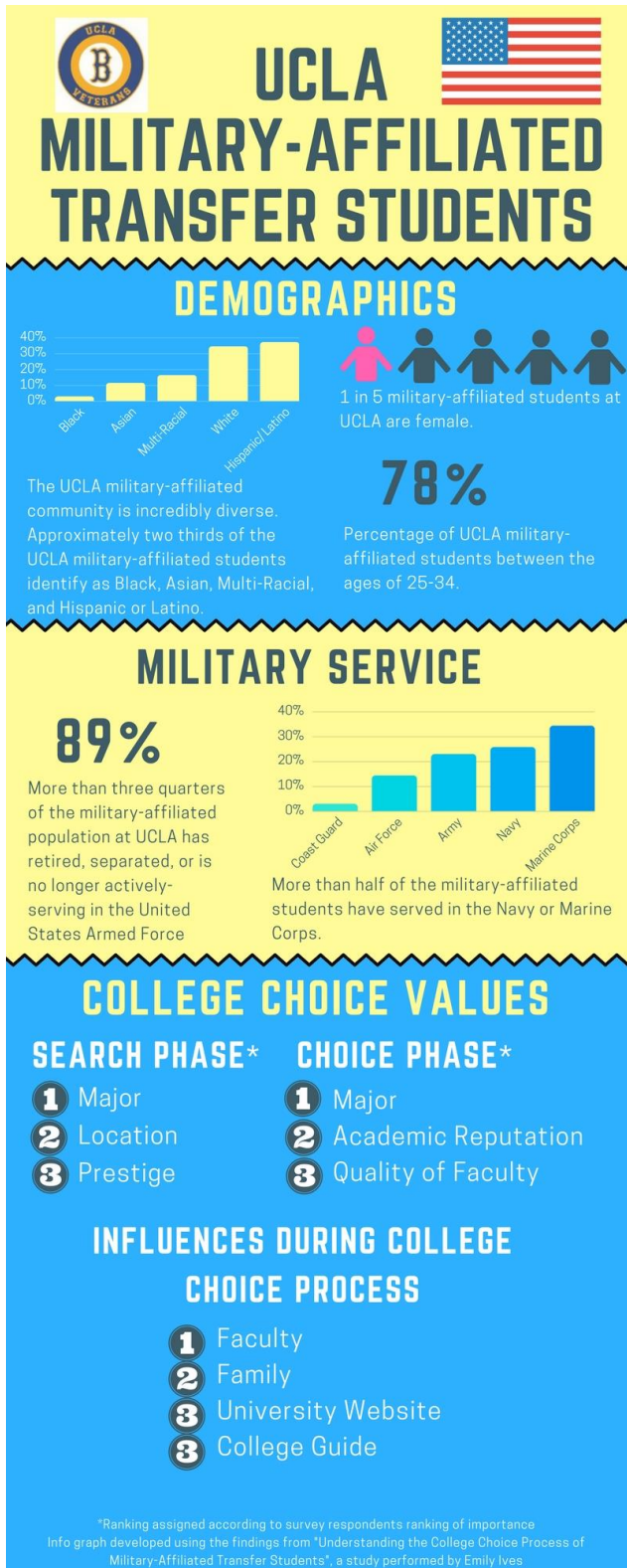
CLOSING

- 10) Trends from the survey found that _____, _____, and _____ were pieces of advice that they would give to a veteran who was thinking of applying to UCXX. What advice would you give to a veteran who was thinking about applying to UCXX?

That was the last of my interview questions. Is there anything that I failed to ask you or you feel like is important to this study that I have not asked?

If not, thank you again for your time and best wishes for a successful semester/quarter!

Appendix C: Infographic



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