

ENROLLMENT TRENDS FOR VETERANS AT HARPER COLLEGE

by

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ABSTRACT

Since the passage of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, (otherwise known as The GI Bill of Rights or the “GI Bill”), postsecondary institutions have seen a steady increase in student veteran enrollment. While veterans of all ages choose to pursue a degree of higher education, this qualitative study chose to examine student veterans of a particular age range which is non-traditional to the study location, Harper College of Palatine, IL. The purpose behind this study was to explore the reason behind the enrollment process for veterans that fall within the age range of 30 or older. With little research on this topic, the researcher felt it necessary to explore the “why” associated with the enrollment decision to determine better ways to recruit and support this population.

Results of the study indicated that location was the most prevalent reason for enrolling at Harper College. The results of this study will be used to recommend targeted outreach to veterans of this age range within the Harper College district to promote the possible educational opportunities and supports available to this population.

KEY WORDS: student veterans, veterans, consumer behavior

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the support system who has continuously rooted me on from the sidelines as I have progressed through this program. My father, Tony, has always stressed the importance of education and has continuously pushed me to better myself through the means of higher education. My husband, Jayce, who enthusiastically encouraged me to pursue this program and has provided unconditional support in times of self-doubt. And, of course, my supportive mother, Carolyn, who has never missed an opportunity to express her pride in my journey, picked me up when I needed it most, and promised me a stethoscope upon the completion of this program. I am forever grateful to have the three of them in my life and to have been able to share this experience with them.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

The passage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, (otherwise known as The GI Bill of Rights or the "GI Bill") provided four provisions that assisted veteran's readjustment to civilian life; guaranteeing "access to education and job training, guaranty of loans, unemployment allowances, including aid for self-employed, and job-finding assistance" (National WWII Museum, 2017, p. 1). Since then, postsecondary institutions have seen a steady increase of veterans on campus (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Institutions continue to evolve and address the unique needs of returning service members and their dependents; however, much about this population is still unknown. Institutions of higher education are beginning to understand that student veterans' benefit from veteran-centered services based on institutional research conducted on this population (Coll, Oh, Joyce, & Coll, 2009; O'Herrin, 2011; Tinoco, 2015).

Student veterans have played an important role in the changes to policies, practices, and cultures at postsecondary institutions since the latter 1940s after the creation of the GI Bill programs. With recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the establishment of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, postsecondary institutions must place more attention on the challenges and concerns associated with the largest influx of student veterans into American higher education since the Vietnam War era (Coll et al., 2009; Jenner, B. M. (n.d.), O'Herrin, 2011; Tinoco, 2015; Vacchi &

Berger, 2014). With the generosity of the Post 9/11 GI Bill program and the continuous need for advanced degrees in a competitive economy, postsecondary institutions will continue to see a large number of veterans enrolling in their programs (Zhang, 2017). With a significant influx in student veteran enrollment, institutions are realizing the importance for faculty, staff, and administrators to have a holistic understanding of, and the ability to meet the needs of, their veteran population.

Demographically, student veterans represent all socioeconomic backgrounds. Only about 27% of all enrolled veterans are women which leaves the majority of military students identifying as male with approximately 73% of the population (Student Veterans of America, 2016). Less than 12% of the student veteran population is under the age of 25 (Student Veterans of America, 2016). Nearly 67% of all student veterans are aged 30 and older; just under 35% fall within the 30-39 age range alone; 45% of veterans are married and approximately 13% are divorced or separated (Student Veterans of America, 2016). Only a small proportion of the veteran population identify with a minority group as about 65% identify as white/Caucasian (Student Veterans of America, 2016). Of the veteran population, 46% responded as having at least one child (natural born, adopted, and/or stepchild) when asked by the Student Veterans of America census for 2016. The demographic findings closely align with trends found within the nontraditional student population, however, one must be cautious not to only focus on nontraditional students when examining student veterans as they come with a unique set of needs and experiences that are important to differentiate.

Cleary and Wozniak (2013) and Sportsman and Thomas (2015) have shown that veterans look for ways to distinguish their military identity from their civilian self. While they

look for opportunities to incorporate their service experiences in the classroom, many found it important to draw identity distinctions to better acclimate to civilian life. Jones (2013) identifies three prominent themes when veterans are attempting to acclimate to civilian life: “the process of adapting a civilian identity, higher education’s role in the civilian acculturation process, and the need for comprehensive services for student veterans” (p. 11). This finding suggests that postsecondary institutions will play a role in facilitating the identity development process. It is crucial for educators to have a deeper understanding of veterans, as a whole, to better support their educational and transitional needs. The participants Jones’s (2013) study identified ways in which higher education can foster the growth of the student veteran population which include specific personnel trained to understand the needs of veterans. The student response from Jones’s (2013) study also suggests that postsecondary institutions must serve as a facilitator for the transitional needs, socially, emotionally, and educationally.

Those who participated in the Jones (2013) study identified ways in which higher education might foster growth within the student veteran population. Most important of which was to ensure that personnel are trained to understand the needs of veterans so that they can better facilitate meeting their transitional, social, emotional and educational needs. Cate and Albright (2015) also recommend training faculty and staff members on campus to become familiar with student veteran needs. In the study conducted by Cate and Albright (2015), they found that students benefitted from faculty and staff that participated in virtual training that focused on having difficult conversations regarding service-related needs and being aware of how to create classrooms and learning environments that foster a student veteran’s ability to enhance the campus culture.

Mentzer, Black, and Spohn (2015) reviewed various support services that assist with the persistence of student veterans. Having compared the services provided to non-military students with those provided to student veterans in areas such as academic and financial and social supports, Mentzer et al. (2015) found that the most significant pathway to persistence was hearty academic support services that catered to the specific needs of student veterans. This coincides with much of what Jones (2013) and Cate and Albright (2015) found, that when institutions are intentional in the way they go about determining what their student veterans need and then ensure that they provide services targeted to meet those needs, their student veterans were more likely to be successful.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to identify factors that most influence the decision of military veterans aged 30 or older to enroll at Harper College in Palatine, IL. Since the creation of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, colleges and universities have seen an increasing number of non-traditionally aged (25 or older), military members enrolling in postsecondary programs (New York University, 2017; Vacchi & Berger, 2014; Zhang 2017). Despite the 3% growth of military members enrolling at colleges and universities due to the availability of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, very little of the available research identifies ways to better serve the veteran's educational needs (Zhang, 2017). Due to limited research on veteran students, this study seeks to determine what motivates members of this population (the 30-year or older population) to make the decision to enroll at a community college, specifically Harper College.

The researcher worked within the Office of Student Financial Assistance as the School Certifying Official at Harper College between the years of 2014 and 2018. This role required daily interactions with the veteran and military-connected population concerning federal and state educational benefits (e.g., GI Bill). Because of the School Certifying Official's close rapport with the population, the researcher estimated that 50 percent of the veteran and military-connected student population identifies as a veteran aged 30 or older.

Research Questions

This particular group is of interest because the typical age of a veteran to enroll in postsecondary education is around the ages of 24 to 26. Based on anecdotal information gathered from Harper College veterans from 2014 to 2017, service-members tend to enlist around the age of 18 (following high school graduation), serve for three to six years in order to qualify for educational benefits, and then separate from the military and gain 'veteran' status. If this is true for the 30 or older population the following research questions will be considered:

1. Why are veterans choosing to enroll at Harper College outside of the typical age range of 24-26?
2. Are servicemembers extending the length of their contracts with the armed forces, if so why?
3. Do veterans feel the need to have a degree or certificate to excel in the workforce?
4. Is there a negative stigma surrounding enrollment after gaining knowledge and skills from the military?

This research will determine if there are reoccurring trends among the selected population that cause them to enroll at Harper College. Portions of the research of this study

will use the information gathered to identify opportunities to market to the population of veterans aged 30 years or older that live or commute to the Harper College district

Conceptual Framework and Theories

The conceptual framework of this study is focused on “consumer behavior.” The reason for this decision is due to the lack of research surrounding decision-making processes when assessing a postsecondary institution. This study will primarily focus on the model presented by Howard and Sheth (1969) which is outlined in chapter three. This model was created to determine if there is a rationale in the decision-making process. They primarily focus on buyer behavior; however, this is essentially what a student goes through when establishing which college to “purchase” or invest in (Notte, 2016; Wasik, 2016).

Readers will also be introduced to studies conducted by Hoxby (2011), Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989), Alon and Tienda (2006), Moogan, Baron, and Harris (1999), and others. Hoxby (2011) and Hossler et al. (1989) focus on post-graduation returns, whereas Alon and Tienda (2006) focus their research on access to selective institutions. Moogan et al. (1999) research decision-making behaviors of students entering postsecondary institutions and focus on students as consumers in the market of postsecondary investments. The model of Howard and Sheth (1969) and other researchers will assist in formulating survey and interview questions when conducting the study as they will give the researcher a foundation to support the type of questions asked of the participants.

Definition of Terms

Veteran: Title 38 of the United States Code of Federal Regulations defines a veteran as “a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable” (U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2017).

Servicemember: The U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2016b) defines a servicemember as “a member of the "uniformed services," consisting of the armed forces (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard), the Commissioned Corps of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Commissioned Corps of the Public Health Services” (para 1).

Non-Traditional Student: The National Center for Education Statistics defines nontraditional students as meeting one of seven characteristics: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attends college part-time; works full time; is financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or does not have a high school diploma (Pelletier, 2010).

Community College: Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014) define community colleges as, “not-for-profit institution[s] regionally accredited to award the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree” (p. 5).

Choice: the act of selecting or deciding when faced with two or more possibilities. (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Summary

Although there have been studies surrounding various aspects of the student veteran experience, very little-to-any research has been conducted on why student veterans choose to enroll at a postsecondary institution. This study hopes to provide insight as to why student veterans, older than the “typical” age range, choose to enroll at a community college. The next chapter will review literature on community colleges, student veterans, various needs of student veterans to be successful in higher education such as: identity development, academic supports, career intervention, and transitional supports, as well as diving deep in to the Howard-Sheth model surrounding consumer behavior.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

While there is little-to-no research available as to why student veterans choose to enroll at a community college, the researcher was able to identify key components of the study to break down the possible rationales for this decision. As mentioned in chapter one, there is a continuous increase in student veterans enrolling at institutions of higher education. This chapter will review elements the researcher felt were necessary to highlight in order to set the foundation for how and why this study is important for future research on student veterans.

Community Colleges

Historical context

When the American higher education system first came to fruition, it was to educate wealthy, white, males (Cohen et al., 2014; Kaufman, n.d.). As expectations of additional education beyond the high school curriculum evolved, so too did the expectations of accessibility to the less elite: the working class (Cohen et al., 2014). The most prominent needs for community colleges were to educate workers for expanding workforces, the “lengthened period of adolescence, which mandated custodial care of the young for a longer time; and the drive for social equality and greater access to higher education” (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 1). Educating the workforce and providing equitable and accessible education are needs seen by non-traditional students as they attempt to enter or re-enter the workforce and balance familial and educational obligations.

In 1940, universities with enrollments of 150 students or less transitioned into junior colleges to act as extensions of what is now known as secondary education (Cohen et al., 2014; Drury, 2003; Trainor, 2015)). Junior colleges intended to accommodate the two transitional years between secondary school and the junior and senior year at a university (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Drury, 2003; Trainor, 2015). Eventually, greater demands came from society which required more access to “schools of business, forestry, journalism, and social work” as well as agricultural and teacher trainings (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 2). Schools were expected to solve these demands which caused colleges and universities to turn to junior colleges which eventually expanded their offerings to accommodate the higher demands of programs. Community colleges “thrived on the new responsibilities because they had no traditions to defend, no alumni to question their roles, no autonomous professional staff to be moved aside, not statements of philosophy that would militate against their taking on responsibility for everything” (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 3). Because of the call for assistance and the lack of historical roots, community colleges were able to take on newer responsibilities to provide the type of training that was demanded by the surrounding population, thus, making community colleges much more accessible, affordable, and practical for the everyday person, including non-traditional students such as student veterans.

According the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017), 69.7 percent of high school graduates enter a postsecondary institution immediately following graduation. According to Cohen et al. (2014), 30% of high school graduates enroll at a community college and that number will continue to rise (Chen, 2017). In terms of curricular functions, most state legislation included the duties of transfer preparation to a four-year college or university, vocational training and

preparation, continuing education, developmental education, and forms of community services for community colleges (Cohen et al., 2014; Drury, 2003; Trainor, 2015). The new distinction between community colleges and the original junior college, which provided two additional years of high school, to what we see today, with the aforementioned services, are what attract non-traditional students such as student veterans. There is a wide variety of offerings to help student veterans reach their educational or occupational goals. As of February 2017 there are 982 public community colleges meeting the needs of the communities they serve (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018).

Evolution of the Community College

According to Morrison (1995), there are critical trends and events that are changing the structure of community colleges. Some major trends identified in a workshop conducted by Morrison (1995) were increasing loss in high paying jobs, increasing need for alternative systems of instructional delivery, scheduling, and distance learning. These trends are particularly important because they tie very closely into “consumer behavior” which will be discussed in a later section. These are some of the very reasons as to why students choose community colleges over the four-year college or university (Niu & Tienda, 2008).

Harper College

Harper College is a community college located in Palatine, Illinois, a suburb of Cook County, with a population of approximately 68,557 (Suburban Stats, 2016). With eight degree types and over forty certificate programs (Harper College, 2016c), Harper had a full-time

equivalent enrollment of 13,749 (Coy, 2017). As of Fall 2017, Harper College employed 1,481 faculty, staff, and administrative personnel (Coy, 2017).

Harper College proudly stands behind its institutional mission, vision, and values, which revolve heavily around student success and community partnerships. The mission of the institution is that “Harper College enriches its diverse communities by providing quality, affordable, and accessible education. Harper College, in collaboration with its partners, inspires the transformation of individual lives, the workforce, and society” (Harper College, 2016b, para. 1). In conjunction with the mission, the institutional vision continues to express the commitment to student success by being, “committed to academic integrity and excellence, Harper College will be a leader in teaching and learning, transforming lives by responding to the needs of the individual and the community” (Harper College, 2016b, para. 2). Continuing to build off the mission and vision, the institutional values reflect the idea of excellence. Harper’s institutional values are integrity, respect, excellence, and collaboration. Overall, Harper’s institutional brand holds community partnerships and academic excellence as their driving forces (Harper College, 2016b).

Strategic issue

Three of the five goals listed in Harper’s 2016-2019 strategic plan are student experience, curriculum and instruction, and stewardship. These goals all connect in some way to student success and completion (Harper College, 2016a). One of the strategic issues that Harper focuses on is student completion. A population that is beginning to gain traction is military-connected students. Military-connected students include veterans, reservists, activated military personnel, National Guard personnel and dependents. Nationally, this group has been

placed in the spotlight due to the continued return of military personnel from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and the implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill which supplies students with tuition and fee coverage as well as a housing allowance and book stipend (Fulton & Sponsler, 2015). In alignment with the Department of Veterans Affairs, Harper is interested in understanding the completion rate of the military-connected student (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016a; Wagner, Cave, & Winston, 2013).

The strategic issue Harper College faces is increasing the number of conferred credentials (i.e., degree and/or certificate) by military-connected students. This issue requires a holistic perspective as military-connected students have unique needs and circumstances, which influence their ability to thrive academically (Sportsman & Thomas, 2015). Military-connected students are often dependent on the financial support from their GI Bill, this means that Harper's Office of Student Financial Assistance must be involved to ensure all benefits are claims are reported to the Department of Veterans Affairs in a timely manner to prevent delay in student compensation. Areas such as the Center for New Students and Academic Advising and Counseling Services must be well informed on the intricacies of the various GI Bills in order to advise students to maintain their educational benefit eligibility. Military-connected students must also feel comfortable in their learning environments, this means that staff and faculty members must be aware of the needs of military-connected students in order to provide environments conducive to learning.

Currently, Harper has a team of dedicated staff members from various departments on campus, which come together to brainstorm ways to improve the college experience for all military-connected students. Unfortunately, the downfall is that there is not a dedicated

department, which can oversee the support and success of this student population.

Strategically, the institution should have a dedicated department to oversee initiatives and cross-campus trainings to assist in the academic success and, ultimately, the completion of a degree and/or certificate program to transfer or begin a career.

Student Veterans

Student veterans, which is the population sampled for this study, have played an important role in the changes to policies, practices, and cultures at postsecondary institutions since the mid-1940s after the creation of the first GI Bill program (Berman, 2015; Dougherty, 2015; Kapell, Boersma, DeVita, & Parker 2017). With recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the establishment of the Post 9/11 GI program, postsecondary institutions are beginning to place more attention on the challenges and concerns associated with the largest influx of student veterans into American higher education since the Vietnam War era (Berman, 2015; Dougherty, 2015; Kapell et al., 2017; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Postsecondary institutions will continue to see a large number of veterans enrolling in their programs due to the availability of the most recent GI Bill, the Post 9/11 GI Bill, and the continuous need for advanced degrees in a competitive economy. With a significant influx in student veteran enrollment, institutions realize the importance for faculty, staff, and administrators to have a holistic understanding of, and the ability to meet the needs of, their veteran population (Cate & Albright, 2015; Hayden, Ledwith, Dong, & Buzzetta, 2014; Jones, 2013).

Veterans attribute location as one of the greatest factors when picking an institution of higher education (Radford, 2009). It is important for veterans to be in close proximity to their

jobs, families, and other obligations (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe, 1986). This factor is what leads just over 43% of all veterans to enroll at public community colleges (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Approximately 89% of all enrolled veterans report that they are pursuing a baccalaureate degree; one can assume that many of the student veterans attending community colleges eventually transfer to a four-year university or college to advance their education (Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

Historical context

For 72 years, institutions of higher education have seen an increase in student veterans enrolling in degree and certificate programs (Berman, 2015; Dougherty, 2015; Jones, 2013; Kapell et al., 2017). This increase came from the passage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (Berman, 2015; Dougherty, 2015; Jones, 2013). As veterans continued to request admissions to colleges and universities across the United States, institutions must be prepared for the challenge of meeting the diverse needs of veterans returning from war. With the expectation of an additional 2 million veterans to utilize the GI Bill by 2020, research has begun emerging offering insight on how to support the persistence and completion of this unique group (Jones, 2013).

Servicemen's Readjustment Act

In 1944, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act passed with the intention of easing the transition of World War II veterans in to civilian life. The Act proposed three benefits to returning veterans: a loan from the Veterans Administration for the purchase of a house, unemployed veterans could take advantage of a \$20 per week stipend, and the ability to have

tuition and living expenses paid while veterans received job training or a postsecondary education (G.I. Bill, 2010). The American Legion later dubbed the Act the “GI Bill.” The GI Bill came about due to concern for lack of employment opportunities for returning veterans and to avoid a repeat of the, alleged, disregard for returning World War I veterans who were not warmly welcomed home upon their return (Forest & Kinser, 2002).

The enactment of the GI Bill caused an enrollment boom at postsecondary institutions and created a culture shift on campuses with more traditional student populations. Estimates expected 150,000 to 1 million veterans to take advantage of the GI Bill benefit. In actuality, approximately 2.2 million veterans entered postsecondary institutions and 5.5 million took advantage of the non-educational benefits. Colleges and universities saw a 50 percent increase in enrollment and, as of 1947, 49 percent of all enrollments were made up of veterans. Due to booming enrollments, institutions faced the challenge to create more learning environments and living spaces. The days of involved leadership shifted to leaders acting as managers and postsecondary institutions became more bureaucratic (Forest & Kinser, 2002).

Not only did institutional practices change, but campus demographics also changed. Veterans returning to colleges and universities were older, more experienced, and often came with families. Campuses that historically met the needs of “traditional” students then faced the challenge to evolve with the changing student body. Policies that acted as parental guidance to younger students were no longer applicable to the adult students on campus. Institutions often governed interactions between the sexes with strict moral codes. These codes, however, began dissolving as married veterans began enrolling at these institutions of higher learning.

Campuses began integrating as African American veterans began taking advantage of their GI Bill (Forest & Kinser, 2002).

The passage of the GI Bill impacted postsecondary institutions in several ways including: who should go to college, how higher education was paid for, and the role the federal government played in higher education. These changes are still affecting present-day higher education as veterans continue to use the GI Bill and return to postsecondary institutions. While campus structures and immediate policy changes were addressed as veterans stepped on campuses, institutions continue to be ill-prepared to meet the academic, emotional, and transitional needs of veterans on campus (Forest & Kinser, 2002).

In 2008, the creation of the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act intended to provide educational assistance to those that served with the U.S. military after the September 11, 2001 attacks (Wagner et al., 2013). Throughout fiscal year 2015, 1,016,664 benefitted from veterans' educational assistance programs, of which, 790,507 participated in the Post 9/11 GI Bill program (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016a). This population represents approximately 5.1 percent of the Department of Education's projected enrollment, of 19.9 million, for the 2014-2015 academic year (United States Department of Education, 2006). Despite 74 years of increased veteran presence on college and university campuses, many institutions are still ill-equipped to meet the unique needs of this student population leading to challenges in persistence and completion. While, research shows, more concerted efforts are being made to understand the complexities of the veteran population, it also shows that institutions are unprepared to assist with topics such as: identity development, academic

support services, career intervention, and transitional supports (Cleary & Wozniak, 2013; Hayden et al., 2014; Jones, 2013; & Sportsman & Thomas, 2015).

Student veteran needs

Student veterans step on to college campuses with a wealth of knowledge, experience, and educational and social needs. Because of the unique nature of student veterans, campuses often find themselves without the experience or resources needed to assist veterans with their emotional, academic, and transitional successes. The support of student veterans is crucial to their ability to complete a credential and, ultimately, emerge in to the workforce as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 intended. As postsecondary institutions attempt to understand the characteristics of a continuously growing population, research shows that there is still much progress needed (Alexander, 2016; Kirchner, 2015).

Student veteran identity development

In a study conducted by Jones (2013), three veteran college students underwent in-depth interviews to determine how they have attempted to create their post-service identity on campus. Jones (2013) hopes to use his findings to enhance campus support and resources available to student veterans. Throughout the interviews, Jones (2013) learned that veterans look for ways to distinguish their military identity from their civilian self. While they look for opportunities to incorporate their experiences in the classroom, many found it important to draw identity distinctions to better acclimate to civilian life.

After reviewing the information, Jones (2013) identified three prominent themes: "the process of adapting a civilian identity, higher education's role in the civilian acculturation

process, and the need for comprehensive services for student veterans” (p. 11). Throughout this study, Jones (2013) identifies that veterans transitioning to higher education are also simultaneously transitioning in to new personal relationships, work, and home environments. While society views postsecondary institutions as learning havens, educators must also understand the outside factors playing a role in a veteran’s ability to succeed. The participants identified ways in which higher education can assist in the acculturation process. Some suggestions include veteran-specific personnel in areas such as admissions, financial aid, and student affairs to provide guidance on military-specific topics. As more research emerges, institutional administrators and educators must incorporate curricular and co-curricular opportunities to guide student veterans as they transition in to civilian life.

Academic support services

Along with identity development needs, veterans have expressed a need for greater academic support services (Cleary & Wozniak, 2013). Many of the supports requested mirror those of other non-traditional student populations (e.g., adult learners, students with families, students working full-time, etc.). In a study conducted by Cleary and Wozniak (2013), it was determined that veterans and non-traditional students experience many of the same obstacles and display similar needs. Cleary and Wozniak (2013) found that the distinction between veterans and non-traditional students can often hinders a veteran’s ability to transition in to their new civilian identity. By familiarizing oneself with the six principles outlined by Malcolm Knowles (need to know, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, motivated, self-direction, and experienced), one would find that veterans and non-traditional students benefit from the

same level of service and are seeking out resources that are beneficial to the student's work and personal lives (Cleary & Wozniak, 2013).

While many institutions identify that veterans require specific resources and services, many overlook the idea that established services on campus assist non-traditional students just as well as veterans. While there is a need for specific support services to assist with veteran-related needs, many of the services on campuses simply need to be intentional about how it provides service to all non-traditional students. Rather than provide boutique-style services to non-traditional and veterans separately, institutions have the ability to improve non-traditional services which will encompass many veteran needs.

Career intervention

The intention of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 was to offer educational support to returning veterans, so they were able to enter the civilian workforce. To uphold that intention, veterans require supports for career preparedness. Hayden et al. (2014) agree that veterans require institutional career intervention services. Student veterans have voiced three major needs in terms of career preparedness: transitioning military experiences to civilian work, developing skills in resume-building and networking, and negotiating job offers (Hayden et al., 2014). There is a need for enhanced career-development support on college campuses due to the overwhelming number of unemployed veterans. Through survey, results suggest that student veterans are interested in group sessions and workshops to improve their career-development skills (Hayden et al., 2014). Hayden et al., suggest a four-week group session with a theoretical approach to career intervention. Sessions would cover communication, analysis/synthesis, valuation and execution, and ending with a debrief to the previous weeks.

Students would be encouraged to participate in groupthink processes and support each other as they work to improve their skills with trained professionals.

Transitional supports

As expected, student veterans require resources to assist in their transition back to civilian life as well as throughout their enrollment at a postsecondary institution. Without transitional support services, veterans have struggled to connect to their institution and benefit from the teachings on campus (Sportsman & Thomas, 2015). Research (Alexander, 2016; Kirchner, 2015; Murphy, 2011; O'Herrin, 2011) suggests that by understanding the transitional needs and challenges endured by veterans, the classroom will be more conducive to assisting the success of student veterans. Veterans seeking a postsecondary education endure three major transitional periods: transitioning to civilian life, transitioning to campus life, and transitioning to the classroom (Sportsman & Thomas, 2015).

The U.S. military allocates a large portion of resources to integrate civilians in to military personnel. At this time, only a fraction of military spending focuses on assisting personnel as they transition back to civilian life. Because of spending limitations, many veterans struggle to reintegrate back to a civilian life. Veterans often find that the life they knew before enlisting is not the same once they return, struggling to reintegrate in to friendships, relationships, and households. This transitional period can be overwhelming by itself, to then enroll in higher education and enter the classroom, employs its own challenges (Sportsman & Thomas, 2015).

Student veteran persistence

Overall, three types of support affect student persistence and completion: academic, financial, and institutional. A 294-student survey conducted by Metzger et al. (2015) determined which of the three supports play the largest role in student persistence. Metzger et al. (2015) determined that academic and institutional supports play the largest roles in student veteran's persistence and completion whereas financial assistance that causes a student to accrue debt, such as loans, negatively affects a student's ability to complete a credential. Organized and clear instruction provides structure in which veterans are accustomed to, leading to increased satisfaction and retention. The survey also determined that institutional identity and support is crucial to student veteran persistence (Metzger et al., 2015). When veterans find their purpose on campus, they report greater investment in their education.

Consumer Behavior

Howard-Sheth model

One of the first theories surrounding consumer behavior came from John A. Howard and Jagdish N. Sheth (1969). The Howard-Sheth Model was created in an attempt determine if there is a rationale to decision-making. As Howard and Sheth (1969) put it, "much [of] buying behavior is more or less repetitive, and the buyer establishes purchase cycles for various products which determine how often he will buy" (p. 467). The model was established on a thought that consumers have a rationale process when making a purchase, that process is repeatable, and results in an incentive to the consumer. "For some products such as durable appliances [the] cycle is often lengthy, and purchase is infrequent. For many other products such as food and personal-care items, the purchase cycle is short and purchase is frequent"

(Howard & Sheth, 1969, p. 467). In the case of college buyer behavior, one can assume the purchase cycle is closely aligned with that of a durable appliance. While creating this model, Howard and Sheth (1969) identified three main variables which affect buyer behavior: input variables, output variables, and external variables.

Input variables are stimuli that come from marketing activities and social environments surrounding the consumer. There are three variable stimuli: significant incentives (i.e., physical characteristics or attributes such as price and product quality), symbolic incentives (i.e., verbal or visual characteristics such as the reception of the product from the buyer, or in other words, how the product is marketed), and social stimuli (i.e., how the product is perceived by the consumer's social surroundings such as friends, family, etc.) (Howard & Sheth, 1969).

Output variables deal with brand perception. In other words, how the consumer perceives the product they are considering purchasing. Howard and Sheth (1969) created a hierarchy of output variables that consumers experience when considering making a purchase: attention, comprehension, cognition, intention, and purchase behavior. Attention is simply attracting the consumer to the brand. Comprehension deals with the amount of information gathered and stored regarding the product, or brand, by the consumer. Cognition is when the consumer begins to form an opinion of the product or brand. When the consumer is considering buying the product or brand they are showing his or her *intention*. And, finally, purchase behavior is when the consumer commits to purchasing the product or brand (Howard and Sheth, 1969).

The final category of variables are external variables. External variables are other variables outside from input and output variables such as: the value of the purchase to the

consumer, character traits of the consumer, membership in to a social group, the consumer's financial status, or the timeframe of the purchase. These are all variables that cannot be controlled by marketing or other external variables as they are non-controllable external variables specific to the individual consumer (Howard and Sheth, 1969).

In terms of brand choice, Howard and Sheth (1969) believed there were certain elements to the decision-making process: "a set of motives, several alternative courses of action, and decision mediators by which the motives are matches with the alternatives" (p. 467). Motives, when discussed in this model are "...specific to a product class and reflect the underlying needs of the buyer" (Howard & Sheth, 1969, p. 467). 'Alternatives' as discussed in this model are defined by three notions. The first notion is that what a consumer considers alternatives may not meet the category set out by the market. Howard and Sheth (1969) use a prime example when discussing beverages. The consumer may see coffee, a malt drink mix, and tea all as alternatives to beverage consumption even though the market would consider them to be three different types of beverages. The market, on the other hand, may only consider Starbucks Coffee, Biggby Coffee, and Dunkin Donuts as potential alternatives to a particular beverage purchase.

The second notion to alternatives is that a consumer is more likely to have a small pool of alternatives he or she chooses from. For example, there are 982 public community colleges around the United States (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018), but due to limited information and/or exposure the consumer is only aware of five or six surrounding community colleges; Howard and Sheth (1969) call this the "evoked set." The evoked set is

“only a fraction of the brands [the consumer] is aware of, and still a smaller fraction of the total number of brands actually on the market” (Howard & Sheth, 1969, p. 468).

The third notion is that “any two consumers may have quite different alternatives in their evoked sets” (Howard & Sheth, 1969, p. 468). This notion makes it particularly difficult when marketing to consumers. Brands marketing to consumers have no idea where they stand when consumers are in the intention portion of the decision-making hierarchy as mentioned above.

Howard and Sheth (1969) also outline ‘decision mediators’ which are “the set of rules that the buyer employs to match his motives and his means to satisfying those motives” (p. 468). Consumers often create a list of desires and a list of realities, such as when selecting a college to attend. The consumer may desire to attend a Big Ten university, however, in reality may only be able to afford a community college at the time of making his or her purchase.

Before the consumer may be able to create that list of desires and realities, he or she may first need help creating those decision mediators. For that, Howard and Sheth (1969) predict that consumers will actively seek information from his or her social environments. Howard and Sheth (1969) say that “the information he actively seeks, or accidentally receives [from the social environment], is subjected to perceptual processes, which not only limit[s] his intake of information (magnitude of information) but modify it to suit his frame of reference (quality of information is affected)” (p. 468). Past experience may also be used to generalize products or brands based on similarities or dissimilarities but come from a brand name. The example used to highlight what similarities may look like is that of a first-time whisky purchase: “the buyer may generalize from his experiences in buying [whisky] in buying gin” (Howard &

Sheth, 1969, p. 468). Dissimilarities, as used as an example by Howard and Sheth (1969) is generalizing “from his experience in buying a refrigerator or range to his first purchase of a dishwasher” (p. 468).

This model is particularly fundamental because it is used as the foundation for consumer behavior research that takes place following 1969. Some of this research to follow.

College brand

According to Stephenson, Heckert, & Yerger (2016), “Branding in higher education has become increasingly used as a mechanism of differentiation among competitors to attract prospective students” (p. 489). Brand is an important factor in purchasing behavior, this was made evident in the section about the Howard-Sheth model of 1969. Brand is also becoming popular in higher education to attract prospective students to postsecondary institutions. While this is becoming a more common practice within higher education, there is very little research to evaluate how prospective students choose his or her respective institution.

With 6,800 institutions of higher education, 982 of those being public community colleges, around the United States (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2012) and a nationwide decrease in high school graduates (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), postsecondary institutions within higher education have entered a competitive environment to attract prospective students. According to Stephenson et al. (2016), branding practices have increased significantly within the last two decades, this makes sense considering the number of institutions available versus the number of prospective students. Branding allows an institution to differentiate itself from competitors (e.g., The Ohio State University has created a brand by adding “The” to their name, this signifies they are the

only Ohio State University making it seem more desirable) (Chapleo, 2010; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2008).

University branding is used as an identifier (Balmer & Gray, 2003; Laidler-Kylander, Quelch, & Simonin, 2007), promotes the prestige of the institution (Chapleo, 2011; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2008), and “functions as a stamp of excellence” (Stephenson et al., 2016, p. 490).

Branding also affords a consumer access to a social environment which is considered a social stimulus in the internal variables outlined by Howard and Sheth (1969). With a brand associated to an institution it “maintains a variety of services and products that bear its brand and serves a variety of customers and other stakeholders for whom the brand is meaningful” (McAlexander, Koeing, Schouten, 2004, p. 62). Researchers believe that prospective students are in tune with institutional brands and compare them against their sample of schools which adds an additional level of consideration when experiencing purchasing behavior (Curtis, Abratt, & Minor, 2009; Moogan, Baron, & Bainbridge, 2001). Curtis et al. (2009) note that institutions such as Oxford, Cambridge, and Harvard have distinctive reputations sewn tightly to their brands so that prospective students and their families understand the type of education that can be expected. Stephenson et al. (2016) stress: “As with consumer goods market, student and their families must navigate the numerous university brands in an effort to make the best choice for their needs” (p. 490). Branding, like so many other variables, acts as a decision mediator as noted in the Howard-Sheth model from 1969.

College choice

With the expansion of postsecondary education and the ability to better assess institutional quality with the help of materials such as College Board, U.S. News & World

Report, etc. college recruitment and acceptance are becoming increasingly more competitive (Lipman Hearne, 2006; McDonough, 1994). In an environment of readily available ranking systems and “best-of” lists, students now have more power than ever over where they choose to enroll. Choices to select a postsecondary institution come in a number of reasons: post-graduation returns (Hossler et al., 1989; Hoxby, 2001) and access to selective institutions (Alon & Tienda, 2006). Additionally, university brands, majors, price, size, and location all ranked as important factors when choosing an institution of higher learning (Stephenson et al., 2015).

In a study conducted by Moogan et al. (1999), the authors researched decision-making behaviors of students attempting to enroll in postsecondary institutions. For the purpose of this study, Moogan et al. (1999) consider students as “consumers” as they are in the market for investing in their education much as consumers are when making a purchase. As the authors indicate that students cannot “test drive” higher education, the first instinct is to reach out to friends and family to, essentially, seek reviews of various institutions of familiarity. This is similar to consumers that search the reviews of products before making a purchase. “The acquisition of word of mouth information acts as a risk reducing strategy for those embarking on higher education, which by its nature requires a great deal of involvement with the student as consumer” (Moogan et al., 1999, p. 213).

Gabbott and Hogg (1998), summarize three types of consumers: cognitive, learning, and experiential. Higher education is most concerned with cognitive consumers because this population is more inclined to organize and practically solve the buyer issue which is that of “purchasing” a postsecondary institution. Cognitive consumers “collect information (via prospectuses/hand-books, the Internet) to quantify (ask teachers/parents, attend open-days)

and the possible benefits linked with the alternatives present and then make a well-balanced decision” (Moogan et al., 1999, pp. 213-214). The cognitive consumer is what this study hopes to find when collecting the data to determine why the participant chose to enroll at Harper College.

Gorman (1976) establishes the concept of uncontrollable and controllable factors when choosing a postsecondary institution. Uncontrollable factors are those such as location. Controllable factors, on the other hand, are factors such as academic reputation. Krone, Gilly, Zeithaml, and Lamb (1981) claim the most important criteria students use to make a decision on a postsecondary institution is that of career prospects. Meaning, where can the student achieve his or her degree to reach their career aspirations. Welki and Navratil (1987) on the other hand determined that cost, financial assistance, location, and academic programs (to name a few) were the largest influencers when choosing an institution of higher education.

According to Niu and Tienda (2008) (as well as Hearn, 1984; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler et al., 1999; Lipman Hearne, 2006; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983), there are two general approaches to understanding college decision-making. The first focuses on “how students aspiring to postsecondary education develop a college choice set, decide where to apply, and conditional on admission, make their enrollment decisions” (p. 417). The second set of research focuses on how institutional characteristics such as geography, size, cost, academic programs, etc. influence decision-making processes (Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Lipman Hearne, 2006; Long, 2004; Manski & Wise, 1983; Montgomery, 2002; Niu et al., 2006). Niu and Tienda (2008) explore two avenues of thought, that students consider every possible postsecondary institution (Long, 2004; Niu et al., 2006), or

they select institutions based on who they believe will grant admissions (Montgomery, 2002).

Niu and Tienda (2008) express that there is absolutely no way for a student to consider all postsecondary institutions, however, any combination of institutions is possible.

Expounding upon the concept above, Naryana and Markin (1975) build off the work of Howard and Sheth (1969) who presented one of the first theories of consumer behavior. Naryana and Markin (1975) created the concept of the inert and inept sets. This can be explained as follows: there is a total set; that is to say, the total number of brands within a category. Within the total set, there are awareness sets and unawareness sets. The groups that fall within the unawareness set are those of which there is no chance of selecting or choosing. Naryana and Markin (1975) created three subcategories of the awareness group: the consideration set, the inert set, and inept set. The consideration set, include subjects (e.g., postsecondary institutions) that rated positively by the buyer (i.e., the student). The inert set are those subjects that rated neutrally, and the inept set are the rejected subjects. The concepts proposed by Howard and Sheth (1969), Naryana and Markin (1975), and Niu and Tienda (2006) all suggest there is some form of ranking system orchestrated by the mind of the consumer (i.e., the student). While there is very little current research specific to decision-making when selecting a postsecondary institution, the foundation provided by Howard and Sheth (1969), Naryana and Markin (1975), and Niu and Tienda (2006) all suggest that there are certain categories and subcategories that are weighed by the student when determining the college or university of best fit.

Summary

Chapter 2 contains a review of literature that expands upon community colleges; the evolution of the community college; student veterans and their unique needs; and decision-making theories. The Howard-Sheth (1969) model as well as the supporting research that came after the creation of this model will be crucial when analyzing the data to determine if the decision-making processes of the participant population follow the same processes outlined throughout this chapter. There is little-to-no research which weaves these topics together and they stand independent of one another. The purpose of this study is to find ways to connect these independent pieces and to better understand a certain population's decision-making processes when it comes to enrolling at a community college.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

To accomplish the outcome of this study, the researcher chose to pursue a qualitative research paradigm. While useful, the researcher did not feel as though a quantitative approach would produce the type of information necessary to address the proposed research questions. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explain, quantitative research assists in determining a relationship (e.g., cause and effect), whereas qualitative research dives deeper in to the meaning of the phenomenon at hand. Philosophically, there are influences that drive qualitative research (e.g., positivism, interpretive, critical) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Patton (2002) writes about the post-positivism influence and how it “recognizes that knowledge is relative rather than absolute, but it is possible, using empirical evidence, to distinguish between more and less plausible claims” (p. 93). This is relevant to the purpose of this study because the researcher chose to conduct interviews as well as qualitative surveys for the data collection process. It is important to recognize that each participant has his or her own knowledge, perceptions, and recollections of reality and that by the end of the research process, the conclusion made by the researcher are not be absolute. The conclusion will come from individual interpretations of questions and perceptions of reality. Ideally, the information gathered will be of use for institutions outside of Harper College, however, the data analysis does not necessarily hold true for populations outside of the institution of interest.

While this research may benefit from a quantitative research model to determine if there was a cause/effect relationship which drove a veteran to enroll at Harper College, for this particular study, the researcher was more concerned with the “why” associated with the phenomenon of enrolling. Qualitative research is best suited to focus on a smaller population while investigating deeper in to the perceived reality of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Methodology

Following the identification of a paradigm, the researcher selected an appropriate methodology to conduct the data collection process. For this particular study, qualitative surveys and interviews appeared to be the most appropriate data collection tools. According to Groves et al. (2004), “The [qualitative] survey is a systematic method for gathering information from (a sample of) entities for the purpose of constructing quantitative descriptors of the attributes of the larger population of which the entities are members” (p. 4). The researcher used qualitative surveys, as defined by Groves et al. (2004), to systematically collect information about the larger student veteran population enrolled at Harper College. The data collected was then used as the foundation for constructing interview questions for a smaller sample of participants. The purpose of the survey was to obtain data surrounding a set population (i.e., all veterans, age 30 or older, and enrolled at Harper College). Fink (2003) recommends using qualitative surveys to explore meanings and experiences rather than aiming to establish frequencies, means, etc., as quantitative surveys tend to accomplish. By identifying

collective experiences and making meaning of those experiences, the researcher expounded on the data collected via qualitative surveys and established richer interview questions.

Once an analysis of the survey data was completed, voluntary members of the survey population participated in an interview to provide additional information about the decision-making process to better identify commonalities within the population. Yin (2008) describes a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (p. 18). As with surveys, the interviews intended to search for meaning and understanding of a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The researcher searched for commonalities among participants to make meaning of why veterans, age 30 or older, were choosing to enroll at Harper College.

Sample selection

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) address two types of sampling: probability and nonprobability. Because this was a qualitative study, their recommendation was to conduct a nonprobability sample selection. Nonprobability sampling is “logical as long as the fieldworker expects mainly to use his data not to answer questions like ‘how much’ and ‘how often’ but to solve qualitative problems, such as discovering what occurs, the implications of what occurs, and the relationships linking occurrences” (Honigmann, 1982, p. 84). Nonprobability sampling, per Laerd Dissertation (2012), in qualitative research

represents a group of sampling techniques that help researchers to select units from a population that they are interested in studying. Collectively, these units form the sample that the researcher studies. A core characteristic of non-probability sampling techniques is that samples are selected based on the subjective judgement of the researcher, rather than random selection (i.e., probabilistic methods), which is the cornerstone of probability sampling techniques. (para 1)

The nature of this study was to identify trends, to determine why a certain phenomenon occurred (i.e., why veterans age 30 or older enroll at Harper College).

To further expound on the nonprobabilistic sampling method, the sampling must be purposeful. In purposeful sampling, the researcher attempted to uncover, discover, or investigate, a particular phenomenon. In this study, the purpose of the research was to discover or identify trends or choices made by the participant population. As Patton (2015) argues, the concept of purposeful sampling “derive[s] from the emphasis on in-depth understanding of specific cases: *information-rich* cases. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (p. 53).

To identify the ‘why’ of the phenomenon (i.e., why veterans age 30 or older enroll at Harper College), participant selection underwent a two-tier sampling approach. The two-tiered criteria approach was useful in selecting participants for the web-based survey and then an additional set of criteria were created for individuals participating in the interview process. The purpose of creating a two-tiered approach was to cast a broad net with the surveys in order to collect demographic information and identify general trends and then narrow the selection criteria to hone in on specific characteristics when conducting the interviews.

To provide generalized data from the selected population, the selection criteria for the web-based survey participant pool came from a maximum variation sampling. Per Merriam and Tisdell (2015), a maximum variation sampling approach “identif[ies] and seek[s] out those who represent the widest possible range of the characteristics of interest for the study” (p. 98). Maximum variation allowed for representation of a wide range of demographics, military branches, etc. throughout the study, which gave a more generalized view of the sample

population. To cast this wide net, very little screening of the student population took place before the release of the survey. There were two criteria used for participant elimination which were the removal of any individual that did not identify as a veteran of the military and/or fell within the age 29 or younger population. By limiting the elimination criteria, the hope was to gain insight from students of all demographic, geographic, and military affiliation and then narrow the scope for the individual interviews. This approach allowed for interpretation of the data in such a way that generalized the population and provided data to better direct the questions for the individual interviews.

In addition to maximum variation, interviews took place under a convenience sampling approach. Convenience sampling, as stated by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) selects participants based on “time, money, location, availability of sites or respondents” (p. 98). At the conclusion of the web-based survey, respondents indicated if he or she would like to participate in one-on-one interviews to expound on the information provided in the survey. While Merriam and Tisdell (2015) indicate that selection based entirely on convenience can lead to poor data, the maximum variation approach within the survey component assisted in combating this occurrence. The participants selected for the interview process came from those that voluntarily responded to the inquiry at the end of the web-based survey. The participants for the interview process came by way of availability and a willingness of the respondents, however they had already undergone a vetting process through maximum variation.

Sampling size was the next logical criteria to consider after establishing the sampling criteria. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend sampling until the data retrieved becomes redundant: “If the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated when no

new information is forthcoming from new sampled units; thus redundancy is the primary criterion” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202). In addition to this philosophy from Lincoln and Guba (1985), Patton (2015) also suggests creating a minimum number of respondents, as it can be difficult to identify the maximum number of participants needed before redundancy hits. Keeping guidelines from Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Patton (2015) in mind, the purpose of this study was to gain knowledge regarding how decisions formulate within a particular group. Within the group of veterans age 30 or older were sub-groups such as age groupings (e.g., 30-40, 41-50, 51 and older), military branches (e.g., Army, Marine Corp., etc.), gender identification (e.g., male, female, etc.), and more. To best tell the story of the selected population, the data attempted to represent at least one member of each sub-group. Population makeup and participant responses limited the ability to provide representation of all sub-groups (e.g., no women age 51 or older enrolled at Harper College), however, the selection process made a best-attempt effort to represent the general population of veterans age 30 or older at Harper College.

Overall, the population studied consisted of Harper College student veterans age 30 years of age or older enrolled during the Spring 2018 semester. A two-tiered, purposeful, non-probable sampling method assisted in identifying and selecting participants for both methods of data collection (i.e., web-based survey and interviews). To better generalize the data received from the web-based survey, the selection process consisted of a maximum variation methodology. Based on participant feedback, a convenience sampling assisted in selecting samples for the second stage of data collection (i.e., interviews). Sample size and selected participants were dependent on the population available at Harper College during the data

collection process. This limitation may have prevented a more information-rich study, however, the data collected and interpreted from the participants reflects the reality of the student population at the time of the study.

Data Collection Methods

Survey

The first method of data collection was a web-based survey. According to Groves et al. (2004), “The [qualitative] survey is a systematic method for gathering information from (a sample of) entities for the purpose of constructing quantitative descriptors of the attributes of the larger population of which the entities are members” (p. 4). The web-based survey was a useful tool in gathering a large sample of data in a relatively simplistic way. Once created through the online service FreeOnlineSurveys.com, the student veteran population at Harper received a web link containing the survey questions via their student email. The FreeOnlineSurveys account is only accessible by the researcher to prevent potential breaches of data. This method allowed for a systematic collection of a variety of demographic, personal, and military-service information, which assisted with creating questions for individual interviews.

Additionally, Fink (2003) recommends using qualitative surveys to explore meanings and experiences rather than aiming to establish frequencies, means, etc., as quantitative surveys tend to accomplish. Because this was a qualitative study, surveying experiences of students aligned better with the purpose of a qualitative paradigm. Ideally, the survey results would provide insight into the initial experiences and decisions made by the sample participants,

however, the survey was not intended to gather all experiential data. The survey results were used in developing the questions used in individual interviews.

Interviews

In addition to a web-based survey, semi-structured, person-to-person interviews took place. A semi-structured interview, as defined by Evaluation Toolbox (2010), is "...a qualitative method of inquiry that combines a predetermined set of open questions (questions that prompt discussion) with the opportunity for the interviewer to explore particular themes or responses further" (para 1). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) indicate, "Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them", (p. 108). This was true for this study because the participants had already enrolled at Harper College. It would be nearly impossible to have observed each participant throughout any point of the decision-to-enroll process for all behaviors, feelings, and/or interpretation. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) also state, "It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate" (p. 108). It would be impossible to authentically replicate the decision-to-enroll process of any of the participants. Because of this, the research involved interviews, which allowed participants to recall the decision-making process to enroll at Harper College.

An outline of the rationale for choosing semistructured, person-to-person interviews is below. Person-to-person interviews, as defined by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) are interviews in which "one person elicits information from another" (p. 108). In this case, the researcher attempted to collect information (i.e., personal recollections) from the student veteran participant. A semistructured approach was best for this study because it allowed for an open-

ended format. The purpose of incorporating a semistructured interview process rather than a structured process was because it allowed the participant to discuss items that fell outside of the scope of the interview and the researcher would not be required to stay strict to the interview script. Ideally, this produced more authentic results and provided depth beyond what was initially intended with the set of predetermined questions.

Data Analysis Process

For this study, the analysis process consisted of five steps: reviewing data as they were collected, construction and naming of categories, sorting of categories, and managing the data. The paragraphs below will delve into the specifics of these processes.

Data Review

During the survey and interview process, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) recommend reviewing the data as they come in. This means, after each completed survey or interview, analysis of the results took place in order to assign a student pseudonym and create a coding system (described later) to better chart the data within a safeguarded database. This step assisted with time management and created less of a burden on the researcher. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) recommend this method because, “This basic organization is easy to overlook, because at the time you are collecting data, you will feel there is no way you could ever forget where and when an incident took place or the characteristics of the person you just interviewed” (p. 199). Additionally, this process assisted in the creation of categories or themes to explore further and directed future data collection (e.g., information gathered in the survey process influenced the questions for the interviews).

Construction and naming of categories

To best understand what needed analyzing, there were data categories set in place. Categories, as defined by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) are “conceptual elements that ‘cover’ or span many individual examples (or bits or units of the data you previously identified) of the category” (p. 206). Identification of categories came from “patterns or recurring regularities” within the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 206). The categories identified assisted with creating a system to use when it came time to code the data. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) indicate that it may be helpful to be broad at this point of the analysis process. The reason for this broad construction is that the researcher was not fully aware of the information available, as the data review process would happen in the sequence it was obtained. What this means is that there was a large “bowl” of data that was eventually funneled in to various themes or patterns; the researcher first looked at the larger picture before she was able to construct smaller “buckets” to place the pieces of data in to. Some examples of foreseeable categories and sub-categories, based on the researcher’s experience, were:

1. Categories:
 - a. Gender, age, branch of service, length of service, location of enlistment, service-related disability, etc.
2. Sub-categories categories for returning to school:
 - a. Poor economic growth in current career field
 - b. Injury due to military experience prevented career opportunities
 - c. Extended length of military experience
 - d. Career change — no economic factor

This section of the analysis process was a metaphorical “conversation” with the data.

Constructing categories was the time for the interpretation of the data to identify what needed

analysis and ultimately what would become of the conclusion of the study. Following this portion of the analysis process, sorting of the categories took place.

Sorting categories (coding)

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) indicate “as you go along, assigning *codes* or themes or category names to your data, you should be compiling these in a separate memo, retaining those that seem to apply more than one interview or set of field notes” (p. 208). In creating codes, the data was more manageable to sort and organize. A code is “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 3.). This study needed codes for the survey and interview portions of the study to better “access them as needed in both the analysis and the write-up of [the] findings” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 199). Merriam and Muhamad (2013), used a coding system for interviews and assigned descriptors such as a participant pseudonym as well as, “location (rural, urban), age, gender, years in practice, and type of practice (traditional healers or Islamic or Koranic healers)” in a Malaysian cancer treatment study. A coding system within the interview portion of the study posed useful for “tracking of thoughts, musings, speculations, and hunches for data analysis” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 200).

The survey portion of the study used an analytical portion of the Free Online Surveys website to assist with coding. This assisted with assigning numeric values to responses to create visual data such as correlations, not in the statistical sense, ratios, percentages, etc. These visual aids assist readers in better understanding the demographic data obtained through the

surveys. This also assisted with the identification of categories and questions for the interview portion of the study.

Protocols & Rationale

There are risks associated with any form of data collection. In order to protect the integrity of the study and support the anonymity of the participants, the data collection process involved protocols. Protocols assisted in identifying how data collection and storage took place throughout the study. When assessing risk in a study with participants, Arwood and Panicker (2016), indicate, “there are two distinct elements of risk that must be considered” (p. 3). The first element is the probability of harm or the likelihood harm will occur, the second is, should harm occur, the severity of that risk to the participant. Arwood and Panicker (2016) also make a point to mention the distinction between risk of harm and the subject population. An example used is the type of risk associated with a survey about sexually transmitted diseases and how this would hold differing level of risks for different populations such as: middle class suburban men, clergy, and gang members. The same is to say that if non-military or non-veterans took the survey and participated in the interview portion of this study, there would be different risks associated with the study.

In order to protect the integrity of the study and the participants, there were protocols in place to manage the potential risks. Arwood and Panicker (2016) recommend the following:

- Remove all direct identifiers as soon as possible,
- Substitute codes for identifiers,
- Maintain code lists and data files in separate secure locations,

- Use accepted methods to protect against indirect identification, such as aggregate reporting or pseudonyms,
- Use and protect computer passwords,
- Encrypt transmitted and stored data,
- Access and store data on computers without internet connections, and
- Obtain a Certificate of Confidentiality. (p. 5)

By incorporating these safeguards, the participants had little risk of having personal information and responses exposed and/or connected to the individual participant. Eliminating personal identifiers and using pseudonyms protected the participants from content exposure; storing data on encrypted and password-protected equipment minimized the risk of a data breach, which may have corrupted the integrity of the research study as a whole. Incorporating these safeguards into this study were crucial in minimizing risk for harm to the participants and the data collection process.

Quality, Validity, Trustworthiness, & Ethics

One important aspect of creating this qualitative study was to ensure that the study itself consists of quality research. For this particular study, the determination of research quality followed the criteria presented by Lichtman (2013) and Tracy (2013). Lichtman (2013) established personal criteria to use when determining the quality of a qualitative research study. The study, based on Lichtman's criteria must show that the study is

1. Important,
2. Clear about how the study was done, and
3. Mak[es] a convincing presentation of the findings of the study. (p. 294)

For this study, the importance of the topic was due to there being little-to-no data available to determine *why* veterans age 30 or older were enrolling at community colleges. Many of the articles available were based on anecdotal information and did not focus on one particular age group of the veteran population. Additionally, this study may provide the Harper College admissions and marketing departments with data to attract adult veterans to participate in the offerings at the college. In terms of the clarity of how to perform the study, the data collection section outlines the processes of web-based surveys and individual interviews. The final criteria, presenting the findings of the study, came during the analysis portion of the study.

As previously discussed, Tracy (2013) also created criteria for determining quality research done in a qualitative setting. The study must

1. Be a worthy topic,
2. Conducted with rich rigor,
3. Sincere — that is transparency of methods,
4. Credible,
5. Research resonates with a variety of audiences,
6. Makes a significant contribution,
7. Attends to ethical considerations, and
8. That the study has meaningful coherence; that it “meaningfully interconnects literature, research, questions/foci, findings, and interpretations with each other.” (Tracy, 2013, p. 230)

Many of these areas overlap with the criteria created by Lichtman (2013). Because the two are so similar, this is why the study took the philosophical approaches from both Litchman (2013) and Tracy (2013) to ensure the study was of quality.

Validity, on the other hand, was more difficult to convey in a qualitative study.

Qualitative research does not have the same controls and components as quantitative studies.

For example, replication within quantitative studies is common with nearly identical outcomes.

With a qualitative study, replication can take place, but the outcomes will never be the same as the qualitative study is working with fluid components such as human experiences. Wolcott

(1994) argues the “absurdity of validity” (p. 364); instead, Wolcott (1994) recommends

searching for

something else, a quality that points more to identifying critical elements and winging plausible interpretations from them, something one can pursue without becoming obsessed with finding the right or ultimate answer, the correct version, the Truth. (pp. 366-367)

The nature of this study was not intended to find the absolute Truth of why veterans age 30 or older enroll at Harper College; the purpose was to find recurring trends that represent the population at the time of the study to use to recruit more adult veterans to the college.

Firestone (1987) states “The qualitative study provides the reader with a depiction in enough detail to show that the author’s conclusion ‘makes sense’” (p. 19). In contrast to quantitative studies, “...the qualitative study describes people acting in events” rather than “...portray[ing] a world of variables and static states” (Firestone, 1987, p. 19). This sense making took place during the data analysis portion of the study. The researcher analyzed the data in an unbiased fashion to make sense of the information collected similar to Firestone (1987). The analysis portion of the study was the time in the research to make sense of and interpret the data to create a sense of validity for the reader.

In terms of research trustworthiness, “Reliability is problematic in the social sciences simply because human behavior is never static, nor is what many experience necessarily more reliable than what one person experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 250). A

qualitative study will not yield the same results, but this does not discredit the results of any particular study; there can be numerous interpretations of the same data. The more important question for qualitative research is whether the results are consistent with the data collected. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, pp. 250-251)

The issue with creating quality, valid, trustworthy qualitative research is the fact that the phenomenon studied is reliant upon many moving pieces. Tracy (2013) states “because socially constructed understanding is always in process and necessarily partial, even if the study were repeated (by the same participants), the context and participants would have necessarily transformed over time — through aging, learning, or moving on” (p. 229). To best illustrate and combat the question of credibility within a qualitative study, one must *triangulate* the data. That is, as Wolcott (2005) says, increase “the correspondence between research and the real world” (p. 160). For the purpose of this study, two of four of Denzin’s (1978) forms of triangulation assisted with establishing the credibility of the study: the use of multiple methods and multiple sources of data.

The first method of triangulation is through multiple data collection methods. This took place through the web-based surveys, individual interviews, and documents or prior research regarding veterans and adult students. This allowed for a more holistic view of the results of the data as well as created more trust between the reader and the research. The second method was using multiple sources of data such as reviewing data retrieved from people with different perspectives. The web-based survey intended to gather information about participants, which

highlight age groups, gender, and military service. The participants involved in the interview process were selected on a voluntary basis, however, the researcher intended to choose participants that come from differing military branches, sexes (if possible), and age brackets to compile data that spans over a large range of demographics.

The final concept to consider when creating a qualitative research study is maintaining ethics. Patton (2015) created a twelve-item ethical issues checklist, which this study followed:

1. Explaining the purpose of the inquiry and methods to be used
 - a. Outlined in the paradigm and methodology sections.
2. Reciprocity (what is in it for the interviewee and issues of compensation)
 - a. Discussed in a disclaimer before taking the web-based survey and again before the interview process.
3. Promises
 - a. No promises made to participants other than the promise to safeguard the data collected to the best of the researcher's ability.
4. Risk assessment, confidentiality, informed consent, and data access and ownership
 - a. Outlined in the consent form to the participant.
5. Interviewer mental health
 - a. Determined by interviewer.
6. Ethical advice (who will be your counselor of ethical matters)
 - a. Dissertation chair acted as ethical counselor.
7. Data collection boundaries
 - a. Determined by the data collection process.
8. Ethical and methodological choices
 - a. Reviewed and decided upon with the dissertation chair.

9. Ethical versus legal

- a. Reviewed and decided upon with the dissertation chair.

Overall, the twelve-point checklist allowed the researcher to communicate the plan for maintaining an ethical stance throughout the research.

Summary

This chapter discussed the methods used to create and execute the two-part research process (i.e., the decisions that led up to choosing web-based surveys and individual interviews). The participant population was selected in a purposeful manner which allowed the researcher to focus on the student veterans age 30 or older enrolled at Harper College for the Spring 2018 semester. Chapter four will outline the research design, data collection processes, and an analysis of, both, the web-based survey and the individual interviews.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

The data outlined in this chapter reflect the experiences and realities of student veterans age 30 or older at Harper College during the Spring 2018 semester. The chapter will highlight the rationale for selecting the participant population, data collection process, the results from the web-based survey and individual interviews and will conclude with analysis of the data collected.

Population and Sample

This study was conducted at Harper College, a medium-sized metropolitan Midwest community college located in Palatine, Illinois. The number of enrolled students defines the size of a community college. In this case, a medium-sized community college has anywhere from 5,000 to 15,000 students (College Data, 2018). Harper College offers associate degrees, certificates, and workforce development training through non-credit continuing education programs (Coy, 2017). In the fall of 2017, the institution had an enrollment of 13,749 students, 4,882 took 12 credit hours or more and 8,867 took 11 credit hours or less (Coy, 2017). The institution is comprised of three large high school districts with an overall district population of 535,487 (Coy, 2017).

The population surveyed for this study consisted of self-identified veterans at this community college age 30 years or older. Of the 106 students who were selected to participate

in this study, 84 percent were male, and 16 percent were female. Of this population, 30 veterans responded to the web-based survey and 9 agreed to participate in a face-to-face interview with the researcher. While the researcher worked closely with the veteran and military-connected student population, their reasons for enrolling at the college were unknown. This site was chosen due to the researcher's familiarity with both the college and the student population.

Sampling Purpose

The use of qualitative research allowed for members of a particular population to describe their own unique stories in great detail. To appropriately study this population, nonprobability, purposeful sampling was used. This method allowed the researcher to understand the sample on a deeper level, thus gaining a richer insight in to the rationale veterans age 30 years or older have for enrolling at Harper College. Because of the use of this sampling method, specific criteria were created to systematically select the population studied.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) suggest that the participants in a study must meet each criterion as predetermined by the researcher. For the purpose of this study, the following criteria needed to have been met:

1. The subject must have been a self-identified veteran of the U.S. armed forces.
2. The subject must have been 30 years of age or older at the time of the data collection process.
3. The subject must have been enrolled for the Spring 2018 semester at Harper College.
4. The subject must be a willing participant in the study on a voluntary basis.

This rationale for selecting this population is based on observations at Harper College that the “traditional” age of a veteran to enroll at this institution is between the ages of 24 to 26. The reason for selecting the first criterion for this study is that the institution is unable to identify who is and is not a veteran without the veteran identifying themselves as one on their admissions application or through the use of veteran educational benefits (e.g., GI Bill). The second criterion was selected because the 30 or older veterans fall outside of the “traditional” age of enrolled veterans. The third was selected due to the time in which the research was taking place. The researcher did not feel it was appropriate to reach out to students that enrolled in prior semesters as they may no longer be at the institution. The final criterion was selected because subjects cannot be coerced or forced to participate in any study, thus the participation must have been voluntary. No incentives were provided to gain additional participation in this study.

Based on anecdotal information gathered from veterans at the institution between the years 2014 and 2017, traditionally, servicemembers enlist around the age of 18 (following high school graduation), serve for three to six years in order to qualify for educational benefits, and then separate from the military. Because of these observations and conversations with veterans, the researcher formulated the following research questions:

1. Why are veterans choosing to enroll at Harper College outside of the typical age range of 24-26?
2. Are servicemembers extending the length of their contracts with the armed forces, if so why?
3. Do veterans need a degree or certificate to excel in the workforce?
4. Is there a negative stigma surrounding enrollment after gaining knowledge and skills from the military?

Instrumentation

A web-based survey from FreeOnlineSurveys.com allowed the researcher to gather demographic information and to gain a brief insight as to why veterans of this age group chose to enroll at Harper College. Within the survey, participants were able to voluntarily provide their email addresses to be contacted to participate in a face-to-face interview. From there, individual interviews were scheduled over a two-week period. The interviews contained close-ended questions to gather additional demographic information such as age, gender, branch of service, and years of service. There were also a series of open-ended questions, during which the researcher strongly encouraged participants to elaborate as much as possible to gain deeper insight as to why the participant chose to enroll at the institution.

Description and appropriateness of instruments

There were several instruments used to collect the data for this study. A brief description of each instrument used is provided within this section.

1. **Web-based Surveys:** The researcher compiled a number of close-ended questions used to gather demographic information, surface-level information regarding the enrollment process, and participant emails for the interview process.
2. **Interview Questions:** A series of closed- and open-ended questions were created to dive deeper in to the rationale to enroll for sample population. The list of interview questions is included in Appendix C.
3. **Participant Interviews:** Nine out of thirteen potential participants responded to the researcher's invitation to participate in the face-to-face interview process. The interview questions were derived from information provided on the web-based surveys to allow participants to provide additional information and tell their story for enrolling at the institution.

The web-based survey allowed the researcher to gather data quickly without having to monitor or schedule interactions with the participants. This was a convenient way to collect

demographic and simple data from the participant pool. It allowed the potential participants to submit their responses on their own time without interrupting their personal schedules.

The interview questions were created with the research questions in mind. These questions were worded so as to gather the information needed to derive a conclusion regarding the rationale to enroll at Harper College. The interview questions were reviewed by peers and student veterans who fell outside of the targeted age range for clarity and relevancy to the purpose of the study.

Interview schedules were based on participant availability. The researcher selected a two-week period in the month of March with the semester mid-term exams in mind to prevent a disruption in participant study time. The participants responded to the researcher's email invitation and provided their availability and interviews were scheduled based on the information gathered. Participants each interviewed on separate days to conceal identities and to ensure anonymity.

The researcher had hoped to interview more than 9 participants, however, wanted to avoid continuously asking the remaining four volunteers to participate as this could be viewed as a form of coercion. For this reason, the volunteers were only contacted twice over the two-week period.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process for this study was rather straightforward. The researcher used the Free Online Surveys as a secure hub for the survey questions and responses. No individual other than the researcher had access to this survey or the responses gathered from

the participants. Because no question requested self-identification, the responses were kept completely anonymous to the researcher. The web-based survey questions are included in Appendix D.

On February 20, 2018 at 9:00 AM, the initial survey request was sent to 106 potential participants. Reminder emails with a link to the survey were sent on February 25, 2018 and again on March 2, 2018 to attempt to gain additional responses. During this survey data collection process, the researcher began reaching out to volunteers for the interview process. The first invitation to interview was sent to 8 individuals on February 27, 2018. One additional invite was sent on February 28, 2018 and 4 more volunteers were contacted on March 4, 2018. As not all volunteers responded to the request for interview, the researcher sent 8 total follow-up emails, 4 on March 5, 2018 and 4 on March 9, 2018, each batch including different participants. Beginning March 5, 2018, the first interview was conducted with Student A. The ninth and final interview took place on March 15, 2018 with Student I.

The interviews took place in the researcher's office on Harper College's campus for convenience for the participants as it is located where the participants take their courses. The interviews were scheduled based on the participant's availability which included nights and weekends to work around familial, educational, and work-related obligations. Before each interview took place, the researcher took time to go over the informed consent form (see Appendix E), which was also included in the web-based survey, to reiterate the purpose of the study, discuss any potential harm by participating in the survey, the expected outcome of the study, and the fact that the interview was entirely voluntary and could be stopped at any point.

With the participant's approval, each interview was recorded to allow the researcher to accurately transcribe the conversation, organize the responses, and identify themes within the participant pool. Each interview allotted 45 minutes for questions and this was communicated in both the web-based survey and the emailed interview invitations to provide transparency to enable the participant to make an informed decision. The interview questions were not given to the participants ahead of time to allow for candid responses for the open-ended questions; the interview questions are located in Appendix C. The researcher asked follow-up questions of some participants to gain clarification or additional information. At the end of each interview, the researcher offered each participant the opportunity to review the data once compiled, however this was on a voluntary basis and the participant was asked to reach out to the researcher to confirm interest. Once all interviews were completed, the researcher used the services of Rev.com to transcribe the interview responses as this allowed all interviews to be transcribed at one time, saving the researcher time. Rev.com has a confidentiality clause which is included in Appendix F.

All documents pertaining to this study were then filed in a lock box in the researcher's home office or stored on a password protected, personal, computer. The data will be kept for 3 years to allow for referencing if needed by the researcher, a participant, or the dissertation review committee.

Survey Results

In this section, reader is introduced to the survey questions and results from the web-based survey which was emailed to the participant pool. An analysis of the results be available in a following section.

Question 1

What is your gender? See Figure 1 for responses.

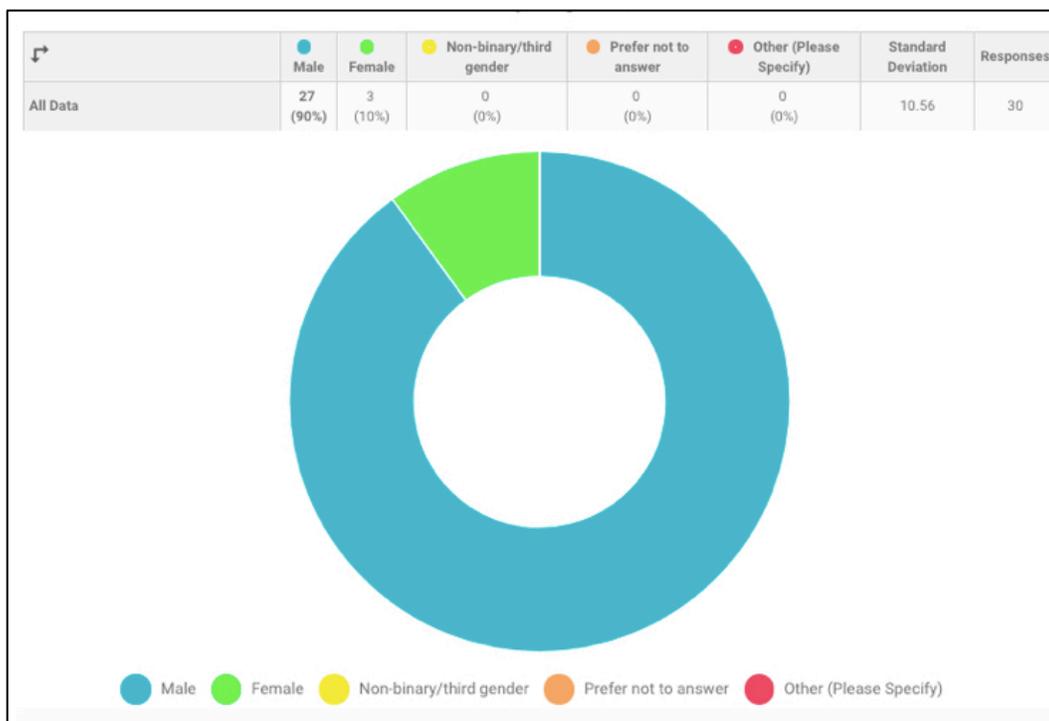


Figure 1. Veteran Gender.

Question 1 analysis

This aligns with the population sample at Harper College because as of the Spring 2018 semester, there were 17 women enrolled out of 106 veterans. This yields a percentage of 16 which is not far off from the results above. What this does is show that the response rate is

close to the actual male to female ratio of veterans aged 30 or older during the Spring 2018 semester.

Question 2

Within which age group do you fall? See Figure 2 for responses.

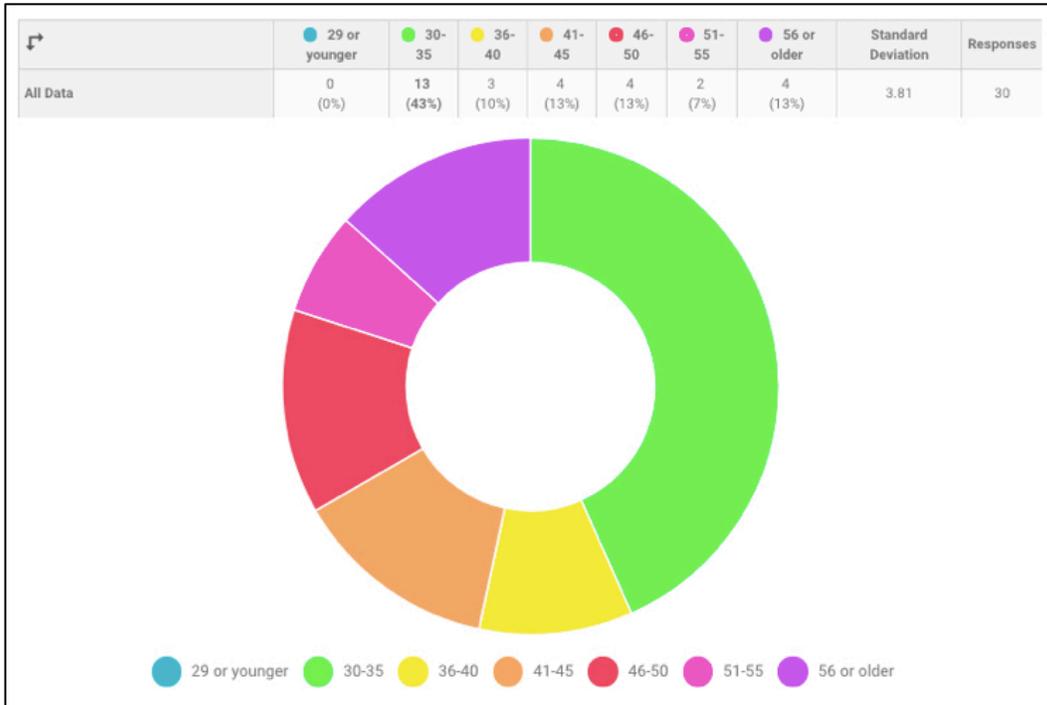


Figure 2. Veteran Age.

Question analysis

These results are consistent with the population enrolled at Harper College which shows the following as the age distribution for veterans aged 30 or older (see Figure 3).

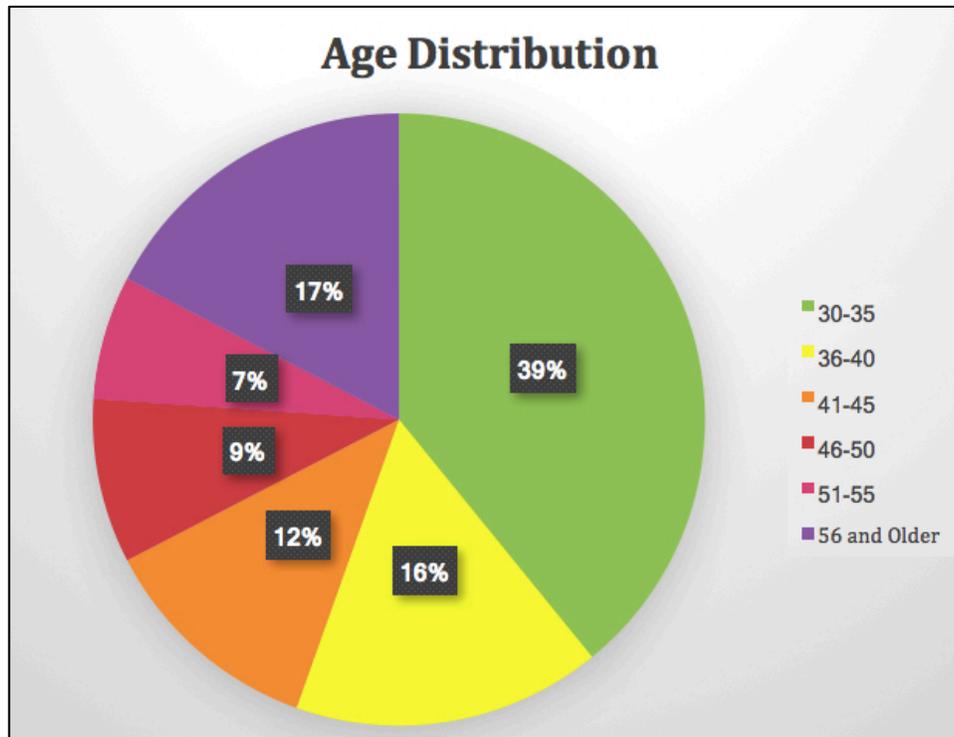


Figure 3. Veteran Age Distribution.

The largest portion of the responses came from the 30-35-year-old age group which could be due to the fact that this is the largest age group enrolled at Harper College for the Spring 2018 semester. The least likely to respond were the 51-55 year olds, but that could be because it is the smallest age group for the sample population. There were no extreme outliers that skewed the response rate to age distribution.

Question 3

Are you a military veteran?

Thirty out of 30 respondents answered “yes,” meaning 100 percent of participants identified as military veterans.

Question 3 analysis

The purpose of this question was to prevent any veteran outside of the selected population from moving forward in the survey. Had a participant responded “yes” to this question, they would have been taken to the end of the survey explaining that they did not meet the requirements to move forward with the study. Because 100 % of respondents answered “yes,” there was very little possibility that the results would be skewed by a non-veteran response. There is always the possibility that a non-veteran responded “yes”; however, the researcher took it on good faith that all respondents would report their actual military-affiliation.

Question 4

Did you feel you were prepared for college after military separation? See Figure 4.



Figure 4. Veteran Preparedness for Postsecondary Transition.

Question 4 analysis

The responses were mostly split between “yes” and “somewhat,” very few of the respondents indicated they were not prepared for college post-separation. Many of the veterans spoken with during the interview process attributed the life skills they learned from the military as a reason for their feeling of preparedness. Additional responses varied from “had attempted college before enlistment” to “taking courses while enlisted.” None of the interview participants felt unprepared for the collegiate experience.

Question 5

How long after separation did you choose to enroll at Harper College? See Figure 5 for responses.

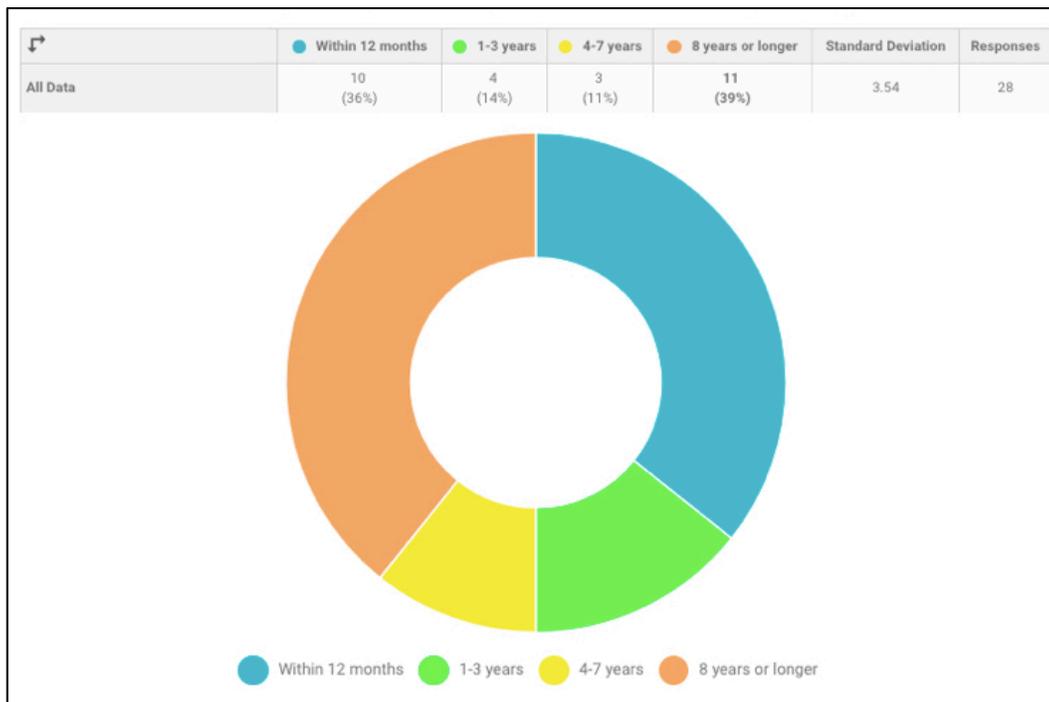


Figure 5. Time Between Separation and Enrollment at Harper College.

Question 5 Analysis

Of the veterans that participated in this survey, most veterans either enroll within 3 years of separation or wait 8 years or longer. Only 25 percent of participants enrolled within 1-7-years post-separation. According to the American Council on Education (2015), veterans often delay enrolling in higher education, post high school graduation, by 5 years. The lowest percentage of respondents fell in the 4-7-year category for when they enrolled in higher education *post-separation*, the highest being 8 years or more.

Question 6

Did your experience in the military create a positive, neutral, or negative outlook on higher education (i.e., was higher education stressed as a positive, neutral, or negative step to take post-separation)?

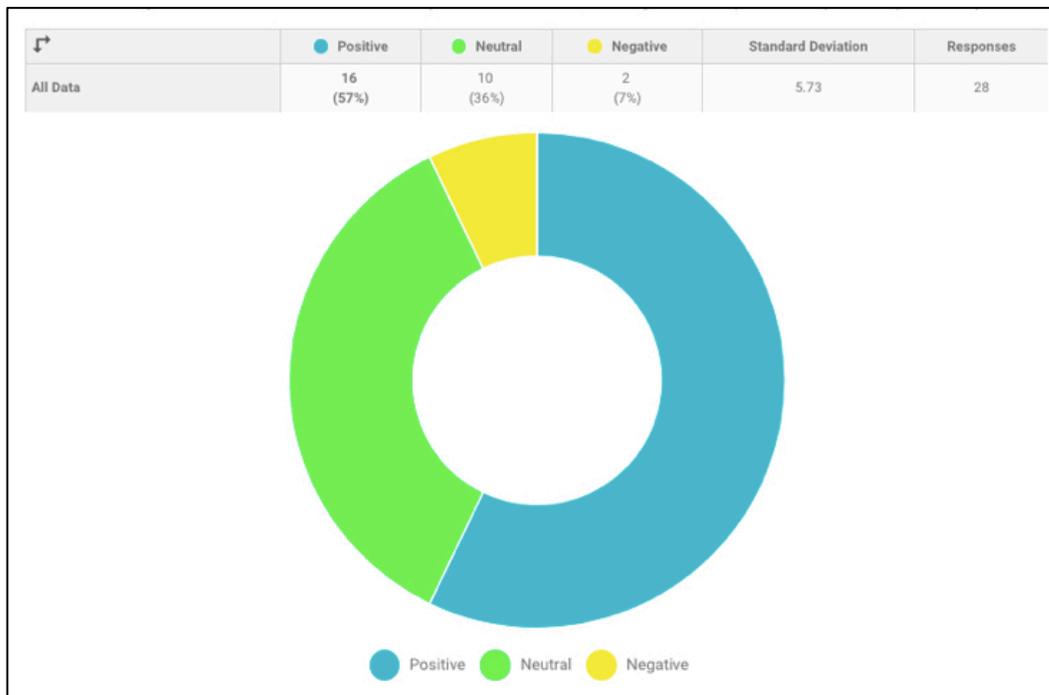


Figure 6. Military's Role in Postsecondary Perceptions.

Question 6 analysis

From speaking with student veterans at Harper College, the U.S. military often stresses the importance of higher education post-separation. Veterans are required to go through a transitional program to prepare them for civilian life and one of the main topics is higher education and using educational benefits to finance their education. It is not at all surprising that 57 percent felt that higher education was stressed as a positive move for the future. What is surprising is that 7 percent that answered “no” to the question. Once again, there were no participants in the interview process that indicated that higher education was not something they intended on pursuing or that it was downplayed in the military so the researcher is unable to rationalize why the respondents answered in the way that they did.

Question 7

How did your experience in the military influence your outlook on higher education?

This was an open-response question. Participants answered in the following ways:

- “My experience in the military influenced me greatly on higher education. Since I always wanted to have an education before i joined the military this was a great way to use my GI bill and get my carrier started in aviation and many other opportunities as well.”
- “I was very positive.”
- “I have been out of the service for many years, but when I returned to civilian life I knew my education was a priority.”
- “It has influence greatly; my personal experience in the military has given me discipline and more characteristic that I really enjoy while attending Harper College.”
- “No influence. I am here because I want to.”
- “Working a Career Development Counselor for 8 years in the military, I had to be very familiar with veteran educational benefits and programs. Having the distinct

pleasure to serve in that capacity had a major influence on my choice to continue my higher education.”

- “It wasn't until I was a civilian for years that I understand the need for higher education.”
- “Education is always good to fall back on.”
- “I was prepared to deal with stressful situations and I wouldn't get sucked into the teen drama of younger students.”
- “It had no impact.”
- “Got robbed out of my GI benefits.”
- “Prepared me to Do my Best. Gave me a great work ethic, a "no excuses" outlook. Taught me commitment. Gave me drive and grit.”
- “It didn't really; I've always believed education is important for success.”
- “It didn't.”
- “I thought higher education was very important to my potential to grow.”
- “It was great. I was actually in charge of making sure my flight knew about alternative/hybrid college classes they could take while being active duty. They deemed me the Education Monitor! Basically, the entire time I was enlisted minus basic and tech school I was enrolled in at least one college course or certificate program.”
- “First if you wanted to higher in ranks you needed to have higher education. Second having a higher education would help improve yourself.”
- “I don't think that my outlook on higher education was influenced by my military service.”
- “My main motivation was learning not just to get the paper. To learn, to know that is my motivation in school. Same in the military, it was a very valuable learning experience about myself, other people, also any type of knowledge.”
- “Made me realize that my body wouldn't be able to sustain a blue collar style work environment and that I would need higher education to get a better paying job that is less physically demanding.”
- “It made me want to look at to going to school.”

- “I am a Vietnam war draftee. Me and my cohorts were all drafted AFTER we completed our college degrees, I used my IVG [Illinois Veterans Grant] to improve my professional qualifications as a Material Manager, then in 2006 looking at retirement in a few years I took paralegal certification which I passed but could not participate in because of the need to work as an unpaid intern and that was not happening. After true retirement I decided to go back to school and continue my education in my major - History. A great way to run out the tape.”
- “My experience made me know higher education was a must for long term success.”

Question 7 analysis

From the responses gathered, many of the participants attributed their experience in the military as a positive influence on their decision to pursue a higher education. Attributing the military’s stress on higher education and teachings of discipline, participants felt as though higher education was a necessary step to advance in the armed forces or in the civilian workforce. Other participants did not attribute the military as an influencer on their choice to pursue a higher education, this could be contributed to a number of factors such as personal goals, family expectations or support, or even the need to advance in a field that they entered post-separation.

Question 8

Prior to enrolling at Harper College, did you consider any other colleges, universities, or career paths? See Figure 7 for responses.

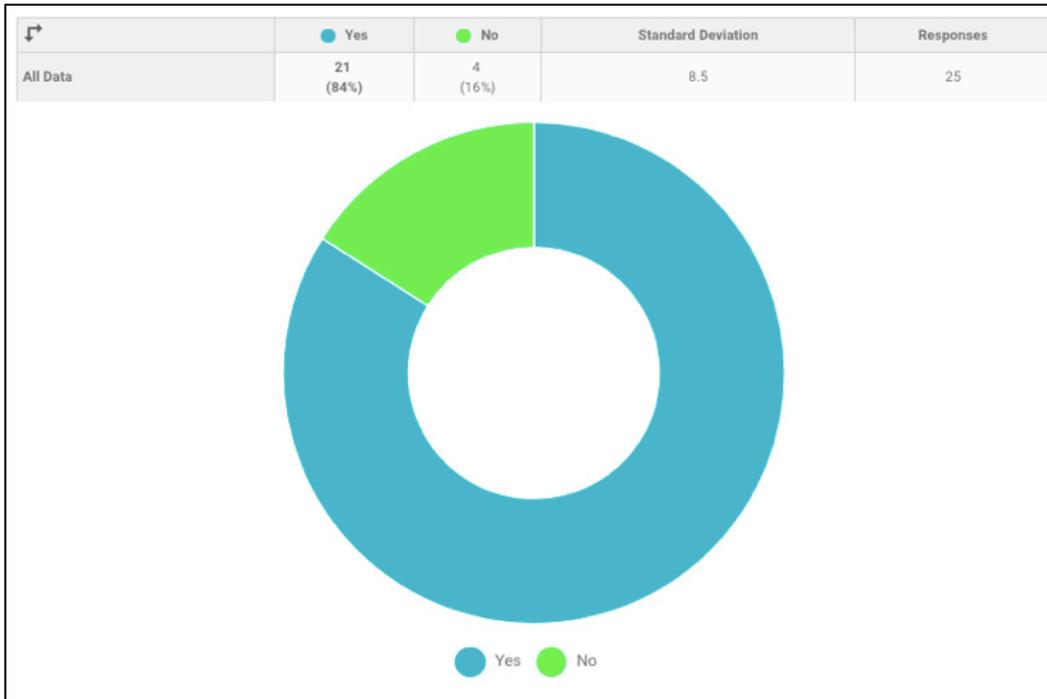


Figure 7. Veteran Options Post-Separation.

Question 8 analysis

An overwhelming number of respondents (21/25) answered “yes” to this question. It is worth noting the possibility that, although participants explored other academic avenues, Harper was still among their options prior to enrollment. This question will be better understood when reviewing the results of question 9.

Question 9

Question 9 was a follow up question to question 8, in which the researcher asked: If you selected YES to the question above, what other options were you considering? (Select all that apply). See Figure 8 for responses.

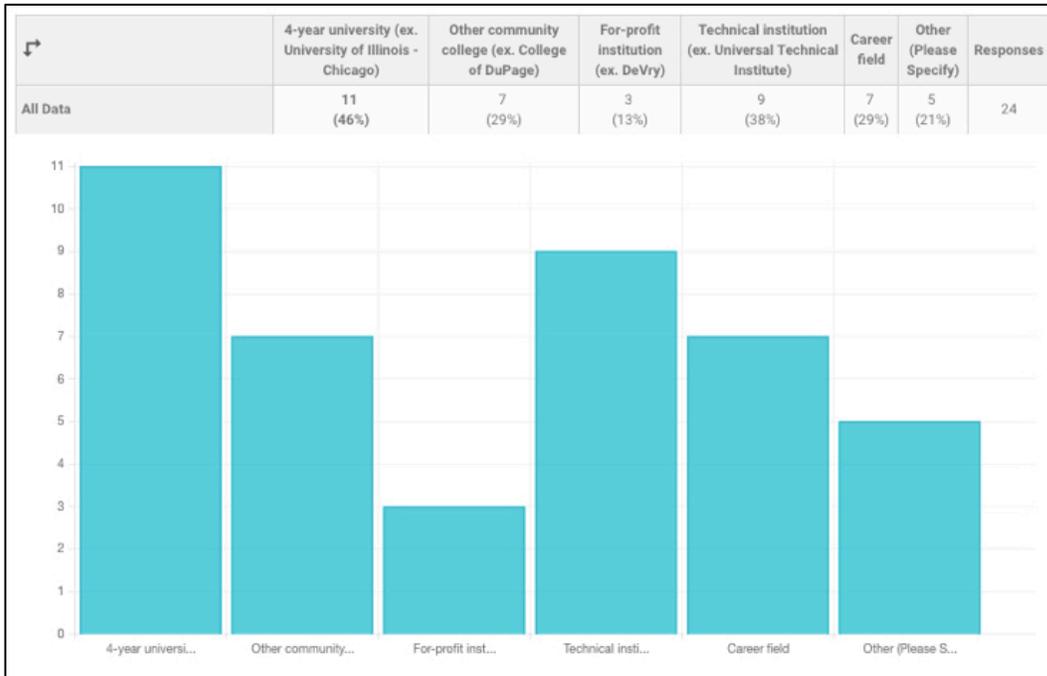


Figure 8. Options for Post-Separation.

One of the options for this question asked participants to specify what other options they were considering if they selected “Other,” the responses received were as follows:

- “I completed a BS degree at Loyola University. I attend Harper College to increase and enrich my life.”
- “Electrician.”
- “I actually already obtained a BS from a 4-year university. Harper is more a secondary career avenue.”
- “International Universities overseas or going right into DOD civilian work.”
- “Roosevelt. They made it next to possible to access and utilize my IGV. Harper facilitated every step of the way. Thank you, Harper. The first facilitator has retired but she and Courtney are the best.”

Question 9 analysis

There were no significant outliers in the responses received for this question. Four-year institutions received the highest number of responses which is not surprising. Overall, the responses were relatively even when compared to all of the data collected for this question. Generally, the response rate for each category fell between 29 and 46 percent with two responses (for-profit institutions and “other”) falling below at 13 and 21 percent respectively. The data may be skewed due to participants having the opportunity to select more than one option. It is very possible that a participant was considering multiple options where others may have only considered one option. Perhaps it would have been better to phrase the question in such a way that the participant only selected their top consideration to have a better understanding of what is most typically considered for this population.

Question 10

What factors led you to enroll at Harper College? (Select all that apply.) See Figure 9.

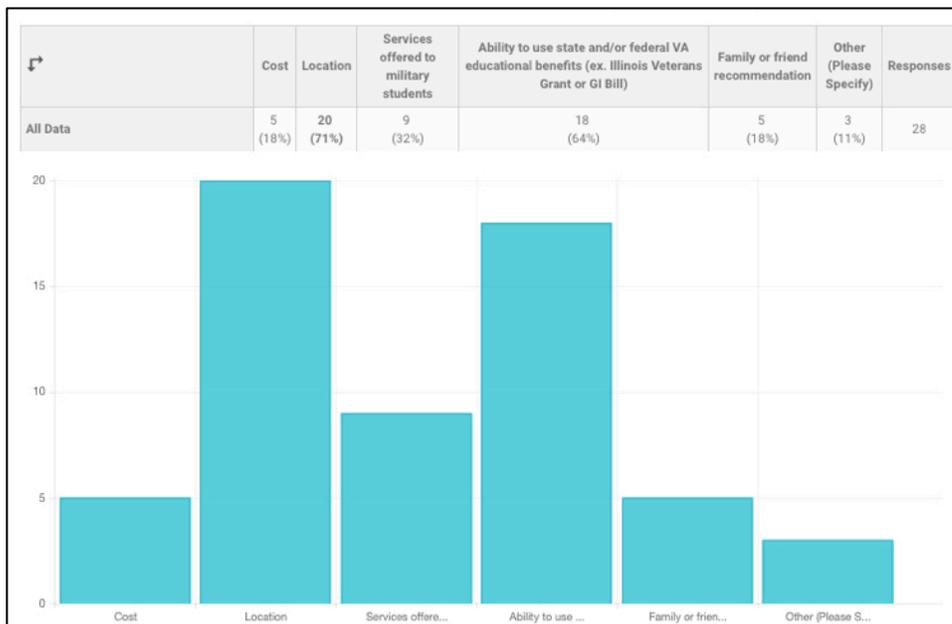


Figure 9. Factors Leading to Enrollment at Harper College.

Question 10 analysis

This question allowed the researcher to understand some of the most common factors that led participants to choose Harper College. The two most common responses were location and ability to use educational benefits. As will be discovered in the interview process, location was the largest factor that led participants to enroll at Harper College due to the convenience it provided for this population. It was surprising to see that cost was not as much of a factor for participants, perhaps this is due to the fact that this population has the ability to use educational benefits provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs that alleviate or completely eliminate the financial burdens of tuition and fees at a postsecondary institution. As with question 9, the data may be skewed due to the participant's ability to select more than one option. Again, it may have been beneficial to phrase the question in such a way that asked participants to select the top reason for choosing to enroll at Harper College.

Interview Results

The sections below will use the information gathered from the interview segment of the study to address the main topics extracted from the interview results. The topics extracted were useful in addressing the research questions which were:

1. Why are veterans choosing to enroll at Harper College outside of the typical age range of 24-26?
2. Are servicemembers extending the length of their contracts with the armed forces?
3. Do veterans need a degree or certificate to excel in the workforce?
4. Is there a negative stigma surrounding enrollment after gaining knowledge and skills from the military?

Topic 1: Enrolling outside of the expected age range

Participants were asked during the interview “*How long were you out of the service before you enrolled at Harper and how old were you when you first enrolled*”? This question was created in hopes that the researcher would find rationales for why veterans aged 30 or older decided to attend Harper College outside of the 24-26 age range. During this process, the researcher was able to interview participants that ranged from age 30 to 70 years old.

Student A, aged 33, indicated that the reason they enrolled after the age of 30 was because they had “failed as a community college student before join[ing] the army”. They came back to the community college because they wanted to boost their confidence in themselves as a student,

Like, of all the things I did in the army, like, the thing that's always terrified me most was school. And so, if I was to get out the army and jump right into a major university with higher academic standards, I mean, I'm not saying Harper's not a great university, it transfers well. But if I just... I might not succeed. I needed to get my confidence up... Because I haven't been schooling for a while. And ... Yeah. I haven't been to school for so long that I felt like anything more than a community college would be overwhelming.

Student A also enrolled one month after separating from the military. They recognized the need for a college degree in order to be hired as a federal government employee at a higher pay grade to try and work towards their 20-year retirement age. This is discussed a little later in the chapter. Student G also had a shorter window between separation and enrolling at Harper; they enrolled 5 months post-separation after retiring after 20 years in the service.

While Student B already received a college degree before being drafted in to the Vietnam War, they reenrolled “three different times under three different scenarios, only

because the Illinois Veteran's Grant never expired.” Student B commented about the first of three attempts:

I think during that time I decided that, yes, I would go and get my master's and my degree in English lit. And I went to Roosevelt. I did attend a few courses, it was so onerous to keep up with the applications and keep the Illinois Veteran's Grant in line with what they were doing.

The second attempt took place in 2006

I'm getting near the end of my professional career. So, I was born in '47; it's now 2006, I'm getting, I'm looking forward to, I'm gonna retire within the 10 years, what do I wanna do? And I decided that I wanted to either change my professional path then or be prepared to change it along the way, within the next 10 years.

The third attempt started in 2013 and continues to present day: “So, when I retired, uh, in 2013-ish, '14-ish, I came back to school for the third time, this time, just to soak up everything I could on philosophy and— and history.” Contrary to Students A and G, Student B enrolled at Harper College after 8 or 9 years post-separation.

Similar to Students A and B, Student D attempted higher education twice, the first not as successful as the second. Student D’s response to the question of why the first attempt was considered unsuccessful was because they “hated school.” Student E’s experience with higher education also took more than one attempt. At first, they enrolled in an online, general studies, program. They earned their degree in general studies which Student E sees as a “cop-out.” This took place in 2008, it was not until 2018 that Student E decided to enroll at Harper College, 18 years after they separated from the military.

Topic 1 analysis

Many of the responses to this question resulted in participants admitting that they had attempted pursuing a higher education prior to enlisting in the military with the first attempt

not being nearly as successful as the second. The researcher often hears from student veterans that they are enrolling at Harper College for a second attempt due to lack of motivation during the first attempt. While some participants are choosing to enroll in a higher education for the first time after the age of 30, some are actually *returning* to postsecondary schooling after an unsuccessful first attempt. Many feel, as found in the responses from the survey, that the military helped participants find discipline and purpose which then motivated them to pursue a postsecondary degree.

Topic 2: Extension of length of military contracts

The first question of the interview process asked to *“Please state your age, branch of service, and how long you served in the military”*? This question was asked in hopes to not only gather basic demographic information such as age and branch of service, but to also gauge if the participants served longer than the expected timeframe of 4-6 years. From this question, the researcher received a number of responses, Student A indicated, *“I’m 33 years old, I served in the army for 12 years.”* The first student already surpassed the expected service time. Student A also indicated that they enlisted when they were 20 years of age.

Students C, D, E, and G had similar lengths of service ranging from 10-20 years. While the typical service contract is for 4 years, this means these students continued to extend their contracts with the U.S. military. Student B on the other hand, indicated, *“My age is 70. My branch of service was United States Army. I was in the service for 18 months”*. Eighteen months is much shorter than the anticipated 4-6 years, however Student B was drafted during the Vietnam War. Student B did not willingly enlist in the service, thus did not extend their contract with the Army.

Students F and I served 5 and 4 years, respectively. These individuals fall within the anticipated service time. Interestingly, students B, F, and I all had college experience before enlisting in the military. Student B had already received a college degree before being drafted in the Vietnam War. Students F and I both attended college, however, dropped out to work full time or to assist with the events that took place on September 11, 2001.

Topic 2 analysis

Out of the 9 participants, 6 extended the length of their contracts with the military, thus delaying entry in to higher education. What was not the focus of the interview was *why* they extended their contracts. There could be a number of reasons why they chose to remain in the military because they saw it as their career, it paid well, and/or the services provided to them were worth remaining active in the military. These, of course, are purely assumptions because this question was not intended to dive in to the question of why they chose to remain enlisted for so long, but for how long they were enlisted. This helped provide clarification on the second research question that, yes, many of the participants that enrolled after age 30 was due to the fact that they either enlisted later than the traditional age of 18 and/or they extended their contracts with the military.

Topic 3: Advancement in the workforce

The researcher asked participants *“Did you take any breaks from the time you initially enrolled at Harper? If so, what made you come back?”* as well as *“Did you attend any other colleges or pursue a career field before enrolling at Harper? If so, what did you do?”*

Student A responded with,

Okay, no, I didn't pursue any career prior. I mean, the army was my career. I was in for 12 years. I got injured, so I got medically discharged, and that's basically why I'm here now. Because I would have stayed in the army. I already have the military experience I need to get hired right now as a federal employee, so if I get a degree, it's something I'm enjoying, I feel like I'd be more successful and computer information, for real, right now with computers I'm just like, oh, man, shoot me. This is ... This is so boring. I want to work for the Federal Government. So, I can work towards a 20-year retirement. Because I already have 12 years.

Student E had a slightly different story to tell with their experience:

While I was in the Navy, right after, I went straight to work for the company I'm with now, and I'm still with them. I, I think I got lucky because I didn't need the schooling then, so I basically started from the very ... the very, very bottom and then worked my way up to the chain. Um, but at first, yeah, I didn't think I needed it, but then ... But not a lot of people are lucky, so, um ... Up to this time, I still probably didn't need it, but I mean, I might as well use what I ... you know, what was granted to me, and I ... you know, so that's why I went back to school.

Student F struggled with personal factors which prevented them from being able to engage with the College on a continuous basis. They explained their experience as follows,

Kind of a break. I was here for like half a semester. The fall semester of 2016- my brother passed away and I got divorced- right then and a bunch of stuff was happening and I kind of pulled away from school for that. I dis-enrolled halfway through...pretty much the whole semester and I got some other things in order, and then the semester after that was continuing through some of those challenges, so I was gone for about a semester and a half. The spring semester of 2016 and the fall semester of 2017, I guess, I wasn't here. But, re-enrolled after I got all that situated.

When asked if Student F had attended any other institutions or pursued a career field before enrolling at Harper College, they responded with, "Right after high school, I enrolled at McHenry County College with zero direction. Just went to go. Yeah, pretty much no idea what I wanted to do." When it came to career opportunities, Student F responded with, "I worked full-time for Snap-On Tools in a warehouse and I knew I didn't want to do that forever. But, I was making very good money for my age, so I didn't want to walk away from it."

Student G was asked a follow up question; the researcher asked if they felt it was necessary to have a college degree. Student G responded with the following,

Necessary? Not really necessary for the navy, so to speak, it just promotes it. It gives you a better chance, but it wasn't necessary. It was just if you're comparing other people and you have good job skills and things like that and you want to say college degree against someone doesn't have one and the two of you going up against for a promotion, that person, if you have the same job skills, college degree will be that trump card. That's for the navy. But for getting out of the navy, of course, understanding how the world works, if you want a job at least ... I always tell my children, I have three daughters, if you want to at least have an opportunity to be seen, you must have that piece of paper. You're not even seen without that piece of paper.

Student I *did* begin a career before enrolling at Harper College and explained their journey in the following way,

Yes. I did take a big gap. So, I started a career in forensic science and I got my Bachelor's in chemistry after I originally separated. The reason why I came back and came to Harper is because I wanted to do something unrelated to my career field. And there's no place basically, no place close enough to where I live, the location that I am, that offered the program. The fashion program that I wanted to take, and Harper was my, not my only option, I should say. It's not like by default, but just the best suited for me and where I live, what I wanted to take and just like worked well with everything, you know, all the working parts of my life.

When asked about college prior to Harper, Student I explained that they had enrolled at multiple colleges prior to enrolling at Harper College,

So, after, or before Harper I went to Northeastern Illinois University and this is after the military. So, before the military I went to University of Illinois in Chicago. And started there, dropped out, enlisted, and then came back home, enrolled pretty much immediately at Northeastern Illinois where I got my Bachelor of Science in Chemistry. Very quick after that, got a job with the Illinois State Police as a firearms examiner and went into forensics. They trained me. I did that for like almost 10 years. And then made the decision to resign actually in September to like full-fledged go into fashion, and, yeah. That's kind of like what I did, and there's no regrets. Every decision I have made I feel has just amplified me and like made me like a better individual, so it's the path that I've chosen.

Topic 3 Analysis

This topic was particularly interesting because the researcher was able to learn a little more about each participant's past. To learn that many of the participants began working prior to enrolling at Harper College and then turned to Harper as a way to advance their careers or pursue new passions emphasized the mission of a community college. Like the "traditional" population, many students enrolled at Harper are there for a plethora of reasons such as preparing to transfer to a four-year institution, obtain a career credential, change careers, or expand on previously gained knowledge, the student veteran population interviewed for this survey were no different. Even the participants that had enrolled at other institutions and then turned to Harper College appeared to have respect for the institution and the programs that it offered in its ability to help the individual reach their career or educational goals.

Topic 4: Stigma surrounding higher education

One question during the interview was *"Did your military experience influence your perception of attending college? In other words, did you feel you needed to attend college despite the experiences you gained in the military?"*

Many of the participants responded positively towards higher education after separating from the military. No participant stated that the military negatively influenced their perception of higher education, however some felt neutral about the military's influence on higher education. Below are some of their remarks.

Student A, freshly separated from the military, responded with,

I think it helps to think, expand your thoughts, I guess, or maybe think outside the box, come back to school, from perspective of a seasoned veteran rather than when I was young and a student. I mean, I just feel like ... If I just get out the military and have this

military mindset, I don't feel like he's back in the civilian world, I might come off as a little abrupt to people. I mean, there's things that have changed, because I've been in for so long. So, I think ... I definitely think coming back to school's a good thing.

Student B, however, did not feel as though their time in the military influenced their idea of college because they had already attended an institution of higher education, they responded as follows "I did not enlist. I was drafted in — Vietnam after I graduated from college. Um, I was already working professionally after college, so my experience in the military did not influence my need for a degree."

Student D, like Student A, did not feel as though the military influenced their perception of attending a postsecondary institution, "No, I wouldn't say that I felt like I needed to, but I'd always known that I was going to."

Student E had a different story to tell, while they felt the military provided a positive outlook on higher education, the message did not quite stick at the time it was received,

I think so. I mean, while I was in the military, they encouraged me to start classes here and there, but I mean, I was young, and I just wanted to party and do my job and serve my country but at the same time, when I got out, I didn't think I needed to go to school.

Student F felt like there was a personal drive and perception for returning to college, when asked the above question, they stated that they "definitely" felt like they needed to attend college post-separation. When asked why, the participant responded,

Maybe this is just my own preconceived notions but without a continued furthered education, unless you are an independently brilliant person who has an idea for entrepreneurship you need higher education to get somewhere in life.

Student H did not feel as though the military provided a negative image of higher education, however, they did not feel as though they influenced their perception of higher education at all, they believed it was their own personal perception that caused them to enroll,

Not necessarily. I feel like with the discipline and the knowledge and the wide varieties of culture that I got from my service I think I can really offer a lot for the labor force and employment. I just felt like going to college would definitely widen my experience as well and offer more to society.

Student I always knew they would return to school after leaving their educational path to assist with the events of September 11, 2001. They stated it was always in their “life plan” to return to complete what they had started.

Topic 4 analysis

The researcher asked this particular question, both in the survey and interview process, to determine if there was a stress on higher education or a dismissal of higher education while enlisted in the military. From the responses gathered, many participants felt higher education was important on their own without any influence from the military. They did not feel as though the skills and knowledge they gained while in the military made them superior to their student peers and valued a higher education to reach their post-separation goals. The researcher was pleased to learn that the military did not dismiss the importance of higher education and even encouraged the idea of enrolling at a postsecondary institution.

Summary

The information gleaned from the interview process was supported by the content obtained through the survey component of the study. The researcher was able to find four main topics from the interview transcriptions which created a full picture as to why veterans age 30 or older chose to enroll at Harper College outside of the “traditional” age range of 24-26. Overall, participants chose to enroll after age 30 due to the fact that they had either (1.) extended their military contract or (2.) entered a career post-separation. Participants saw

higher education as a way to advance their careers or begin anew and they each had a high regard for higher education, whether that came from the influence of the military or their own personal perceptions.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter's focus is to discuss what the researcher learned from the study, what was not able to be learned due to the context of the study's design, ways that the study is important to higher education and student veteran research, future research proposals, as well as a reflection by researcher on the overall study.

Summary of the Study

Overall, this study was able to bring to light some fruitful aspects about the "non-traditional" student veteran population. From the survey and interview processes, the researcher was able to learn more about the Harper College 30 or older student veteran population and why they chose to enroll at the institution at the time that they did. While many of the rationales were unique to the individual participant, there were reoccurring themes throughout the study which primarily focused on career exploration or advancement in education or the workforce. There was also an overall theme between all participants that location was the most valuable attribute in selecting Harper College. This is very similar to most students enrolled a community college as the main purpose of the community college was to help prepare the community it serves to transfer to an institution to pursue a higher degree and/or prepare students for employment within their field of interest.

This particular population differs very little from a non-veteran, non-traditional student. Due to their age and life experiences, student veterans age 30 or older are looking for ways to advance themselves in the workforce so they are able to provide for, not only themselves but, their families and to expand their knowledge to be better informed members of society. Some participants turned to Harper College as a second chance after being unsuccessful in their first attempt at higher education while others turned to the institution in order to advance or change their careers. These are characteristics of non-veteran, non-traditional students as well.

While the researcher was not able to come to conclusions not already reflected in many studies around student veterans and non-traditional students, this does help support what has already been uncovered. This study assists in understanding why student veterans of a certain age are choosing a community college before first enrolling at a four-year college or university. The study also supports that there are many similarities between non-traditional and student veteran populations which is often discouraged. While the studies referenced in chapter two caution individuals from assuming that the two populations have the same needs, it did become apparent that although certain needs (e.g., civilian identity development) may be targeted to the student veteran population, there are many areas of need that overlap between student veterans and non-traditional students (e.g., career intervention).

Limitations

This study was able to capture a snapshot of why veterans, age 30 years or older, chose to invest in Harper College. What it was not able to do is generalize why *all* veterans, age 30 years or older, choose to invest in Harper College. The results are only applicable to the

moment in which they were captured, however, they shed a brief insight as to why this population is enrolling at Harper College. The results are truthful for the participants of the study and no one else. Additionally, the study cannot, and should not, provide an absolute truth for this particular population and why they chose to enroll at a community college. In addition to this capturing a snapshot of this population, it captured a *small* snapshot. The participant size was not as large as the researcher had hoped. The limitation of a small participant pool means that there were less experiences to pull from to support the found themes and conclusions.

While there may be similarities between veterans within the same age group at the same type of institution (i.e., community colleges), the researcher cannot possibly know this for certain without interviewing every veteran age 30 or older at every community college across the nation and this process would not necessarily capture consumer behavior for incoming veterans, veterans that stop out, etc. What this study was able to accomplish was understanding why student veterans within the specified age bracket, enrolled during the Spring 2018 semester, chose to invest in Harper College and the rationales associated with that investment. This study can be replicated in terms of the study's design; however, the results will continue to differ with every institution and every participant group.

Additionally, this study has a qualitative design. By conducting a qualitative study, the results can be generalized to the targeted population however they cannot provide an absolute truth regarding this population. As previously mentioned, the data collected from each participant is only true to the individual at the time the data was collected. Future researchers can generalize that veterans, age 30 years or older, tend to choose community colleges because

of the themes identified through the data analysis process, however it cannot hold true for every individual that falls within this specific population.

Furthermore, the methodology provides a limitation to the depth of information gathered. This study only gathers data from a short period of time from a specific community college. By expanding the timeframe and/or the geographical boundaries, the data may have provided differing insight as to why this population enrolls at a community college.

Implications

Based on the results, the researcher was able to negate many of her own assumptions of this population. The data from the study showed that there are no significant differences between non-veteran and veteran students. The researcher constructed this study assuming that there would be significant dissimilarities between non-veterans and veterans. What was found was that this population has many of the same motivators for enrolling at a community college as non-veterans or veterans that fall outside of the targeted age bracket.

The results also refuted the idea that veterans age 30 or older are avoiding a higher education. The researcher assumed that possible discouragement from the military or personal biases may have dissuaded the enrollment process. In fact, what was learned was that the military is supportive of active servicemembers enrolling in distance-learning education, transitional programs discuss the importance of higher education post-separation, and that the military promotes servicemembers to higher ranks due to advanced degrees.

The study also highlighted that veterans of this population do see a value in furthering their education. While many of the participants were employed at the time of the interviews,

they also saw goals that were only attainable with the help of a college credential. One participant indicated that they wanted to make a sizeable income which would only be possible with a college degree. Other participants, while already having earned a credential, saw the need to return to a postsecondary institution (beginning with Harper College) to change career fields. Interestingly, only one participant stressed the importance of their educational benefits in allowing them to further their education. This was a theme that the researcher felt would be more prominent with the availability of the Post 9/11 GI Bill and the length of time that each participant served in the military.

One additional assumption that the researcher had was that this participant pool was enrolling at Harper College due to the programs offered for advancement in the workforce. While some participants indicated that they enrolled at Harper for a specific program, many participants chose the institution due to the location. Unfortunately, this result does not allow the researcher to assist in the promotion of specific programs to the population within the community as she had originally hoped.

The results of this study removed many biases that the researcher initially had. Regardless of age, length of time served in the military, and gained skills, it became clear that the participants had the same aspirations as their “traditionally” aged peers (age 30 or younger). It also eliminated the idea that Harper offered programs that drew this population to the institution. More often than not, having a location close to home to prevent the disruption of outside obligations was the main factor for their choosing the institution. While reputation of the institution was touched upon, Harper was simply a more convenient choice for this population. Assumably, many “traditionally” aged students are afforded the luxury to enroll at

institutions throughout the country. Due to the non-traditional nature of the study's participants, lives rooted in their current location prevents them from being able to attend institutions outside of their geographical boundaries.

This study does bring light to what is important to this particular population and how it may vary from younger student veterans. Additionally, it strengthens the likeliness of student veterans and non-traditional students despite the discouragement of this comparison. The biggest similarity between the two populations is that student veterans of any age bracket are seeking a stable career and turn to higher education to achieve that goal.

Recommendations for Future Research

From this study, the researcher was able to identify other areas necessary for study to better understand the student veteran population and add to the limited knowledge there is surrounding this unique population. One area of research that may be of interest is to conduct the same study on the younger student veteran population. Many of these students have not yet established careers, families, and/or committed to a geographical location. It would be interesting to understand why this population chose to enroll at Harper College (or at any community college for that matter).

Additionally, the researcher recommends future research which compares this participant pool to those of other community colleges. Conducting a cross-campus study from various geographical locations would help determine if the findings at Harper College are similar to the experiences of those in differing locations. Conducting a similar study over rural, suburban, and urban institutions may provide differing results. Even expanding on that idea,

conducting the study throughout various geographical areas (Midwest, Southwest, East Coast, West Coast, etc.) across the United States may yield varying results due to the cultures and needs of the location.

It may also be of interest to take the student veteran, 30 or older, population and do a side-by-side comparison to their non-veteran peers or the same age group. This may further confirm the similarities between the two groups, however, there may be findings which show dissimilarities which were not identified in this study.

Future researchers may also want to consider using a different methodology to conduct a similar study. Perhaps create a longitudinal study which compares entering student veterans within this population to matriculated veterans to see if their rationale for selecting the institution changes over time. It would be interesting to understand if the recollection between enrolling at the institution and remaining at the institution differ. By comparing various data sets over time, this route could provide the foundation for further research to understand how the perceptions of choosing an institution change over time.

Building off of the recommendation above, it may also be useful to design a case study methodology to follow one participant from the enrollment process through transfer or credential earning. This research could dive in to a number of topics surrounding the student veteran's educational processes to build upon the research discussed in chapter two. While this would not necessarily coincide with this particular study, it would be of interest to understand how the participant evolves over time. The findings would not be generalizable; however, it would provide some insight as to the validity of other research that has been conducted.

Conclusion

Each participant brought their own personal story as to why they chose to enroll at Harper College but, overall, the two main factors were: location and career advancement/exploration. Regardless of the student's educational objective, the geographic location and self-motivation to build a career brought these participants to Harper's campus. The study provided insight in to the decision-making processes as to why the participant pool chose to invest in Harper College. Most importantly, the results from the study enlightened the researcher and provided a better understanding of the targeted population. While many of the topics discussed in chapter two (e.g., identity development, academic and transitional supports, and college branding) played little-to-no role in the decision-making process of this participant pool, it did establish a foundation for future research possibilities to better understand the student veteran population.

The findings of this study highlighted that very little differs between student veterans age 30 or older and other students, traditional or non-traditional. There appears to be a misconception that student veterans vary greatly from their non-veteran peers. While student veterans do come with a unique set of skills and needs, they are in search of the same goals: self-improvement, identity development, and career attainment. Student veterans are a special population; however, it would be disadvantageous to make assumptions of this group simply due to their life experiences. Studies shown in chapter two indicate that there are certain needs of student veterans, but those needs are not exclusive to student veterans. The data collected provided an understanding that student veterans within this targeted population varied very little from the other students she has interacted with. The outcomes of this study highlighted

decision-making processes of student veterans, age 30 or older, and how sometimes, like many other students, it all depends on location, location, location.

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APPENDIX A: FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL LETTER

FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects in Research

Office of Research & Sponsored Programs, 1010 Campus Drive, FLITE 410D · Big Rapids, MI 49307

Date: January 11, 2018

To: Sandra Balkema and Courtney Friedlund
From: Dr. Gregory Wellman, IRB Chair
Re: IRB Application for Review, *Enrollment Trends for Veterans at Harper College*

The Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application for using human subjects in the study, "*Enrollment Trends for Veterans at Harper College*" and determined that it does not meet the Federal Definition of research on human subjects, as defined by the Department of Health and Human Services or the Food and Drug Administration. This project does not meet the federal definition of research on human subjects because it is a program improvement activity. As such, approval by the Ferris IRB is not required for the proposed project.

This determination applies only to the activities described in the submission; it does not apply should changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities are research involving human subjects, submit a new request to the IRB for determination. This letter only applies to Ferris IRB Review; it is your responsibility to ensure all necessary institutional permissions are obtained and policies are met prior to beginning the project, such as documentation of institutional or department support. Note that quality improvement project findings may be published, but any findings presented or published should be clearly identified as part of a quality improvement initiative and not as research.

Your project will remain on file with the Ferris IRB for purposes of tracking research efforts at Ferris. Should you have any questions regarding the determination of this letter, please contact the IRB.

Regards,



Ferris State University Institutional Review Board
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

Version 12.2014

APPENDIX B: HARPER COLLEGE IRB APPROVAL LETTER



Harper College

Go Forward[®]

**NOTICE OF APPROVAL
EXEMPT REVIEW**

Date: January 18, 2018

TO: Courtney Friedlund
From: Dr. Katherine Coy, IRB Chair
Re: Project Entitled: *Enrollment Trends for Veterans at Harper College*

The Chair of Harper College Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application for using human subjects in the study, "Enrollment Trends for Veterans at Harper College" and agrees with the Ferris State University determination that it does not meet the Federal Definition of research on human subjects, as defined by the Department of Health and Human Services or the Food and Drug Administration. This project does not meet the federal definition of research on human subjects because it is a program improvement activity. As such, approval by the Harper College IRB is not required for the proposed project.

This determination applies only to the activities described in the submission; it does not apply should changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities are research involving human subjects, submit a new request to the Ferris State University IRB for determination. This letter only applies to Harper College IRB Review; it is your responsibility to ensure all necessary institutional permissions are obtained and policies are met prior to beginning the project, such as documentation of institutional or department support. Note that quality improvement project findings may be published, but any findings presented or published should be clearly identified as part of a quality improvement initiative and not as research.

Your project will remain on file with the Harper College IRB for purposes of tracking research efforts at Harper College. Should you have any questions regarding the determination of this letter, please contact the IRB.

Sincerely,

Katherine C. Coy
Harper College Institutional Review Board
Director, Office of Institutional Research

File #FY18_010

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Research Interview Questions

1. Please state your age, your branch of service, and how long you served in the military?
2. At what age did you enlist in the military?
3. What led you to enlist?
4. Did your military experience influence your perception of attending college? In other words, did you feel that you needed to attend college despite the experiences you gained in the military?
5. Was college your first choice after separation? And if not, what was your first choice?
6. Did you have any apprehensions prior to enrolling in college, and if so, what were those apprehensions?
7. How long were you out of the service before you decided to enroll at Harper, and how old were you when you first enrolled at Harper?
8. Did you attend any other colleges or pursue a career field before enrolling at Harper, and if so, what did you do?
9. Out of all the possible schools available to you, why did you select Harper?
10. What are you currently studying at Harper, and what led you to that choice?
11. What is your ultimate career and/or educational goals after you leave Harper? Are you looking to transfer, or go right into the career field?
12. Has your time at Harper been helpful in you meeting your educational or career goals, and what factors influenced your answer?

APPENDIX D: WEB BASED SURVEY QUESTIONS

Web Based Survey Questions

Qualifying Questions

1. What is your gender?
2. Within which age range do you fall?
3. Are you a military veteran?

Survey Questionnaire

1. Did you feel you were prepared for college after military separation?
2. How long after separation did you choose to enroll at Harper College?
3. Did your experience in the military create a positive, neutral, or negative outlook on higher education (i.e. was higher education stressed as a positive, neutral, or negative step to take post-separation)?
4. How did your experience in the military influence your outlook on higher education?
5. Prior to enrolling at Harper College, did you consider any other colleges, universities, or career paths?
6. If you selected YES to the question above, what other options were you considering? (Select all that apply)
7. What factors led you to enroll at Harper College? (Select all that apply)
8. As a result of this survey, you may be eligible to participate in a brief 30-45 minute in-person, on-campus interview to further discuss your enrollment process at Harper College. If you would like to be considered for an in-person interview, please enter your email address below:

APPENDIX E: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Enrollment Trends for Veterans at Harper College

Principal Investigator: Courtney Friedlund

Email: friedlc@ferris.edu

Phone: 847-925-6821

Faculty Advisor: Sandra Balkema

Email: sandrabalkema@ferris.edu

Phone: 231-591-5631

STUDY PURPOSE

You are invited to participate in a research study about trends that cause military veterans aged 30 years or older to enroll at Harper College. The researchers are interested in gaining insight from currently enrolled student veterans regarding his or her choice for enrolling at Harper College.

PARTICIPATION

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary.

You are eligible to participate in this study because you have self-identified as a student veteran and are aged 30 years or older. If you agree to be part of this study, you will be asked a series of questions related to your experiences and choice(s) for enrolling at Harper College.

POTENTIAL RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

There are no known risks associated with this study.

ANTICIPATED BENEFITS

This research is designed to examine how Harper College can better serve the student veteran population of veterans aged 30 years or older and how the institution can create better services to address this population's needs.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Signing this form is required in order for you to take part in the study and gives the researchers your permission to obtain, use and share information about you for this study. The results of this study could be published in an article, but would not include any information that would identify you. There are some reasons why people other than the researchers may need to see the information you provided as part of the study. This includes organizations responsible for making sure the research is conducted safely and properly, including Ferris State University.

In order to keep your information safe, the researcher will protect your anonymity and maintain your confidentiality. The data you provide will be stored in a locked file. The researchers will retain the data for 3 years, after which time the researchers will dispose of your data by standard state of the art methods for secure disposal. The data will not be made available to other researchers for other studies following the completion of this research study.

CONTACT INFORMATION

APPENDIX F: REV.COM CONFIDENTIALITY CLAUSE – TRANSCRIPTION SERVICE

How do you keep my information secure?



- Your files are securely stored and transmitted using TLS 1.2 encryption, the highest level of security available. We also never store credit card information - we simply pass it securely to our bank for safe-keeping.
- We will never share your files or personal information with anyone outside of Rev. Files are visible only to the professionals who have signed strict confidentiality agreements. If you'd ever like us to delete your files, just let us know.

APPENDIX G: EMAIL INVITATION – SURVEY

E-MAIL INVITATION (similar script will be used for follow-up phone calls, if no response from email invitation).

Dear _____:

My name is Courtney Friedlund. I am a doctoral student in the Community College Leadership program at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan. I am conducting a study as part of my dissertation research and would value your participation.

I am studying the enrollment trends of veterans at Harper College. I would appreciate your responses to a brief online survey. A link to the survey is included below. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may discontinue your participation at any time or decide not to answer any question you are not comfortable answering.

When using any information gathered from the survey, I will use pseudonyms for participants and their institutions to protect the anonymity of all participants.

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me by phone 847-925-6821 or email friedlc@ferris.edu or you may contact my faculty advisor, (Dr Sandy Balkema, email balkemas@ferris.edu) if you have study related questions or concerns. Furthermore, if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Institutional Research Board at Ferris State University at (231) 591-2553.

By clicking on the link and continuing with the survey, you are indicating your consent to participate in the study: [LINK INSERTED HERE]

Thank you!

Courtney Friedlund

Systems Coordinator

APPENDIX H: EMAIL INVITATION – INTERVIEW VOLUNTEERS

EMAIL INVITATION – INTERVIEW VOLUNTEERS

Dear _____,

I am a student in the Doctorate in Community College Leadership program at Ferris State University and am working on a dissertation project designed identify trends that cause veterans aged 30 years or older to enroll at Harper College.

You have indicated that you would be willing to answer a series of questions about your own experiences and reasons for enrolling at Harper College.

Your participation in this study is voluntary which is explained along with other details in the informed consent form (attached). A copy of the consent form will be made available to you at the time of the interview as well. When interviews are completed, I will use pseudonyms for participants and their institutions to protect the anonymity of all participants.

The interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes. Please send me several dates and times that fall between MONTH XX and MONTH XX that would be most convenient for your schedule.

If you have any questions please call me at 847-925-6821 or send an email to friedlc@ferris.edu or cfriedlu@harpercollege.edu.

I hope to hear from you soon,

Courtney A. Friedlund
DCCL Student, Harper Cohort
Ferris State University