



**2021**  
**NASPA**  
**VIRTUAL SYMPOSIUM ON**  
**MILITARY-CONNECTED**  
**STUDENTS**

*Transfer and Military-Affiliated Community College Students*  
*Saralyn McKinnon-Crowley, The University of Texas at Austin*  
February 24-26, 2021 | Virtual

# Agenda for Today

- Learning Objectives
- Literature about Military-Connected Students
- Study Overview & Findings
- Implications for Practice & Future Research
- Discussion



---

#SMCS21

@NASPAtweets

---



# Learning Objectives

- Learn how military-affiliated students navigate the transfer process
- Discuss how military-affiliated students describe their identities and sense of belonging at the community college and, if applicable, their four-year institution
- Discuss how the lessons learned can apply to all students.

# Transfer Background

- Facilitating transfer to 4-year institutions one of key goals of community colleges (CC)
- While 80% of entering CC students aspire to obtain a bachelor's, only 25% transfer within 5 years
- Lots of research on transfer, but little research on transfer and military-affiliated students

(Grubb, 1991; Jenkins & Fink, 2016)

# Veterans in Higher Education

- High structure of military -> “organized anarchy” of higher education
- Changes: from active duty to “student” self-identity
- Strongly committed to higher education
  - “A necessary step to improving their lives as civilians after military service”
- Many joined military for educational funding

(Vacchi & Berger, 2014, p. 123; Cook & Kim, 2009, p. 21; Barr, 2016)

# Veterans and Staff Members

- Veterans preferred one-stop shop for military benefits
- Staff who understand VA system very helpful to students

(Brown & Gross, 2011; Persky & Oliver, 2010; Whikehart, 2010; DiRamio et al., 2008; Vacchi, 2012)



---

#SMCS21

@NASPAtweets

---



# Military Students and CCs

- Every CC in the U.S. enrolls active-duty military students, veteran students, or their dependents
- CCs have a variety of academic programs, offered at a low cost
- We don't know how students navigate the transfer process

(Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2018; Rumann et al., 2011)

# Poll

- Out of the military-connected students you work with, what percentage do you encounter that either have transferred from a CC to a 4-year or intend to transfer?
- <http://etc.ch/pDHz>
  - 0-25%
  - 25-50%
  - 50-75%
  - 75-100%
  - Don't know/unsure
- Results:
- <https://directpoll.com/r?XDbzPBd3ixYqg8p1WWUqFP1IMiN2YjHna2gtlylz>





# Our Study

- From a larger case study of 100+ transfer-intending CC students in Texas
  - 2015-2021
  - 2 CC systems: CCA & CCB
- Interviews and surveys
- Here, I focus on the 16 students in our study who were military-affiliated as of Year 3 of data collection
- First- and second-level coding
- Memos and triangulation

(Patton, 1990; Yin, 2015)

# Community Colleges: Shapeless River

- Community colleges are historically quite unstructured (“shapeless river”)
- Students are free to make their own decisions without consulting an advisor
  - Not always great!
- Structured staff meetings can help
  - Especially for low-income and/or first-generation students
- Guided pathways model seeking to change the lack of structure

(Scott-Clayton, 2011; Bailey et al., 2015)



---

#SMCS21

@NASPAtweets

---



# Limitations

- From larger study
  - Military-connected students not explicit focus
- Data from each student varied
  - 9/16 or 56.25%: 3 years of data
  - 2/16 or 12.50%: 2 years of data
  - 5/16 or 31.25%: 1 year of data

# Participant Demographics

Gender	Racial Self-Identity	Ethnicity Self-Identity	Whose Military Benefits?
Women: 62.5%	African American: 12.5%	African American: 12.5%	Own: 68.75%
Men: 37.5%	Asian: 12.5%	Asian: 6.25%	Parents': 31.25%
	Did not Report: 6.25%	Latina/o/x: 56.25%	
	Native American: 12.5%	White: 25%	
	White: 56.25%		

# Minute for Reflection

- What do you think we learned?
- What would you expect this population to say about navigating the transfer process?
- Take a minute to note down what you'll think we'll find
  - Or, put it in the chat
  - Plan to revisit during Discussion

# Findings: Transfer Rates

- Transferred by Year 3: **9/16** or 56.25%
  - Recall from earlier: 80% want a bachelor's, but only 25% transfer within 5 years
  - That's a high amount!
    - Relatively large rate of transfer inspired this study
- We wanted to know: why were these students transferring successfully?

(Jenkins & Fink, 2016)

# Findings

- Guardrails
  - Institutional support for military-connected students
- Financial Independence
  - Educational benefits
    - Pros/cons
- Identity Characteristics
  - Traits that can help with transfer

# Minute for Reflection

- Any surprises with these findings so far?
- Note your thoughts to yourself or in the chat.
  - Plan to revisit at the end of the presentation



# Findings: Guardrails

- Guardrails
  - Definition: Institutional supports that contribute to a successful transfer process
  - Degree plan & required courses (at least enough to reach full-time status)
  - Course choice matters a lot!
    - Wrong choice = no funding for a semester

# Findings: Guardrails

*For me, [my degree plan] mattered just because it's one of the VA requirements—that you have a degree plan and that you're following it. . . It's just one of the things that the VA has, just to make sure that you're spending the GI bill wisely, not just taking random classes just to get a living stipend or something like that. – “Gregory,” transfer*

# Findings: Guardrails

- Or, waiting to use benefits until applicability to career goal was assured
  - *Sometimes I want to pick [a course] for fun, but I can't really do that. I won't wanna waste my money . . . like, I'm dying to take another art class, but . . . it'd have to come out of pocket.* - “Olivia,” Voc Rehab benefits (transferred as of Year 5 of the study)

# Findings: Guardrails

- Contact between staff and students was required
  - VA advisor; academic advisor
  - Students highly valued that support
    - 2 did receive misinformation or not enough information
    - Talked to father about transfer and benefits rather than academic advisor because: *“I’m not allowed to go anywhere else. I could only stay with the veterans, but if I could . . . I mean, [I’d see] anybody who knows more about transfers than them, because they don’t know at all.”* “Martina,” transfer

# Findings: Guardrails

- Forced interactions between students and staff because of the VA benefits
  - Structured their community college experience
  - AND therefore their transfer experience
  - Optimal transfer behavior

# Findings: Financial Independence

- Independence because of governmental educational financing
- High structure in course selection = requirement for educational financing
  - Past labor/parents' labor for financial independence while in higher education
- Manifested in:
  - Earned benefits v. government money
  - Where to spend?
  - Careful planning

# Findings: Financial Independence

- Sense of responsibility regarding educational benefits:
  - “*I know it’s not exactly my money*” but wanted to be careful in spending it – Olivia
  - School as new vocation post-military
- But, there were inefficiencies in staying full-time to receive maximum benefits

# Findings: Financial Independence

- *“To get my full benefits from the GI Bill, like the housing allowance and stuff like that, [I] had to be full time. But I had gone as far as I could at [CCA], so I had to tack on two extra class[es] to be full time to get my full benefits, and those classes could be in anything.” – “Ryan,” Year 3 transfer*



# Findings: Financial Independence

- Trying to maximize benefits by using it only for most expensive education
  - *You get 36 months of school. So however you break that up, you know, like a semester is four months, there's four months down. You take summer, two and a half months or whatever, that subtracts that off. And that's why the first, I think, maybe first two semesters and I think the summer at [CCA], I didn't use the GI bill, because tuition at [CCA] is a lot cheaper, one-fifth what it is at [the four-year university]. So, I figured, if there was a chance I would run out of GI bill at [the four-year university], I'd rather not use it at [CCA]. So, I did that in order to make sure I would have enough GI bill to carry me through [to my master's degree]. - Gregory*

# Findings: Financial Independence

- Earned Benefits
  - Like a salary
  - NOT a handout
    - *“I just wanted to use the GI Bill because it is such a great benefit. I did my years, so I earned it. I felt like it would be foolish not to go back to school. I have free education.” – Gregory*

# Findings: Financial Independence

- Still, could be leery of using benefits at private school
  - *I don't want to go to a private school. I know my school's paid for; I still don't want to spend that money. You know, it's stupid to me. I don't want to spend that money on a private school. – “Veronica”*
- Insufficient book benefit (\$800 out of pocket)
  - *Then I turned everything in, and then of course I had to go get it approved, because the military has a cap on how much you can spend on education. Well, the school costs \$14,000 . . . well, it cost \$13,000 when I started, but it costs \$14,000 now, and it costs a [per] semester, so it was kind of expensive . . . That was the hardest process, is making sure that they would approve the program, the military. – Veronica*

# Findings: Identity Characteristics

- Defined as: the traits students possess that can impact their transfer process, positively or negatively
- Veteran students: easy transfer process
  - *“The military would give me directions. I had specific, straight to the point. If I have a problem, let me do my thing. If I have a problem I will raise my hand. I have no problem doing that.” - Olivia*

# Findings: Identity Characteristics

- Transfer could be easy
  - Transfer *“wasn't complicated. It's not like I'm applying to an Ivy League, you know.”* - “Mario,” Year 3 transfer
- Using parents' benefits could be more complicated:
  - *“I had to resubmit all my paperwork”* upon transfer and was *“super frustrating”* *“annoying”* *“aggravating”*
    - “Reilly,” Year 3 transfer
- Felt older and more mature than other students
  - Made friends through veterans' or transfer groups

# Poll

- One-word reflection on what you've learned so far:  
[PollEv.com/saralynmckin318](https://PollEv.com/saralynmckin318)
- Can skip submitting your name
- Can submit multiple times

# Discussion

- Military benefits created structure for students absent elsewhere
    - Forced to pursue optimal transfer strategy
      - Degree plan
      - Advanced planning (destination institutions)
        - Triangulation
      - Staff interactions
  - But, no/limited room for degree experimentation
    - Locked into particular path, for better or worse
- (Scott-Clayton, 2011)

# Breakout Rooms (5 Minutes)

- Introduce yourselves, if you feel comfortable
- What resonates with you and your experiences?
- Is there any way to apply the findings from this study in your own practice? Why or why not?



# Whole-Group Reflection Questions

- Any volunteers to share what you discussed in small groups?
- Are there any additional implications of this work we may not have considered?
- What else do you want to know about the students in this study?
- Revisiting the chat, if applicable
- What general questions do you have?

# Thanks to My Collaborators

- Eliza Epstein, Huriya Jabbar, & Lauren Schudde
  - Andrea Chevalier, Wesley Edwards, Marisol Garza, Catherine Hartman, Joanna Sánchez, and Elif Yucel contributed to data collection
- This research was funded by the Greater Texas Foundation as part of the Texas Transfer Project.

# References

- Bailey, T., Jaggars, S. S., & Davis, J. (2015). *Redesigning America's community colleges: A clearer path to student success*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Barr, A. (2016). Enlist or enroll: Credit constraints, college aid, and the military enlistment margin. *Economics of Education Review*, 51, 61–78. doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2015.06.003
- Brown, P. A., & Gross, C. (2011). Serving those who have served—Managing veteran and military student best practices. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 59(1), 45–49. doi:10.1080/07377363.2011.544982
- Crisp, G., & Nuñez, A.-M. (2014). Understanding the racial transfer gap: Modeling underrepresented minority and nonminority students' pathways from two-to four-year institutions. *Review of Higher Education*, 37(3), 291–320. doi:10.1353/rhe.2014.0017
- Jenkins, D. (2018, July). *From articulation agreements to regional talent pathways partnerships*. Presentation at the San Antonio/Austin Regional Summer Transfer Pathway Forum, San Marcos, TX.
- Jenkins, D., & Fink, J. (2016). *Tracking transfer: New measures of institutional and state effectiveness in helping community college students attain bachelor's degrees*. New York, NY: Community College Research Center, Aspen Institute, and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.
- Jones, K. C. (2017). Understanding transition experiences of combat veterans attending community college. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 41(2), 107–123. doi:10.1080/10668926.2016.1163298
- Ma, J., & Baum, S. (2016). *Trends in community college: Enrollment, prices, student debt, and completion*. New York, NY: The College Board. Retrieved from <https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/trends-in-community-colleges-research-brief.pdf>
- McKinnon-Crowley, S., Epstein, E., Jabbar, H., & Schudde, L. (2019). Crossing the shapeless river on a government craft: How military-affiliated students navigate community college transfer. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*. 43(10–11), 756–769. doi: 10.1080/10668926.2019.1600613
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Morrill, S. M. (2017). *From benefits to service: Post-9/11 student veterans' educational outcomes at a Texas community college* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX. Retrieved from <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/47301/MORRILL-DISSERTATION-2017.pdf>
- Olson, K. W. (1973). The GI Bill and higher education: Success and surprise. *American Quarterly*, 25(5), 596–610.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.
- Persky, K. R., & Oliver, D. E. (2010). Veterans coming home to the community college: Linking research to practice. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 35(1–2), 111–120. doi:10.1080/10668926.2011.525184
- Rumann, C. B., & Hamrick, F. A. (2010). Student veterans in transition: Re-enrolling after war zone deployments. *Journal of Higher Education*, 81(4), 431–458. doi:10.1353/jhe.0.0103
- Rumann, C. B., Rivera, M., & Hernandez, I. (2011). Student veterans and community colleges. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2011(155), 51–58. doi:10.1002/cc.457
- Scott-Clayton, J. (2011). *The shapeless river: Does a lack of structure inhibit students' progress at community college?* (Working Paper No. 25). New York, NY: Community College Research Center.
- Shaw, K. M., & London, H. B. (2001). Culture and ideology in keeping transfer commitment: Three community colleges. *Review of Higher Education*, 25(1), 91–114. doi:10.1353/rhe.2001.0015
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (n.d.). Forever GI Bill - Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act. Retrieved from <https://www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/FGIBSummaries.asp>
- Vacchi, D. T. (2012). Considering student veterans on the twenty-first-century college campus. *About Campus*, 17(2), 15–21. doi:10.1002/Abc.21075
- Vacchi, D. T., & Berger, J. B. (2014). Student veterans in higher education. In M. B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 29, pp. 93–151). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer Science+Business Media.
- Wassmer, R., Moore, C., & Shulock, N. (2004). Effect of racial/ethnic composition on transfer rates in community colleges: Implications for policy and practice. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(6), 651–672. doi:10.1023/B:RIHE.0000040267.68949.d1
- Wheeler, H. A. (2012). Veterans' transitions to community college: A case study. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 36(10), 775–792. doi:10.1080/10668926.2012.679457
- Whitehart, J. (2010). Mission graduation: A student military and veteran organization. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 34(11), 920–922. doi:10.1080/10668926.2010.509261
- Williams-Klotz, D. N., & Gansemer-Topf, A. M. (2017). Identifying the camouflage: Uncovering and supporting the transition experiences of military and veteran students. *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 29(1), 83–98. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=E11139413>
- Williams-Klotz, D. N., & Gansemer-Topf, A. M. (2018). Examining factors related to academic success of military-connected students at community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 42(6), 422–438. doi:10.1080/10668926.2017.1339647
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

# Thank YOU!

- [saralyn@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:saralyn@austin.utexas.edu) with any questions/comments
- Check out our website at: [sites.edb.utexas.edu/texas-transfer-project/](https://sites.edb.utexas.edu/texas-transfer-project/)



---

#SMCS21

@NASPAtweets

---

