Program Services for Veteran Students in North Carolina Community Colleges: Perceptions of Administrators and Students

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Over 2,000,000 servicemen and servicewomen returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will take advantage of the educational benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and will enroll in community colleges. Despite over 70 years of education benefits for U.S. veterans, there has been little research into the availability and effectiveness of institutional support programs and policies on U.S. college campuses, especially at the community college level. Typically, social support services for veteran students have been examined predominantly at four-year institutions. Goodman and Hoppin (1990) identified that support needs to include encouragement, information, referrals, door openers, and practical help. Sources of social support include intimate relationships, family members, friends, and membership institutions and communities (Goodman et al., 2006; House et al., 1988; Procidano & Heller, 1983; Schlossberg, 1981, 1984; Schlossberg et al., 1995). This study examined the types of institutional support services provided by North Carolina community colleges for veterans, veteran students' frequency of use, and perceived importance of these services. Veteran students' responses were compared with college administrators' perceptions of students' use of such services. Overall, the types and number of services varied widely among colleges with a small group offering a considerable array of services for veterans. The comparison of the perceptions of veteran students and administrators on the use of offered services provides insights on possible priorities for each group and possible changes for the future.

To facilitate reintroduction into mainstream America, many veterans will need to acquire new skills, knowledge, and credentials. The need to prepare for the influx of veterans to college campuses has received widespread attention by higher education institutions, with many initiating

new programs and services and/or expanding existing ones to serve this student population (American Council on Education, 2009). Though an increasing number of articles explore veteran experiences from post-9/11, they predominantly provide information on unique needs of veterans with combat-related physical and psychological issues, traumatic brain injury (TBI), alcohol abuse, and relationship problems (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; O'Herrin, 2011; Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011; Smith-Osborne, 2009). Few focus on perceptions of educational support services for veterans.

Several studies are situated in educational settings but concentrate on the impact of veterans' physical and psychological issues (Barry et al., 2012; Elliott et al., 2011; Whiteman & Barry, 2011; Widome et al., 2011). Other studies focus on the needs of returning veterans to help educational institutions develop policies and programs; however, they looked primarily at experiences at four-year institutions (DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott et al., 2011; Livingston et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Sargent, 2009; Whiteman et al., 2013). Only a handful of studies have focused on community college students (Barnhart, 2011; Persky & Oliver, 2011; Savage & Smith, 2008; Wheeler, 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Though there is a growing body of research on returning veterans, there is a dearth of information on the types of support services institutions offer veterans and perceptions of administrators and veterans regarding those services.

Community colleges enroll almost 40% of the 20,712 veterans returning to North Carolina postsecondary institutions. According to M. Wells, Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Policy & Planning, National Center for Veterans Analysis & Statistics (personal communication, November 16, 2012), from August 1, 2009, through January 23, 2012, a total of 8,255 trainees (veterans, active duty, and dependents) utilized Post-9/11 GI Bill educational benefits at 55 of the 58 North Carolina community colleges.

Transitioning to college is among the most difficult adjustments that veterans will make when returning from wartime service (DiRamio et al., 2008). It is imperative that community colleges not only provide access to educational opportunities, but that they also establish programs, policies, and procedures to ensure that veterans accomplish their educational goals, thereby facilitating acclimation to civilian life and attainment of a better future. This study sought to understand how to enable persistence of veteran students at North Carolina community colleges through institutional support mechanisms.

Theoretical Framework

Though this study was descriptive in nature, the lens used for the study's theoretical view relates to Astin's (1993) notion of social support. Social support may come from family, peers, or programs set up by an institution to provide a variety of processes, information, or materials that help students and improve student support (social, academic, financial, occupational counseling, etc.). DiRamio et al. (2008) contend that shortages or lack of informational support are evident in the lack of guidance and information provided to veteran students to negotiate institutional infrastructure and bureaucracy, which is necessary to obtain their benefits as they enter a world new to many.

Jacobson (1986) shares three aspects of social support: emotional, cognitive, and material. These form the lens of our framework for this study. Emotional support refers to behavior that promotes feelings of comfort and leads individuals to believe they are admired and/or respected. Cognitive support refers to information, knowledge, or advice that may help students better navigate their academic world. Material support includes goods and/or services that may help students resolve problems that can arise via institutional bureaucracy. In this study, emotional support services could include veteran recognition activities or veteran student lounges. Cognitive support could include academic advising or academic tutoring. Material support could include such programs as financial aid counseling, employee assistance, and orientations.

Research has consistently reported social support as an important factor in veteran student adjustment to higher education; however, in these same studies, veteran students indicated a lack of both institutional and peer support (DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott et al., 2011; Livingston et al., 2011; Persky & Oliver, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Weber's (2012) study of veteran students at Arizona State University reported that social support was a significant predictor of persistence, and participants who made use of more campus programs and services indicated more positive persistence decisions. Though social support has been examined with undergraduate students and veterans, the emotional support mechanisms are primarily studied and typically at four-year institutions. Few studies have focused on institutional support programs and services for veterans attending community colleges.

Literature Review

Social support among military personnel is considerable both during and after active service (Barber et al., 2008; Laffaye et al., 2008). Qualitative

research has consistently reported that social support is an important factor that influences veteran student adjustment to higher education but has also reported that veteran students perceive a lack of informational or emotional support from peers (DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott et al., 2011; Livingston et al., 2011; Persky & Oliver, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). While qualitative research has revealed the significance of social support for veteran students, there is a paucity of quantitative studies investigating social support among this population (Whiteman et al., 2013), especially on community college campuses.

The American Council on Education sponsored two studies (Cook & Kim, 2009; McBain et al., 2012) to gauge the preparedness of American higher education to serve veteran students. The initial research (Cook & Kim, 2009) was the first national effort to gather information on institutional programs, policies, and services that were in place and planned. The follow-up research (McBain et al., 2012) was a collaborative effort with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AAS-CU); NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education; and the National Association of Veterans' Program Administrators (NAVPA). Its findings, when compared with the earlier findings, provide a portrait of the impact and influx of returning veterans and how postsecondary institutions are responding.

Of the 690 responding institutions, 238, or 34%, were public two-year institutions. They found that institutions with larger veteran populations were more likely to have in place veteran-specific programs and services (especially services such as staff training, a dedicated office, and targeted recruiting efforts). The presence of veteran-specific programs and services was also related to whether veteran students were included in the institution's strategic plan. In 2012, 70% of the responding public two-year institutions included veterans in their strategic plan (compared to 68% in 2009); despite this 2% increase, the percentage of two-year institutions with veteran-specific initiatives declined 8%, from 67% in 2009 to 59% in 2012. In 2012, community colleges explored private funding for campus programs (27.8%), established a department (33.5%), increased budgets for programs and services (27.8%), provided professional development for faculty (43.6%) and staff (54.6%), trained counseling staff (43.2%), increased staff (40.5%), and increased the number of programs and services (49.3%).

In November 2012, NASPA and InsideTrack combined an online survey with interviews to gauge efforts undertaken by institutions to track veteran student progress and outcomes and what they were providing in

the way of student support and perceived effectiveness of these practices. Of the responding 239 institutions (of 1,162 invited), 33 of the respondents were public two-year colleges. Nearly 75% had dedicated offices and/or personnel specifically for veteran and active duty students; nearly 67% offered professional development to faculty and staff to address the unique needs of this population; and most had various initiatives to promote success (NASPA Research and Policy Institute & InsideTrack, 2013).

Noting that involvement in campus organizations, something that is lacking on community college campuses, Summerlot et al. (2009) discussed the role that student veterans' organizations (SVOs) can play in the development of a sense of community, and therefore connection, among veteran students. Based on their personal experiences as veterans along with conversations with veteran students around the country, the researchers categorized campus climates as either supportive, ambivalent, or challenging toward veteran students. Community colleges as commuter campuses with large nontraditional student populations were characterized as ambivalent—settings where veteran students lack a connection to the campus and find little or no recognition or campus-based support services. It is in this type of setting that SVOs can play a crucial role, providing much-needed support services and programs in the form of networking, peer mentoring, and advocacy efforts that enable veterans to connect with fellow veteran students and facilitate the transition to and success in the academic environment.

Community College Initiatives

The Veterans Center at Lee College provides support and up-to-date information on VA benefits and important events such as job fairs, job openings, and internship opportunities. In addition to providing a friendly environment where veterans can interact with each other, the Veterans Center provides services such as academic support (Individual Education Plan, placement tests, academic advising/referrals, transfer assistance, academic success workshops, computer and internet access, veterans library for school books, evaluation of military transcripts to provide maximum credit through Lee College and College Credit for Heroes program), veterans educational benefits advising/certification, and moral/mental health support (mentoring, career guidance, peer-to-peer individual/group tutoring, basic individualized counseling and referral for PTSD, TBI, etc.) (Lee College, 2013).

Green River Community College (GRCC) in Auburn, Washington, created a Veterans Coordinating Council to bring college stakeholders together to address academic and support services for veterans on cam-

pus. GRCC provides assistance with financial aid, Veterans Services-GI Bill paperwork, enrollment services, advising, campus orientation, and vet-friendly posters and training sessions. GRCC also offers academic initiatives (VCC program), counseling and disability support resources, symbolic events such as celebrations on Veterans Day and Memorial Day and a coin ceremony to honor veterans, and statewide and national presentations (student panels) (Green River Community College, 2013).

Cape Fear Community College (CFCC) in North Carolina offers a Summer Institute for Returning Veterans, veteran-to-veteran mentoring and tutoring programs; a Veterans Day celebration; the displaying of "veteran friendly" stickers on faculty and staff doors; and dedicated staff members such as the Veterans Affairs Coordinator, Veterans Affairs Office, and Student Affairs office with counselors trained in different areas of expertise. CFCC's Bob Philpott Veterans Center provides a place for veteran students to meet, study, get assistance with registration and advising, and be with other veteran students (Philpott, 2012).

Citrus College in California is the first college in the nation to offer a transition course for veteran students to assist them in their military-to-civilian-life transition: "Boots to Books," a veterans-teaching-veterans program. Citrus also provides the following programs and services in support of its veteran student population: Academic Battle Buddies (ABB) Mentors Program; a three-credit course, Counseling 161: Higher Education Transitional Skills for Veterans and Families; a veteran-specific orientation; acknowledgment events such as Saluting Our Veterans; support counseling for PTSD, TBI, and military sexual assault, as well as marriage counseling; dedicated veteran tutoring services; a Veteran Student Ambassador; Veterans Book Fund, sustained by donations and employee payroll deductions, to help veteran students pay for their textbooks; and Veterans Network for social networking and community service. Their Veterans Center offers veteran students a place to meet, receive the latest veteran benefits information, coordinate with their Veterans Network (club), have workshops, and meet with veterans' service organizations (Chappell, 2010; Citrus College, 2013).

Clackamas Community College in Oregon opened a Veterans Education and Training Center to provide guidance on service-earned health and education benefits, workshops, and dedicated space for socializing and studying. The center is also the meeting place twice a month for the campus' veterans' club, a source for fellowship and support (Chappell, 2010).

Research Questions

1. What institutional support services are provided by North Carolina community colleges to facilitate the educational experience of veteran students?
2. What are veteran students' ratings (in terms of importance and frequency of use) of selected institutional support programs and services?
3. How do veterans' ratings of frequency of use of institutional support services and programs compare with college administrators' perceptions of veteran students' use of these programs and services?

Methods

Design

This study used a descriptive design with two surveys (one for administrators and one for students) to collect data and report findings using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and percentages).

Administrator Sample and Questionnaire

A letter was sent to each of the 58 North Carolina community college presidents explaining the research and requesting their institution's participation. Thirty presidents responded to the invitation; 25 agreed to participate. Three of the participating community colleges required the researcher to complete the college's institutional review board (IRB) application, in addition to the IRB application submitted to and approved by the researcher's own institution.

Of the 25 consenting colleges, 13 college administrators completed and submitted usable surveys. Directors of institutional research of the 13 colleges were sent a questionnaire to provide basic demographic information on their college. They were also asked to forward the next part of the survey to the appropriate administrator who worked with veteran programs and services. That individual provided information on the specific programs offered for veterans at their institution and rated their perception of frequency of use estimates for each service by veteran students.

Veteran Student Sample and Questionnaire

Each participating college provided a list of veterans attending their institution; the combined sample consisted of 2,685 names with email addresses. The final number of completed student surveys was 348 for a response rate of approximately 12%.

The questionnaire asked respondents for demographic information, to rate their frequency of use for selected veteran services (often, sometimes, rarely, or NA/unknown), and to rate their perception of the importance of each service (very, somewhat, or not all all). The programs/services listed were academic advising/planning, tutoring for veterans, career planning, employment assistance, financial aid counseling, orientation, VA education benefits, vet recognition activities, vet student lounge/service center, and website/portal.

Limitations

The survey was designed and implemented to minimize measurement error and encourage people to respond. The contact strategy incorporated a presurvey announcement and intentionally timed follow-up contacts to help in the collection of as many responses as possible; design elements were standardized and consistent to ensure all options had an equal chance of being selected; there was consistency in scaling methods, and all answer scales were fully labeled so as not to leave anything open for interpretation.

While survey design and implementation efforts were made to minimize measurement error, certain elements beyond the control of the researcher introduced other limitations. Identification of members of the target population of veteran students was difficult; there was not a clearly defined population at each college. The quantity of undeliverable messages and mail pieces called into question the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the lists provided by the colleges. When reviewing the results, one must keep in mind that the findings are only from those who responded, not the entire population. The perceptions of those who did not respond may differ from those who did participate in the study. In addition, three of the colleges accounted for 80% (n = 6208) of the veteran students in the sample; the findings could, therefore, be more influenced by these three colleges.

Data Analysis

Research question 1 is a descriptive question that sought to provide information on what veteran-specific programs and services are offered by each of the community colleges. In addition to identifying the programs and services, the data provided insight into the variation in offerings across community college campuses. Data from each of the three open-ended descriptive questions that addressed campus characteristics (distance in miles from the nearest military facility, institutional enrollment of veteran students, and veteran students as a percentage of total

enrollments) were analyzed by calculating the distribution of responses, mean, and standard error. Data for each of the remaining close-ended, multiple choice questions were analyzed by tabulating the frequency of each response.

Research question 2 is a descriptive question that sought to provide information on veteran students' perceived importance of various programs and services and their use of those offered at their institution.

Research question 3 is a descriptive question that sought to compare the perspectives of veteran students and community college administrators regarding the use of veteran-specific programs and services. Frequency responses from close-ended, multiple-choice questions on both the administrator and student surveys were compared.

Results

Colleges

Total curriculum enrollments (associate degrees, diplomas, certificates, pathway, and transitional programs) per college for fall 2014 obtained from the North Carolina Community College System's Curriculum/Continuing Education Information System (2015) ranged from 1,186 to 21,582 (Table 1).

The 13 colleges in this study reported 7,715 veteran students in curricular programs (college #13 did not have any reported data on enrollment). Using the National Center for Education Statistics' IPEDS Data Center (2014), the 13 responding colleges' locales (degree of urbanization) can be classified as follows: two colleges (15.4%) were considered City: Small, one college (7.7%) was City: Midsize, three colleges (23%) were Rural: Distant, three colleges (23.1%) were Rural: Fringe, one college (7.7%) was Suburb: Large, and three colleges (23.1%) were Town: Distant.

Three of the colleges (#1, #2, and #6) had 80% (n = 6208) of the veteran students in the sample. The classification of those three colleges (City: Small, City: Midsize, and Suburbs: Large) represented 30.3% of the colleges in this study. In North Carolina, those same classifications constitute 26.5% of all community colleges in the state. Thus, the distribution of those classifications in the study sample are reasonably similar to the distribution of those same classifications across all North Carolina community colleges. Two of the 13 colleges (#1 and #2) were less than 10 miles from a military base.

Of those colleges that had veteran-specific programs and services, the two most prevalent programs and services were VA education benefits

counseling and veteran recognition activities, followed by academic services such as advising and support/tutoring. In addition, two colleges collaborated with community organizations to provide additional health and employment assistance. One college partnered with the local medical system to provide referrals for students who needed personal counseling, and another college hosted a job fair in partnership with the Employment Security Commission and the local Office of Veteran Services.

The college with the largest veteran student population in terms of total curricular enrollment and veteran enrollment as a percentage of total enrollment (college #2) offered the most services and programs (10) specifically for veterans. The colleges with the second-largest and third-largest veteran student populations in terms of enrollments (colleges #6 and #1, respectively) offered the second- and third-highest number of services and programs (#6 and #4, respectively) (Table 2). Not surprising, the colleges with the highest veteran enrollment offered the most veteran-specific programs.

Table 1. *Each College's Demographics, Distance to Nearest Military Facility, and Veteran Student Enrollment*

Institution	Total Enrollment (Curriculum)	Locale (Degree of Urbanization)	Distance (miles) to Nearest Military Facility	Number of Veteran Students	Veteran Students as % of Total Enrollment
College 1	3,048	City: Small	1	1,049	-
College 2	12,337	City: Midsize	9	3,094	25
College 3	4,018	Rural: Fringe	30	400	10
College 4	1,357	Rural: Distant	35	80	18
College 5	1,223	Rural: Distant	40	100	10
College 6	21,582	Suburbs: Large	49	2,065	6
College 7	2,031	Rural: Fringe	52	100	4
College 8	4,627	Rural: Fringe	74	131	2
College 9	3,618	Town: Distant	113	80	2
College 10	1,186	Town: Distant	240	16	1
College 11	7,558	City: Small	250	100	17
College 12	3,303	Rural: Distant	250	500	7
College 13	2,463	Town: Distant	-	-	-

Table 2. *Services and Programs Specifically for Veteran Students*

Programs and Services	# of Colleges	% of Colleges
VA education benefits counseling	7	54%
Veteran recognition activities	6	46%
Academic advising	4	31%
Academic support/tutoring	4	31%
Financial aid counseling	3	23%
Campus social and/or cultural events	2	15%
Career planning/career services	2	15%
Employment assistance	2	15%
Website/portal	2	15%
Other	2	15%
Transition assistance	1	8%
Veteran student lounge or gathering place	1	8%
Orientation	0	0%
None	0	0%

The college with the largest veteran student population in terms of total curricular enrollment and veteran enrollment as a percentage of total enrollment (college #2) offered the most services and programs (10) specifically for veterans. The colleges with the second-largest and third-largest veteran student populations in terms of enrollments (colleges #6 and #1, respectively in Table 1) offered the second-highest and third-highest number of services and programs (#6 and #4, respectively) (Table 2 and Table 3). Not surprising, the colleges with the highest veteran enrollments offered the most veteran-specific programs. As seen in Table 3, the most prevalent service for veterans was VA educational benefits counseling with 7 of the 13 community colleges providing that for veteran students. Interestingly, the second most offered program was veteran recognition activities. What is surprising is that the most important service, according to veterans (with almost 75% rating it as very important—financial aid counseling), was offered by only three colleges. Similarly, the third most important service, according to veterans (with almost 65% rating it as very important—a veterans student lounge), was provided at just one institution.

Veteran Student Demographics

The majority of the sample was White (62%), male (70.5%), married (56%), enrolled full-time at the college (76.7%), and planned to re-enroll the next semester (83.6%). Slightly less than half (49.0%) began college

Table 3. *Services and Programs Specifically for Veteran Students by College*

Programs and Services	College Number and Veteran Student Enrollment												
	1 1049	2 3094	3 400	4 80	5 100	6 2065	7 100	8 131	9 80	10 16	11 100	12 500	13 N/A
VA educ benefits counseling	-	x	x	-	x	x	-	x	-	x	-	-	x
Vet recognition activities	-	x	x	-	x	-	x	x	x	-	-	-	-
Academic advising	x	-	-	-	-	x	x	-	-	-	-	-	x
Academic tutoring	x	-	-	-	x	x	x	-	-	-	-	-	-
Financial aid counseling	-	x	-	-	-	x	-	x	-	-	-	-	-
Campus social/cultural events	x	x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Career planning/services	x	x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Employment assistance	-	x	-	-	-	x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Website/portal	-	x	-	-	-	x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other	-	x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Transition assistance	-	x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Vet student lounge	-	x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Orientation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
None	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

at the institution they were currently attending. The number of full-time versus part-time students was more than three-to-one. The average age of the group was 35.3 with an average active duty time of 8.4 years and an average of 2.3 deployments during their service. In terms of branch of service, the largest contingent of veterans was Army; this is no surprise since Fort Bragg and its associated schools and air support units is one of the larger bases in the United States.

Table 4. *Student Demographics*

Variable	Category	Percent
Gender	Male	70.5
	Female	29.5
Race	American Indian, Native American, or Alaska Native	0.3
	Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander	1.6
	Native Hawaiian	0.8
	Black or African American, Non-Hispanic	23.5
	White, Non-Hispanic	62.3
	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish	5.5
	Other	6.0
Married	Yes	56.1
	No	43.9
Children Living at Home	Yes	48.0
	No	52.1
Started College	Began at their current college	49.0
	Began college elsewhere	51.0
Enrollment Status	Full-time	76.7
	Part-time	23.3
Plan to Re-enroll	Next semester	83.6
	Not next semester, but within the next 12 months	7.3
	No current plan to return	2.8
	Uncertain	6.3
Military Branch	Air Force	9.7
	Army	59.5
	Coast Guard	1.6
	Marine Corps	18.7
	Navy	10.6

College Administrator Responses

Table 5 compares veteran students' ratings (in terms of importance and frequency of use) of institutional support programs and services with college administrator perceptions of veteran student use of these programs and services. College administrators were not asked to rate their perceived importance of the support programs and services, but from their responses to their perceptions of veteran student use of these programs and services, one can deduce the administrator perceptions of program and service importance (i.e., perceived high usage would translate to perceived high importance).

Of the participating colleges, administrators indicated that their institutions currently have programs and services specifically designed for veteran students. The two most offered programs and services were VA education benefits counseling and veteran recognition activities (offered at seven and six colleges, respectively); these were followed by academic advising and academic tutoring (each offered by four colleges), financial aid counseling (three colleges), career planning/career services, employment assistance, and website/portal (each offered by two colleges), and veteran student lounge/service center (one college). However, when asked to estimate the veteran student usage rate of these services, a larger number of administrators provided responses than had indicated that their colleges even offered veteran-specific services. The administrator usage estimates in some cases reflect veteran use of these services, whether they were veteran-specific or offered for the general student population.

College administrators estimated that the three most widely used services were VA education benefits counseling (used "often" by 100%), financial aid counseling (used "often" by 88%), and academic advising (used "often" by 86%). The least utilized service, according to administrators, was a veteran student lounge/service center ("not applicable" by 86%).

Veteran Student Responses

The three most widely used services reported by veteran students were financial aid counseling (used "often" by 36.2%), VA education benefits counseling (used "often" by 23.8%), and a veteran student lounge/service center (used "often" by 20.9%). The least utilized service was academic tutoring, which 60.3% of responding students indicated they rarely or never used and an additional 25.2% indicated was not applicable.

Perhaps more revealing than student use of institutional support programs and services was students' perceived importance of these same programs and services. As indicated with the data of this study, there

Table 5. *Comparison of Administrator and Student Responses on Use of Institutional Support Services*

Programs and Services	No. of colleges that offer	Colleges' Estimations of Veteran Students' Use					Veteran Students' Usage				Importance to Veteran Students		
		N =	Often	Sometimes	Rarely/Never	N/A	Often	Sometimes	Rarely/Never	N/A	Very	Somewhat	Not at All
Academic advising	4	7	86%	14%	0%	0%	15.2%	40.8%	40.2%	3.8%	61.9%	30.0%	8.1%
Academic tutoring	4	7	29%	71%	0%	0%	4.5%	10.0%	60.3%	25.2%	38.8%	34.5%	26.8%
Career planning/services	2	7	29%	57%	14%	0%	10.4%	25.0%	57.0%	7.6%	51.9%	34.7%	13.4%
Employment assistance	2	7	14%	57%	0%	29%	7.3%	15.9%	56.5%	20.3%	60.6%	23.6%	15.8%
Financial aid counseling	3	8	88%	0%	13%	0%	36.2%	31.4%	28.2%	4.1%	74.6%	18.2%	7.3%
Orientation	0	7	57%	43%	0%	0%	7.3%	13.0%	54.9%	24.8%	43.1%	33.8%	23.1%
VA education benefits counseling	7	10	100%	0%	0%	0%	23.8%	30.8%	37.2%	8.3%	70.9%	18.6%	10.5%
Vet recognition activities	6						9.2%	14.3%	54.6%	21.9%	46.1%	28.1%	25.8%
Vet student lounge/service center	1	7	14%	0%	0%	86%	20.9%	26.7%	40.9%	11.5%	64.6%	21.4%	14.0%
Website/portal	2						9.9%	28.0%	48.0%	14.3%	42.9%	36.4%	20.7%

does not seem to be widespread implementation of institutional support programs among most North Carolina community colleges. If the programs and services are not available to students on their campuses, then they cannot make use of them. Students' perceived importance, however, indicates the value of these services, and this information may be useful for community college administrators as they conduct strategic planning.

The three most important institutional support programs and services according to veteran students were financial aid counseling (rated "very important" by 74.6% of responding veteran students), VA education benefits counseling (rated "very important" by 70.9% of responding veteran students), and a veteran student lounge/service center (rated "very important" by 64.6% of responding veteran students). The support service rated least important was academic tutoring (rated "not important at all" by 26.8% of responding veteran students).

Student responses were consistent for frequency of use and perceived importance. The three most frequently used services were also viewed as the most important by students: financial aid counseling, VA education benefits counseling, and a veteran student lounge/service center. Similarly, the least-used service held the lowest value to veteran students—academic tutoring. What is interesting is that for most support services, the percentage of students that ranked the service as "very important" was approximately twice the percentage of those who used the service frequently. For financial aid counseling, 36.2% indicated they used the service frequently, yet 74.6% rated that service as "very important." For VA education benefits counseling, 23.8% indicated they used the service frequently, but 70.9% rated it as "very important." For a veteran student lounge/service center, 20.9% used the service frequently, yet 64.6% rated it as "very important."

Comparison of Administrator and Student Responses

The data highlight a disconnect between administrator perceptions of institutional support service use and actual use by veteran students. With the exception of a veteran student lounge/service center of which administrators underestimated the use, responding administrators overestimated the use of institutional support services. The greatest discrepancy occurred in the use of academic advising. Administrators estimated that this service was used often 86% of the time, whereas 15.2% of students indicated they used this service often. Administrators overestimated the use of this service by 70.8%. One redeeming point is that, overall, administrators' estimates were closer to students' importance ratings, but they were still not aligned.

There was agreement between the two groups that the two most widely used services were VA education benefits counseling and financial aid counseling. However, administrators estimated that these services were used often by 100% and 88% of students, respectively, whereas 23.8% and 36.2% of students indicated they used these services often. Administrator estimates were closer to the 70.9% and 74.6% of students who indicated that VA education benefits counseling and financial aid counseling, respectively, were very important; however, administrators still overestimated the value of these services.

Another disparity was related to use of a veteran student lounge/service center. According to administrators, this was the least used service, yet veteran students indicated this was their third most used and most valued service (65%).

The comparison of administrator perceptions of use and veteran students' actual use and valuation is meaningful for two reasons. First, it provides a reality check for community college administrators, and second, it provides direction. Community colleges need accurate information on the use and preferences of institutional support services by their veteran students so that budgeting and resource allocation decisions may be correctly targeted. The insights provided by students should help administrators prioritize their dollars, personnel, and efforts toward the most crucial services that assist veteran students. These findings also illuminate the need to establish more effective data gathering processes and mechanisms for the identification and tracking of veteran students and the services they value most.

Results in Light of Similar National Studies

To provide a comparative perspective for veterans' services offered by institutions in this study, the researcher examined similar data from two national studies. The first was performed by Cook and Kim (2009) on behalf of the American Council on Education (ACE). Their study assessed the status of programs and services for veteran students at college campuses across the country. Though much more extensive than this study, it did provide information on services and programs offered for veteran students by colleges similar to those in this study. Because data from the 723 post-secondary institutions that responded to their survey was broken down by institutional type, the research was able to examine their results for community colleges (*n* = 212).

The second national study was conducted by Queen and Lewis (2014) on behalf of the National Center for Educational Statistics and looked at

service and support programs offered for veterans at educational institutions. Of the 1,520 responding institutions, 510 were community colleges, which is what was used for comparative purposes.

In the current study, approximately 77% of North Carolina community colleges in the sample offered programs and services specifically designed for veteran students. This was greater than the national average of 65.6% that Cook and Kim (2009) found in their national study. However, Table 6 demonstrates that a far smaller percentage of North Carolina community colleges in this study's sample offered each of the services when compared to the national averages of the two national studies by Cook and Kim (2009) and Queen and Lewis (2014). The area that exhibited the greatest difference was VA benefits counseling, where 54% of North Carolina community colleges offered this service compared to approximately 85% of colleges from the two national studies. When a disparity of this magnitude exists between the North Carolina colleges and a national sample of colleges for a service that 70% of the veteran students in this study's sample considered important, retention of this group may be impacted. Additionally, it may be a signal to administrators to examine more closely veteran services at their institutions.

Table 6. *Comparison of NC Community Colleges' Veteran-Specific Services with Two National Studies*

	NC– Current Study	Nationwide– Cook & Kim	Nationwide– Queen & Lewis
Programs and Services		N = 139	N = 510
VA education benefits counseling	54%	86.3%	85%
Veteran recognition activities	46%	-	-
Academic advising	31%	57.6%	45%
Academic support/tutoring	31%	38.8%	24%
Financial aid counseling	23%	56.1%	49%
Campus social and/or cultural events	15%	33.8%	-
Career planning/career services	15%	38.8%	27%
Employment assistance	15%	54.0%	22%
Website/portal	15%	-	-
Other	15%	10.1%	-
Transition assistance	8%	19.4%	-
Veteran student lounge/gathering place	8%	11.5%	32%
Orientation	0%	-	26%
None	0%	1.4%	-

Another area where wide disparity exists is financial aid counseling. The two national studies range from 49% to 56%, but for this study's sample, only 23% of the colleges offered veteran-specific financial aid counseling. When considering all services/programs listed in Table 6, North Carolina community colleges were lower in all categories compared to community colleges from the two national studies. Though 77% of the North Carolina community colleges offered veteran-specific services/programs, only three colleges offered a variety and mix of programs, and the others either had none or only a few.

The data from one of the open-ended questions asked in this study indicated that only 38% of the colleges in the sample currently included services or programs designed for veterans in their long-term strategic plan.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The North Carolina community colleges need to embrace words offered by California State University Chancellor Charlie Reed at the 2008 American Council on Education Annual Meeting, "do an assessment of how you're doing with programs and services for service members and veterans. You won't find a pretty picture. What you will find is that you need to reorganize and reprioritize" (Cook & Kim, 2009, p. iii).

Implications for Policy Makers

It is recommended that the State Board of Community Colleges mandate that a veterans' database at both the system and individual college levels be established and implemented. The Executive Order, "Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses and Other Family Members," signed by President Obama in April 2012, stipulates that any college that receives federal veteran education benefits must provide outcomes data (Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges, 2012; The White House, 2012). To provide outcomes data, colleges must first be able to identify and track their veteran students. At the time of this study, the North Carolina Community College System had neither records nor tracking of its veteran student population at the system level. Each individual college had to be contacted to obtain a list of currently enrolled veteran students. The ability of individual colleges to track their own students may be questionable, given the difficulty to obtain lists of veteran students at various institutions. In addition, 5% of follow-up postcards were returned as undeliverable, indicating that the colleges did not have the most current contact information for their enrolled students. The colleges must be able to identify, monitor, and communicate with their veteran students.

It is also suggested that there be a central information source on campus to provide veterans with details about their education benefits: what they are, how to access them, and how to apply them. Veterans feel there is a lack of readily available information about the educational benefits to which they are entitled and how to access those benefits (Cook & Kim, 2009). As noted by one study participant, "Using the Post-9/11 GI Bill in conjunction with my community college has been a huge hassle." Veteran student identification of financial aid/tuition assistance counseling as the most important and most frequently used institutional service should make this area a focal point for colleges. It is particularly important that colleges have someone on staff who is an expert in the educational benefits afforded veteran students by the government and what these individuals must do to obtain full use of these benefits. When they retire from active duty, veterans lose their connection to the education offices on military bases, thereby severing their access to support systems that provide valuable information. Colleges must fill this void by providing a knowledgeable, accessible point of contact for information about educational benefits.

At Salt Lake Community College, after a significant spike in veteran enrollment, administrators and staff realized the need to offer a centralized location for information for this growing student group and their special needs. The services included, "admissions, registration, and disability resources, as well as VA services such as education benefits, disability information, health care information and enrollment, employment information, tutoring services, and accommodation needs" (Ahern et al., 2015, p. 80). Since developing their veterans services center, the college has seen increased veteran enrollment and a rise in the completion of those students. As a result, the college is being "recognized as one of the 'Best for Vets' community colleges in the country, recently ranking #11 in the *Military Times* 2014 rankings" (Ahern et al., 2015, p. 78).

A third implication for policy makers is that there should be mandatory professional development to ensure that faculty and staff are familiar with the challenges faced by veteran students and have the needed knowledge and skill sets to address those challenges. The training should follow a two-level approach: one at the system-wide level (with the appropriate representatives from all colleges) and additional training at the individual campus level. Mandatory system-wide training in universally applicable areas such as veterans' federal education benefits and funding options would ensure that representatives from all campuses receive the training to effectively counsel veterans. It would also guarantee that individuals across all campuses receive consistent information. Campuses

would only receive entitlements (i.e., state funding) once the designated representative(s) participated in "certification" training. Campus-specific training should address issues unique to each campus; individual campuses would decide whether to make the training mandatory or optional.

Implications for Practitioners

Each community college should use its veterans' database as a customer relationship management (CRM) system. From the moment of first student-institution contact (institutional recruitment, veteran inquiry/application), continuing throughout the student's progress in their program, and extending past their tenure at the institution, the college should actively maintain current contact information, demographics, and academic progress; it should also monitor the student's progress, any stoppages, and reasons for those stoppages.

Each institution should identify any faculty or staff members who are veterans. College employees who are veterans are a valuable resource to both the institution and veteran students. These employees would be individuals with whom veteran students could bond and therefore serve as confidantes and sources of counsel. If the college currently does not have any faculty and/or staff who are veterans, perhaps they could enlist the services of veteran student alumni.

It is also recommended that when forming institutional committees or counsels, especially in areas that would affect veteran students, the college should include representation by a veteran staff member, and, where appropriate, a veteran student. Such representation would provide the veteran student population with a voice and ensure that discussions and decisions take into consideration military culture and mindset and the challenges faced by veteran students.

In addition, academic advisors must be familiar, not only with academic requirements, but also with the benefits and requirements to effectively advise veteran students. One study participant shared their experience:

> Since being in college, I have spent hundreds of dollars on classes, books, and supplies, despite the fact that I have 100% eligibility with the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Unfortunately, my academic adviser at the college signed me up for classes that were not covered under the GI Bill. One semester, I only got $600 per month in BAH [Basic Allowance for Housing] when I should have gotten over $1200, just because I was not signed up for the right classes. I even asked if the class in question was covered, and I was told that it was...

Directions for Future Research

To obtain the rich, detailed data to more thoroughly understand and serve this population, future research should involve qualitative, in-depth interviews with individuals who are willing to share their stories, including the challenges they face, the role of support mechanisms, and the sources of their support. It would be important to gather information from a cross-section of campuses that represents the demographic diversity of the 58 campuses.

Despite earlier research findings and reports in the literature, this study did not find statistical significance for institutional support programs and services that would connect veteran students with each other. One possible explanation is the lack of availability of these programs and services on the campuses of study participants; only one campus had a lounge for veteran students, and only two campuses offered social/cultural activities. None of the responding campuses offered a veteran-specific orientation, which would not only assist veterans in acclimating to the college, but would also afford them the opportunity to connect with fellow veterans at the outset of their educational experience. There is at least one campus within the North Carolina Community College System that does provide multiple venues and opportunities for veterans to connect with each other, both fellow students and faculty and staff; however, they did not participate in the study.

It is, therefore, recommended that additional, similar research examine the availability, use, and value of institutional support services at community college campuses that provide more profuse and diverse social support opportunities. Feedback from students at more veteran-friendly campuses would provide greater insight into the true value of campus support mechanisms; as became evident with the current study, you cannot use that which is not available, and it is hard to make a value judgment on something with which you are not familiar. Other states with military base concentrations similar to or greater than North Carolina that theoretically would be veteran-friendly include Alaska, California, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Texas, and Virginia.

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