U.S. Military Student Veterans Identity Formation:
Policy Feedback and Symbolic Interactionism

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Abstract

This dissertation takes a three-article approach in which the literature from public administration, political psychology and sociology is synthesized around student veterans as a new phenomenon in higher education and public policy. By examining student veterans through the Social Construction of Target Populations (SCTP) framework, these articles contribute to the theoretical understanding of how social identity at the group and individual levels impact a target population's understanding of and reaction to a policy that does not always align with the policy-makers' intent. Because the current SCTP literature has focused on how policy-makers construct target populations and the practices they use to mitigate any negative effects of policy feedback, these articles offer a new perspective by applying symbolic interactionism as a method for capturing the two-way interaction between the target population and the policy's intent. The articles focus on the policy feedback mechanism in the SCTP framework to explain why and how policies shape the identities of target populations, and how they in turn, engage in the policy process by first presenting student veterans as a new social concept, then presenting a case study of how an organization that represents student veterans achieved policy change, and finally, interviewing veterans, revealing that their individual interpretation of the policy is not always representative of the student veteran identity as constructed by policy-makers and advocates.

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General Audience Abstract

This dissertation takes a three-article approach to understanding how and why student veterans are different from other veterans based upon the latest policy changes to expand educational benefits available through the G.I. Bill. The first article describes what policy-makers and veterans' organizations claim a student veterans is – a Post 9/11 veteran pursuing higher education that will lead to a career or fulfill the needs of 21st Century jobs. The second article presents a case-study of how an organization that represents student veterans was able to engage in the policy-making process and succeed in achieving policy changes that resulted in the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017, also known as the Forever G.I. Bill. The third article focuses on the factors influencing veterans' decision-making process about when and how to use their educational benefits based on how they understand and interpret the policy. All three articles provide a new perspective on the ways in which policy-makers and advocacy groups can create a new social identity group, such as student veterans, and design and implement policies based on the assumptions these policy actors have about the group. However, at the individual level, student veterans might not always behave in the way policy-makers expect them to, causing student veterans to use or not use their educational benefits based on their perceptions of what the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill means to them.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my loving husband, Rick, and beautiful son, Ryan, who supported me throughout this, often difficult, journey. I also dedicate this work to my mother and father, whose incredible work ethic inspired me most of my life. Finally, in memory of my father Jesus, who passed away October 18, 2018, and my daughter Ruby, who has been my guardian angel since April 10, 2005.

Acknowledgements

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List of Abbreviations

AVF – All Volunteer Force

BAH – Basic Allowance for Housing

DoD – Department of Defense

FGIB – Forever G.I. Bill/Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017

GAO – Government Accountability Office

G.I. Bill – The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944

GY6 – Got Your Six (nonprofit consortium)

HELP – U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions

H.R. – House Resolution

HVAC – U.S. House Committee on Veterans Affairs

IAVA – Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America

IVMF – Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University

MGIB – Montgomery G.I. Bill/Chapter 30 of USC§38

MOPH – Military Order of the Purple Heart

NDAA – National Defense Authorization Act

Post 9/11 GIB – Post 9/11 Veterans' Educational Assistance Act of 2008/Chapter 33 of USC§38

PTSD – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

SCTP – Social Construction of Target Populations

STEM – Science, technology, engineering and math studies

SVA – Student Veterans of America

SCVA- U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs

TAPS – Tragedy Assistance Programs for Survivors

USC – U.S. Code of law

VA – U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

VFW – Veterans of Foreign Wars

VSO – Veterans service organizations

VVA – Vietnam Veterans of America

Introduction

In the United States, military veterans have a distinct place in society as evidenced by the various public policies that award benefits to them that other members of the population are not equally entitled to. Within the Social Construction of Target Populations (SCTP) framework (Schneider & Ingram, 1993), veterans serve as an example of the most advantaged policy target population with respect to how policy-makers perceive them and legitimize their participation in the policy process. Other scholars focused on the origins of U.S. social policy have also found that this long-standing concern for veterans, from the Revolutionary War to present day conflicts, is what prompted and eventually led to other state welfare policies (Skocpol, 1995; Jensen, 2003; Mettler 2005; Mittelstadt, 2012). From a policy feedback perspective, this history of valorizing veterans through policies has impacted their social construction not just by policy-makers, but veterans themselves. That is, how organizations that claim to represent veterans' interests and individual veterans engage, interpret, and act upon policy issues is based upon their own internalization processes of the political rhetoric used to justify and implement such policies (Edelman, 1985; Pierson, 1993; Potter, 1996; Moynihan & Soss, 2014; Burroughs, 2017; Russell & Russell, 2018).

In the following three articles, I examine the relationship between the meanings policies create and their interpretations by individual veterans and by veterans as a social group as they understand their place in society within the SCTP framework. I specifically focus on the policy feedback mechanism as the source of influence on veteran identity. The influence policies have on how a veteran identifies his/her/their self are salient to the field of public administration because as a distinguished group in the policy-making process, they are also able to shape the implementation of policies which impact public agencies such as the Department of Veterans

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Affairs (VA) and determine who the policy-makers are through political action committees such as VoteVets.org or run for political office themselves. Furthermore, because veterans often conceptualize their benefits as "earned" entitlements or "rewards" for their military service, paying for these benefits has become a point of contention that can also change how the public and veterans see themselves in the future (Bennett, 2017; Kleykamp, Hipes & MacLean, 2018; Driver & Callaghan, 2019).

The example I focus on is that of the student veteran in the Post 9/11 era. Since the passing of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill in 2008, over one million veterans have taken advantage of this educational benefit (va.gov). However, much of the literature on veteran identity places them in an unruly space between national hero and victim (Gade & Wenger, 2011; Muldoon & Lowe, 2012; Feinstein, 2015; Martin, 2017; Orazem et al., 2017; Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Parrot et al., 2018; Driver & Callaghan, 2019). I suggest that the development of the student veteran identity is in response to the positive rhetoric behind the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill and the negative rhetoric behind the continued U.S. engagement in the global war against terrorism. The student veteran identity is taken by veterans of the Post 9/11 era, the newest cadre of veteran, who choose to enroll in educational programs as a way of distinguishing him/her/themselves from the "wounded warrior" stereotype. Student veterans view their educational benefit as a way of improving their social standing instead of simply relying on the other benefits or entitlements based on their veteran status alone, such as disability payments. However, not every veteran enrolled in an academic program embraces the student veteran identity. Informational interviews with admissions officers and veterans themselves concede that under certain circumstances enrolling in school is a means to achieve temporary financial security. That is, some veterans depend upon the housing stipend that comes with the G.I. Bill while they seek employment.

Some veterans in graduate school do not identify as "student veterans" because the term is interpreted to be applicable to undergraduate students only (Phillips, 2016). Thus, the first article in this series is devoted to building the concept of a "student veteran" as a distinct identity for empirical investigation (Goertz, 2006).

My dissertation takes the form of three articles suitable for publication in academic journals. As already mentioned, the first article – "Are Post 9/11 Student Veterans the Next 'Greatest Generation'?" – will focus on building the student veteran as a concept by examining the various intended and unintended consequences of the policy-making process within the SCTP framework, grounded in the historical, political and social context of the Post 9/11 era. This article synthesizes public administration, political psychology and sociology literature around student veterans as a new phenomenon in higher education and public policy. Readers of academic journals such as *Policy Studies Journal*, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, or *Administrative Theory and Praxis*, will gain a theoretical understanding of the psychological orientation of the policy feedback mechanism in the SCTP framework, which explains why policies shape the identities of target populations.

The second article – "Student Veterans of America: The New Kids on the Policy Block" – will focus on how the student veteran identity applies to prevalent veterans' issues today. This case study illustrates the empowerment of a student veteran organization to shape policy and administration by recounting the events leading up to the enactment of the Forever G.I. Bill in 2017. The student veteran identity is also what motivates organizations like Student Veterans of America (SVA) to engage in the policy-making process to ensure that educational benefits are expanded. SVA also advocates for the establishment of a new department within the VA that will focus on improving the administration of educational benefits that is separate from the

administration of medical and disability related benefits – arguably to distinguish "student veterans" from the "wounded warrior" stereotype. This article is suitable for publication in *Policy Studies Journal* because it offers a real-world case study for those seeking to understand what happens when a target population adopts and/or constructs their own social identity and uses this new identity in an entrepreneurial way to make policy changes that further reify the target population within the SCTP framework.

The third article – "U.S. Military Veterans and Utilization of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill" – focuses on individual veterans' interpretation of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill and how that affects their decision to use or not use the benefit as well as their decision of how to use it. Because these educational benefits are the most expansive benefits the federal government has offered to veterans, I interview eligible veterans and ask them to explain their decision-making process for utilizing their educational benefits. The factors influencing their decisions may or may not be rooted in their understanding and interpretation of the policy's intent. Therefore, these interviews contribute to furthering social and political understanding of the student veteran identity so that policy-makers can better communicate policy intent and improve the implementation/administration of policies and/or policy changes. This article is suitable for publication in academic journals such as *Policy Studies Journal*, *Administrative Theory and Praxis*, *Armed Forces & Society* or *Journal of Veterans Studies* because it contributes to the theoretical understanding of how individuals within a target population construct themselves and act upon their understanding of a policy, which does not always align with the policy-makers' intent. Because the current SCTP literature is primarily focused on how policy-makers construct target populations and the practices they use to mitigate any negative effects of policy feedback,

this article offers a new perspective, at an individual level of analysis, demonstrating causality as a two-way interaction between the target population and the policy's intent.

Significance/Contributions

The SCTP literature offers insights as to why certain segments of the population are treated differently, and how policy-makers target socially constructed groups to either receive benefits or burdens based on positive or negative perceptions (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Within that framework, however, less emphasis is placed on studying how policy feedback constructs individual and collective identities through experiences with the administrative state and political leaders (Pierce, Siddiki, Jones, Schumacher, Pattison & Peterson, 2014) . While veterans are often used as an example of a positively constructed group that most members of society view as deserving of benefits, there is a lack of discussion on how veterans' social and individual identities are shaped by such policies (Braxton, 2011; Phillips, 2016; Martin, 2017; Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Parrott et al., 2018). This gap in the literature is significant since the individual's military experience is tied to political, historical, and social contexts. Since Schneider and Ingram (1993) define social construction to be the many ways in which meanings are created to shape reality, this bounded relativity informs "how policy designs shape the social construction of a policy's target population, the role of power in this relationship, and how policy design 'feeds forward' to shape politics and democracy" (Pierce et al., 2014, p. 2). In this sense, the elements of political, historical and social context are critical to the policy feedback effects within the SCTP framework because past policies concerning veterans have the potential to "restructure and reconfigure politics in ways that shape and, in particular, *limit* subsequent policy processes (as cited by Jordan & Matt, 2014, pp. 227 – 228).

In addition, the SCTP literature suggests that it is possible for target populations to move from one of the categories (advantaged, contender, dependent, and deviant) to another as over time their social construction can be reshaped and/or policy designs changed (Pierce et al., 2014).   This is particularly salient to the development of veteran identity across time, and the Post 9/11 GIB, in particular, is an example of how policy design contributes to the external and internal factors that have led to changes in the social construction and political power of student veterans within the U.S. veteran population (Pierce et al., 2014). Although it may be difficult to determine causal relationships in policy feedback because of the recursive nature of the framework, symbolic interactionism as a methodology offers one way to empirically investigate how policies create meaning, how individuals and target groups interpret these meanings and how decisions are made based on these meanings, such as policy design and uptake. Schneider et al.'s (2014, p. 108) model of the feed-forward effects of social construction and policy design demonstrates that "policy designs usually reproduce the prevailing institutional culture, power relationships, and social constructions; at times, however, they depart from this pattern and introduce change" (p. 109). The following articles seek to connect the role or agency of the target population as "intermediate variable[s] to policy change" (Pierce et al., 2014, p. 21). In the case of students veterans, my research finds that institutions, culture, and policy-making dynamics mutually reinforce a concept of student veterans that directs future policy designs with minimal input from individual veterans as visualized in Figure 1A – Policy Feedback Effects of Student Veterans.

[Figure 1A]

By focusing on the student veteran identity, I then explore how SVA, an organization that represents student veterans, engages in the policy-making process based on their espoused

organizational identity. From this case study, the student veteran identity is further socially

constructed by SVA as they interact and negotiate with policy-makers and other veteran groups.

Building on the multi-level feedback effects presented by Goss, Barnes and Rose (2019), the

case is an example of how a policy can magnify the role of an organization as a recruiter or

mobilizer of individuals to political causes. The existing literature makes a case for how the

feedback effects "trickle down" from public policies to organizations to individuals (Goss et al.,

2019).   In the case of student veterans as constructed today, it would be unthinkable for

politicians to have an education policy discussion without representation from SVA, but SVA

would not be missed if the policy debate concerned a ban on transgender people serving in the

military. Yet, because it is assumed that "organizations can interpret policy for individuals, and

individuals often experience policy through organizations" (Goss et al., 2019, p. 1), the

expectation is that veterans choosing to use the Post 9/11 GIB to pursue higher education will

also embrace the student veteran identity as discussed in most legislation and constructed by

organizations like SVA. Instead, the areas in which SVA and other veteran service organizations

(VSO) overlap with the Congressional culture of policy-making work closely together to impact

future policies or make policy change (Burroughs, 2017), as displayed in Figure 1B – Policy

Feedback Effects on Policy Change for Student Veterans.

[Figure 1B]

While SVA claims to represent thousands of student veterans across the country, not all

individuals who might claim the student veteran identity conform to the socially constructed

student veteran identity shaped by SVA in the policy process. To understand the policy feedback

effects at the individual level, I interview veterans who are using their educational benefits to

explore their interpretation of the policy as it applies to them individually. Because policy

feedback theory is focused on measuring levels of engagement, this exploratory research will further illuminate the psychological effects a policy can have on its target population, which can be useful for understanding policy niches, motivation for collective action, and uptake rates (Pierson, 1993; Klandermans, 2003; Soss, Hacker & Mettler, 2007; Béland, 2010), but also for theorizing when and how an organization acts as the collective interpreter of public policies between the state and the individual (Goss et al., 2019).

What the three distinct but related articles present is how the target population acts as a variable for policy change, particularly when institutions and culture mutually and positively reinforce one another to the point where they not only have an impact on the policy making dynamics, but become essential to the policy-making process (see Figure 1). However, the interviews with individual veterans indicate that their interpretation of the policy and their reasons for using the educational benefits (or not) are much more nuanced and personal than what the student veteran identity conveys. In this sense, student veterans as a target population are more likely to engage in the policy process to support changes recommended by organizations like SVA, instead of engaging as individual student veterans directly.

However, when considering uptake rates of programs that policies create, such as the G.I. Bill, as political participation, it is also expected that more eligible veterans would utilize their educational benefits based on their positive social construction (Moffitt, 2004; Mettler, 2007; Lerman et al., 2017). Yet, "a theory of policy uptake based on social construction is not mutually exclusive from one that emphasizes the role of transaction costs, since enrollment processes that require individuals to divulge a great deal of personal information may increase feelings of stigmatization among potential recipients and thereby decrease uptake" (as cited by Lerman et al., 2017, p. 756). Interviews with veterans using the Post 9/11 GIB are also an

example of how, in spite of their categorization as an advantaged group in the SCTP framework, they have a less than expected uptake rate of expanded educational benefits.

Limitations.

Although this three-article dissertation is focused on the policy feedback/feedforward mechanism within the SCTP framework, policy feedback theory is mainly used to measure the level of civic or political participation of the population being studied (Mettler & SoRelle, 2014; Goss et al., 2019). Rather, the research presented in these articles is focused on the impact of policies on the identities of the target population at various units of analysis (concepts, organizations or individuals) that can result in different empirical observations of the theory (Burroughs, 2017). By taking a symbolic interactionist perspective, much of the analysis is localized and contextual. However, much of the groundwork is laid out for future research that can be generalizable.

The veteran identity, while still underdeveloped, also intersects with many other types of social identities, such as race, gender, and class. These intersections have not been fully addressed, particularly with respect to the participants interviewed in Article 3. The pool of participants were predominantly white males, which in some ways is reflective of the culture of higher education in general. However, more investigation is needed on this front since much of the literature indicates that Post 9/11 veterans share more characteristics with other non-traditional students which mirror the racial and socioeconomic inequalities that may also be impacting other identity aspects of policy feedback (Katznelson & Mettler, 2008; Leal, Nichols & Teigen, 2011;Ottley, 2014; Vaccaro, 2015; Jenner, 2017).

The articles focus on demonstrating the heterogeneity of the veteran population, primarily

by making the argument that student veterans are a new phenomenon in higher education and

public policy. However, more comparative analysis could contribute to understanding the social

construction of student veterans by policy-makers and advocates in the policy design and

implementation processes. For example, after conducting the research for these three articles, I

noticed that because of the positive social construction of student veterans, many of the tracking

mechanisms that are in place for other non-traditional or low-income students did not apply to

them. Pell Grant[1] recipients are heavily tracked throughout their educational experiences at

colleges and universities. Yet it was not until five years after the Post 9/11 GIB that the widely

cited Million Records Project (Cate, 2014) conducted by SVA was able to match VA records of

veterans using the new G.I. Bill to those used by the Department of Education to track college

enrollment and graduation rates. In addition, student veterans who receive the housing stipend

while enrolled in school are not required to provide any proof that they are indeed using that

money for rent, mortgage payments or general living expenses. In theory, a student veteran

could be living with a family member for free and just save the BAH money. Contrast that to the

numerous restrictions Section 8 Housing Voucher recipients endure to maintain eligibility and

secure approved living conditions from both the landlord and state. These observations point to

the significance of social construction of target populations on policy designs and suggest that its

implementation within the veteran population may go unnoticed because veterans are often

studied as a monolithic group, apart from civilians, and using different normative values. These

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[1] The Federal Pell Grant program provides need-based grants to low-income students for postsecondary education. A student's eligibility and award amount is determined by completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and must be submitted annually while the student is in school.

two examples of future comparative cases could offer more generalizable theories about the

policy process to both advantaged and disadvantaged groups within the SCTP framework.

Article 1 – Are Post 9/11 Student Veterans the Next "Greatest Generation"?

Abstract

This article examines the social construction of student veterans and seeks to provide a conceptual definition of student veterans using content analysis as a method for generating context-related characteristics to abstract and develop the meaning of the concept. In other words, the article seeks to answer the following research question: *what is a student veteran*? By examining Congressional records and media stories, this article finds that student veterans are predominantly centered in discussions of higher education and programs aimed at connecting them to employment. By examining the historical, social and political context surrounding the Post 9/11 GIB, this article provides a fuller understanding of the student veteran concept and helps to distinguish it as a unit of analysis for further study While the outcomes of students veterans' policy are still unfolding (and will be for many decades to come), this content analysis also reveals expectations that Post 9/11 student veterans will become the next "Greatest Generation" because it is assumed that their pursuit of higher education will make them contributors to the 21st Century economy.

Article 1 – Are Post 9/11 Student Veterans the Next "Greatest Generation"?

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, more commonly known as the G.I. Bill, has been viewed as a landmark social policy program that furthered democracy and the value of equality among American citizens by providing military veterans of the World War II era the opportunity to attend college, among other benefits (Kiester, Jr., 1994; Light, 2002; Mettler, 2005; Caspers & Ackerman, 2013). Yet, other scholars have taken the viewpoint that these entitlements seemed contradictory to the ideals of equality for all citizens in American democracy, and have sought to understand why these policies developed and persisted (Skocpol, 1995; Jensen, 2003; Bennett, 2017). Underlying these approaches to scholarly inquiry are the social construction of veterans – a social identity that was shaped by policies like the G.I. Bill. By examining these cases through policy feedback theory (Mettler & SoRelle, 2014), this article examines the historical, social and political context of policies designed to serve the latest cadre of veterans, the Post 9/11 era, and how the broader state definition of veterans became a catalyst for the development of a "student veteran" identity.

The development of the student veteran identity as a concept is important for future research related to education policy changes, such as the Forever G.I. Bill of 2017, and for understanding individual veterans' interpretations and utilization of the policy because of the meaning the policy has to them. Concepts serve "as cognitive symbols (or abstract terms) that specify the features, attributes, or characteristics of the phenomenon in the real or phenomenological world that they are meant to represent and that distinguish them from other related phenomena" (Podsakoff, MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2016, p. 161). Accordingly, since a concept can be abstract in nature (in addition to Goertz's "realist" view of concepts), it might not always be observable, manifesting, for example, in the form of attitudes, beliefs, or emotions

(Bagozzi, 2007). Yet, for research purposes the concept still needs to communicate a clear idea of what it means. The manner in which these concepts are developed also influences the research methodologies used (quantitative or qualitative), case selection, and measurements aimed at capturing the essence of these concepts for future policy analysis.

This article seeks to provide a conceptual definition of student veterans using content analysis as a method for generating context-related characteristics to abstract and develop the meaning of the concept (Dey, 2003; Burnard, 1996; Polit & Beck, 2004; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Content analysis has a long history as a method for analyzing documents, and it is usually applied to make inferences from the data to their context to obtain a condensed and broad description of the phenomenon (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Assuming that words or phrases which can be grouped together because of their similarities will also share the same meaning (Cavanagh, 1997), I make decisions as to what things related to the term "student veterans" should be put in the same theme or category, labeling them according to my own interpretation of the text (Dey, 2003). The result of this analysis using the keyword in context approach (Simon & Xenos, 2004) will be the basis for the conceptual definition of the student veteran identity (Wendt, 1998; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Podsakoff et al., 2016). In other words, the analysis is guided by the following research question: *what is a student veteran?*[2]

Social Identity Theory and Symbolic Interactionism

The literature on social identity theory provides useful and fundamental ideas to understanding how a person comes to understand one's self based on the social structures and

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[2] I use "what" instead of "who" because the inquiry is concerned with building student veteran as a concept with a social identity that is distinct from a person who is a veteran or a student. Similarly, veterans may be students, but do not consider themselves "student veterans." Therefore, the interrogative "what" seems more appropriate.

perceived characteristics of the group one identifies with and determines one is a part of (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). That is, the self is comprised of a set or series of identities that a person might use individually or concurrently depending on the situation, but once evoked, the individual will then act based on how others respond or whether the identity/identities are verified or denied by others (Mead, 1934; Blumer 1969; Serpe & Stryker, 2011). These sets of identities are also multi-dimensional and can act as a filter for perceptions and interpretations as individuals engage with one another. "In other words, identity comprises not only 'who you think you are' (individually or collectively), but also 'who you act as being' in interpersonal and intergroup interactions – and the social recognition or otherwise that these actions receive from other individuals or groups…" (Vignoles, Schwartz & Luyckx, 2011). In this sense, the student veteran identity acts as an additional filter within the social identity of veterans, distinguishing them based on the veteran's decision to use the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill for education benefits. This is similar to how Goertz (2006) applies Satori's ladder of generality to concept extensions by which the addition of an adjective to a concept reveals a new secondary-level dimension that may have previously gone unnoticed in scholarship, such as gendered concepts (pp. 69 – 93).

While there are many personal and developmental perspectives on how identities can be formed, this paper focuses on the social and contextual views of identity because this tradition of social identity theory is the most salient for studying and understanding the constructs that lead to group membership, collective action and social change (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hornsey, 2008; Spears, 2011). To be able to empirically study group motives or understand how a group internalizes values or images given by others, a symbolic interactionist perspective on identities emphasizes the importance of the social structural context in shaping identity (Stryker, 2008; Hornsey, 2008; Serpe & Stryker 2011). Although Blumer (1969) states that symbolic

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interactionism strives to "respect the nature of the empirical world and organize a methodological stance to reflect that respect" (p. 60), others recognize that social organization and structure can reinforce or restrain one's capacity for identity development (Goffman, 1974; Serpe & Stryker, 2011). Although a more inclusive framework for investigating "the interrelated and reflexive nature of social structure, person, and culture" which can "broaden the understanding of how society shapes self, which shapes social interaction" (Serpe & Stryker, 2011, p. 244) remains elusive, social identity theory – when taken from an interactionist perspective – can still draw upon the meanings created by the structurally based relationships within the context of a given culture or society. "Since both society and persons derive from social process, both take on meanings in and through interactions" (Serpe & Stryker, 2011, p. 229). The student veteran identity is in many ways a social identity that developed based on the interactions and recognitions among military veterans, policy-makers, and higher education.

The Social Construction of Veteran Identity and Policy Feedback

Contemporary literature recognizes that there are multiple dimensions of identity – which can be on-going constructions made by the self or externally imposed – and "how meaning-making capacity interacts with contextual influence on the perceptions and salience of students' multiple social identities" (Jones, 2013, p. 1). In the case of student veterans, the adjective of "student" provides a new way of conceptualizing the difference between a *veteran* and a *student veteran* or a *student* versus a *student veteran* (Goertz, 2006).

The veteran identity "is an underdeveloped concept in the social science literature" because it is mostly tied to one's military experience such as, war era, location and length of service, combat exposure, service-connected disability, and rank instead of identities that are tied to physical characteristics such as sex, race or gender (Gade & Wilkins, 2012, p. 272).

Furthermore, one only becomes a veteran by ending one's military service, which entails the physical removal of the military uniform and separation from the military organizational structure in daily life. Yet, it is an identity that is defined by the government for distribution of entitlements that other members of the polity do not have claim to. Therefore, it is helpful to think about the veteran identity as shaped by organizational structures (e.g. military branch of service) and a person's occupational role within the organization (e.g. a Navy intelligence officer will have a different experience from an enlisted Army cook) (Bechky, 2008; Hallett, Shulman & Fine, 2009); yet regardless of a person's status within the military, once a person exits the military, he/she/they are referred to as a veteran – a collective social identity which has been valorized through political rhetoric, policies and public opinion (Martin, 2017; Kleykamp, Hipes & MacLean, 2018).

Theories of self-identity focus on how people understand and make meaning of the world around them, and one of the most distinguishing features of symbolic interactionism is that human beings are self-referential with the capacity to shape their environment (Blumer, 1969; Charon & Cahill, 1979; Hewitt, 1991; Kegan, 1994). In policy feedback theory, especially, where the manner in which policy makers construct target groups and spell out who is a member and who is not (Schneider & Ingram, 1993),

> the language and content of the policy can assign a social or political standing to the targeted population, whether intended or not. …Frequently, these characteristics become embedded in the public symbology associated with a particular group. As a result, the creation of target populations can influence how members see themselves and the relative value of their participation, as well as how society, more broadly, construes a particular group's identity. Mettler & SoRelle, 2014, p. 169

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, this is the most empirically supported causal relationship because self judgement is greatly influenced by how others evaluate us (Charon & Cahill, 1979). This conception of policy feedback is similar to Goffman's (1959) description of

institutions that operates outside of wider society, such as the military does, which can manipulate the individual's world so that the individual comes to redefine self to the extent that any positive self-judgement becomes highly dependent upon obedience to the authorities that control such an environment. As Schneider and Ingram (2018) point out, elected leaders often participate in *anticipatory feedback* as they try to mitigate any negative backlash that could threaten their re-election by predicting how constituents might behave based on their social construction of the target population, ideology, and power of the organizations related to the policy under consideration. By controlling which problems will be addressed and what policy designs will be used even before a policy has been passed or implemented, politicians seek "to design policy that will produce more positive feedback (self reinforcing) that enhances their own power and image and avoid negative feedback (self undermining)" (Schneider & Ingram, 2018, p. 2). That is, it is assumed that target populations will behave in the manner that policy-makers intend or expect. However, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, that is not always the case as the target population has the agency to interpret and create its own meaning of the policy.

Public policies influence individual and group identity when the state defines these through public law or based on certain characteristics or traits that make someone either a part of a group or excluded from a group. United States military veterans are thus recognized by the state under U.S. Code Title 5 §2108, and their readjustment benefits, including provisions for education, are outlined under U.S. Code Title 38 Part III (www.law.cornell.edu). In general, these statutes define a veteran as an individual who:

> served on active duty in the armed forces during a war, in a campaign or expedition for which a campaign badge has been authorized… for a period of more than 180 consecutive days any part of which occurred during the period beginning on, and ending on the date prescribed by Presidential proclamation or by law… (5 USC §2108(1)).

While this definition is taken from federal statutes, it is common for state and local government agencies to use this same definition to help them define veterans and determine what services they might be eligible for within their own jurisdictions or communities. With respect to veterans eligible for educational benefits, the latest amendments to USC§38 with the passing of Public Law 115-48 on August 16, 2017, further expanded eligibility from those serving a minimum of 90 days since September 10, 2001, to Purple Heart recipients (regardless of time in service), and surviving dependents, in addition to increasing aid to those pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM) fields, and removing the 15 year time limit for use of the entitlement (www.congress.gov/115).

However, these definitions do not take into consideration the historical and colloquial contexts that still exist among the general population and varying eras of veterans. For example, servicemembers have a tendency to define themselves as "veterans" only if they have seen combat (Zoli, Maury & Fay, 2015). In a 2018 study of how regional news publications represented veterans on Twitter, the label of "hero" was generally applied to World War II veterans, whereas veterans of other eras were typically framed as charity cases because they received assistance from a charitable organization or as a victim of war who suffered mistreatment by the government and/or society (Parrott et al., 2018). Veterans of the Post 9/11 era find themselves in a unique quandary because many have endured multiple deployments to combat zones without an official declaration of war by Congress. These social, historical and political contexts contribute to how veterans understand their place in society.

The portrayal of veterans in the Post 9/11 era places them in a paradox between heroes and victims, focused primarily on health care issues such as suicide prevention and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Veterans who do not strongly identify with these

representations have found other outlets to differentiate themselves (Hamrick & Rumann, 2012; Feinstein, 2015; Gade & Wilkins, 2012; Kleykamp, Hipes & MacLean, 2018). One group in particular are the veterans who are using their educational benefits as a way to transition into civilian life (Braxton, 2011; Falkey, 2016). Considering that most of the positive ideology about veterans comes from the positive impact the G.I. Bill had on WWII veterans (Mettler, 2005; Kleykamp et al., 2018; Parrott et al., 2018), policies designed to assist and reward the Post 9/11 veterans of today seek to replicate the outcomes of the WWII veterans who are often referred to as "the Greatest Generation" (Brokaw, 2000).

This positive association of veterans and education, typically reserved for WWII veterans, has become an important factor for present day servicemembers as many claim educational benefits to be the main reason for joining the military to begin with (Zoli et al., 2015). In 2006, James Webb, a Vietnam Veteran and father of an active duty Marine, campaigned for a Virginia U.S. Senate seat by calling for an update to the existing Montgomery G.I. Bill (MGIB) that would expand educational benefits similar to those received by WWII veterans (Krewson, 2017). In presenting the need for a policy change based on a normative value embedded in American society and using anecdotal evidence that this type of policy worked for the WWII generation of veterans, the general public, politicians and policy-makers unintentionally constructed a new identity that can be applied to veterans of the Post 9/11 era instead of the negative stereotypes. The successful enactment of the Post 9/11 GIB of 2008 can be viewed as the catalyst for the student veteran identity as the state constructs the definition of who qualifies for these benefits and distinguishes them from those veterans in need of other assistance (Canaday, 2009; Engel et al., 2014).

The notion that student veterans of the Post 9/11 era are somehow different from the general veterans population, called for examining the contrast between the use of the term "student veteran" and the negative stereotype of a "wounded warrior" in Congressional records as part of the process for concept building (Goertz, 2006; Podsakoff et al., 2016). Using the keyword search terms on Voxgov.com for both "student veteran" and "wounded warrior" during the time period of 2000 to 2017, Figure 1.1 displays the number of times each term appears. The timeline is consistent with the legislative activity surrounding the Post 9/11 GIB, whereby the term student veteran appears more frequently in 2008 and 2017. However, it should be noted that while the term wounded warrior is significantly dominant, there are points in which the increased use of student veteran coincides with less use of wounded warrior. This implies that as the legislative discussion around student veterans increases, there is a drop in the discussion around wounded warriors.

[Figure 1.1]

The association of veterans and higher education, specifically, is a form of typification connected to the concept of the student veteran identity. "A typification is fundamentally an image or picture that people maintain with respect to a particular role, situation, person or objects and that organizes or catalogues their knowledge of it" (Hewitt, 1991, p. 176). That is, when discussing veterans and their use of their educational benefits, the image that comes to mind are veterans pursuing college degrees. While I have demonstrated that there are legal definitions established by the government to determine to whom and how these benefits should be awarded for the pursuit of a wide range of educational programs (not limited to four-year degrees), the student veteran identity has been made into a stereotype by policy-makers and advocates to promote this positive association between higher education and earnings, which is also backed

by other social science findings (Coleman, 1966; DiMaggio & Garip, 2012). Thus, I argue that "student veterans" are a new phenomenon, emerging from policy feedback of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill and its subsequent amendments like the Forever G.I. Bill. To support this claim, I use content analysis as a method for understanding the meaning of student veteran as a concept, guided by the literature on social identity theory and policy feedback within the SCTP framework (Blumer, 1969; Kelle, 1997; Tummers & Karsten, 2012).

Method. First, I perform a content analysis of various government documents, news articles, and secondary sources such as surveys and interviews, that allow for an event-history map with a stopping rule (Waldner, 2015) to trace when the term "student veteran" came into colloquial and scholarly use. The content analysis allows me to infer how, when, why, and by whom the term is being used in order to build the concept of "student veteran" by providing context to identify what is important about the term's use (Dey, 2003; Goertz, 2006). By demonstrating that the student veteran identity is more than just a veteran (as legally defined) who uses educational benefits (as legally defined), future research agendas using this concept as a unit of analysis might better understand how the identity is associated with student veteran group engagement in the policy-making process, and how individual veterans make decisions about how and why to use or not use the educational benefit (Hewitt, 1991; see Krewson Articles 2 & 3).

Taking the keyword in context (KWIC) approach, I searched the following databases for the term "student veterans" in quotations from 2000 to 2017 (Simon & Xenos, 2004): Voxgov.com and MediaCloud.org[3]. Voxgov.com provides the ability to search critical sources

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[3] These databases were also selected because of their accessibility. Virginia Tech libraries have a subscription to Voxgov.com; Mediacloud.org is an open source platform.

of government information for analysis, including documents in all three branches of government. Mediacloud.org is an open source platform that captures digital media ecosystems to track how media stories spread. The rationale for choosing these databases is based upon the policy feedback mechanism as the source of influence: the context and rhetoric used to communicate any policy changes concerning veterans and educational benefits. Each of these databases provides an opportunity to view the news source or legislative contexts of the search term.

Although the sources available on MediaCloud.org only date back to 2011, this platform is still valuable because it provides information on media attention from a wider variety of online news sources, including Breitbart or local town newspapers in addition to major outlets such as The New York Times and Washington Post. The results provided by MediaCloud.org were used to obtain a secondary-source word count of the search term for comparison to the Voxgov.com results, in order to increase the validity of my interpretation and coding decisions since I am not conducting the study with co-researchers who might not agree with the way the data was interpreted and categorized to support the concept production (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

The rationale for using the year 2000 as the starting point and 2017 as the stopping point is based on a military and policy event-history map. The United States had not been attacked in 2000, and no major policy changes had been made to the existing MGIB. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the country was not officially engaged in military campaigns until 2003, and no significant G.I. Bill educational policy changes were made until 2008. However, the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill of 2008 was applied retroactively to those serving since the day before the 9/11 attacks (September 10, 2001). In addition, the trend line using Voxgov.com search results indicate that prior to the year 2000, the keyword produced few results (see Figure 1.2). Because

of this complex timeline, it is necessary to look at how the term "student veteran" was used, if at all, prior to these historical events and policy changes, as well as during the period of changes.

An initial KWIC search of legislative, executive and judicial documents published on VoxGov.com for the year 2000 to 2017 returned the following results displayed in Figure 1.2 for the term "student veteran."   However, every result had to be carefully read because there were times that the words "students" and "veterans" appeared in the same sentence but were often separated by a comma or a period, indicating that these terms were not an exact match with the keyword under examination. For each result, the title of the document and the 100 words surrounding the keyword result had to be examined to determine if it was relevant to the search term "student veteran." This process was repeated for each year in the period (2000 – 2017).

The first positive result appeared on March, 26, 2001, in House Committee Report 107-27 – Veterans Opportunities Act of 2001 to discuss the expansion of work-study opportunities at the VA for "veteran-students." These work-study opportunities are for "veteran-students… who have declared an academic major within the department of an academic discipline that complement and reinforce the program of education pursued by the student" and also expands the definition of "educational institution" to include private entities that provide courses to fulfill requirements needed for licenses or certificates for employment in a technological field (H.R. 107 – 27, Section III). On June 19, 2001, the term appears in the Congressional Record, in a speech by Congressman Pickering of Mississippi in support of H.R. 1291 – the 21st Century Montgomery G.I. Bill Enhancement Act as follows:

> Madam Speaker, I rise with great pride to support H.R. 1291, the 21st Century Montgomery GI Bill. It is a great honor for me to follow G.V. Sonny Montgomery, who represented the Third District of Mississippi, the legislation which bears his name and which is an embodiment of his commitment and his legacy to our Nation's Armed Services, the military, and to our veterans.

What does it mean for Mississippi? In the Third District we have 4,763 members of the Army-Air Force National Guard throughout the district; 1,410 active duty Air Force at Columbus Air Force Base; 1,646 active duty Navy and Marine Corps personnel at Meridian, Mississippi. It means that they will have the opportunity to get an education, to better their lives, to have a higher standard of living and quality of life for their children and for their families.

At Mississippi State University, if they choose to attend there, today 55 percent of their tuition is covered. Under this legislation, 87 percent of their tuition and costs will be covered. One hundred twenty **student veterans** are now enrolled at the University of Southern Mississippi. Today, 51 percent of their costs are covered under this legislation. Three years from today, 83 percent of their costs will be covered. Four hundred sixty students are enrolled there today. At the University of Mississippi, 55 percent of the costs are covered today. Eighty-seven percent will be covered in the future, and over 100 students will benefit.

Madam Speaker, it is time for the next generation to step up to the plate and follow the leaders of the World War II generation, to show our commitment to the Armed Services. For the men and women of the 21st Century who are willing to commit to serve their country, we need to make sure we can recruit and retain and give them the educational opportunities and benefits of the Montgomery GI Bill. For that reason, I have great pride in supporting this good and noble effort.

From these two brief examples, the term "student veteran" is used to discuss veterans primarily pursuing higher education, wherein higher education is viewed as a positive value to justify the expansion and monetary resource allocation for such endeavors. In the speech by Congressman Pickering, the discussion is more explicit because he argues that the existing educational benefits provided by the Montgomery G.I. Bill (MGIB), at that time, failed to keep up with the rising costs of tuition at state institutions, thus warranting a change that would provide more financial assistance to help veterans pursuing higher education (Montgomery, 1994; Asch, Fair & Kilburn, 2000). Pickering clearly associates veterans pursuing higher education with inter-generational upward social mobility and cites the example of WWII generation of veterans as integral to the economic success and leadership of the country. In this brief example, I start to see the foundations of how organizations like Student Veterans of America (SVA) began to relate this term with veterans pursuing higher education as a continuation of their service to the country.

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Results. In total, I reviewed 3,683 legislative documents that turned up in the Voxgov.com keyword search results for the years 2000 to 2017. Of those search results, I qualified 1, 279 to be exclusively dedicated to the keyword "student veteran" based on the title of the documents and the context in which the keyword was located within the document. I then removed any results in which the words "student" and "veteran" were separated by a comma or period or not collocated in the same sentence because those grammatical and contextual markers indicated that conceptually "student" and "veteran" are distinct nouns, not adjectives for each other (e.g. articles containing the term "veteran student" were counted as a qualifying result, but articles with results such as "veterans, students, and farmers" or "veterans can help students reflect upon the importance of ideals of liberty, democracy and freedom…" were disqualified).

In order to identify articles that were deemed relevant to building the concept of student veteran, I coded each result based on the topic or theme of the context in which the search term appeared. Because my research goal is to develop the constitutive elements of the concept of a *student veteran*, the initial decision coding method is rooted in grounded theory as emergent, inductive coding choices based on the initial search results (Saldaña, 2016, p. 74 – 75). This led me to identify eight (8) main topics displayed in Figure 1.2 – Keyword in Context (KWIC) Results by alphabetical order and frequency:

- Budget- Discussions to reduce or increase VA budget with respect to educational programs and benefits;
- Education - Any type of post-secondary education, including vocational and on the job training programs, not limited to higher education;
- Education Benefits Administration - Any discussion involving improving or correcting VA claims processes and/or disbursements;
- Employment - Any act, program or other type of initiative aimed at connecting veterans to employment, either during or post education;
- Health Benefits Administration - Improving or changing process for veterans to access healthcare on a college campus;
- Higher Education - Post secondary education at a degree granting college or university;

- Memorial - Any act, program or other type of initiative aimed at honoring veterans in society; and
- Name - Whenever the search "student veteran" term appeared in the name of an organization or legislative act.

[Figure 1.2]

Once the articles were grouped into these eight (8) main themes, the second round of coding produced 30 subthemes or subtopics within the major categories as shown in Figure 1.3 – Subthemes of "Student Veterans" in Voxgov.com by frequency in each year examined. From this point, I was able to associate the prevalence of certain topics within the main themes as expressed by the 100 words surrounding the qualifying results I identified. "A Subcode is a second-order tag assigned after the primary code to detail or enrich the entry … for categorization and data analysis" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 91). Because I did not have additional coders available to counter my own biases or subjectivity (or come to an agreement with), I relied on the Voxgov.com word keywords algorithm to compare my results against. This also allows me to see how the prevalence of topics evolves over time to help me configure which elements/topics seem to be most related to the concept of a student veteran based on context of the documents examined (Roberts, Stewart, Airoldi, 2016). By comparing my own coding to that of the Voxgov.com word cloud shown in Figure 1.4 – Ordered Word Cloud of Student Veterans Search Results, I find that the most prevalent topic associated with student veteran is related to education as well.

[Figure 1.4]

Because I used open coding in the initial process as a means to generate the descriptive characteristics of what it means to be a student veteran (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), I also conducted a

keyword search in MediaCloud.org as a secondary source to determine if my interpretations of

the Voxgov.com results were consistent with the ones generated by the MediaCloud.org word

cloud. Because MediaCloud follows news cycles and stories related to the keyword searched,

the data generated by this platform is another way to corroborate whether my assessment of the

context characteristics words are applicable to media stories as displayed in Figure 1.5 –

Mediacloud.org Ordered Word Cloud Results for "Student Veterans." Given that media stories

are another form of influence that impact government policies, public perception of veterans and

the veteran identity, it follows that media stories can also add insights about what it means to be

a student veteran (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). "Media content and public attitudes concerning

veterans likely feed off each other. As Wilbur (2016, p. 268) noted, 'Since the U.S. military is a

product of American society and culture, frames about its veterans will reflect certain shared

cultural assumptions'" (as cited by Parrott et al., 2018, p. 5). Therefore, the results from

MediaCloud.org offer a broader context in understanding what a student veteran is as a concept

for empirical investigation.

[Figure 1.5]

Using the Topic Mapper feature on MeadiCloud, I created a query using the search term

"student veterans" and selected the U.S. national news (including state and local news sources)

databases. This generates a preview of the initial matching results, followed by a list of sample

news stories to be reviewed and confirmed as to their relevance to the topic by me. It also allows

me to preview an ordered word cloud in which the words that show up the most often are bigger

and appear first in the list based on the sample of stories provided. For example, the title of the

news article found on Politico.com on May 8, 2014, reads "Kidnapped girls – House tees up for

charter vote – Vets, NCAA, Ted Mitchell vote on the Hill – Dems plan roundtables on sexual

violence." At first glance, the title may not seem relevant, but by clicking on the link to view the full article I found the search term in the following context: "The House Veterans Affairs Committee will also hold a hearing on higher education for student veterans at 10 a.m. Curtis Coy, deputy undersecretary for economic opportunity at Veterans Affairs, will testify in addition to several college presidents and leaders: http://1.usa.gov/1orlukr." In this context, the article proved to be relevant because the keyword is an exact match and it describes who (HVAC, VA deputy undersecretary for economic opportunity, college presidents and leaders) and what (higher education) is related to the search term. Once I reviewed and confirmed the relevance of the 20 sample stories provided, the final results were made available in downloadable visualizations as shown in Figures 1.6 – Top 4 Themes of Media Stories About Student Veterans on Mediacloud.org from 2001 to 2017.

[Figure1.6]

Discussion. Based on the frequency of topics over time, Figure 1.7 – Totals of Topics Related to Student Veterans in Voxgov.com identifies which topics over time have become most prevalent based on my own coding schema of Main and Sub-themes described herein. Although I have identified most legislative documents connecting student veterans to employment opportunities, these are still within the context of education, such as work-study or on-the-job training programs which are covered by the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill. The least discussed topics related to student veterans involve creating a new undersecretary for the administration of educational benefits at the VA (primarily because this was related to the implementation of the FGIB in 2018) and the media outreach of changes to the G.I. Bill by the VA.

[Figure 1.7]

This analysis shows that the top five (5) topics or themes related to student veterans are (i) employment, (ii) funding and implementation of transition assistance programs at college/university campuses, (iii) representations made by Student Veterans of America (an organization which claims to represent veterans in pursuit of bachelor's and master's degrees), (iv) discussion about post-secondary education at a degree granting college or university, and (v) the broadening of benefits to cover more categories of veterans, dependents and educational programs . While most of the legislative documents reviewed on Voxgov.com were related to the topic of education, comparing my own coding schema against that of the databases' word cloud (both Voxgov.com and MediaCloud.org) demonstrates how topics can be inferred from the data rather than topics that may be assumed by the researcher prior to analysis (Chandelier, Steuckardt, Mathevet, Diwersy & Gimenez, 2018). As such, I have more confidence in my interpretations and coding decisions since both ordered word clouds produced by the databases share similarities and are in agreement that the concept of a student veteran is mostly associated with veterans using their G.I. Bill education benefits to pursue a college education.

Based on these initial searches, I can begin to identify what is meant by "student veteran" in the policy-making process. The social construction of this target population is positive and invokes patriotic rhetoric. Student veterans fit the SCTP framework as an advantaged group, having earned respect for their status as veterans, but also worthy of more allocation of resources because their pursuit of higher education also holds a positive moral value. Although the social constructivist view acknowledges the use of symbols to create the images associated with the policy target population, it fails to capture the meaning attributed to those symbols and the constitutive properties of the social construction itself (Miller, 2012).

Group membership, which in the case of veterans is determined by statutes and policies, contributes to one's social identity as it creates self-awareness of belonging by creating a psychological attachment to the group (Huddy, 2003). However, not all members will have internalized a sense of belonging to a socially constructed group, unless there is a shift in one's personal identity to want to emulate the attitudes and behaviors of other group members (Huddy, 2003). Furthermore, "group identity is likely to emerge among members of high-status groups because membership positively distinguishes group member from outsiders" (Huddy, 2003, p. 519). Since the term "student veteran" acts as a positive symbol among the veteran population, it follows that a new target population would emerge that wants to emulate the positive images constructed by policy-makers. As inferred from this content analysis, the intent of the policy-makers is to reward veterans pursuing higher education, and the public perception of a student veteran is that of a veteran pursuing a degree at a college or university campus. The term "student veteran" is almost exclusively associated with higher education. The only exception is for those pursuing careers in technology, which is considered a highly needed skill in the 21st Century. Because the term student veteran is mostly used to describe veterans pursuing a college education, their actions are also associated with other social values such as employment, successful transition back into civilian life, and a sense of continued purpose outside of the military.

Limitations and Future Research. Applying theories of identity development to the emerging population of student veterans is helpful for policy process and design as well as for creating a conceptual definition for future research. Since the original G.I. Bill of 1944, veterans have been afforded the opportunity of a college education; yet, the concept of a student veteran appears to have become prevalent during the Post 9/11 era. This indicates a shift in the social

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construction of the target population, which has mostly gone unnoticed in the policy literature because veterans are treated as a monolithic group (Kleykamp, 2013; Vaccaro, 2015). While this content analysis of legislative documents and media stories is limited to the perspectives presented by policy-makers in Congress, organizations representing veterans, and activities taking place at college campuses, the frequency of topics in which the keyword "student veterans" appears provides a basis from which to build the concept of the student veteran. The notion that a student veteran is someone who served during the Post 9/11 era and is using G.I. Bill education benefits in a manner that leads to a bachelor's degree (or higher) has been adopted by organizations such as Student Veterans of America – representing veterans who are pursuing higher education as the normative value for expanding educational benefits to replicate the outcomes achieved by WWII veterans with the original G.I. Bill.

Since veteran organizations have repeatedly expressed concerns about Post 9/11 veterans being framed as "wounded warriors," which combines contradictory stereotypes of what it means to be a veteran (Feinstein, 2015; Martin, 2017; Parrott et al., 2018), veterans taking advantage of the expansive policy changes to the G.I. Bill in 2008 (the Post 9/11 GIB) by enrolling in colleges in increasing numbers, organized themselves to create this new student veteran identity as a way to deal with the shift in their status from servicemember to student (Braxton, 2011). Indeed, even in terms of other dimensions of identity such as gender and race, today's veterans come from a much more diverse population than previous G.I. Bill recipients (Falkey, 2016). However, the continuous changes to the G.I. Bill, including the expansion of benefits under the Forever G.I. Bill of 2017, suggests that even more veterans of the Post 9/11 era will potentially enroll in higher education programs. As such, student veterans have the potential to play an instrumental role in improving U.S. global competitiveness and productivity

by improving educational attainment (Gomez, 2010, pp. 94–96). Thus, veteran service organizations such as SVA have embraced this concept of student veteran and have built an organization to support this collective social identity due in part to the policy feedback of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill. As a socially constructed target population, SVA also operates as an Advantaged group, which gives it access to and the ability to engage in the policy-making process, further impacting policy feedback with its influence.

By examining the historical, social and political context surrounding the Post 9/11 GIB, this article provides a fuller understanding of the student veteran concept and helps to distinguish it as a unit of analysis for further study. While the outcomes of students veterans' policy advocacy are still unfolding (and will be for many decades to come), this content analysis also reveals expectations that Post 9/11 student veterans will become the next "Greatest Generation" because it is assumed that their education will make them contributors to the 21st Century economy (Gomez, 2010; Krewson, 2017). For future research, this concept can be tested using the Structural Topic Method to further mitigate concerns about subjectivity. However, this research is the first step in being able to develop measurements for capturing the essence of what a student veteran is for future education policy analysis, as well as policy and social change and/or collective action theories.

Article 2 – Student Veterans of America: The New Kid on the Policy Process Block

Abstract

The Social Construction of Target Populations (SCTP) framework offers one way of understanding why policies are designed to reward or punish certain segments of American society. However, less attention has be given to the impact of policy feedback within the framework, particularly as it pertains to how policies give rise to new target populations and how these new groups engage in the policy-making process. By relying upon semi-structured interviews with advocates and policy-makers, this case discusses how Student Veterans of America (SVA), an organization that emerged to assist veterans pursuing higher education, solidified its identity based on the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill of 2008, and built a coalition among other veterans' groups to pass the Forever G.I. Bill in 2017 by adopting policy entrepreneurship as an emergent strategy. This article discusses how new constituents can quickly become major players in the policy-making process and proposes that even a newly formed organization can be successful in achieving policy change with policy entrepreneurship as an emergent strategy.

Article 2 – Student Veterans of America: The New Kid on the Policy Process Block

As the American political environment has become increasingly partisan, the passing of the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017, also known as the Forever G.I. Bill (FGIB), is notable for gaining unanimous bipartisan support in a short period of time. Indeed, the site GovTrack.us estimated that this bill had a 35 percent chance of passing when it was first introduced. The unique characteristics of this event cannot be fully understood by reviewing the Congressional records alone. Understanding the motivation and activities of advocates and policy-makers leading up to the passage of this new legislation helps explain why this policy change was successful.

The Social Construction of Target Populations (SCTP) framework offers one way of understanding why policies are designed to reward or punish certain segments of American society. However, less attention has be given to the impact of policy feedback within the framework, particularly as it pertains to how policies give rise to new target populations and how these new groups engage in the policy-making process (Béland, 2010). By relying upon semi-structured interviews with advocates and policy-makers, this case discusses how Student Veterans of America (SVA), an organization that emerged to assist veterans pursuing higher education, solidified its identity based on the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill of 2008, and built a coalition among other veterans' groups to pass the Forever G.I. Bill in 2017 by adopting policy entrepreneurship as an emergent strategy.

New constituents can quickly become major players in the policy-making process (Patashnik, 2008), and this case explores the use of policy entrepreneurship by a new socially constructed target population (i.e. student veterans) to explain their success in achieving policy change (Mintrom & Norman, 2009). Many studies focus on individual actors as being policy

entrepreneurs, but few (if any) have applied this concept to an organization. The concept of policy entrepreneurship involves the following elements: displaying social acuity; defining problems; building teams; and leading by example (Mintrom & Norman, 2009). This article proposes that even a newly formed organization can be successful in achieving policy change through policy entrepreneurship as an emergent strategy (Mintrom & Norman, 2009).

Student Veterans of America (SVA) is a nonprofit organization created to support student veterans returning from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan launched after the attacks on September 11, 2001. Lacking on-campus support, student veterans organized themselves through social media, formalizing their grassroots movement in 2008. SVA, along with other veteran service organizations (VSO), also advocated for the modernization of the G.I. Bill, resulting in the passing of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill in June 2008. Since then, SVA has grown to include over 1,300-chapter affiliates, offering programs for student veterans pursuing higher education and STEM careers, and connecting them to internship and employment opportunities. Despite being in existence for only 10 years, SVA also led a coalition of VSO's to further reform the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, which resulted in the passing of the Forever G.I. Bill (FGIB) in August 2017.

This case study builds upon the policy feedback literature concerned with the impact interest groups have in creating niches within an existing policy arena (Wilson, 1995; Béland, 2010) while using practice tracing as a method for identifying the causal power behind the policy change (Pouliot, 2015). Based on semi-structured interviews with representatives of the various parties involved in the policy-making process connected to FGIB, and a review of organizational documents and communications (e.g. press releases, news articles and media), I characterize the practices used to achieve this policy change as policy entrepreneurship.

Social Construction of Target Populations and Policy Feedback of Interest Groups

The SCTP literature has made a significant contribution to policy studies because it has placed the importance of meaning-making of the social world by drawing attention to "who constructs policy issues, and how they do so, such that policy actors and the public accept particular understandings as 'real,' and how construction of groups, problems and knowledge then manifest themselves and become institutionalized into policy designs, which subsequently reinforce and disseminate these constructions" (Schneider & Sidney, 2009, p.106). Within this framework, Schneider & Ingram (1993) suggest a typology of policy target populations based on image valence (positive or negative) and relative political power, as presented in Figure 2.1 SCTP Framework: 1) Advantaged – groups with positive images who are politically powerful, such as veterans; 2) Contenders – groups with negative images who are politically powerful, such as large corporations; 3) Dependents – groups with positive images who are politically powerless, such as the working poor; and 4) Deviants – groups with negative images who are politically powerless, such as criminals.

[Figure 2.1]

The policy process usually involves debates among the actors as to how the target population should be perceived, and interest groups often play a role in working to either maintain or change the image and political leverage a population might have in response to a previous policy outcome (Pierson, 1993; Schneider & Sidney, 2009). This interaction has been termed *policy feedback* (or feedforward) because it describes the process in which politics creates policies that are designed to award benefits or burdens based on the underlying social constructions of the target population, which then loops back into the policy process by reshaping politics, and presumably resulting in appropriate policy changes that redistribute

benefits and burdens, and so forth (Schneider & Sidney, 2009; Béland, 2010; Schneider, Ingram & DeLeon, 2014). Although more recent policy feedback scholarship has focused on the effects on individuals of existing target populations, earlier work examined how political organizations were shaped or influenced by feedback effects (as cited by Goss, Barnes & Rose, 2019). Thus, this type of policy feedback examines the impact of existing policy legacies on interest group formation and mobilization (Béland, 2010) since policies can reinforce the social constructions associated with certain groups, which are then internalized by the general public and/or the target groups themselves. "Put another way, feedback effects may influence individuals not only directly, through their interactions with government programs, but also indirectly, through interactions with civil society groups" (Goss, 2010, p. 4). However, in this case, SVA acts not only as a nonprofit organization that represents its members' interests, but policy-makers appear to accept SVA as a proxy for all student veterans, regardless if veterans are members of the organization or not. For example, throughout the events of this case, neither SVA nor any of its allies asked their members to contact their Congressional representatives about the issue. It was only after SVA was able to build a successful coalition to move its policy changes forward that it began to engage with its social media followers, asking them to promote support for the policy change using the hashtag #ForeverGIBill.

When taking into consideration the student veteran identity that SVA represents through the SCTP lens, its social construction and assumed political power may have been a factor in succeeding with the policy along with its entrepreneurial behavior. The case illustrates how SVA's niche within both the veteran and higher education space facilitated its entry into the policy domain through policy feedback effects of the Post 9/11 GIB design to expand levels of support and play an influential role based on the student veteran identity SVA represents –

veterans earning college degrees in pursuit of STEM and business careers. "Either policy design is a function of social construction and power creating a proposition of target populations, or social construction and power is a function of policy design creating a proposition of feed-forward impacts" (Pierce et al., 2014, p. 6). While this case primarily illustrates the latter, the cyclical nature of policy feedback theory also suggests that any changes in social construction of the target population can be a contributing factor to policy change (Mettler & Soss, 2004; Pierce et al., 2014; Schneider & Ingram, 2018; Larsen, 2019).

While most of the policy feedback literature focus on the development of target populations (which may or may not resemble social identity groups) and how policy design impacts the allocation of resources (Larsen, 2019), this case also considers the impact of practices that can create opportunities for policy change (e.g. Congressional rules for introducing legislation, organizational culture, and strategies for coalition building) and how these are used to communicate support or opposition, implementation, or revision of a policy as a means for capturing policy feedback empirically. Also, positive effects of policy feedback are associated with mobilization in support of a policy without addressing the fate of the policy (Larsen, 2019); however, this case goes further because it illustrates how SVA's practices culminated in successful policy change.

Practice Tracing to Capture Meaning of Student Veterans and Policy Entrepreneurship

Pouliot (2015) explaining why practices are relevant to understanding causality in social scientific analysis states, "Practices are the generative force thanks to which society and politics take shape; they produce very concrete effects in and on the world" (p. 241). "Methodologically speaking, this means that practices must be understood from within the community of practitioners so as to restore the intersubjective meanings that are bound up in them" (Pouliot,

2015, p. 243). From this perspective, practice tracing serves as an appropriate analytical framework for understanding how SVA has constructed its own meaning of a student veteran, how that definition of a student veteran has enabled the organization to engage in the policy process, and how it came to use policy entrepreneurship as an emergent strategy for overcoming challenges to achieve policy change. An emergent strategy is a set of patterns or behaviors that are realized by an organization (i.e. a group of individuals working purposefully and jointly to achieve a common mission) despite the lack of intentional planning for such actions (Minztberg & Waters, 1985).

From February to May 2018, I served as an unpaid Policy Research Associate in the Government Affairs department to observe how SVA functions as an organization and learn about the practices it used to achieve policy change resulting in the Forever G.I. Bill. Because I had not previously worked in policy, my only knowledge of policy processes came from academic coursework, and I was eager to see how well theory aligned with the work practitioners actually do (Adler & Adler, 1987). While I was not present to observe the activities leading up the FGIB, those events were reconstructed through semi-structured interviews in which I asked questions about things that practitioners generally take for granted in order to learn how practitioners behave in order to further their interest in expanding educational benefits to Post 9/11 veterans. In addition, analysis of SVA documents and other actors' public documents (Congressional testimonies, press releases, media interviews, social media posts, etc.) also rendered visible tacit knowledge and meaning of their actions (Adler & Adler, 1987; Saldaña, 2016; Pouliot, 2015). Thus, the case study presented is based upon my synthesis of interviews, organizational documents, and media communications to construct a timeline of events, but also

to corroborate how everyday practices were insufficient for SVA to achieve the policy changes it

was proposing, leading it to adapt to policy entrepreneurial behaviors.

The literature on entrepreneurship has evolved along two trajectories: 1) for rational

choice theorists, it is an economic function or way for solving common problems that leads to a

new process for the more efficient provision of public goods (Dahl, 1961; Ostrom, 1965;

McCaffrey & Salerno, 2011). The entrepreneurs are sometimes understood to be state actors, as

the owner of resources with the authority to make decisions about the allocation of these

resources (Petridou et al., 2015); 2) in policy process, entrepreneurship is a lens for viewing

policy and institutional change when coupled with other policy process theories, such as

Kingdon's (1994) Multiple Streams framework (Petridou, 2014; Petridou et al., 2015). Although

both traditions approach entrepreneurship from different perspectives, the literature agrees that

entrepreneurship "is a set of behaviors, a function and not a personality" in which creativity is

valued for taking actions that "breaking the mould, … different from the ordinary," as are "the

building of coalitions, the embeddedness of the political entrepreneurs in the sociopolitical

context and the collective nature of entrepreneurship…" (Petridou et al., 2015, pp. 3-4). It is

from within the policy change stance that policy entrepreneurship is discussed in this case.

> For a policy to be made and implemented there has to be a political system in
> place – an institutional arrangement which can host this policy. At the same time,
> institutions *per se* do not make policy, people do. Actors, stakeholder, policy
> makers make policy, while at the same being a part of larger institutional
> arrangements. … On the one hand, stakeholders in a given policy domain are
> embedded in institutional contexts which inform and shape their actions (Wang,
> 2010). On the other hand, structure may be seen as not a fixed constellation of
> relations between actors, but as constantly reproduced (Giddens, 1984), as
> something comprehended by actors and used as constraints and resources in
> action (Bogason, 2000). Petridou et al., 2015, pp. 4–5

To overcome the dilemma of the structure/agency issues in entrepreneurship and SCTP,

practice tracing is appropriate because it allows for examination of the meanings behind the

actions taken by SVA and other interested parties to explain their motivations or actions. Based on the description of events and actions, I concluded that these behaviors were consistent with policy entrepreneurship that emerged as a reaction to the challenges SVA faced, rather than a planned course of action (i.e. emergent strategy).

While veterans are usually presented as a monolithic group, SVA is able to enter the policy arena by making a claim on the collective identity of veterans using their educational benefits to pursue higher education as distinct from the needs of other veterans' issues. SVA is very clear in that it represents and acts on behalf of veterans enrolled in higher education in pursuit of undergraduate or graduate degrees in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), or business. Although the Post 9/11 GIB covers a wide range of educational and training programs, from cosmetology school to on-the-job training, to doctoral degrees, SVA has constructed the *student veteran* to be one who pursues higher education in a high needs career field, and in turn, continues to serve the country by contributing to society, as opposed to being a burden to society. By carving out this niche in the veterans arena, many of the establishment VSO's defer to SVA as the authority on education policy issues. Likewise, within the higher education policy arena, SVA has also been able to establish its position as the advocate for veterans. This unique position within the veteran and higher education policy spheres has given SVA the potential to act as a policy entrepreneur or agent of policy change (Kingdon, 1994; Sheingate, 2003; Capano & Howlett, 2009; Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Brouwer & Biermann, 2011).

SVA also has several distinguishing organizational factors that contribute to its adoption of policy entrepreneurship in order to succeed at its policy change goal in this case. First, SVA is focused primarily on matters of higher education (i.e. bachelor's degrees or higher); second,

SVA is organized to support student veterans through programming; advocacy is not as dominant, and not a primary expense of the organization[4]; and third, although SVA was formally incorporated in 2008, it did not have the resources to formally employ anyone until 2012, relying heavily on grassroots efforts and volunteers. Therefore, SVA had to adapt its usual lobbying practices to achieve their policy goals in part because of its relatively young age as an organization and its capacity rather than by intentional design or strategy (Wilson, 1995).

SVA revised its strategy once the organization experienced public opposition to the proposed funding mechanism to support the expansion and improvements to the Post 9/11 GIB as presented in the case study below. Based upon the explanations of their behaviors to deal with these setbacks, their actions were consistent with what Mintrom and Norman (2009) describe as policy entrepreneurship. SVA displayed policy entrepreneurship during the events leading up to the FGIB in the following ways:

1. Social acuity – SVA understands the political landscape of their issue areas and maintains positive relationships within both the veterans and higher education networks. These relationships are sometimes based on individuals' reputations as many individuals in these networks have worked together on past issues or have previously worked at the same organization. SVA also expected that a change in administration after the 2016 presidential election would provide a "window of opportunity" for the policy changes they sought.

2. Defining problems – Policy entrepreneurs must be skilled at defining problems for policy-makers to act, but in this case SVA acted preemptively to solve a

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[4] During the time of my internship (February 2018 to May 2018), the Government Affairs department consisted of two full-time employees and one paid policy fellow; whereas, seven full-time employees oversaw programs.

problem before it began. SVA also had to define their policy problems for other

veterans' groups to convince them to join as allies. SVA initially sought to make

the educational benefit permanent by disassociating its cost as a price of war;

instead, education is an earned benefit for military service, not a recruitment tool.

By reframing the issue, SVA offered solutions to its policy problem.

3. Building teams – SVA reached out to various organizations to build a coalition to

   support this legislation. This approach, which SVA named the Tiger Team,

   allowed the various veterans' groups to present a united voice to policy-makers.

   Yet each member of the Tiger Team also represented their individual

   organization's priority issues which also served to motivate them to work

   collectively for the passage of the bill.

4. Leading by example – SVA's optimism to expand and improve the Post 9/11 GIB

   gave the coalition the energy to work behind-the-scenes. Although individual

   organizations had previously attempted to make policy changes to benefit their

   members, the Tiger Team approach reinvigorated their efforts, making change

   possible.

All of this effort would not have been necessary were it not in support of the concept of a

student veteran. The student veteran is a direct result of the policy feedback effects of the Post

9/11 GIB. That is, through the policy intent and design of the Post 9/11 GIB, anyone who

served a minimum of 90 days in the US military since September 10, 2001 is eligible for the

most expansive educational benefits offered. These benefits, which may be used by veterans

themselves or transferred to a dependent, are seen as an enlistment incentive, a reward for

service, and a stimulus toward educational attainment to assist veterans transitioning back to

civilian life. Because of this policy change, more veterans of the Post 9/11 era are enrolling at degree granting public universities than before (Wang, Elder & Spence, 2012; Kleykamp, 2013; Cate, 2014; Barr, 2015; Cappello, 2017; Vick & Fontanella, 2017; Young, 2017; Zhang, 2017). SVA not only emerged to serve this new cadre of veterans returning to school, but also to help policy-makers distinguish these student veterans from the collective identity of veterans. Although veterans as a policy target population are viewed favorably and as being deserving of help, student veterans (those taking advantage of their educational benefits) are portrayed as contributors to the general welfare of society not only because of their military service, but because they are pursuing higher education in high needs areas such as healthcare, business, science, and technology (Cate, Lyon, Schmeling & Bogue, 2017).

Illustrative Case Study Method

Case studies based on real-world events are useful to policy studies because they offer in-depth understanding of what policy actors actually experience. The Government Accountability Office (1990) defines a case study as "a method for learning about a complex instance, based on a comprehensive understanding of that instance obtained by extensive description and analysis of that instance taken as a whole and in its context" (p. 15). In other words, the goal of a case study is to obtain and analyze information that describes and explains what happened in that particular occurrence and why. An illustrative or descriptive case study is meant to provide readers with information about the behind-the-scenes activities that are not normally accessible to the public as well as the social interactions that take place within the context of the instance under study (Stake, 1978; Yin, 2012, p. 49). Case studies are also a "valid way of amplifying a more systemic presentation via the realism and vividness of anecdotal information" (GAO, 1990, p. 39).

Selecting the FGIB as the instance for this case was based upon the opportunity to speak with many of the parties involved because of my affiliation with SVA, and because it was the latest policy change to the G.I. Bill. While Congressional records indicated that the bill passed with ease, enjoying bi-partisan support, I quickly learned that the work SVA engaged in to achieve this policy change actually began nearly a year before it was officially introduced to the House. This case aims to help policy students experience what "being in the room" was like, in addition to providing an illustrative example of policy entrepreneurship as an emergent strategy.

Case Study: The Forever GI Bill.

Background and Motivation

In October 2016, SVA staff began discussing the concept of a "GI Bill 3.0" that would ensure future generations of veterans would be able to pursue higher education without being vulnerable to budget cuts. Although more veterans began using the Post 9/11 GIB, the earlier Montgomery G.I. Bill (MGIB) could not be easily terminated due to the investment servicemembers had made to receive their educational benefits (i.e. opting to pay $100 per month for their first 12 months of service). At the heart of the MGIB, the program would need to be fully vested before significant cuts could be made, making it more cost effective for the federal government to allow the remaining participants to collect their benefits rather than "cash out" to terminate the program. SVA staff viewed the payment mechanism used for MGIB as a model for protecting any future reductions in funding to the Post 9/11 GIB.

The SVA Government Affairs team had informal discussions with Congressional staffers at the House Veterans Affairs Committee (HVAC) about this proposal in which servicemembers would pay $100 per month for 24 months. These payments or "buy-in" were scored by the Congressional Budget Office as $3.2 billion dollars, which would cover the many changes being

proposed to the Post 9/11 GIB. These discussions were broadened in February and March of

2017 to include representatives from military and veteran organizations. This wide audience of

advocates discussed a list of 17 different proposals to improve and expand the Post-9/11 GIB.

In the spirit of transparency, the payment mechanism was discussed up front with the

various groups. There were mixed reactions from both policy-makers and veterans' groups

about asking servicemembers to pay for educational benefits that they were currently receiving

for free. However, SVA believed that if they could convince these other groups that the cost was

small compared to the benefits veterans would receive by making the G.I. Bill permanent, they

would be on board. Some of the groups outright supported the buy-in, citing the interest in

having servicemembers with some "skin in the game" with regards to their personal

responsibility in how they chose to utilize their educational benefits. Veterans of Foreign Wars

(VFW) expressed concern over the buy-in concept but did not convey to HVAC staff that they

would publicly oppose it. Rather, it was understood that VFW would not support this initiative

because it disagreed with charging troops for benefits they had earned as a reward for war time

service. Subsequent meetings were held with the intent to announce the plans for a large package

of legislation at an HVAC hearing scheduled for April 26, 2017.

On Monday, April 18, 2017, VFW issued a press release titled "VFW Strongly Opposes

New Tax on Troops," and *Stars and Stripes*, an online military news publication, published an

article insinuating that HVAC was making back room deals to slip-in the buy-in proposal to the

Post 9/11 GIB (Wentling, 2017). The article quotes the VFW leadership about its position

opposing this measure to "charge troops." VFW expressed that until the country was no longer

at war, it would not support a buy-in. Later that day both VFW and Iraq Afghanistan Veterans of

America (IAVA) went on the record to oppose this proposal, and specifically named Chairman

Roe as the sponsor of the proposed bill, which had not yet been introduced and did not have a named sponsor at the time the article was published. SVA and their allies attempted to rally support for the proposal on social media. The following day, April 19th, Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) issued a press release in support of what became known as FGIB. On April 20th, IAVA leadership was interviewed by MSNBC about the issue, and again Chairman Roe was named as introducing the bill. On April 21st, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi issued a statement calling it a "House Republican proposal," which further politicized the issue. All these events led the HVAC staff to make the decision to cancel the hearing because they were unprepared for this highly politicized and negative response. In the past, most work done within the House and Senate committees on veterans enjoyed a bi-partisan spirit. However, staffers expressed how unusual this type of partisan behavior was for veterans' issues.

At the same time SVA, VVA, and other allies continued to try to rally support via social media, but by April 24, 2017, SVA acknowledged they had lost the "talking points" war. SVA leadership decided that they needed to reassess the situation and decided not to pursue the matter for the time being. In lieu of the hearing on April 26th, SVA decided to hold a conference call with its members to explain to student veterans what had actually happened since there were many inaccuracies circulating in the media about the proposal and SVA's role. The 25 SVA members who joined the conference call wanted their organization to figure out a way forward. It also became clear that the buy-in concept was dead on arrival. The HVAC staff declared that the committee would not be considering GI Bill issues for at least another six months.

Building a Coalition Around the Veteran and Student Veteran Identity

Noting the strong opinions about the buy-in mechanism to pay for educational benefits, SVA wanted to hear from all organizations and parties to express their thoughts about the full list

of legislation that would have been considered at the April 26th hearing. The meeting provided

SVA with the opportunity to inform and educate other veterans' organizations who were

generally unfamiliar with education issues. It was also a chance to highlight where concerns

existed for organizations that opposed the funding mechanism and where common ground could

be found. Nearly 85 attendees from over 40 non-profit organizations and government entities

attended the meeting, none of whom wanted to be left out of this important policy change

initiative for the veteran community. The outcome of the meeting included unanimous agreement

on four priorities that were widely regarded as issues of urgent concern, including: equity of GI

Bill entitlement for Fry Scholarship recipients (survivors) and Purple Heart recipients, reservists

activated under 12304b orders to ensure their time in service counted towards earning GI Bill

benefits, and the restoration of benefits to student veterans enrolled at schools that had closed. A

letter was drafted to the congressional VA committees based on these priorities and received

signatures from the executives of 35 organizations. Many committee staff had attended the GI

Bill Roundtable, and the letter demonstrated the will of the veteran community to coalesce

around the four priorities.

SVA planned to host a second GI Bill Roundtable on July 13th and invited the same

groups that participated in the first meeting, except for government representatives, to allow for

as candid of a discussion as possible with respect to the offset. In the constrained budget

environment, any legislation that would have a realistic prospect for passage required a payment

mechanism, or "pay-for" or "offset." Therefore, this second meeting would be where the

veterans' groups would discuss all options for an offset.

The offset that SVA identified was a pay-for that had been proposed the previous year to

pay for the failed Vets First Act of 2016. The pay-for came from repealing the exemption for VA

beneficiaries on a change to the housing allowance, already implemented in the National Defense Authorization Act of 2015 (NDAA) for active duty troops serving in the Department of Defense (DoD). Under this proposal, the rate of increase to BAH for veterans would be reduced to match that of active duty servicemembers. This pay-for resulted in no major backlash when implemented for DoD and was also under consideration for budget deficit reduction—hence a "use-it-or-lose-it" proposition. In announcing the second GI Bill Roundtable, some of SVA's fellow advocates reached out to express concern over focusing the second meeting on the offset. They shared that any discussion of a pay-for would spark an immediate and acute reaction from the same groups that had previously opposed this proposal during Veterans First Act. Instead, they urged SVA to postpone any discussion of the offset until more support had been built. SVA followed this recommendation and began to strategize, building a committed core of organizations and advocates in order to have a reasonable chance at re-introducing the issue to HVAC.

SVA first recruited VVA whose founding principle of "never again would one generation of veterans leave another behind" resonated with the concept of creating a GI Bill for all future generations of veterans. The removal of the 15-year time limit on the GI Bill resonated with VVA's mission statement – hence the nickname, "Forever GI Bill." Next, being one of the major opponents of the previous offset, SVA met with VFW to determine if this was a pay-for that they could accept. Generally, none of the organizations support offsets. However, the overall package outweighed the costs associated with this pay-for and when combined with the prospect of the offset occurring regardless, due to the budget committee's plans — VFW became an ally. The American Legion was also an early supporter of the new package since former SVA staff members, now working for the American Legion, helped develop the concept for a

permanent GI Bill through the initial buy-in proposal. Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) also had a strong interest in the bill's passage due to the multiple provisions that would support survivors. TAPS had been working on these issues for years without much success and seized the opportunity to be part of the broader coalition. In fact, because TAPS had been working on these issues for so long, it was the most prepared with its requests and managed to secure one third of the package, totaling more than $1 billion allocated for survivors. Got Your 6 (GY6) was also eager to see the bill's passage, recognizing the obvious implications of education empowering veterans. Members of GY6 provided critical strategic advice through the whole process. Finally, the Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH) joined the team, with a keen interest in the bill passing due to inclusion of legislation that would grant 100 percent GI Bill eligibility to all Purple Heart recipients, regardless of time in service qualifications. The issue of Purple Heart GI Bill equity mainly affected National Guard and Reserve Members who may have deployed only once or twice when they were injured before being sent back to their guard or reserve status. Since those individuals did not meet the amount of active duty time required to be eligible for the GI Bill, as many as 1,500 Purple Heart Recipients were only eligible for partial GI Bill benefits, despite having sustained injuries during their tours.

With representatives from these seven organizations, the "Tiger Team" was born. The diligent research of the SVA Government Affairs Policy Associates, who are typically unpaid students, was a crucial element of the process. Nicknamed "Hubbard's Cupboard" or just "the Cupboard" for short, the Tiger Team had ample knowledge of what offices on Capitol Hill (the Hill) needed to be targeted because of these dedicated associates. SVA prioritized a comprehensive list of Members of Congress based on four tiers: tier one included Members who were previously public about their opposition against the Vets First Act, or of other immediate

strategic importance such as House and Senate Leadership; tier two Members included HVAC and SVAC committee members; tier three included Members who were relevant based on their committee and caucus membership, as well as personal background (e.g. veteran status); and tier four Members included any members who were also military veterans who had not previously engaged in this issue.

SVA Takes a New, More Inclusive Approach

Although the Tiger Team managed to work with HVAC to get the draft out of committee with virtually no changes and schedule a full vote the following week, they still had hurdles to overcome in the Senate. Staff members of Senators on the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee expressed major concern over several of the provisions, citing apprehension on student protection issues raised. The HELP staff believed that the STEM Scholarship and the High-Tech Pilot provisions appeared vulnerable to bad actors in higher education. Additionally, the provision providing relief to students affected by school closures did not reflect the language that the staff had hoped for. After a series of email exchanges, extended meetings between HELP staff and the Tiger Team, and negotiations with HVAC, the HELP staff proposed several rounds of improvements to the House version of the bill.

As these negotiations continued, SVA managed to gain support from the "Big Six" of higher education associations, spearheaded by the American Council on Education. Some higher education associations had presented opposition to the bill initially due to a provision mandating priority enrollment for veterans at all schools that have any early enrollment programs. Additionally, the Association of Public Land-Grant Universities (APLU) was committed to modifying the definition of STEM in the STEM Scholarship provision to include "agriculture and natural sciences." Again, SVA and the Tiger Team were receptive to the higher education

community's concerns and worked to address them. With that, the Big Six sent a crucial letter of support for the new bill. The night before the House vote, the Senate sent a final round of proposed improvements, noting that if the House accepted the last round of updates, that the Senate would be willing to introduce an identical Senate companion bill. The House incorporated many of the last-minute revisions, paving the way for SVAC to unanimously pass a mirror image of the bill during the markup. On July 24th, the Tiger Team witnessed the passage of the bill, introduced as the Harry W. Colmery Educational Assistance Act of 2017 in honor of the father of the original GI Bill in 1944, Harry W. Colmery.

Members of the Tiger Team sat in the gallery and recall the House floor was silent. Eventually the clock began to buzz, calling for votes, and members trickled in to cast their ballots for the various proposals up for a vote. Within the first minute of voting being opened on FGIB, well over 100 Yay votes were cast. One Nay vote appeared on the board in bright red, and the Tiger Team all turned to the vote board to see who had dared to vote against the bill. Within seconds, the vote was switched to a Yay, likely cast as a Nay in error. After just a few minutes, the final vote count of 405-0 stood, and the Speaker Pro Tempore, Rep. James Comer, announced that the measure had carried.

SVAC staffers (both Majority and Minority) informed the Tiger Team shortly after the House passage of the bill that they planned to schedule the package for committee markup on July 26th. SVAC advanced the legislation with no changes and began the Amendment & Substitution process to formally adopt H.R. 3218, the Forever GI Bill, for unanimous consent. Under the Amending process in the Senate, a complete substitution is a special form of amendment that proposes to replace the entire text of the measure with a different text (Davis,

2015). In this case, complete substitution was used to adopt the text from the House bill for the Senate bill.

The Tiger Team aggressively sought Senate co-sponsors of the Senate version, S. 1598, to ensure as many offices as possible were aware of the legislation and recorded as being in favor of it. As summer recess approached, many things became increasingly opaque, such as the actual Senate recess date, the proceedings of the Amendment & Substitution process, and the intentions of the Senate Leadership. By the afternoon of Tuesday August 1st, the bill had cleared the Amendment & Substitution process on both sides of the aisle. It looked as though Senate leadership might include it in the read-out that evening. The Tiger Team and allies aggressively pushed the Senate leadership to get the bill through, still unclear if it would make it on the calendar and whether it was even a priority. The Tiger Team feared that it was possible for a veterans' education bill, with unanimous support in the House and amongst advocacy groups, to possibly die at the last minute because of a procedural hurdle. The following day, August 2nd, the Tiger Team flooded Senate leadership offices with as many phone calls as they could generate. Every favor, string and connection was pulled by the Tiger Team to get the message to the Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, that the GI Bill must happen before recess. If the bill failed to pass the Senate before recess, the bill's pay-for would likely be taken by the budget committees for deficit reduction as early as the next day. Finally, the staff of the Senate Whip, Sen. John Cornyn, met with TAPS, who explained the urgency to the Whip's staffer – the bill had to pass that day, or the funding would be lost. As an original co-sponsor of the bill, Sen. Cornyn's staff said they would make the case and relay the urgency of the situation. At five o'clock that evening, SVA got word from SVAC staff that the bill was about to hit the Senate floor. The SVA staff jammed into the small staff conference room and turned the television to

CSPAN, eagerly awaiting the read-out. Sen. Richard Blumenthal was speaking on veterans' issues, and then he mentioned the name of the bill, noting the importance of that legislation. The SVA staff cheered at the announcement. Finally, the Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, was recognized for the night's read-out. As he began to speak and read off various bills to be recognized as passing through unanimous consent, he finally muttered, "I ask unanimous consent the senate proceed to the immediate consideration…" The bill was recognized, and, in that moment, the Forever GI Bill had passed Congress unanimously. Unlike the House vote which was a distinct win, the SVA staff was confused as the moment was anti-climactic. After finally realizing that it had, in fact, been successful, the team cheered and began to inform the Tiger Team and all other key parties.

Throughout this whole process, SVA had kept the White House informed of the bill's progress. SVA briefed them on the legislation in early July, and they were initially eager to do a public signing ceremony. The White House went silent the day before passing the Senate and the plan SVA had to have the signing ceremony that Friday never materialized. The White House noted that the Senate did not deliver the bill until after the President had gone on vacation. The President had 10 days to sign the bill from the date it was delivered, minus Saturdays. On August 16, 2017, the President signed the bill into law in a quiet ceremony joined by the Secretary of VA, Dr. David Shulkin, at his golf course in New Jersey. The signing was followed by a press conference that Secretary Shulkin hosted, and only one question was asked about the bill; the rest of the questions were related to the riots in Charlottesville, Virginia. The conclusion of this herculean effort which began back in October 2016, terminated without fanfare. Despite the lack of a public celebration, the SVA Government Affairs team began focusing on FGIB

implementation; and with that, the policy feedback effects will continue as SVA seeks to shape how the VA will implement and administer these policy changes.

Discussion

By all formal accounts, the FGIB is a unique accomplishment in that it passed both the House and Senate unanimously in the midst of a highly divisive political environment during a short period of time. The effort to change the MGIB to the Post 9/11 GIB, introduced originally by Jim Webb in January 2007, died, was reintroduced in June 2007, and was eventually signed by President Bush in June 2008 (Govtrack.us). In contrast, the FGIB was introduced on July 13, 2017 and was enacted on August 16, 2017. This case study provides insights to all the behind-the-scenes work that went into reviving an initiative that previously failed and shepherding it to success. By examining this case through SCTP's policy feedback in combination with policy entrepreneurship one can begin to understand how this new category of student veterans, represented by the organization SVA, became highly engaged and influential in the policy-making process. Furthermore, SVA's relative newness in the veteran's arena pushed them to employ policy entrepreneurship as an emergent strategy, which ultimately members of the coalition credit as the reason for its success in getting this legislation passed.

In this case, SVA by way of policy feedback was able to engage in the policy process because of its already positive construction as a special group of veterans. In doing so, it was also able to leverage its position within the veterans, higher education, and policy-maker groups to push for policy change. While its initial attempt failed, SVA still believed that its proposal would be viable if it could build a coalition that abolished any opposition so that politicians did not have to experience any negative feedback from the policy changes as illustrated in Figure 2.2 – Student Veteran Identity Role in Policy Feedback and Policy Entrepreneurship.

[Figure 2.2]

These semi-structured interviews revealed that most policy-makers and veterans' groups appreciated SVA's role as a policy entrepreneur. The role SVA played in building the Tiger Team coalition is what most interviewees would like to see replicated on other veterans' education issues. By presenting a united voice, with no opposition to the offset, the coalition made it easy to gain bipartisan support. SVA's willingness to work in partnership with other groups, even VFW who initially was against the proposal, demonstrates the organization's social acuity and leadership by example. In addition, the Tiger Team removed many of the burdens placed on Congressional staffers throughout the negotiation processes to build consensus among the political parties, advocacy groups, and constituents.

Another revelation illustrated by this case is that policy-makers recognize the various factions and identities within the veteran community, but often call on these groups to behave as one homogenous group for the sake of political capital. That is, politicians do not want to be perceived as unsupportive of veterans' issues. So, if there are veterans' groups that take opposing positions on a policy issue, as in the FGIB case, policy-makers need them to resolve the issue beforehand or behind-the-scenes before moving the matter forward publicly. This also illustrates the application of anticipatory feedback strategies by politicians and their staffers towards a target population they have constructed to be worthy of benefits and politically powerful (Schneider & Ingram, 2018), although only approximately seven percent (7%) of the U.S. population as of 2017 identify as veterans (census.gov). Veterans are also politically savvy enough to use their social and political power against politicians and opponents to policy positions they favor when necessary. The literature on SCTP suggests that policy-makers treat their target populations with a sense of uniformity, unaware of the diversity within the group;

however, this case illustrates that they are aware of the diversity. Whether this awareness is present for all SCTP or only advantaged populations is unclear and should be further researched.

Conclusion

SVA senior leadership acknowledges that their organization's existence is due in part to the passing of the Post 9/11 GIB, but their organizational activities and priorities are devoted to student veterans pursuing higher education. Rather than taking a defensive position to oppose budget cuts to the Post 9/11 GIB, SVA sought to further expand educational benefits and re-direct this issue from being viewed as a cost of war to a permanent component of one's military service. By defining the policy problem and offering a solution (albeit one that was initially unpopular), it was able to build a coalition that was compelled to act in the face of the alternative – leaving the GIB vulnerable to future cutbacks, which in the end would have been a detriment to the veterans' community.

This case demonstrates how policy feedback within SCTP framework led to the development of student veterans as a result of the Post 9/11 GIB that policy-makers now must contend with. Although the needs of student veterans differ from those of the general veteran population, SCTP assumes that policy-makers are unaware of the diversity within the populations when, in fact, they are. However, policy-makers rely heavily on the input of veteran' groups in the policy process even if at times only for symbolic and/or political reasons. Veterans have internalized these messages, and therefore, readily participate in the policy process, and can be especially vocal when challenging the efficacy of policies affecting them without fear of losing their advantaged status.

By examining SVA at the organizational level, this case also establishes the effectiveness of policy entrepreneurship. That is, policy entrepreneurship does not have to be adopted

intentionally, but can be used as an emergent strategy by a new organization that may lack experience or capacity in the policy field. Being adept at policy entrepreneurship can also help a new organization establish itself as a major player or influencer within their policy issue arena.

Policy feedback can create new constituent groups and give rise to new organizations due to the nature of design and implementation of new policies. However, how these new groups engage in the policy-making process is also connected to their social construction. That is, advantaged groups like student veterans are able to engage in the policy-making process because of their already established high-status as veterans. Furthermore, new organizations like SVA can be more effective and successful in achieving policy change when they adopt policy entrepreneurship.

Article 3 – U.S. Military Veterans' Utilization of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill

Abstract

Under the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, enacted in 2008, veterans serving a minimum of 90 days in the U.S. military since September 10, 2001, are eligible for the most expansive Federal education benefits ever offered. These benefits, which may be used by veterans themselves or transferred to their family members, and are seen as an enlistment incentive, a reward for service, and a stimulus toward educational attainment. However, little is known regarding what influences veterans' decisions about whether and how to use their benefits. This exploratory study investigates the factors that figure in veterans' decisions regarding benefit utilization based on their own interpretation of the policy intent. Semi-structured interviews with nineteen Post 9/11 veterans revealed that location post-military service, the ability to collect a housing allowance, and the perception of a school as "military friendly" were important factors influencing veterans' decisions. The study also found that veterans are making these decisions by themselves, without the help of traditional sources of advice (parent, spouse, mentor, etc.), and rely heavily on institutions of higher learning for assistance accessing these benefits. These insights provide direction for future research to determine if the label of "student veteran" is an accurate representation of how veterans utilizing the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill view themselves.

Article 3 – U.S. Military Veterans' Utilization of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill

J.R. Martinez is a United States Army veteran and Purple Heart recipient for the burns and injuries he sustained from an improvised explosive device (IED) in Iraq in 2003. During his three-year recovery at Walter Reed Hospital, he began pursuing an acting career, and is most notable for winning the mirrored-ball trophy in 2011 on the popular television show "Dancing With the Stars." His fame led to other career opportunities as a motivational speaker, veterans' and burn victims' advocate, and best-selling author. Yet, in a speech to the Congressional Hispanic Caucus on September 11, 2017, Martinez revealed that despite his success and responsibilities to his five-year old daughter, he had decided to go back to school at the age of 34. He is pursuing a bachelor's degree at New York University. Why and how did he make this decision?

Veterans like J.R. Martinez, who have served for a minimum of 90 days in the US military since September 10, 2001, are eligible for the most expansive educational benefits offered under the Post 9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2008, commonly known as the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill (Post 9/11 GIB). These benefits, which may be used by veterans themselves or transferred to a dependent, are seen as an enlistment incentive, a reward for service, and a stimulus toward educational attainment to assist veterans transitioning back to civilian life. Yet, little is known about the actual influences on veterans' decisions about whether and how to use their education benefits. Because veterans choosing to advance their education or training are also further removed from traditional sources of advice about post-secondary education, such as school counselors and parents, student veterans are more likely to make decisions about education, such as institution and degree choice, using other sources that current research does not address (Jenner, 2017).

The research on Post 9/11 veterans discusses an upward trend in educational achievements of veterans, attributing this success to policy changes (Wang, Elder & Spence, 2012; Kleykamp, 2013; Cate, 2014; Barr, 2015; Cappello, 2017; Young, 2017; Zhang, 2017), without a clear causal explanation as to why veterans continue to experience a gap in degree completion and employment rates despite increasing degree enrollments at mostly public institutions (Cappello, 2017; Vick & Fontanella, 2017; Zhang, 2017). While a few studies suggest that these disparities may be attributed to student characteristics, such as demographics (e.g. race and age) as most 9/11 veterans share more similarities with other non-traditional students than veterans from previous eras (Cooney, Jr., Segal, Segal & Falk, 2003; Armor & Gilroy, 2010; Burke & Espinoza, 2012; Routon, 2014; Sims, 2014; Cappello, 2017; Jenner, 2017), few discuss how these characteristics influence a veteran's decision on whether and how to use their educational benefits. Furthermore, nontraditional students often cite their inability to pay for college as a barrier to their educational attainment (Gulley, 2016; Sanchez, 2013), whereas, Post 9/11 veterans do not have that challenge because of their educational benefits. In fact, it is estimated that 50% of eligible veterans do not use the educational benefits provided by the Post 9/11 GIB (Zoli, Maury & Fay, 2015; Gross & Altman, 2017). Because the literature on Post 9/11 veterans and education exposes more "unknowns" than "knowns" regarding veterans' decision-making process for utilizing their educational benefits, this article uses a qualitative exploratory research approach to identify factors influencing Post 9/11 veterans' decisions to provide direction for future research.

This exploratory research also provides insights as to how individual veterans interpret and act upon policy changes that directly impact their lives. This further expands our understanding of the policy feedback mechanism within the Social Construction of Target Populations (SCTP)

framework (Schneider, Ingram & DeLeon, 2014) because it provides an opportunity for the target population (in this case, veterans) to express their interpretation of what the policy means to them and how it impacted their decision to use or not use the educational benefits. The interviews also provide insights about how individual veterans construct their own identity which is often inconsistent with how policy-makers and VSOs have constructed the student veteran identity which motivates their collective action in the policy process. Whether an individual veteran embraces the student veteran identity can also impact his/her/their academic success and social integration to college life (IVMF, 2017).

This article begins by providing an overview of the G.I. Bill as a reward and incentive for military service and its significance to veterans' education and employment success. It then highlights the need for causal explanations of the issues exposed by the literature on Post 9/11 veterans and education that led to the formulation of the research question: *What are the sources that influence a veteran's interpretation of the educational benefits and whether or how he/she/they act upon the meaning of the policy?* The need for an exploratory research design is discussed, followed by the study's methodology for data analysis. Next the study's preliminary findings are presented based on emergent themes identified during the manual coding process. Lastly, the insights about the sources influencing veterans' decisions on whether and how to use their educational benefits are considered and suggestions for more precise future research are offered.

Reviewing the Literature: Post 9/11 Veterans, Education and Employment

The development and intent of the Post 9/11 GIB has led much of the research to focus on the educational and employment rates of veterans, usually noting variances between veterans and their civilian counterparts, using quantitative data sources such as the Current Population

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Survey, Bureau of Labor Statistics and/or American Community Survey (Vick & Fontanella, 2017). As scholars acknowledge that examining veterans as a monolithic group fails to provide insights on causality, more studies have started to examine effects of age, race and gender might have on educational attainment and employment among Post 9/11 veterans (Kleykamp, 2010; Kleykamp, 2013; Cappello, 2017; Vick & Fontanella, 2017). The literature reveals that Post 9/11 veterans share more similarities with other nontraditional students than veterans from previous eras have because Post 9/11 veterans are increasingly more racially and ethnically diverse, are typically 25 years or older when they enroll in higher education, are the first in their families to attend college, and are more likely to be married with children of their own (Cooney et al., 2003; Armor & Gilroy, 2010; Routon, 2014; Cate, 2014; Jenner, 2017). These characteristics have been cited as possible factors inhibiting Post 9/11 veterans' success in transitioning as students and civilian workers, a clear causal explanation as to why veterans are experiencing these disparities, despite the expanded benefits and assistance programs being offered, has not been addressed (Cappello, 2017; Vick & Fontanella, 2017; Zhang, 2017).

Another focus of the literature is examining how Post 9/11 veterans use their educational benefits. The Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University (IVMF) surveys veterans annually since 2014, has found that educational benefits are the primary reason for joining the military, but less than 50% of eligible veterans utilize the benefit (Zoli et al., 2015). IVMF also found that out of those who do use the educational benefit, less than one percent (1%) are enrolled in *US News and World Report's* list of "Top 20 Colleges and Universities in America." As Zoli et al., (2015) note,

> Juxtapose that with the fact that year after year, online for-profit colleges have received … *40 percent of all GI Bill tuition payments over the past five years.* On average, veterans attending these schools drop-out at exceedingly high rates, and

if they do graduate, are often overwhelmed by student-loan debt, and persistently struggle to find living-wage employment in a labor market that does not uniformly value their expensive online degrees. (p.iii)

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has also issued reports concerning the mixed results of veterans education, student-debt and employment rates connected to the Post 9/11 GIB. Reports issued by the GAO such as "Student Characteristics and Outcomes Vary across Schools" (July 2013) and "VA Should Strengthen Its Efforts to Help Veterans Make Informed Education Choices" (May 2014) imply that veterans need more guidance with educational decisions, particularly those who tend to come from disadvantaged backgrounds. A single report provided by NCVAS (2017) indicated that in 2014, fewer non-white veterans used the Post 9/11 than their white peers. However, the report does not discuss why this difference in utilization existed. Similarly, the Student Veterans of America (2016) survey asked respondents why they were not using the Post 9/11 GIB, providing a list of 14 choices: 28% had exhausted their benefits; 17% claimed "Other"; 13% were saving it for later; and 12% claimed their eligibility to use the benefit had expired. The fact that 17% chose "Other" making it the second out of 14 choices, demonstrates that there is more to uncover about the factors influencing veterans' decisions. Moreover, 40% indicated that policy restrictions (used up all benefits or time period to use expired) were the reason for not using or continuing to use the Post 9/11 GIB educational benefits.

While these studies highlight many reasons as to why the American taxpayer should be concerned with the educational achievement of Post 9/11 veterans, few reveal anything about the factors or sources of influence impacting veterans' decision-making process, and most suggest that more research is needed. Indeed, "social scientific research on contemporary veterans is surprisingly thin. ...It remains an open question as to whether the GI Bill benefits will ultimately

increase the education, employment and earnings of this generation of veterans" (Kleykamp, 2013, p. 849); "research can investigate the effects of factors possibly driving the gaps … These phenomena could be better understood through qualitative research…" (Vick & Fontanella, 2017, p. 27). Thus, to compliment these mostly survey-based studies, this article relies upon semi-structured interviews with veterans eligible for Post 9/11 GIB benefits for identifying sources of influence on their educational benefits choices.

Exploratory Research Design. This exploratory study was motivated by the causal gaps exposed in the literature which require not only an explanation, but a preliminary inquiry to determine where future research should be focused (Thomas, 2011). Furthermore, exploratory research "attempts to see what is there rather than to predict the relationships between variables or hypothesis testing" (Holliday, 1964). This led to the formulation of the following research question: *What are the sources that influence whether and how veterans utilize their educational benefits under the Post 9/11 GIB?*

To answer this question, I chose to follow the suggestions of the existing literature on Post 9/11 veterans which called for a qualitative approach and deemed that interviews with veterans eligible for the Post 9/11 GIB would be the most fruitful (Cappello, 2017; Jenner, 2017; Vick & Fontanella, 2017; Zhang, 2017). However, prior to conducting the interviews, I also met with elites from veteran services organizations (VSO) and institutions of higher education (private and public universities, a community college and a for-profit university) to gain insights from their experiences with the Post 9/11 veterans they serve. I also conducted three informational interviews with student veterans currently pursuing doctoral degrees at Virginia Tech and Portland State University.

The information gathered from these conversations was used to construct the interview questions. One recurring suggestion that was not discussed in the literature, was to ask when and where the veteran begins the transition process. Service members can begin preparing to separate from the military up to two years in advance, but not all may be encouraged to do so based on where they are stationed and the culture of that particular duty station or command. Winslow (1998) described military culture as one in which the individual exhibits "strong allegiance to their group and the group exerts social control over the individual member. In the military, group allegiance is seen to be essential to combat effectiveness. Strong affective ties bind soldiers into a fighting unit in which they are willing to sacrifice their lives for each other" (p. 345). That is, someone serving in Korea today will probably not be given time to attend a resume writing course as it is not a priority for that command's combat readiness, but someone assigned to the Pentagon might be bombarded with the number of transition services available and be encouraged to use the two years to plan. An interview question was created to understand how much of a factor this plays in a veterans' educational decision since military culture places a strong emphasis on everyone contributing to the good of the military and putting the self before the military may be viewed negatively.

Another factor not identified in the literature, but observed by organizations working with veterans, is that their school choice is also determined by where veterans decide to live after leaving the military. If someone decides to move back to their hometown, they may decide to attend whatever school is closest to home and decide on a degree program available at that school. A veteran may be interested in starting his own car repair shop, but if mechanic training is not available at the local community college, he may decide to take up welding instead of going to a different school that does offer mechanic training.

Because the Post 9/11 GIB has changed frequently and has been applied retroactively, many veterans may not be aware of how these changes have impacted them. For example, the most recent change in 2017 applies retroactively to veterans who separated from the military beginning January 1, 2013. However, a service member on active duty at that time could not have foreseen this policy change and may have decided to serve an additional four years because she was planning to transfer the benefit to her five-year-old son in the future. The existing policy in 2013 required that the educational benefit be used within 15 years of separating from the military. By serving additional time, she is able to ensure that her son is within the age range to use the educational benefit within the 15-year window. Therefore, interview questions were also designed to address these timing issues as they may be factors veterans take under consideration.

Veterans living in the Washington, DC metropolitan area were recruited to participate in the study with the help of nonprofit organizations working with veterans, such as Blue Star Families, Protect Our Defenders, and Student Veterans of America, by posting an announcement on their DC area chapters' social media pages, like Facebook or Twitter. Volunteers contacted the researcher for more information and to schedule the in-person interview. To recruit more veterans for the study, the researcher decided to recruit veterans from outside the Washington, DC area as well. Communication tools such as Zoom or Skype can be used for qualitative research in place of in-person interviewing, since it allows for communicating in real-time with the ability to hear and see each other (Sullivan, 2012). The researcher used Zoom, a video conference platform, to conduct interviews with veterans from other parts of the United States (New York - 2; Florida - 4; Massachusetts - 1; DC Metro - 12) to complete a total of 19 interviews over the course of one year for this study. Each interview was approximately thirty

(30) minutes in length and included semi-structured questions to focus on the decision-making process of how a veteran did or did not use his/her/their educational benefits.

Any veteran who served a minimum of 90 days since September 10, 2001, or a minimum of 30 days if discharged with a service-related disability, and was honorably discharged is eligible to receive funds for tuition, education materials, and housing while enrolled in on-the-job training programs, post-secondary vocational school, or any approved degree program, including associates to doctoral level degrees (www.benefits.va.gov/gibill). The initial geographic limitation of the study was for the convenience of the researcher, but the DC area also has a high concentration of veterans who have chosen to remain or relocate to the area for educational and employment opportunities. Of the 12 veterans interviewed from the DC metropolitan area, all but one indicated that they chose to live in the area after ending their military service for work or school. Similarly, the other seven veterans living in other parts of the country made their decision about where to live after leaving the military based on where their families were located and prospects for employment.

Veterans who have served a minimum of ten years since September 10, 2001, may also transfer their educational benefits to a dependent (spouse or child). At this time, the research only includes veterans' responses regarding their decision to use, not use, or transfer their educational benefits. Therefore, if a veteran indicated that the benefit was transferred to a dependent, questions were asked about what brought about that decision. No interviews with dependents were conducted at this time, but two of the participants did transfer the benefit to a spouse.

To prevent the researcher from confirmation bias, open-ended interview questions were designed to allow the veteran to describe his or her decision-making process and name the

factors or sources of influence contributing to the decision. The researcher later transcribed and coded each interview. The coding methods used will be discussed in more detail under the heading *Interview Data: Themes and Profile for Analysis*. Interview questions fall into either "grand tour" or "prompts" categories (Leech, 2002). "Grand tour" questions are designed to get respondents to talk descriptively about a subject guided by parameters set by the interviewer (Leech, 2002). "Prompts" are helpful when a respondent's answers are too vague or unfocused on the topic of research (Leech, 2002). "Prompts" are usually unscripted, but important for the researcher to have as follow-up questions to ensure that the necessary points of the interview are covered (Leech, 2002).

These semi-structured interview questions are designed to help respondents name in their own words what factors or sources of influence impacted their decision to use, not use or transfer the Post 9/11 GIB. These new insights will allow future researchers to draw inferences about the factors influencing veterans' educational decisions, which could lead to more focus on causal mechanisms or a more detailed survey administered to a larger group of veterans resulting in more generalizable findings.

Interview Data: Themes and Profile for Analysis. The data set consists of semi-structured interviews with 11 Post 9/11 veterans, with seven (7) who used the benefit for themselves, one (1) who transferred the benefit to a spouse, and three (3) who have not used the benefit. Although respondents represent all branches of the US military, the racial and ethnic representation was limited to mostly white respondents, but there were also three (3) Black, (3) Hispanic, one (1) Asian, and one (1) Mixed race veterans as illustrated below in Figure 3.1 – Demographics of Veterans Interviewed. It should also be noted that only four (4) females volunteered to participate in the study.

[Figure 3.1]

To maintain the privacy of each subject, names of subjects will not be used. Instead each respondent will be labeled A, B, C, etc. and will only be identifiable by the following characteristics:

1. Race;

2. Gender;

3. Branch of service;

4. Military rank/rate;

5. Years of service;

6. Age range; and

7. Education level completed.

The levels of education completed by each veteran were collected, regardless if they indicated using or not using the Post 9/11 GIB. Figure 3.2 – Education Program G.I. Bill Used by School Type – illustrates the levels of education completed by the Post 9/11 veterans, where most had completed bachelor's and master's degrees, and one had completed a doctoral degree. None of the respondents indicated using the educational benefit for vocational or on-the-job training programs. Of the two (2) who had not completed a degree, one was currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering with the Post 9/11 GIB, and the other was still undecided about how and when he would use his educational benefits. Figure 3.3 provides a breakdown of how the 16 veterans and two (2) transfers used the educational benefits. Most were using or had used it to pursue a master's degree in the following fields: 1- information technology; 1 - public health (transfer); 4 - business administration. Three (3) veterans were using the G.I. Bill for a doctoral degree, but at the time of the interview were still in the early

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stages of the degree program; thus, they are counted in the master's category for completion of degree. The two (2) who used the Post 9/11 GIB for an undergraduate degree were in the following fields: 1 - nursing; 1 - chemical engineering.

[Insert Figure 3.2]

[Insert Figure 3.3]

Of the three (3) who indicated that they had not used the educational benefit, one was currently pursuing a doctoral degree through another military program and felt that he would probably never use the benefit in the future. At the time of the interview, he had no dependents that he could transfer the benefit to. The other had already completed two (2) master's degrees during his military service, and therefore, had no need to use the benefit. Although this respondent did have dependents he could have transferred the benefit to, he had determined on his own that he did not meet the eligibility required to transfer the benefits, despite 24 years of service in the Coast Guard. The third (Veteran E), however, had not yet completed any degree or training, and at the time of the interview was in the process of deciding whether and how to use the benefit.

Since Veteran E was in the process of deciding whether and how to use his educational benefits at the time of the interview, I have included a profile in Appendix C3 for readers to experience the participant's viewpoint and make sense of the interview data collected by the researcher (Seidman, 2013, pp. 121–127). "We interview in order to come to know the experience of the participants through their stories. …[Profiles are a] way to find and display coherence in the constitutive events of a participant's experience, to the share the coherence the participant has expressed, and to link the individual's experience to the social and organizational

context within which he or she operates" (Seidman, 2013, pp.122–123). Thus, a profile of

Veteran E offers readers a real-life picture of the factors influencing his decisions as well as his

views about the policy, which are aspects salient to the social identity of student veterans in

policy feedback.

After the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed, In Vivo Coding was

applied to each interview. In Vivo Coding "refers to a word or short phrase from the actual

language found in the qualitative data record" that are participant-generated expressions

reflective of a particular group or subculture (Saldaña, 2016, p. 105). Because this exploratory

research is focused on allowing veterans to name the factors or sources of influence on their

decision, there may be words or phrases that are specific to veterans as part of their military

experience. For example, veterans often refer to the housing allowance as "BAH" which stands

for Basic Allowance for Housing. The researcher reviewed and manually coded the transcripts,

identifying the most salient words or phrases said by veterans during the interview.

For the second round of coding, the In Vivo codes were organized based on the

participants demographic information and then according to interview questions to find any

emergent patterns in how veterans named their sources of influence. In taking this approach the

patterns and themes were derived from the participants' experiences to better understand the

reasons for their decisions instead of imposing the assumptions found in the literature or opinions

of VSO elites (Patton, 1990; Williams, 2008).

Once the broad themes were identified based on the language used by the participants,

the researcher analyzed the expressions of belief that most veterans held in common, as well as

interpreted their attitudes and convictions regarding their decisions. By reading and marking the

transcripts of the interviews, the researcher searched for connections or patterns that arose out of

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the passages being read (Seidman, 2013). The following section presents the findings organized by coding method (In Vivo and Pattern), and provides examples of text that reflect veterans' sources of influence on their decision to use or not use their education benefits afforded by the Post 9/11 GIB organized by the themes generated by the researchers coding (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Seidman, 2013; Saldaña, 2016).

Analysis Using In Vivo and Pattern Coding for Thematic Profiles. Upon reviewing audio recordings and interview transcripts, the researcher identified the following three phrases in responses: location (e.g. "DC", "North Carolina", "Maryland" and "Italy"); housing stipend ("BAH"); and school description ("military friendly") as the most common factors relevant to veterans decision-making process. All veterans named the place where they decided to live upon exiting the military (coded as location) as a deciding factor regardless if they had or had not used the benefit. That is, whether they used the Post 9/11 GIB bill or received some other source of educational funding from the military, location was the primary factor influencing (or limiting) veterans' choice in schools and degree program. For example, Veteran C spent six (6) years in the Army and is originally from Kentucky. In 2011, he received orders to Ft. Belvoir in Virginia. When he began looking at schools for a nursing degree, he only considered the local community college: "I knew I needed a degree to be hired, so I made the decision based on location. So, I only considered schools in this area that had nursing programs. It never occurred to me to look at schools back home because I knew I would be staying here."

Veteran H spent 10 years in the Army and left in 2016 as a Captain. His wife was a nurse in the Army, so they were considering San Antonio, TX or Washington, DC as potential places to live after their military service. "We knew that DC had good schools, and that there are a lot of former military living in the area. So, we felt that this would be better for the both of us. I

wanted to see if I could get into [private university] during their first round [of admissions], and when I did, it just made the decision to move here that much easier" (Veteran C, Army, MBA).

Most veterans also discussed how the housing stipend (BAH) impacted their school and degree choice, whether they have used the Post 9/11 GIB or not. Veteran A spent a total 24 years of enlisted service in various branches of the military (Marines and Army National Guard), with the last 14 years in the Air Force, making rank of Master Sergeant. In 2013, he had a medical condition that forced him to take an early retirement with only three months to transition back to civilian life. He was unprepared for an early retirement and decided to enroll in school because he knew that under the Post 9/11 GIB he would receive a housing allowance.

> I had already started my bachelor's degree, which took me about eight (8) years to complete because of all the deployments. I got it in environmental studies, mostly online. My plan was to get out in 2015, so I started thinking about getting a master's degree in policy, actually… I started taking classes online, but then I had this medical issue, so I had to switch to a program that offered in-residence classes so I could get the BAH. So that was my deciding factor, really… necessity. I needed that BAH to survive because I had nothing lined up, no way to support myself. (Veteran A, Air Force, MBA)

Veteran I is a Captain in the Army pursuing an MBA at a private university in Washington, DC. He is a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point and is committed to serve until 2019. He went on active duty in 2009, and in 2016, he was assigned to Vicenza, Italy. His wife went with him to Italy, but she could not get a visa to work. Because he is a West Point graduate and is receiving funding for his own graduate degree by the Army while on active duty, they decided she should use the educational benefit since she could not work. Because they were living in Italy, she decided it would be better to get a master's degree in public health online from a US-based private institution. When asked if there was anything about their decision he would change, Veteran I replied, "We don't regret having used it, but it would have been better if we could have waited. ...If we could have waited to use [the

educational benefit] so that she could have gone to a school where we could have gotten the

BAH - that would have been better." Although the Post 9/11 GIB offers a housing stipend, since

2008 many amendments have been made that have further complicated how the housing stipend

is awarded and to whom. According to militarybenefits.info, for the period of August 1, 2018 to

July 31, 2019, no BAH is paid to anyone taking less than seven (7) credits or to spouses.

Anyone enrolled in exclusively online programs receives $825 per month. However, attending a

U.S. school (part-time to full-time, with in-classroom instruction) offers an E-5 with dependents

rate based on the location of the school, which for the Washington, D.C. area is $2,436 per

month. In this respect, the policy incentivizes veterans to pursue in-person or traditional

educational programs.

Finally, all the veterans who were currently using or had used the Post 9/11 GIB claimed

that attending a "military friendly" school was important to them. The term "military friendly"

had various meanings for each of the veterans interviewed. Several identified their schools as

military friendly because they were Yellow Ribbon schools – schools that placed a tuition cap to

match what the Post 9/11 GIB covered. That is, if the annual tuition at a private university is

$30,000, but the Post 9/11 GIB only covers up to $18,000 in tuition based on the highest cost of

in-state tuition at a public institution, a Yellow Ribbon school will only charge the veteran

$18,000 in tuition. Public colleges and universities are also labeled Yellow Ribbon schools

because they must charge veterans in-state tuition rates, regardless of whether the veteran meets

in-state residency requirements. In addition to reduced tuition, veterans described receiving

other perks such as waived application fees, free laptop computers, acceptance of military

experience as credits, the ease of transferability of academic credits from one institution to the

other, and highly responsive staff that helped them access their Post 9/11 educational benefits.

Veteran D, a Petty Officer Second Class in the Navy after four (4) years of service, described military friendly schools as institutions that traveled with sailors on deployment. Upon joining the Navy in 1998, she began working towards her bachelor's degree.

> I wanted to go to a military friendly college because I didn't want to get behind while I was deployed. These schools don't hold it against you if you get activated, like they don't make you lose credit if you can't go to class. They also gave me academic credit for my service, so that mattered to me because I always knew I wanted to get a PhD and having my service count kept me on track. (Veteran D, Navy, PhD)

Veteran J was also in the Navy, working as an engineer. He enlisted after high school, and after eight (8) years left in 2014 as a Petty Officer First Class (or E-6). He was fortunate enough to land a job in engineering after leaving the Navy, but he knew that he would not be able to advance without at least a bachelor's degree. It is very difficult to find a chemical engineering program on a part-time basis, but since the Post 9/11 GIB covers housing, it was easy for him to decide to leave his job and go back school full-time at a public university.

> Honestly, more than anything, I wanted to make sure I went to a school that had a strong veterans' office that would actually help me. I've got so many friends who ended up at schools that don't explain their benefits to them properly, and then they end up having to take out loans… I didn't want that to happen to me. I've heard too many horror stories of people getting screwed out of their benefits, so more than anything, I wanted to be at a school with a strong veterans' office. I spent hours talking to counselors until I found a place where I felt comfortable. (Veteran J, Navy, BS)

In addition to hearing Post 9/11 veterans cite location, housing stipend and military friendly schools as the most common sources influencing their decisions, the following patterns also emerged: 1) Veterans are mostly making these decisions on their own; 2) Veterans rely upon the schools for assistance with accessing their benefits; 3) Veterans are concerned with the transferability of academic credits; and 4) Veterans who left the military prior to 2008 are uncertain about their eligibility under the Post 9/11 GIB.

Only Veteran F, who served a total of eight years in the Army (five as an enlisted soldier and three as an officer), admitted to attending a graduate school fair and discussing his options with his wife. Ironically, Veteran F, who consulted with many people in his network, was the least satisfied with his decision to attend a private university in Washington, DC for the MBA. Instead, he wished he had followed his own instincts and pursued a master's in information technology. "I felt like the admissions officer convinced me that getting an MBA would be better because it's more broad. But I don't think it's helped me at all, and I wish I either had gone into IT or just saved [the G.I. Bill] for my daughter to use" (Veteran F, Army, MBA).

All other veterans claimed that while they may have asked for information, they did not seek the advice of any friends, family members or career counselors to help with their decision in choosing a school or degree program. Again, Veteran D explained, "I went to the education center on base to get a list of military friendly schools, but I chose the school on my own." Veteran E, who has not used his educational benefits yet, said, "My wife is still on activity duty, so I don't bother her with any of this stuff. I'm researching schools on my own, you know, online – checking out the websites."

The other aspect veterans identified as being a military friendly school is having an office that is focused on assisting student veterans. All veterans who used their benefit expressed their reliance on the school's office for information about accessing benefits and guiding them through the process. Veteran C who started out at community college and then transferred to a public university to complete his bachelor's degree recalls, "The veterans' office made everything easy. They told me what to do, and it all went smoothly. Then when I transferred to [public university], their office was helpful as well. I had heard some bad things about transferring, but I had no issues and all of my credits were accepted."

The issue of whether an institution will accept military service for academic credit, transferring credits between institutions, as well as the time limit for which credits remain valid, emerged as another concern for most veterans. Veteran E spent 25 years in the Coast Guard but was forced to retire in 2013 over a medical issue. His focus has been on getting well, and now that he is better, he is thinking about going back to school at age 50 for the bachelor's degree he never completed. He joined the military after one year in community college because he couldn't afford it and saw the military as a way to pay for his education. Once in the Coast Guard, he continued to take classes when he could, but after several years his community college classes were no longer accepted. So, he decided to focus on his military career instead.

However, for the veterans who ended their services before the passing of the Post 9/11 GIB in 2008, they had the additional burden of having to figure out on their own if the policy applied to them or not. Veteran F, who left the Army in 2006, described finding out about the new policy through a military friend who was using it:

> We were just catching up, you know just talking… then he told me that he's going to school because of the new G.I. Bill. So, it was just pure luck that I found out about it through him. So, I decided to call the 800 number for the VA to find out if I was eligible, and they told me I was.

Veteran D left the Navy in 2002 and was working in law enforcement when the bill passed. She heard about it on the news, and when she found out the benefit included housing, she decided to go back to school full-time to complete a master's degree in foreign affairs.

> I knew I didn't need a master's degree to be in law enforcement. So, I saw this as a chance to do something different. I called the VA to find out if I qualified, and they told me I had earned one year. So, I used it to complete my master's in one year, going full-time. Having the BAH and money for books really helped me do that.

On the other hand, Veteran K retired as a Lieutenant Commander in the Coast Guard after 24 years in 2008. He had heard about the new G.I. Bill being in the works, but he didn't

pay much attention to it because he already had two (2) master's degrees that he had earned while on active duty. When asked if he knew that the benefit could be transferred to a dependent, he said, "Yeah, I heard about that, but I looked at the VA's website and didn't think that applied to me." When asked how he had determined that he was not eligible to transfer the educational benefits, he replied,

> Well, I looked at the website. There was nothing there that made me think I could do that. But based on your line of questioning, I guess I should have called and talked to someone at the VA to know for sure. I would feel really silly if I found out that I could have because my daughter is in her last semester of college! (Veteran K, Coast Guard)

Not only are veterans making these decisions about their eligibility alone, they reported that the Veterans Administration (VA), the agency responsible for administering these educational benefits among others, had no mechanism for notifying veterans about the policy change or eligibility. This has caught the attention of organizations like Student Veterans of America, and they are presently advocating that the VA change its organizational structure to form a new department within the VA that will focus on the administration of educational benefits. Currently, the VA has one benefits department that process all types of benefits, from medical to home loans. Since disability and medical issues have taken a priority, Student Veterans of America has recommended to Congress and the VA that a new undersecretary be created to oversee the administration of educational benefits.

Discussion and Future Research. Based on the analysis of these interviews, there is certainly a need for more qualitative and exploratory research on Post 9/11 veterans. However, this limited sample of 19 veterans, does provide insights on where future researchers should focus. First, survey questions can be redesigned by government agencies and VSO's based on the sources of influence named by the veterans interviewed in this exploratory study to determine how prevalent these factors are. During the interviews, most veterans claimed to know many

other veterans who shared their same experiences or circumstances, particularly as it applied to

making decisions about schools based on the BAH. Could this be the reason for the increase in

college enrollment? That is, are veterans enrolling in degree programs in order to qualify for the

housing allowance? This could be a possible explanation; however, it still does not explain why

degree completion rates are falling behind that of non-veteran students.

Second, institutions of higher education need to understand what "military friendly"

means to veterans. Since the IVMF report (Zoli et al., 2015) indicated that fewer than one

percent (1%) of Post 9/11 veterans attend a "top 20" school, such schools may want to consider

their outreach strategies for attracting more veterans to these degree-granting institutions.

Additionally, veterans are concerned about how academic credits are awarded. This could be

another area schools could be more transparent about to aid veterans with their decisions.

The Post 9/11 veterans in this study were very independent in their decisions regarding

whether and how to use their educational benefits. While many expressed pride in their

independence, it might also be contributing to the number of eligible veterans not taking

advantage of their educational benefits. In particular, veterans who left the military prior to 2008

have not been formally notified of their eligibility. Although the VA is responsible for

administering these benefits, in 2016 the agency processed 7.8 million applications of the more

than 15 million veterans eligible for the Post 9/11 GIB; however, VSO's claim that veterans

usually contact the VA for issues other than education. Student Veterans of America (SVA)

recommends that more resources be allocated to school offices handling veterans' education

questions. All veterans in this study indicated that they relied on the school for information for

accessing benefits. In addition, SVA has noted that restructuring the VA to include a department

dedicated only to the administration of educational benefits would also improve the uptake rate

and the processing time for payments to schools. Thus, SVA's recommendation is rational, but it is unclear whether allocating more resources to schools will also be well received advice by veterans since they tend to be independent. It is also not clear if more counseling or staffing will help increase degree completion or employment rates.

This exploratory research makes a small contribution to the literature on Post 9/11 veterans by using a qualitative approach to compliment the mostly survey-based research on whether and how the educational benefits are being used by this new generation of veterans. While this study is mostly limited to the experiences of veterans living in the DC metropolitan area, it is still reflective of the student veteran as a policy target population at the individual level. The interviews reveal how each veteran engages or acts upon the policy changes, and such activity can be used to further develop the student veteran identity based on how veterans see themselves. Future research should be expanded to include a larger, national sample that probes deeper into veterans' decision-making process, including their motivations and expectations of how their degrees help them secure employment or facilitate the transition back into civilian life. A summary of the categories of influence this exploratory research has identified with associated descriptions and propositions for future study (e.g. survey) are detailed in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1 – Propositions for Future Testing

Factor of Influence	Description	Proposition 1	Proposition 2	Proposition 3	Proposition 4
Location	The place a veteran decides to live after leaving the military, usually based on proximity to social networks and employment opportunities. This does not always correspond to a veteran's hometown.	Veterans choose to use their educational benefits based on the educational programs available at their post-service location.	Veterans choose not to use their educational benefits if the education or training they are seeking is not available where they live.		
Housing Stipend (BAH)	The money a veteran receives to help cover living expenses for housing (rent or mortgage) while enrolled in a qualifying educational program. Referred to as BAH (basic allowance for housing), the amount is calculated based on location of the school, full or part-time enrollment, and number of years in military service.	Veterans choose to use their educational benefits based on their need for financial assistance with living expenses not covered by other types of benefits.	Veterans choose to use their educational benefits based on the amount of BAH regardless of financial or educational need.	Veterans choose to use their educational benefits for more rigorous educational programs because the BAH provides greater financial support to pursue education full-time.	

Military Friendly	An institution offering post-secondary education programs that markets itself as considerate or responsive to veterans' needs. Often, veterans described the perks institutions offered them, regardless if mandated by policies or unique to the institution. Individual veterans' perception of what it means to be a military friendly school varies and should be investigated as a separate topic since military and veteran friendly are terms that are used interchangeably, but in practice applied differently based on policies.	Veterans choose to use their education benefits if a school in their location markets itself as military friendly.	Veterans choose to use their educational benefits if an institution has an office dedicated to serving veterans that is responsive and makes accessing the benefits easy for the veteran.	Veterans will not use their educational benefits if tuition is not fully or mostly covered by the G.I. Bill.	Veterans will not use their educational benefits if the institution does not recognize military service for academic credit or if prior coursework is deemed invalid due to time restriction policies the institution might have.
Eligibility	Veterans who left the military prior to 2008 are often unaware of how the policy changes apply to them or not. Since 2008, additional amendments to the G.I. Bill have	Veterans who left the military prior to any policy changes will not use their educational benefits because	Veterans will use their educational benefits once they find out they are eligible.	Veterans are more likely to transfer the benefit to a dependent than to use the benefit for themselves.	

	been made that have also been applied retroactively. It is up to the individual veteran to inquire about eligibility, and veterans report making that determination on their own by reviewing the VA website.	they are unaware of their eligibility.				

The preliminary findings presented here provide future researchers with a more focused avenue for exploration. Rather than continue to use the data made available by various surveys of veterans, this study demonstrates the importance of uncovering causal explanations to better inform policy-makers, institutions of higher education as well as organizations working with veterans to meet their needs. For example, what can be done to ensure that eligible veterans are made aware of policy changes that affect them? Whose responsibility (i.e. government agency, Congress, media) is it to inform them?

There is still much more that is unknown than known when it comes to understanding the role education plays in the successful transition of Post 9/11 veterans. This exploratory study, however, provide insights that were gained simply by spending one-on-one time, listening to what these veterans had to say.

CONCLUSION

Veterans are a paradox in American society. In particular, veterans of the Post 9/11 era find themselves being characterized as both national heroes for volunteering to serve in the military and charity cases or victims of war deserving of help from government and society. As such, these articles show that many policy-makers, especially politicians who have been veterans themselves, are concerned with providing assistance to veterans in the form of generous benefits for education programs.

Examining the historical and social timeline leading up to the Post 9/11 GIB in 2008 through symbolic interactionist methods is a way to capture the meaning of such policies. The symbolic interactionist methods also provided a way to empirically investigate how groups and individuals interpret these meanings, and how they made decisions to act based upon those meanings. These policy changes to the G.I. Bill shaped veterans' interpretation and understanding of themselves, collectively and individually, leading to the social construction of student veterans as a new phenomenon in education and public policy.

The promise of going to college for free has a history rooted in the outcomes of the first G.I. Bill offered to WWII veterans. However, the concept of a student veteran did not become a distinctive veteran identity until an increased number of Post 9/11 veterans began to enroll in higher education programs due to the expansion of benefits in 2008 as a policy tool to maintain an adequate level of troops during the surges in Iraq and Afghanistan. As veterans organized themselves to raise awareness about the issues they faced on college campuses, veteran organizations also wanted to combat the negative media portrayals of veterans as "wounded warriors." Institutions of higher education also recognized that veterans of this era were markedly different, and the content analysis of the legislative activity during the period of 2000

to 2017 indicates that many of the topics related to student veterans were focused on assisting

veterans in making a successful transition from college to career.

Organizations like SVA also emerged for this same purpose, but by taking on this student

veteran identity organizationally, SVA also gained entry into the policy process. By being a

single-issue organization that is relatively new to the veterans' policy space, they managed to

leverage their position to create policy change by shepherding the Forever G.I. Bill in 2017.

From an interactionist perspective, practice tracing was an appropriate method for collecting data

to build the case study for understanding how SVA was successful in leading a coalition to

achieve policy change. Interviews with members of the coalition revealed that SVA used

practices that were outside of their routine to engage other veterans service organizations in their

efforts. SVA's actions match certain characteristics of policy entrepreneurship, which offered

additional insight as to how even a relatively new organization can be influential in the policy

change process.

Of course, not all veterans are student veterans. Conceptually, student veterans have also

been positively stereotyped in political and social life because of the underlying assumption that

veterans are using the G.I. Bill to go to college. However, interviews with individual veterans

offer a different understanding of how they see themselves and their reasons for choosing to use

their educational benefits. Most veterans in the study viewed their education benefits as a reward

for their military service and viewed an undergraduate education as essential for securing

employment. Some participants using their G.I. Bill for graduate education viewed their

education as a way to secure a career that gave meaning to their lives, leaving their veteran

identity in the past. Still some veterans admitted that the transition process had caught them off-

guard, and saw the housing stipend offered to student veterans as the fastest way to obtain some

form of financial security, even if only temporarily. Thus, the decision processes of each veteran on whether and how to use the G.I. Bill were just as varied and many times inconsistent with the symbology or public perception of what a student veteran is supposed to be.

Because the current SCTP literature is primarily focused on how policy-makers construct target populations and the practices they use to mitigate any negative effects of policy feedback, my work offers a new perspective by applying symbolic interactionism as a method for demonstrating a two-way interaction between the target population and the policy's intent. What the three distinct but related articles present is how the student veteran identity is mutually reinforced by the institutions, culture, and policy dynamics within the policy feedback model to the point at which representatives of the target population become embedded in the policy-making process. However, the interviews with individual veterans indicate that their interpretation of the policy and their reasons for using the educational benefits (or not) are much more nuanced and personal than what the student veteran identity conveys. That is, not all veterans using the Post 9/11 GIB embrace the student veteran identity because their own interpretation of the policy differs from that of the policy-makers and SVA's. From the pool of veterans interviewed, I labeled their interpretations of why they are using the Post 9/11 GIB into the following three categories: (i) It is a reward for their military service and must be used to its maximum amount, regardless of utility of the education attained; (ii) It is a financial "safety net" and had to be used because no other option was available or at least until gainful employment could be secured upon separating from the military; and (iii) It is an opportunity to have an education that will lead to a job or career outside of their military experience. This last category is probably the closest to the student veteran identity espoused by SVA; however, the notion that graduating from college and being gainfully employed or having a new career is somehow a

continuation of a veteran's service to the country did not materialize in the interviews.   In an

infograph produced by IVMF and SVA in June 2017, they make the case for student veterans as

valuable to American society:

> With the implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill and a global workforce that
> requires, at minimum, a bachelor's degree for marketplace entry, more and more
> veterans are looking to higher education to launch the next chapter in their lives.
> … We aim to spark a new discourse on how our colleges and universities view
> and empower student veterans, a discourse that pushes higher education past the
> "veteran friendly" rhetoric to seize the long-term value of veteran students and
> alumni, and one that actualizes the intended promise of the Post 9/11 GI Bill not
> only for our veterans, but for all Americans.

The three articles examine the development of student veteran identity as a social

construction that emerged from a policy change, but also as a way to combat the negative

stereotypes of veterans that tend to dominate current veterans' issues. The role SVA played in

achieving a policy change to further expand benefits to veterans by representing the student

veteran identity is not only due to the effects of policy feedback but also to displaying policy

entrepreneurship as an emergent strategy. Although the institutions and cultures in which policy-

makers and SVA operate mutually reinforce the idea that veterans should use the Post 9/11 GIB

to transition from the military to a career to benefit all of American society, individual veterans

view the policy differently. For individual veterans choosing to use their educational benefits is

very contextual and dependent upon other variables that are not so easily captured empirically. It

is also a decision that veterans make alone and often with inaccurate and limited information.

Thus, my findings support the claims made by VSO's like SVA, that if the policy intent is to

ensure that veterans use their education to reintegrate successfully into civilian life and choose

educational programs in high-need fields, the policy is not meeting its objective based on what

individual veterans report. "A scholar evaluating policy design alone cannot intuit the material

and symbolic effects of public policies with confidence. … To do so, we will need to investigate

citizens' political uses of policy-based resources and the 'practices of meaning-making through which social actors attempt to make their worlds coherent'" (Mettler & Soss, 2004, p. 64). As policy feedback scholars seek to be more citizen-centered, the symbolic interactionist approach can help in better understanding the psychological impacts of policy meanings on student veterans that result in policy feedback effects.

The theoretical frameworks used in my dissertation are also salient to other areas in the field of public administration, especially with regards to how target populations can influence policy design, implementation and administration of programs, and/or organizational structures. By providing additional insights and empirical work to support the significance of the SCTP framework in public policy, future research can continue to build upon these articles to better conceptualize student veterans as a subject for further investigation.

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Appendix A: Policy Feedback Figures

Figure 1A – Policy Feedback Effects of Student Veterans
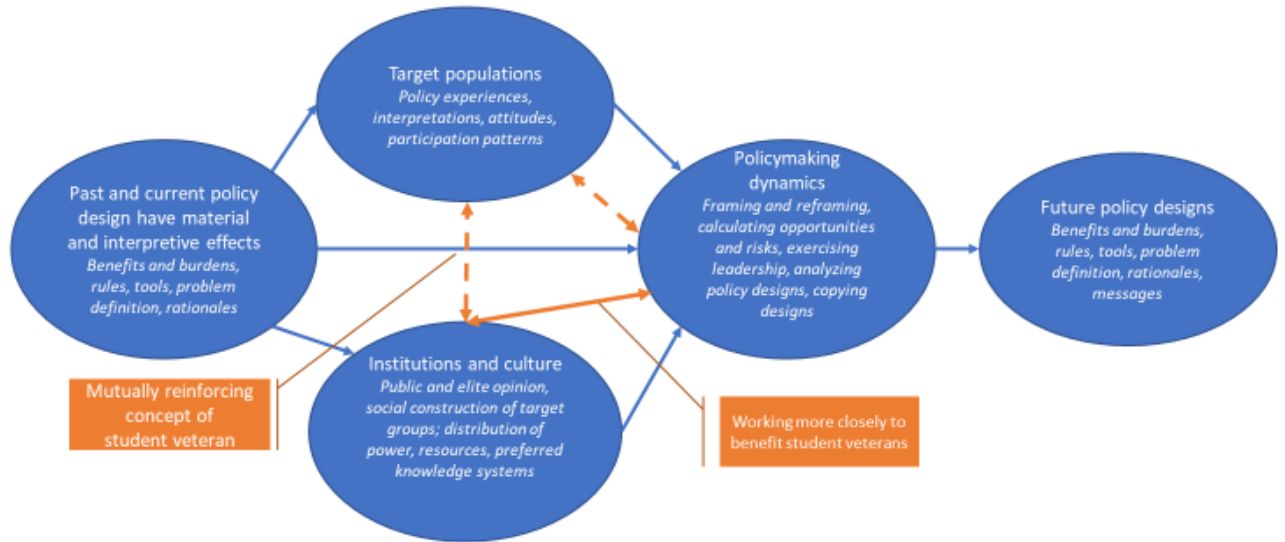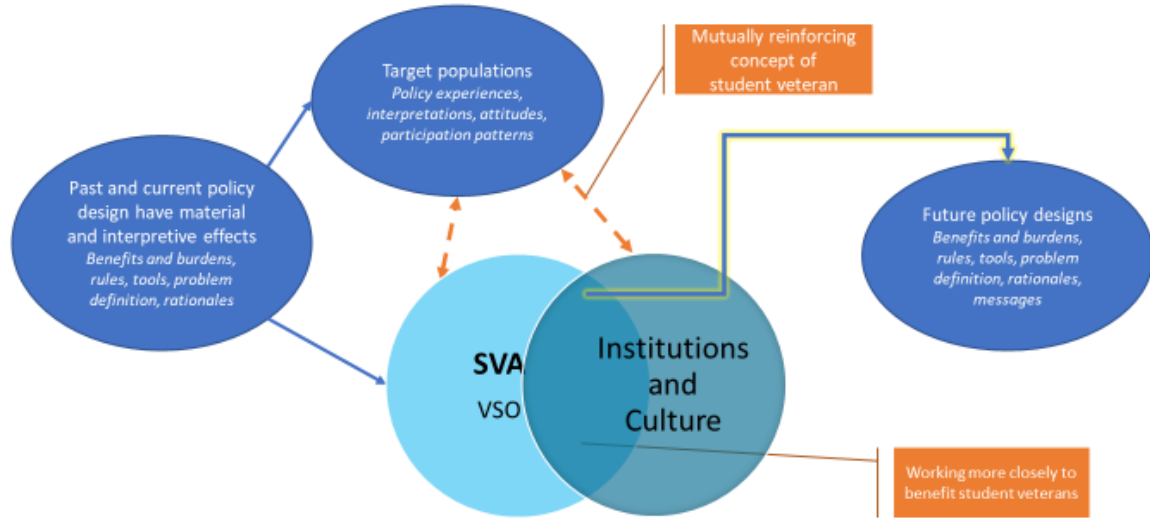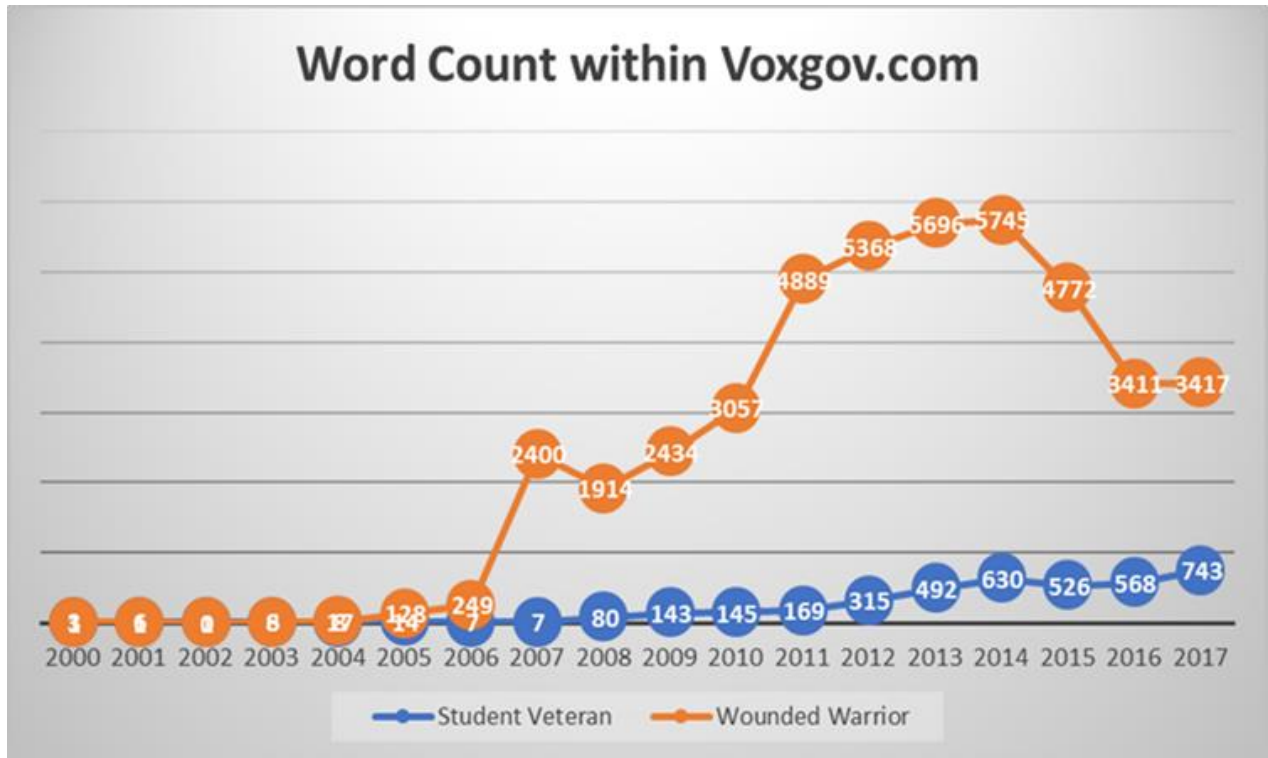*(Adapted from Schneider et al., 2014, p. 108)*

Figure 1B – Policy Feedback Effects on Policy Change for Student Veterans
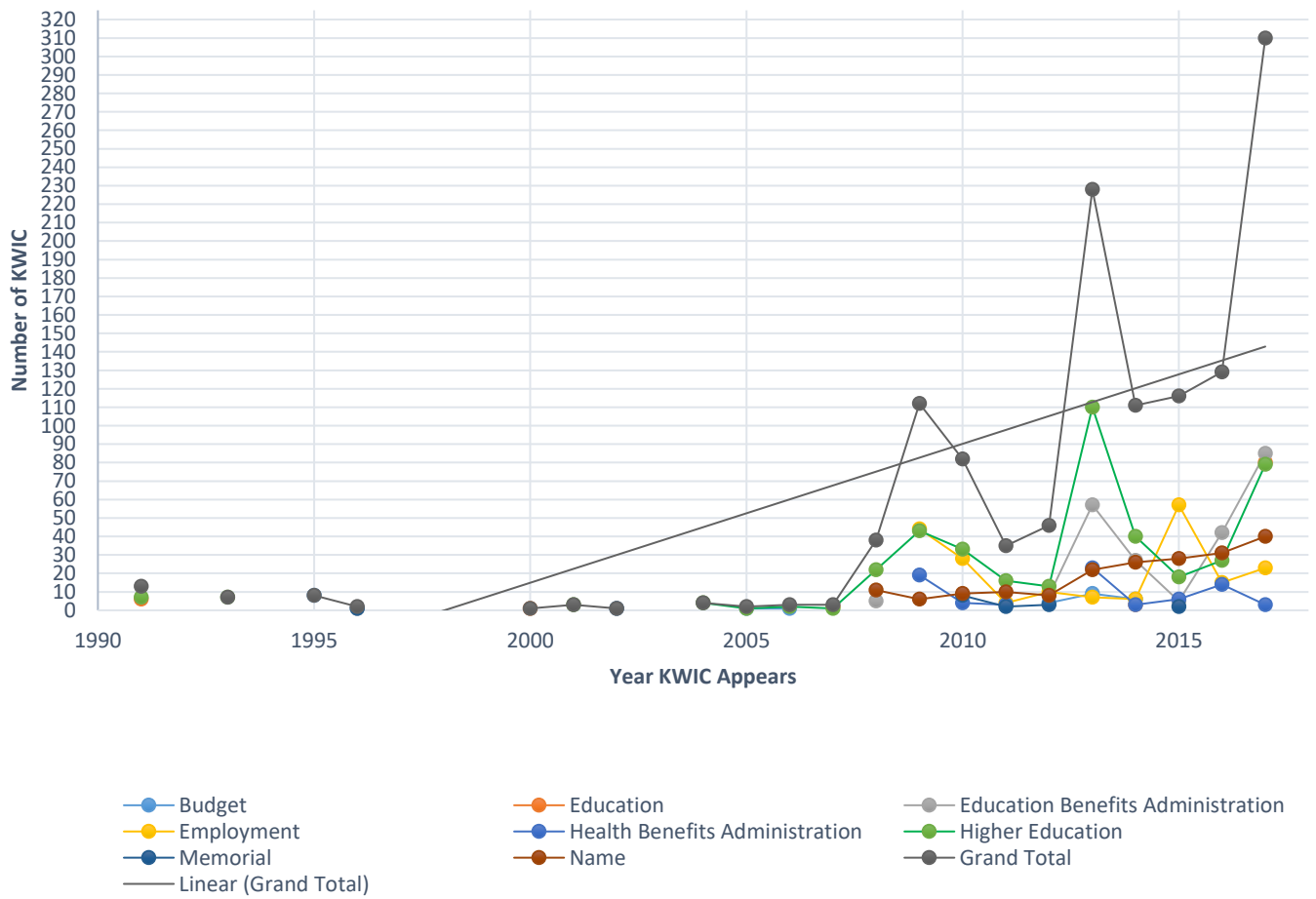
(Adapted from Schneider et al., 2014, p. 108)

Appendix B: Article 1 Figures and Charts

Figure 1.1

Figure 1.2 - Key Word in Context (KWIC) Results: Topics of "Student Veterans" Discussed in Voxgov.com

Figure 1.3 - Subthemes of "Student Veterans" in Voxgov.com
Years 2000 to 2017

Legend:
- Balanced budget
- Broaden benefits
- Budget cuts
- Budget Requests
- CR Act
- Education Information
- Financial Aid
- For-profit colleges
- General - Admin
- General - Employment
- General - Higher Education
- Gold Star Families
- Graduation
- In-state Tuition
- Kagan Nomination
- Mental health
- Monuments
- New Undersecretary
- Transition Assistance
- Work-study
- Work-study
- Online education
- Oppose Earn & Learn
- Outreach
- Restore Benefits
- Speech
- Student Loans
- Suicide prevention
- SVA
- Technology
- Totals

Figure 1.4 – Ordered Word Cloud of Student Veterans Search Results

Keywords

For Term: "student veteran"; Date From: Jan 1, 2000; Date To: Jan 1, 2018;
Content: Legislation, Congressional Docs, Official Releases; Source Type:
Legislative

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Figure 1. 5 – Ordered Word Cloud of Student Veterans Search Results on Mediacloud.org 2011 to 2018

Figure 1.6 – Top 4 Themes of Media Stories About Student Veterans on Mediacloud.org from 2001 to 2017

Education & Schools
72.56%

Colleges & Universities
66.38%

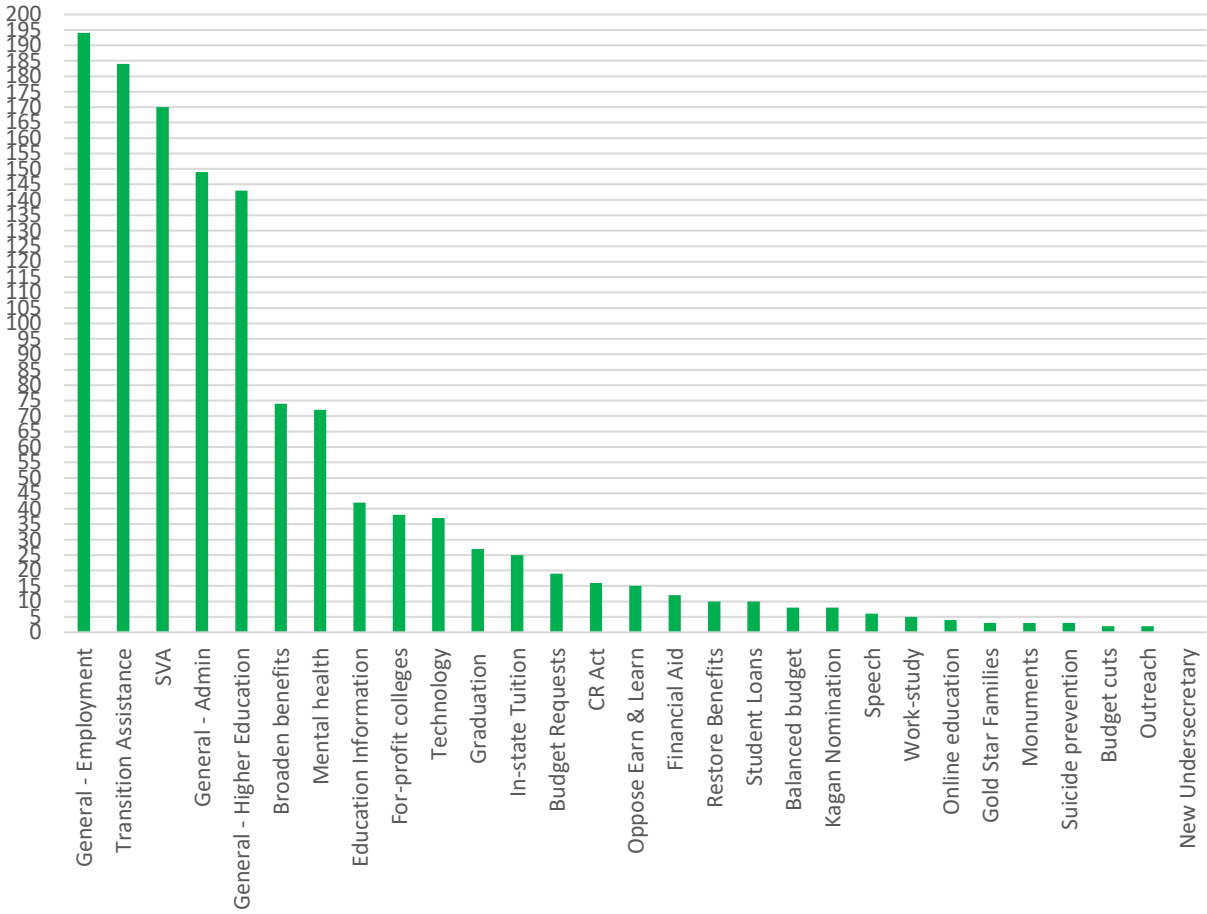Armament, defense and military
38.27%

Politics & Government
31.1%
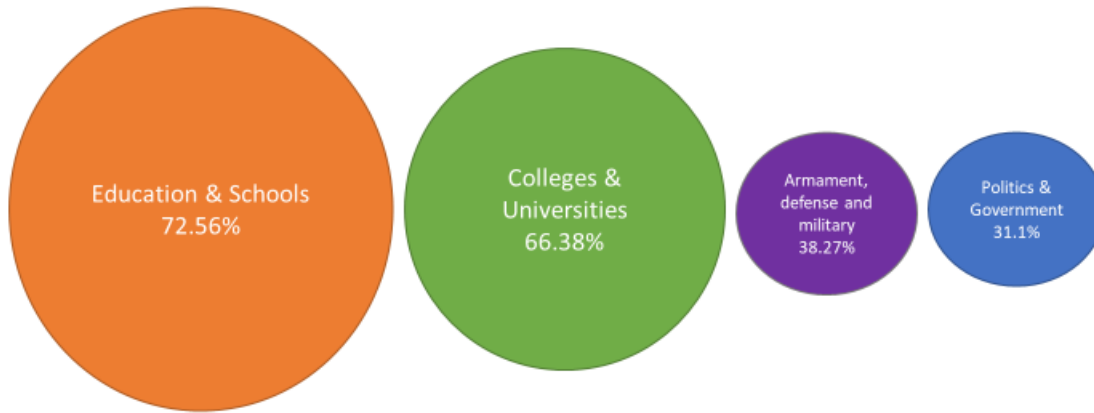
Figure 1.7 - Totals of Topics Related to Student Veterans in Voxgov.com Years 2000 to 2017

Appendix C: Article 2 Figures and Charts

Table 2.1 – SCTP Categories of Populations and Political Power
(adapted from Schneider et al., 2014, p. 111)

Category	Social Construction Description	Political Power	Example
Advantaged	Positive, deserving of benefits	High	Middle class families
Contenders	Negative, selfish, hidden benefits	High	Big banks
Dependents	Positive, less deserving of benefits	Low	Children
Deviants	Negative, deserving of burdens	Low	Criminals

Figure 2.2 – Student Veteran Identity Role in Policy Feedback and Policy Entrepreneurship
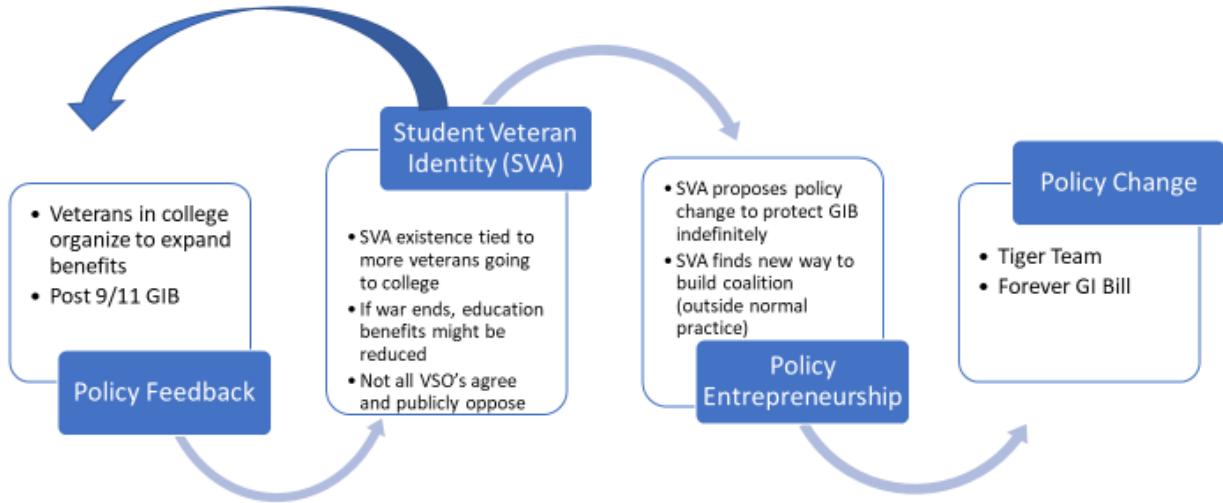
Appendix D1: Article 3 Interview Questions

The following are the list of questions asked of each volunteer subject:

1. What year did you exit the military?

2. When and how did you learn about your educational benefits?

3. Have you or your dependent used the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill?

    a. If yes, for what type of education or training program?

        i. How did you come to that decision?

        ii. How does your training or education compare to your job in the

            military? Is it different or more specialized?

    b. If no, why?

        i. How did you come to that decision?

4. Is there anything about your decision that you would change?

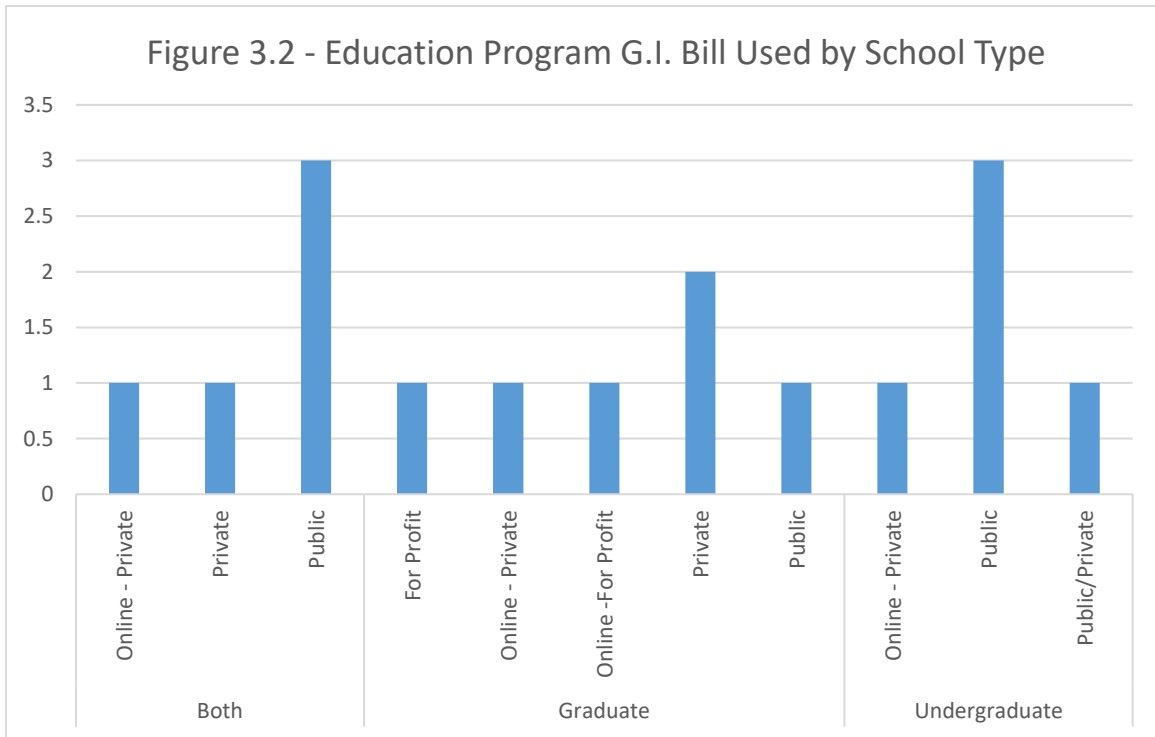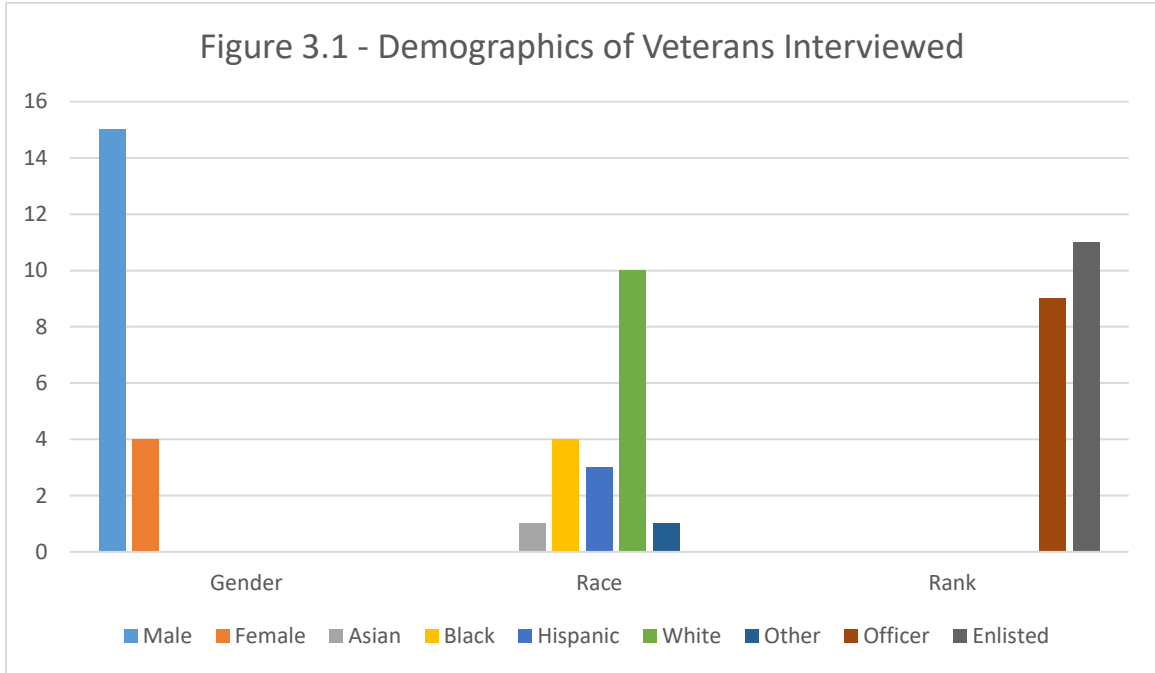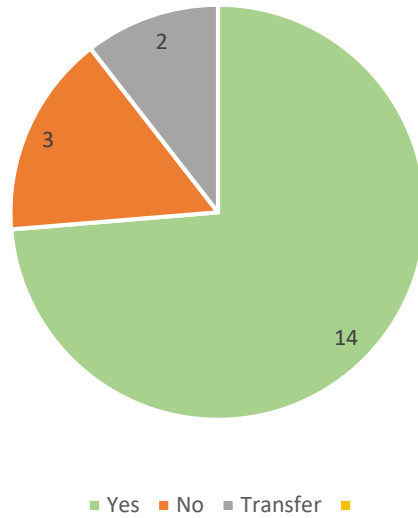**Appendix D2: Article 3 Figures and Charts**

Figure 3.1 - Demographics of Veterans Interviewed

Figure 3.2 - Education Program G.I. Bill Used by School Type

Figure 3.3 - Veterans Use of Post 9/11 G.I. Bill

Yes ■ No ■ Transfer ■
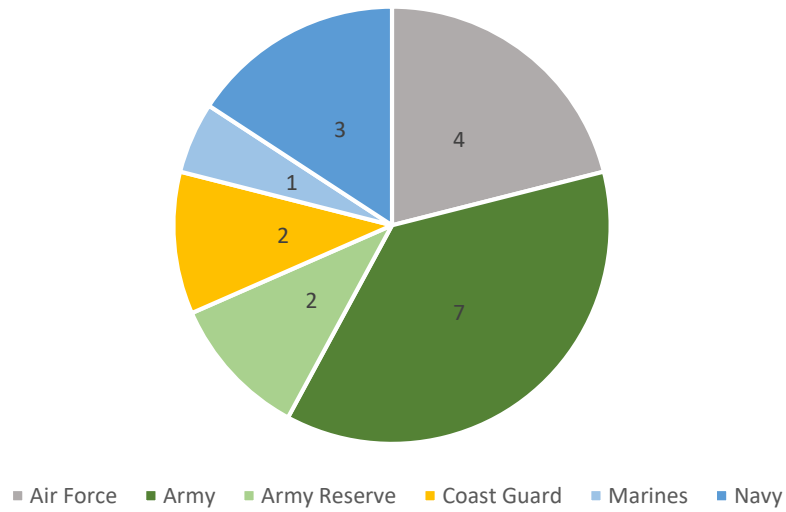
Figure 3.4 - Veteran Participants by Branch of Service (N= 19)

■ Air Force ■ Army ■ Army Reserve ■ Coast Guard ■ Marines ■ Navy

Appendix D3: Interview Profile for Article 3

Veteran E - Coast Guard (Interviewed on 2/2/2018)

I initially joined the Coast Guard to be able to pay for college. I don't come from a wealthy family, so I started at community college first. I soon realized how expensive a college education would be and decided to join the military because I knew from recruiting materials that they offered money for college. Back when I joined there was a different G.I. Bill that you had to pay for. During Basic Training I was given the paperwork to either opt-in or opt-out. I believe at that time it was $100 per month, which seemed like a good deal for getting a college education. Getting a college education was something I was always interested in but going to school while still being on active duty was too difficult for me. I spent most of my military career in field operations, which kept me very busy. I was hooked ever since my first rescue mission! But that makes it difficult to have a schedule that allows you to go to school. I know people who have done it, but it just wasn't for me. I decided to just focus on my military career instead.

Looking back at my career in the Coast Guard, I wish that I had been able to finish my degree before retiring, or at least, have two or more years completed. Actually, I did have a plan to do that, but my plan to go back to school was disrupted because of my medical issues. Being assigned to the Coast Guard headquarters was my first shore duty. The plan was for me to go to school since I would have a normal workday schedule. Shortly after I arrived, I was forced to retire because of a medical issue. Since being medically retired in 2013 after 25 years of service, I have been focused on getting better. My attitude was – I don't need a degree if I can't work.

Now that I'm better, I want to start my own business. So I want to go back to college to get a business degree.

I have not used the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill yet because there are several issues that I'm facing that are delaying my ability to use it. My wife is also on active duty in the Coast Guard, and she is planning to retire in 2019. We have already decided that we will be moving to North Carolina when she retires, but in the meantime, I'm trying to figure out if it's worth it for me to start taking classes up here in the Washington, D.C. area. My greatest concern is that if I start a program now, when we move to North Carolina next year, I will have to transfer to a school in that area in order to finish my degree. Because I know where we are moving to, I have been able to talk to schools down there to ask them questions about transferring credits – what will they accept, how many. I'm lucky because I know where I'm going to end up when my wife retires, but many other veterans I know are still trying to figure those things out before they leave the military.

In my opinion, many veterans are being screwed by the schools because if you start a program in one location, and then you end up having to move to another location to find a job, then the credits you earned at one school don't always transfer to another school. That seems to be a big problem that I see – that schools don't want to accept credits from other institutions. Then what ends up happening is that a veteran will use up all their G.I. Bill money because they paid for classes at one school, then end up moving, and the new school will not accept their credits. I hear about that problem from other veterans I've talked to because now I'm facing the same issue. I hear from many military people that the school tells them one thing, then once they've enrolled, the school decides not to accept the credits. So I'm waiting to hear back from

the schools in North Carolina about what courses they will allow me to transfer, and I want it in writing before I start taking any classes towards a business degree program.

The other issue I am facing is that the timeframe I have for using the G.I. Bill is slipping away. I only have 10 years from the time I left the Coast Guard to use the G.I. Bill and five years have already passed. I also have some community college credits that I would like to transfer, but most schools will not accept them because they are more than seven years old. So, I'm trying to find a school that will work with me on this issue because I don't want to lose those credits. If a school will not accept those credits or take my military experience for academic credit, then it will take me a long time to finish my degree. Just in case I don't get to use all my G.I. Bill funds, I made the decision to transfer at least one month over to my son. Many people don't know this, but if a veteran doesn't use the G.I. Bill for himself, he can't just transfer it to a dependent. Veterans must make that decision before separating from the military. By transferring one month to my son prior to leaving the military, I will eventually be allowed to transfer it all to him if I don't end up using it. Because of that, I am already starting with one month less than someone with the full benefits (which is 36 months) to complete a bachelor's degree. This time constraint has also been a motivation for me to get back to school.

The reason I decided not to enroll in an online degree program is because of the BAH. It just doesn't make sense to me that someone gets less money for housing if they are taking online classes. So that's another reason why I haven't started taking classes yet. If I did an online program I wouldn't have to worry about credits transferring, but then I lose the BAH. For the DC area, that is a difference of about $1000 per month. That's a lot of money to lose out on just for doing a degree program online. Because I am retired, I have a pension that helps me financially, but other veterans who leave the military without retiring are highly dependent on

that BAH to survive. The DC area is expensive, and I have heard of some veterans relying on

that BAH to make ends meet if they lose their job or get laid off. They enroll in school to collect

the BAH, and I don't judge them for that, because like I said, I'm retired and get a pension. But

the ones that leave before reaching 20 years of service in order to retire – they have no safety net.

The BAH is really important to a lot of veterans, myself included. Since I can't receive the full

amount for housing for an online degree, I have ruled that out because it just doesn't make

financial sense for me. I prefer to get my degree from a public institution that will be covered by

the G.I. Bill so I don't have to take out any loans and collect my BAH.

Once I hear back from the schools in North Carolina, I will be able to make a decision

based on how many of my credits they will accept. Then I have heard that the school's veterans

office will make it easy for me to access my benefits from the VA because the school wants my

money. So, I am not worried about getting assistance from the school to help me through the

process of enrolling and getting my benefits. At least that's what I've heard from other veterans,

but I'm not there yet. My wife is still on activity duty, so I don't bother her with any of this

stuff. I'm researching schools on my own, you know, online - checking out the websites. I have

been doing the research about academic credit transfers on my own because in the end, it will be

up to me to decide where I want to go school.