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Critical Junctures along the Chicanx/Latinx Educational Pipeline: Interdisciplinary and Intersectional

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**Mexican American Student Veterans: From Military Service
to Higher Education**

Alfredo Gonzalez

California State University, Dominguez Hills

algonzalez@csudh.edu

Abstract

This study employs descriptive qualitative analysis to explore the experiences of eight Mexican American veterans utilizing Veterans Affairs education benefits to pursue baccalaureate degrees. Participants were recruited in Southern California at two California Community Colleges and three California State Universities. The findings suggest that Mexican American student veterans navigate college and their education benefits based on their experiences in the military. The study identifies five factors Mexican American student veterans negotiate when transitioning to college: (a) minimization of racism; (b) lack of support; (c) being experiential learners; (d) substitute leadership; and (e) being financially motivated.

Keywords: *student veterans; post-9/11; GI Bill; Mexican American; military*

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In the wake of heinous tragedies that took the life of Army Specialist Vanessa Guillen, serving in the military is losing its appeal for many Latinx¹ community members (Diaz et al., 2022). The rise in military sexual traumas, coupled with spiking Latinx casualties overseas, suggests that military service is becoming an increasingly hostile path to achieve economic and social mobility. More than two straight decades of U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have caused labor shortages in military institutions (Scott-Killern & Singer, 2023). In a desperate move during its lowest point in the 2022 recruiting crisis, the Army relaxed the high school diploma enlistment requirement for new recruits 18 and older (Beynon, 2022). At the same time, high schools nationwide have noticed a consistent presence of recruiters on campus, specifically in the most economically vulnerable districts (Monforti & McGlynn, 2021). Countering recruiters in schools are organizations like Truth in Recruitment and the Project on Youth and Non-Military Opportunities, which educate students on what some recruiters intentionally omit and offer alternatives to military service.

Today, the education benefits available to service members increased significantly with the passage of the Veterans Educational Assistance Act in 2008, commonly known as the post-9/11 GI Bill. Eligibility is based on three years of honorable service after September 10, 2001, which includes a monthly living stipend based on the military's Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) determined by the institution's location (Picker, 2011). Despite the financial resources attached to pursuing a college degree, veterans are less likely to utilize their education benefits compared to other Veterans Affairs (VA) programs like disability compensation and health care (VA, 2020).

Given that Hispanic service members constitute 18% of active-duty personnel (DOD, 2021), and they are expected to make up about 16% of all veterans by 2046 (Schaeffer, 2021), the literature on the military-to-education pipeline remains silent on the effect military service has on Latinx veterans who exercise their benefits to seek a college education, let alone Mexican Americans—the largest Latinx subgroup in the military. Keeping in mind that veterans have historically faced personal and institutional difficulties integrating back into civilian life and college campuses, it is urgent that we explore how Mexican American veterans use and navigate their education benefits. To what extent, if at all, does military service equip Mexican Americans with the competencies to pursue and complete baccalaureate programs?

The Mexican American Veteran Education Pipeline

Research on the education pipeline makes clear that Mexican American students suffer disproportionately at every “leakage” point in the continuum (Alemán et al., 2022; Covarrubias, 2011; Solórzano et al., 2005). Of particular significance is the transition from secondary to postsecondary education (Solórzano et al., 2005). This is also a critical juncture when students transition to young adulthood. Though students are pushed out or drop out of the education pipeline (Yosso & Solórzano, 2006), some Mexican American students may instead choose other forms of professional development, like joining the military to receive job training, travel, or simply leaving their homes (Martinez & Huerta, 2020; Monforti & McGlynn, 2021). Given the importance of a college education—along with the training and necessary certifications—to enter some of the most in-demand occupational sectors, military service similarly offers prospective enlistees a path to social and economic mobility with precise figures on education, housing, and retirement benefits (Martinez & Huerta, 2020). For example, Huerta (2015) identified that one of the factors prompting Latino men to enlist—while in secondary education—was regular contact with military recruiters who reinforced occupational and economic incentives associated with serving. Compared to sparse and inconsistent contact with school counselors that offered narrow guidance on ambiguous career paths with little to no assurances, the presence of military recruiters played a significant role in Latino enlistment.

Whether or not serving in the military delivers on promises of upward mobility remains debatable. A closer look at the Chicana/o education pipeline sheds some light on the outcomes of Mexican American veterans. Using Covarrubias’s (2011) qualitative intersectionality as a template, I employed the August 2021 supplement of the Community Population Survey to plot the Mexican and Mexican American veteran education pipelines illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.² Immediately noticeable is that Mexican educational outcomes have improved since 2009. Figure 1 illustrates that of the 100 Mexican students that begin school in the United States, 30% will be pushed out of high school in 2021 compared to 44% in 2009; 70% will complete high school in 2021 in contrast to 56% in 2009; and 37% will enroll in college in 2021 as opposed to 27% in 2009. Based on that same pool of 100 students, the number of Mexicans that earned an Associate’s degree climbed from 5 in 2009 to 8 in 2021—a 60% increase—and those that earned a professional degree or doctorate doubled from 2.2 to 4.45 in 2021.

Mexicans that earned a B.A. increased by 10%. Only .03% out of 70 who complete high school join the military.

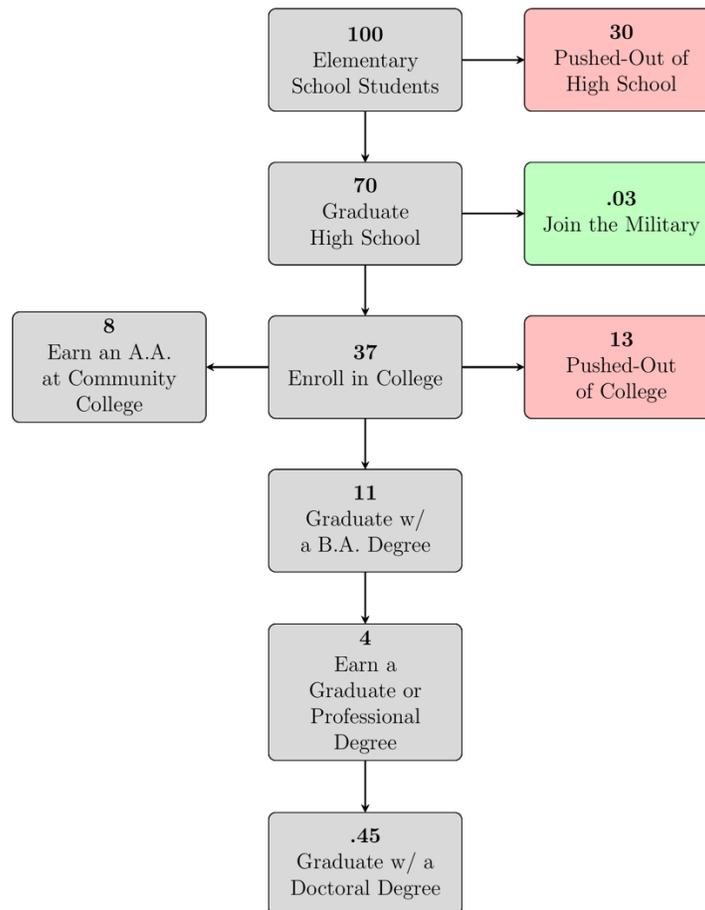


Figure 1. Mexican American education pipeline.

The Mexican American veteran education pipeline, illustrated in Figure 2, outlines a significantly different narrative. Out of 100 Mexican students that served in the military, 95% completed high school, a difference of 25% from those without service. In 2021, there were 75% more Mexican Americans with military service enrolled in college; more than double earned an Associate's degree; over one-third more received a four-year degree; and more than double completed professional and doctorate degrees compared to Mexicans without service. Though this is simply one observation measuring educational attainment, for Mexicans, serving in the military does indeed offer a clearer path to educational benefits and attainment compared to not serving.

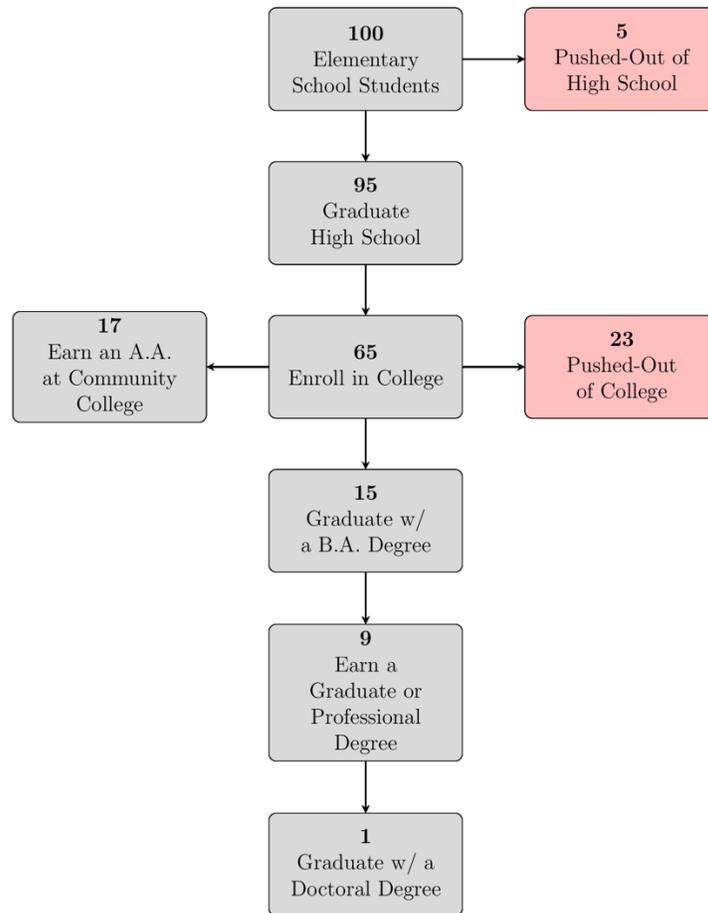


Figure 2. Mexican American veteran education pipeline.

Induction in the military based on educational attainment is at the discretion of each service branch, “Possession of a high school diploma is desirable, although not mandatory, for enlistment” (Enlistment, Appointment, and Induction Criteria, 2016). Apart from the recent recruiting crisis, for several decades, service branches required a high school diploma or its equivalent for induction, which explains the higher number of service member high school graduates. Still, what is striking from the Mexican American veteran education pipeline is that the number of students pushed out of college is almost double the number of non-service Mexicans. One explanation for higher numbers of Mexican American veterans being pushed out of college could be that many more are enrolled and face similar obstacles as Mexicans without service. Alternatively, the higher number of Mexican American veterans pushed out of college could stem from pursuing college while in the armed forces, which can be difficult to manage along with individual unit demands (Buddin & Kapur, 2002).

Nevertheless, the critical juncture creating leaks in the Mexican American veterans education pipeline is relocated from secondary education to post-college enrollment. Despite securing access to education benefits, higher education institutions are not structurally positioned to offer the proper mentorship and socio-emotional support Mexican American student veterans may need to begin and complete a four-year degree (Hung et al., 2022), which is the basis of this study.

Latinx Student Veterans Transitioning from the Military to Higher Education

Interest in the experiences of military veterans transitioning to college has grown significantly after the United States has spent over two decades continuously at war in Iraq and Afghanistan. A small group of scholars has focused on service-connected undergraduates and their experiences after leaving the armed forces and entering higher education (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Norman et al., 2015). They found that veterans' experiences transitioning to college are made difficult in the absence of individual oversight by senior leaders to help guide their everyday tasks (Ackerman et al., 2009). Other studies highlight previous characteristics prior to entering the military as determinants of college choice (Molina, 2015). The research conducted so far assumes that because veterans have financial education benefits at their disposal, they are likely to begin and complete a baccalaureate program.

A growing body of research has begun to investigate Latinx military recruitment and service to better understand the relationship between patriotism and decisions to enlist, or commission, and considers their positions doubly colonized (Bradford, 2021; Monforti & McGlynn, 2021). Scholars found that about one-fifth of "Hispanics" face discrimination in branches like the Army (Dempsey & Shapiro, 2009), yet few studies have directly investigated how experiencing racial discrimination in service influences student veteran experiences transitioning to college (Hunt et al., 2022; Santos et al., 2015). Recently, Hunt et al. (2022) found that racially minoritized student veteran men in the Southeast, including four Latinx student veterans, face alienation and racism on campus. However, their findings suggest that Latinx student veterans minimize the presence of racism on campus, invoke their veteran identity as a mechanism of resiliency, and continue to subscribe to meritocracy. The current study seeks to expand this literature by descriptively summarizing Mexican American student veteran experiences navigating higher education institutions in and outside the armed forces.

Methodology

Considering the purpose of this investigation is to understand the impact of military service on Mexican American student veterans pursuing a four-year degree, basic qualitative description was employed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Sandelowski, 2000; Schroeder & Perez, 2022). A basic qualitative descriptive design is ideal for studies that are under-theorized, and when researchers are interested in how people understand and interpret their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Additionally, basic qualitative designs are less restricted from being committed to theoretical antecedents or frameworks (Sandelowski, 2000). The main goal of a qualitative descriptive study is to produce an accurate, descriptive summary that captures the phenomenon under investigation “in a way that best contains the data collected” (p. 339; see also Schroeder & Perez, 2022, p. 57). The descriptive summary may catalyze future phenomenological or grounded theory approaches on this topic (Sandelowski, 2000).

Positionality

As a post-9/11 Mexican American Marine Corps and Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran, I navigated community college and transferred to a four-year university in 2009, when the post-9/11 GI Bill was implemented. My first-hand experience in the infantry provides a unique platform to pose questions mindful of different experiences in military occupational specialties (MOS), military culture and values, overseas deployments, and availability of resources in and outside of service.

Data Collection and Participants

The following analysis is derived from eight in-depth semi-structured interviews with Mexican American student veterans in July 2022. These interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom, ranging from 40 to 60 minutes. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. A call for participation was distributed from the Veterans Resource Centers (VRC) at three California State Universities (CSU) and two California Community Colleges (CCC). I initially contacted the directors at each VRC to solicit participation through their email lists, which included a screening survey in determining eligibility based on two criteria: self-identifying as any Latinx subgroup and being able to present their Department of Defense Form 214 “Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty” (DD-214). Verifying participants possessed a DD-214 affirms that they served and separated from the military (Schwille et al., 2019). Moreover, student veterans cannot access benefits associated with

programs like the post-9/11 GI Bill without presenting their DD-214 to a certifying official. Table I illustrates the participants using pseudonyms to uphold confidentiality, along with selected demographics and characteristics.

Table I

Mexican American Student Veteran Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Military Branch (Years of Service)	Institution Type	Education Benefits	Major
Abigail	Woman	35	Marine Corps (4)	CCC	Voc. Rehab	Sociology
Gil	Man	26	Marine Corps (6)	CCC	Voc. Rehab	Business
Leticia	Woman	28	Navy (4)	CCC	Voc. Rehab	Administrative Justice
Andres	Man	36	Navy (4)	CSU	Voc. Rehab	Accounting
Juan	Man	33	Army (8)	CSU	Post-9/11	Jazz Studies
Benito	Man	25	Army (3)	CSU	Post-9/11	Sociology
Alfonso	Man	56	Navy (12)	CSU	N/A	Management
Jackie	Woman	30	Marine Corps (12)	CCC	Post-9/11	Biology

During the interview, I asked participants to describe their racial and ethnic background. All eight participants identified as Mexican; two participants stated they were Mexican American, and one identified as Mexican and Peruvian. Seven were born in the United States; one reported being born in Mexico and naturalizing while in service. Two served in the Army, three in the Marine Corps, and three in the Navy. Their active-duty service ranged from three to 12 years; the average time in service was 6.5 years. One participant was junior enlisted, six were non-commissioned officers (NCO), and one was a senior enlisted staff non-commissioned

officer (SNCO). Three participants were in a combat related MOS and five were in combat support MOSs. Three participants were women and five identified as men. Six participants reported honorable discharges and two received general discharges. Four participants were enrolled at a CCC and the other four were enrolled at a CSU. All participants served in the post-9/11 era.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with a review of interview transcripts and participant summaries, which included the initial participation survey. Subsequent content analysis proceeded in two stages. First, using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software, I conducted open coding inductively to identify patterns and cooccurrences and generated initial codes. The second phase of analysis consisted of collapsing initial codes into subcategories to reduce the data (Schreier, 2014). The following is a descriptive summary of eight Mexican American student veteran experiences navigating CCCs and CSUs.

Findings

Minimizing Racism

One of the first ideas that emerged when Mexican American student veterans reflected on their individual military service was that they, initially, were inattentive to racial discrimination. Though each veteran had varying degrees of awareness to implicitly or explicitly racially motivated events, most deferred or minimized racist experiences as being part of the military's culture of meritocracy. Stated differently, if service members were being singled out, hazed, or ridiculed based on their racialized identities, participants suggested that service members were expected to preserve and adopt the dominant group's high standards by meeting its thresholds or succumb to discrimination as an "other."

Participants were asked about experiencing racism while serving. During his interview, Juan stated that he did not experience racism. However, he mentioned, "but my nickname was Jose Suave Adios Mios Cadillac Rios the third," which was reduced as a joke among his unit. Although Juan was reluctant to classify his nickname as racism, he was aware of the racial tropes associated with being a Mexican man. Gil also indicated that he did not experience racism, but instead encountered "tough love." Gil shared his perspectives on racism in the military:

Every race is going to get treated the same way, even if it's good or bad. So yeah, I don't, I wouldn't say it was racist because it wasn't just a specific race, it was just more a rite of passage kind of thing. I know like a lot of times the like African American guys or girls would get in trouble, or not get in trouble, they get ridiculed for failing swim [qualification] or something. Everyone be like, oh okay, that's like that's expected. I mean and nine times out of ten, they wouldn't get butthurt they're just like, yeah, whatever they'll laugh about it. You know they really know what's coming. Just little things like that. I don't think anything was like legit like hardcore racism like out of hate is what I'm trying to get at.

Similar as Juan, Gil minimizes explicit racism as a joke, yet at the same time, he is aware that institutions and society perceive certain racialized groups as inferior when he identifies races as "good or bad." Gil notes that Black service members are stereotyped as unable to successfully complete swimming qualifications. The fact that Black service members refrain from publicly challenging racist comments signaled to Gil that they supported and even endorsed these perceived stereotypes that Black people are unable to swim. Gil supports the meritocratic ideology that Black service members' abilities will either demonstrate whether they get accepted or are ridiculed. For Gil, racist microaggressions do not meet the threshold of racism because they are not "hardcore" or driven by hate, as seemingly evidenced by people deferring to laugh about such situations.

Other participants initially rejected the idea that they experienced racism while serving but quickly changed their minds. For example, Jackie, who served twelve years in the Marines, reflected and soon realized, "now that I'm on this topic, there is a lot of racism." She would eventually be promoted as a Staff Sergeant and trained to become a military recruiter, where she observed explicit moments of racism and discrimination. During her recruiter training program, Jackie's command mobilized Spanish-speaking recruiters to address a shortage on the East Coast:

So, when you're telling me I'm going to Connecticut because I speak Spanish, all of a sudden, I don't speak Spanish. It's not fluent. So, at that point, I got to stay in California. I didn't stay with Riverside because they already had too many female Hispanic speakers, but they needed one in Orange County, specifically in Placentia, because they don't have any other Mexicans to send there. So that's when I got pulled out of Riverside the

morning of and placed in Orange County. But I think when the Marine Corps chooses recruiters, all they look at is demographics. And statistically, if we put this race in this kind of area, they're going to look at that race and be like, I want to be that.

Jackie had initially been unaware of institutional or systemic racism in the Marine Corps until she reflected on experiences that stood out to her. Without reflecting, Jackie would argue that racism was less prevalent than sexism. Her identity as a woman was more detrimental to her career than being racialized as "Hispanic." At the same time, Jackie realized that senior leaders in her recruiting command employed race strategically to assign specific duty stations for new recruiters, "They put all the Black [recruiters] in Long Beach. It all makes sense to me then, that it does exist at a higher level, but I think when it's, like, trickling down at the lower levels, we don't even see it." Jackie noticed that her recruiting orders were not based on her abilities; instead, the Marine Corps intentionally placed her where potential recruits that looked like her would see themselves in uniform.

Unsupported

All the participants expressed feeling unsupported on the topic of seeking an education while serving in the military. The lack of support manifested in three ways: (a) being unaware of education resources; (b) lacking proper mentorship to use resources; and (c) being discouraged by unit leaders. Information about education resources differed by branch, with the Army and Marine Corps being the least accommodating for service members seeking to take advantage of their benefits. Most participants only learned about resources like Tuition Assistance (TA) while attending transition classes when they separated from the military. Additionally, since military culture generally rejected the idea of taking college courses while actively serving, there were very few, if any, senior leaders to look toward as mentors.

The military is responsible for sharing information about educational resources, it is also the same institution that blocks its members from effectively utilizing those resources. One way the military prevents service members from using their education benefits is by not making them aware of available resources. For instance, Jackie was not informed about available resources until she completed her first enlistment, "I didn't even know it [TA] existed until my second enlistment. And at that time, I was already pregnant." Jackie believes that if resources like TA had been explained early on in her career, she would have taken advantage of those opportunities before starting a family.

Another way the military made it clear that utilizing educational benefits while serving was undesired was through a lack of mentorship. Abigail, a Marine veteran, was aware of TA but less acquainted with navigating both college and military service:

It was different, I think. I was kind of not confused about the actual process of it, I think I was more confused on like time management like how to be a student in the military. Yeah, yeah, that was kind of hard and I didn't really have like a mentor that you know was trying to pave the way or anything. I'm kind of conflicted because I feel like I should have had more of the initiative. You know to figure it out if I didn't have that [a mentor], but I think in hindsight, you know, just being a young Marine like that's the whole point of a mentor, you know, because young Marines don't think like that.

Though Abigail recognized that she lacked mentorship when she contemplated pursuing college courses in the military, she ultimately resorted to meritocratic ideals to insist that despite not having a mentor, she herself should have had more initiative in learning about education benefits. As Abigail continued, it became more apparent that her commitment to meritocracy conflicted with her desire for mentorship navigating higher education when she mentioned, “. . . not to just say I have my degree right, you should strive for that. But sometimes you have to break it down, like I say, Barney style, you know, like to get somebody on a path.” For Abigail, “Barney style” meant taking things by the numbers, step-by-step, which is the type of guidance she had wanted, but ultimately did not receive.

A third way that Mexican American student veterans evoked feeling unsupported was through being explicitly discouraged from seeking educational resources by institutional policies and senior unit leaders. For example, during Leticia's interview, she mentioned that prior to enlisting, her recruiters helped provide information about the various educational resources available while serving. Yet, when asked about her experience using resources like TA, Leticia stated, “I actually never got to use it [TA]. I never took advantage of it, and I wish I did.” Leticia further shared:

I didn't get to use it because I think at the time, I had to have two years in the military. I think they changed it or something while I was in, I don't recall. But I remember I had my daughter, and I didn't pass the first BCA [body composition assessment] after having my daughter, so I was automatically at the time, like, disqualified from it.

Though Leticia was interested in pursuing college coursework while serving in the military, two separate institutional policies restricted her ability to use those benefits; a time-in-service requirement that was not met and a physical fitness exam that, for the most part, penalized her pregnancy. Leticia stopped short of identifying the military as the institution that limited her from pursuing college; rather, she summed up her disappointment as being unable to use the opportunity when she “wanted to.”

Comparably, Andres was equally discouraged by the military’s bureaucratic labyrinth to use TA, “It was too burdensome, I guess, because I had to go up my chain of command.” Access to educational resources excited Andres that he took advantage of his opportunities but was quickly deterred by the lack of information and guidance:

When I got to my final duty station, they said, oh, you know, use tuition assistance, which I did, and I had to submit a chit and write it up through the chain of Command. And then I had to go to the Command Education Officer. And then when I went to the college, they told me, why don’t you just fill out the FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid]? It’s a lot quicker. You don’t need to be dealing with all this. And I thought, oh, really? And so, I used the financial assistance once from the command, and then after that, I just used the FAFSA.

Andres realized that the messages he received prior to enlisting omitted details about navigating chains of command and completing critical paperwork. In fact, his college provided more financial guidance than his command, which ironically suggests that if college had been one of the factors for his enlistment, he could have started—and maybe even finished—his studies without enlisting. Moreover, Andres’s training command summarily declined applying for educational opportunities, “They wouldn’t allow me to seek [an] education while under a training status, even though I had like months because I had like a month gap between corpsman school and field medic school.” Despite his motivation and eagerness to concurrently enroll in college courses while training to become a field medic, the Navy confined Andres’s opportunities and attention to completing its own training courses—information that had been left out before he enlisted.

Experiential Learners

Surprisingly, while Mexican American student veteran accounts of using educational resources while in the military largely depict being unsupported, most participants lauded their

military service for thriving in college. They attributed their current motivation and educational journey to learning productive habits, implementing routines, paying attention to details, and being mission oriented in uniform. In addition, military service provided participants with tools that easily segued from one institution to the other.

Gil disclosed that without his experience in the military, he “would have been more relaxed, not really focusing, just kind of here [in college] just to be here.” As an infantry rifleman in the Marines, Gil indicated that if he had gone to college immediately after high school, he would not be as successful:

Just because, you know, you take it more seriously, and you know how to navigate through everything as far as the basics of time management and scheduling. Being prepared for something, like you learned all that, and then you’re kind of just putting it through to just like another kind of thing, like studying versus getting ready for a field [operation] or rehearsals.

Due to his military experience, Gil was not only trained in infantry tactics but also fundamental organizational skills, such as meeting deadlines and recognizing the importance of planning—he had not acquired these “basic” skills in his secondary education. Gil also identified executing tasks as a learned skill that he then applied, almost innately, toward studying for his courses cultivated during training exercises. Additionally, Gil demonstrated that being mission-oriented promoted a sense of urgency, further increasing the importance of executing tasks that are quickly measured and evaluated, such as making it to a platoon formation on time or completing a ten-kilometer hike with full combat loads.

At first, Benito was reluctant to attribute his time in the military as an incubator for college, “I mean, for my job, being an I I Bravo [Army infantry], the only thing they care about was how fast can you run, how many push-ups can you do, and what’s your rifle qualification.” As he reflected, however, Benito shared that the Army had, indeed, equipped him to pursue a college degree:

But then also mentally? Yeah, I think the military prepared me quite well because my entire train of thought, going to school was just like, this isn’t even that bad. I’m in a room that has air conditioning. I just have to listen to a professor, write some notes down and just do the homework and study for a test. And so far, it’s gotten me a pretty high GPA. I’m at 3.8 GPA right now. That’s my mentality going through it all. I’m chilling.

There's no sense of danger whatsoever in here. For some people that have no military experience, it's just like, they're just freaking out about getting a homework assignment done that probably takes, like, 20 or 30 minutes to do.

Though challenging, going to college for Benito seemed more hospitable than deploying overseas to a combat zone where service members face constant imminent threats. Enduring traumatic events in war gave Benito an alternative perspective to articulate obstacles in college, such as assignments and exams, that were unevenly matched.

Furthermore, Benito was unable to relate to his peers who could not complete and execute assignments. Benito expressed confidence in implementing the same types of habits and routines in a challenging environment absent of danger. Similarly, Leticia indicated that she "needed" the military to disrupt what had become a complacent life:

Before the military, I wasn't really going anywhere in life. I didn't have motivation. I think I was just letting the days go by, and it was just years wasted, like, four years wasted. And the military itself, I didn't see it at the time, but once I was transitioning out, like, I saw that I was more determined, and I had more motivation than I ever had. And I knew what I was passionate for. And I knew my strengths and my weaknesses. And I work well under pressure. So, I was like, I want to take that to my advantage and see what I can do with that.

Currently in the process of transferring to a research university, Leticia seeks to become a lawyer and veterans' advocate. Part of her motivation for pursuing a career in law stems from testifying as a witness for a friend's legal dispute in military courts. Leticia realized that she enjoyed those experiences and the legal process, "I've always been the one to just, like, put the pieces together and like, argue, and I like it. And, I was just like, well, what can I do with that?" Although Leticia was discouraged from acquiring a college education while in the Navy, her experiences in the military exposed her to other career possibilities that would otherwise go unrecognized.

Substitute Leadership

Though no longer in uniform, each participant searched for guidance from people they could trust to provide accurate and relevant information. More often than not, key personnel like certifying officials and student veteran counselors were associated with Veterans Resource Centers (VRC). Together with VRC program directors and coordinators, Mexican American

student veterans were able to meet with staff members that understood how to effectively exercise VA education benefits by introducing strategies unbeknownst to them. Through these interactions, student veterans developed confidence in their relationships with VRC staff that mirrored their experiences with senior leaders in the military as being cared for.

After meeting with a certifying official, Andres gained confidence in realistically going to school, “speaking with the counselor helped me plan everything because I didn’t know that if you go half time, it only eats up half of the eligible time remaining [on post-9/11 benefits].” Andres was reluctant to pursue college because he assumed that VA education benefits would only be granted when enrolled full-time. Prior to transferring to a CSU, Andres used most of his VA education benefits at a community college that lacked an adequate VRC. Despite depleting his VA education benefits, the certifying official at the CSU VRC offered Andres critical mentorship to continue his studies using a less familiar VA program: Chapter 31, Veteran Readiness and Employment, formerly known as vocational rehabilitation (voc rehab). This program provides veterans with service-connected disabilities job training and pays for college tuition to acquire a specific occupation (VA, 2022). Andres recollected, “I used the GI Bill at [CCC]. Took a break, then I decided to go back to school. I used my GI Bill and had about a month and eleven days left, and that’s when I applied to voc rehab.”

Similarly, Leticia was directly mentored by a Chapter 31 counselor, “the VR and E counselor told me, like, you know what? Use this program first [Chapter 31], and then for law school, use your GI Bill for whatever education that you want to pursue after the VR and E program is done.” Though still in the process of transferring to a four-year institution, Leticia built rapport and is close with the veterans’ counselors and Veterans Department at her CCC. The benefits of pursuing Chapter 31 were also brought up to Gil at his CCC:

I used my post-9/11 for more trades and things. I didn’t use it all, I used a fraction of it until I learned about Chapter 31, the vocational rehab, and that I learned about when I applied to [CCC]. They were like, oh, you should apply, and they told me how and they helped me through the process and that one [Chapter 31] I feel like they’re [CCC] super helpful, and it’s not just applying, and you know everyone’s going to accept the GI Bill, but that one [Chapter 31] is more in depth and personal.

Gil highlighted the extra steps involved in securing Chapter 31 benefits compared to the post-9/11 GI Bill. Since Chapter 31 is meant to support job training in a specific occupation, not the

pursuit of a college education, service-connected disabled veterans must qualify for the program by completing interviews with the VA, which may take longer to become eligible. The VRC staff continued to be Gil's guide throughout the process and plans to save his post-9/11 GI Bill to pursue a master's program.

Financially Motivated

The most salient characteristic shared by Mexican American student veterans about transitioning to college is their financial motivation. Although achieving a college degree for most participants also signified higher earnings potential, Mexican American student veterans approach VA education entitlements as another mission to complete to earn a wage. In other words, one of the main factors impacting their decision to pursue college has more to do with their pocketbook rather than a chosen area of study. While the VA grants enrolled student veterans monthly living stipends, it does so based on the schools' location, meaning certain schools might be less attractive not because they are inadequate. Instead, enrolling in other schools may provide student veterans higher BAH payments (DOD, 2021).

Going to college was not the goal for Benito after getting out of the military. He believed that his time away from school while in the military had already put him at a disadvantage, "Everyone's going to look at me like I'm some idiot," he expressed. Originally, Benito intended to become a police officer; however, due to sustaining a knee injury in the police academy, he resigned. Pursuing a college education was his last resort to provide for himself, and the fact that taking courses came with financial support helped finalize his decision, "They gave me a monthly check, and that's why I decided to go to school." With that same incentive in mind, Juan enrolled in college after completing his enlistment in the Army. Not only was his CCC nearby and easily accessible, to Juan, "It was free money, so I might as well collect on that GI Bill and get something out of it." When Andres responded to how the post-9/11 GI Bill affected his decision to pursue college, he was motivated by the amount of money he could receive compared to his previous factory job: "I wasn't even working 40 hours a week. It was actually less than what the GI Bill was paying me."

Other participants were strategic about enrolling in specific schools to maximize the amount of housing allowance they received since the post-9/11 GI Bill awards funds based on where the school is located. As a result, Jackie preferred a different college but enrolled at her local CCC since the award amount was higher, "I probably would have went to Mount SAC if

they gave me more BAH, but because [CCC] does give more [money], I attend here.”

Considering that she is a single parent caring for young children, Jackie believed she lacked the luxury of gaining an education compared to finding a stable job. The post-9/11 GI Bill, however, extended a path where she could pursue a program of study and support her family:

I think it enabled me to get the education. I don't think if I wouldn't have had those benefits I'd be in college right now because you get promised those grants, but that's not putting money in my pocket. I need to work, so I don't think school would have been a focus for me if it weren't for those benefits.

Jackie is aware of general opportunities to receive financial college support, however, without guaranteed funding to cover the cost of attending—on top of the cost of living—seeking a college education would be the least of her concerns. At the same time, she also realizes that receiving scholarships only pay for tuition, her most important obligation demands a stable income to support her family.

Discussion

Mexican American student veterans are determined to pursue a college degree, due in large part to their experiences and commitments to military culture and values, including selfless service, meritocracy, and loyalty. Studies on Latinx student veterans attempt to demonstrate how prior conditions and characteristics before military service may be important indicators of college enrollment and success (Molina, 2015). One critical aspect these studies neglect to consider is how the military prepares veterans to pursue higher education.

Consistent with Hunt and colleagues (2022), Mexican American student veterans downplayed the existence of racism in the military, which also affirmed their adoption of meritocratic values they carried into civilian life. At the same time, however, some Mexican American student veterans recognized how the military fundamentally maintains racism through everyday operations, disrupting the idea that “only Black veterans acknowledge it [racism]” (p. 786). Still, the military's emphasis on meritocracy inculcated Mexican American student veterans to believe that individual ability is the most significant factor impacting upward mobility.

Despite being systematically discouraged from using education benefits while in service, Mexican American student veterans continue to attribute their persistence and confidence in college to their military service. This finding suggests that the military passively prepares

Mexican American service members by adapting and gradually shifting their perceptions from fixating on outcomes to valuing the process that leads to completing missions. Another important finding in this study departs from previous research indicating that prior characteristics before enlisting are determinants of college enrollment and school choice (Molina, 2015; Santos et al., 2015). These studies failed to consider how new education policy initiatives and their implementation would impact veterans' decisions to pursue a college education, leading some to speculate about the actual impact service-connected education benefits have on Latinx student veterans (Santos et al., 2015). For financially motivated Mexican American student veterans, school location—particularly at the community college level—is a critical factor influencing enrollment since the level of BAH is contingent upon the school's address.

Implications

Based on these findings, most Mexican American student veterans are unclear about their educational or professional goals, and they are likely to enroll in college for financial security. Moving forward, colleges and universities can better support Mexican American and Latinx student veteran transitions to college by informing their career goals. In other words, since higher education institutions are enrolling student veterans, more efforts must be made to expand VRC budgets to include not only program administrators but also staff directing veteran research and professional development opportunities. Given the amount of financial resources and diversity that student veterans contribute to higher education institutions, it makes sense to broaden the capacity of VRCs with faculty and career advisors, otherwise, colleges and universities run the risk of maintaining student veteran mentoring deficits. Though lacking direct mentorship in exercising education benefits, research shows that three out of four Latinx service members report having an occupational mentor throughout their enlistments (Dempsey & Shapiro, 2009). In the same way, VRCs can train a cadre of staff to mentor incoming student veterans that share academic and professional interests.

Additionally, considering that Mexican American student veterans may shop for institutions with the highest financial return, it may be appropriate for colleges and universities to develop regional VRC consortiums to better exchange information between institutions and students. Situations may arise where some institutions may be better equipped to accommodate student veterans than others. Within this same recommendation, VRC

consortiums may have the ability to host veteran summer transition programs focused on student-veteran intersectionality (Smith, 2014), where incoming racially minoritized student veterans can be invited to learn more about their intersecting identities, activities that were institutionally suppressed while serving. Holding such transition programs will recreate cohorts familiar to most veterans, further creating opportunities to build and develop their new community.

Notes

¹ The use of Latinx signals an acknowledgment of nonbinary gender identifications within the various groups with backgrounds in Mexico, Central America, and Latin America. Mexican and Mexican American is used to refer to people who have family origins in Mexico. Legal permanent residents are included in the term Mexican American student veterans. Chicana and Chicano are used to identify people normally associated with people of Mexican origin in the US seeking racial identification and distance from labels like “Hispanic.”

² I only utilized data for observations that were 25 and older, following similar guidelines found in Covarrubias (2011).

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