THE INFLUENCE OF SPOUSAL SUPPORT ON AIR FORCE SENIOR NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICERS’ PURSUIT OF A BACHELOR’S DEGREE: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Randy Allen Croft

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Liberty University
2016
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APPROVED BY:

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore perceptions of spousal support among active-duty Air Force Senior Noncommissioned Officers (Senior NCOs) in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. Senior NCOs are comprised of enlisted Airmen in the ranks of E-7 through E-9. Fourteen active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs, who have completed, or are enrolled in a bachelor’s degree program completed an online survey and a personal interview regarding their perceptions of spousal support in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. In addition, participants completed a written timeline, which helped provide context to college degree enrollment decisions and spousal influence. Pattern, theme, and content analysis provided structure in classifying data results in recurring themes through coding and categorical assessment. The findings from this hermeneutic phenomenological study add an important dimension in understanding military student degree persistence and help fills a gap in existing literature concerning the role of spousal support and the military student. Air Force education leaders and counselors will be able to use the results of this study to better advise and support military students in their educational goals, while staff at Airmen and Family Readiness Centers (A&FRC) will be able to better counsel and support Air Force spouses and families.

Key terms: attrition, nontraditional students, persistence, senior noncommissioned officers
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Krista, and our three children, Jeremiah, Jake, and Allison. I know full well that I was not the only one who joined the Air Force when I raised my right hand 13 years ago in taking the commissioning oath. You also took on the commitment to serve even when it meant packing up and moving thousands of miles away from close family and friends. God has blessed me above and beyond what I could ever hope for (Eph 3:20) through your persistent love, support, prayers, and encouragement.
Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful for the many people who supported me in this study. First, I would like to thank my Lord Jesus Christ for providing the ultimate gift of love and forgiveness in laying down his life for mine. Soli Deo Gloria!

To my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Jennifer Courduff. Thank you for believing in this study and for your tremendous encouragement, motivation, insights, and prayerful support in the dissertation process. You challenged me often to think deeply about how this study could add value to Airmen and their families. Thank you! To my other dissertation committee members, Dr. Megan Cordes and Dr. Alton “Al” Clemmons. Thank you for your timely advice, expertise, greatly needed editing suggestions, and prayers. You truly made a dissertation “dream team.”

To the Senior NCOs from Royal Air Force Mildenhall, my respect and appreciation for you has deepened immensely. Thank you for all you do to make our Air Force better. To my supervisor, Chaplain Timothy Porter and his wife, Patricia, for their timely words of advice and encouragement. Thank you for being an inspiration in serving God and caring for Airmen and their families. To the 100th Air Refueling Wing legal office, Command Chief’s office, and the Education Center, thank you for providing essential support for this research. To my chapel staff teammates, thank you providing exceptional spiritual care to people every day. I love serving alongside you.

To Dr. Jon and Kathy Dybdahl, thank you your devotion to God through teaching, writing, and missions. Krista and I are grateful for your godly example and family support. Finally, to my older brother, Lonnie, who served with a Marine tank battalion unit in the first Gulf War. You are an inspiration to me—even though I bleed Air Force blue.
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List of Abbreviations

Airmen and Family Readiness Center (A&FRC)
Airman Leadership School (ALS)
Air Education and Training Command (AETC)
Air Force Instruction (AFI)
Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC)
Air Force Policy Directive (AFPD)
Air Force Reserve (AFR)
Air Force Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy (AFSNCOA)
Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC)
Air National Guard (ANG)
Air University Associate to Baccalaureate Cooperative Program (AU-ABC)
Army National Guard (ARNG)
Associate in Applied Science (AAS)
Basic Military Training (BMT)
College Level Examination Program (CLEP)
Community College of the Air Force (CCAF)
Department of Defense (DoD)
Department of Education (DoED)
Enlisted Performance Report (EPR)
Forward Operating Base (FOB)
Global War on Terror (GWOT)
Grade Point Average (GPA)
Integrated Delivery System (IDS)
Major Command (MAJCOM)
Noncommissioned Officer (NCO)
National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA)
Permanent Change of Station (PCS)
Professional Military Education (PME)
Regular Air Force (RegAF)
Royal Air Force (RAF)
Senior Noncommissioned Officer (Senior NCO)
Temporary Duty Assignment (TDY)
Transition Assistance Program (TAP)
Tuition Assistance (TA)
United States Air Force (USAF)
University of Maryland University College (UMUC)
Weighted Airman Promotion System (WAPS)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Education is more than a luxury; it is a responsibility that society owes to itself” (Cook, 1977, p. 171).

—Robin Cook, physician and author

Overview

From the moment a new Air Force recruit enters Basic Military Training (BMT) at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland, more than 400 military training instructors will begin the process of initiation into a military culture built on discipline, honor, and the Air Force Core Values of “Integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do” (Department of the Air Force, Air Force Instruction [AFI] 36-2618, 2012, p. 3). Air Force leaders also drill into the psyche of these new recruits the importance of becoming responsible, proficient, and qualified. Upon graduation from BMT, these new Airmen enter a culture that highly values leadership development and technical expertise.

New recruits not only learn their new responsibilities, but are also informed of the expectation that they must pursue professional development through on-duty and off-duty education (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2618, 2012, p. 7). Air Force policy (Department of the Air Force, Air Force Policy Directive [AFPD] 36-26, 2015) mandates that the Regular Air Force (RegAF), Air Force Reserve (AFR), and the Air National Guard (ANG) provide “quality voluntary educational opportunities, military tuition assistance, counseling, testing programs, and a vehicle for self-development designed to complement the professional development of military members and serve as recruiting and retention incentives” (p. 3-4).
The Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) offers an associate of applied science degree. The Air Force highly encourages Airmen of all ranks to pursue a CCAF degree as it reflects education and knowledge as well as technical expertise in their specific career field (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2618, 2012). Since October 1, 2015, Air Force policy required a CCAF degree, in any area of study, for promotion consideration to the two highest Senior NCO ranks—SMSgt (E-8) and CMSgt (E-9) (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2502, 2015).

While 91% of Airmen in the top three enlisted Air Force ranks have earned a CCAF associate’s degree, only 38% have been able to further their educational goals by completing a bachelor’s degree or higher (Hollis, 2016). With financial incentives in the form of Tuition Assistance (TA), as well as the Montgomery or Post-9/11 Government Issue (GI) Bill, military personnel can earn a bachelor’s degree with little to no out-of-pocket tuition expenses. The purpose of this current research was to explore the lived experiences of the top three ranks of enlisted Airmen in the United States Air Force, Senior Noncommissioned Officers (Senior NCOs), and explore the motivational influence spouses that may have had on these leaders in their decisions to pursue, or not pursue, a bachelor’s degree.

**Air Force Senior NCO Characteristics**

In June 2016, active-duty Armed Forces (Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps) comprised 1.3 million service members (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2016). The Air Force was the second largest branch with 315,786 active-duty service members (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2016). Each military branch is made up of officers and enlisted personnel, with the enlisted ranks (81%) making up the bulk of the personnel (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2016). Commissioned officers are required to have a bachelor’s degree, or higher, and enter
military service through a competitive approval process before receiving their commission. Congress approves their commission and grants officers supervisory responsibility of enlisted personnel in meeting their assigned military mission. Air Force enlisted members, though similar to other branches, are relied upon for their technical expertise and receive specialized training in one of more than 40 career fields, also known as Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSC). Enlisted members are required to have a high school diploma, with roughly .5% of all annual Air Force enlistments only holding a GED (ASVAB Boot Camp, n.d.). In July 2016, 10% of all active-duty Air Force enlisted members, in all ranks, held a bachelor’s degree or higher (Air Force Personnel Center, 2016b).

Enlisted personnel make up what the military refer to as the “enlisted force structure” (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2618, 2012, p. 1). The enlisted force structure is composed of three tiers—or levels—of leadership, responsibility, and development. These tiers are referred to in official military instruction and policy as the junior enlisted airman tier, noncommissioned officer (NCO) tier, and the senior noncommissioned officer (Senior NCO) tier. Often referred to as the Top-3, Senior NCOs make up the top 13% of the active-duty Air Force enlisted ranks: master sergeants (MSgt [E-7]) make up 10%; senior master sergeants (SMSgt [E-8]) comprise 2%; and only the top 1% of the Air Force enlisted force are promoted to the highest enlisted rank of chief master sergeant (CMSgt [E-9]) (Air Force Personnel Center, 2016a). Each Senior NCO is given a high level of leadership, management, and supervision and is expected to “reflect the highest qualities of a leader and professional” (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2618, 2012, p. 14).

Though lower in rank than the officer corps, Senior NCOs are greatly respected for their knowledge and leadership experience, and officers seek their perspective and advice regarding
command decisions, strategic planning, policy formation, and execution of the mission. They serve as leaders and mentors to develop younger enlisted Airmen and must keep themselves, and all subordinate enlisted members, qualified, trained, and deployment ready (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2618, 2012). Senior NCOs make up 79% of all enlisted members that retire (excluding disability and reserve members) after serving the required minimum 20-year service commitment (Department of Defense Office of the Actuary, 2016).

As of June 30, 2016, the United States Air Force (USAF) was composed of 315,786 active-duty forces with 250,084 (79%) making up the enlisted ranks (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2016). Senior NCOs make up the top three enlisted ranks: master sergeant (E-7), senior master sergeant (E-8), and chief master sergeant (E-9). Table 1 breaks down the Air Force enlisted force structure along with percent and average years of service according to rank.

**Table 1**

**United States Air Force Enlisted Rank Structure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Tier</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Avg. Years of Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-1</td>
<td>airman basic (AB)</td>
<td>junior enlisted airman</td>
<td>9,974</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-2</td>
<td>airman (Amm)</td>
<td>junior enlisted airman</td>
<td>6,465</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-3</td>
<td>airman first class (A1C)</td>
<td>junior enlisted airman</td>
<td>42,551</td>
<td>16.96</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-4</td>
<td>senior airman (SrA)</td>
<td>junior enlisted airman</td>
<td>60,128</td>
<td>23.97</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-5</td>
<td>staff sergeant (SSgt)</td>
<td>noncommissioned officer (NCO)</td>
<td>59,124</td>
<td>23.57</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-6</td>
<td>technical sergeant (TSgt)</td>
<td>noncommissioned officer (NCO)</td>
<td>39,742</td>
<td>15.84</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-7</td>
<td>master sergeant (MSgt)</td>
<td>senior noncommissioned officer (Senior NCO)</td>
<td>24,653</td>
<td>9.83</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-8</td>
<td>senior master sergeant (SMSgt)</td>
<td>senior noncommissioned officer (Senior NCO)</td>
<td>4,946</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-9</td>
<td>chief master sergeant (CMSgt)</td>
<td>senior noncommissioned officer (Senior NCO)</td>
<td>2,501</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>250,084</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As annotated in Table 1, Senior NCOs make up the top 13% of the Air Force enlisted ranks, even though almost half (48%) of the enlisted corps are comprised of the newer junior enlisted airmen in the ranks of E-4 and below. While many join the military with the goal of building a career, others choose to join the military to get out of poverty, learn new skills, or to take advantage of the heavily subsidized educational benefits (Morreale, 2011). Those who enlist with the goal of building a career may retire after 20-plus years of service. Those who serve in the military, but separate before the 20-year mark, are referred to as “veterans” while those who serve 20 or more years, thus earning a retirement pension, are referred to as “military retirees,” or simply as “retirees.” Sometimes the military will offer financial incentives for early retirement (i.e., 15 years), or will separate a member for various other reasons (disability or discharge).

**Senior NCOs and Retirement**

Senior NCOs that were fortunate to retire after a full service career frequently choose to re-enter the workforce shortly after their military retirement for personal, economic, social, and even psychological reasons (Hoffeditz, 2006). Economically, the drop in standard of living can be dramatic. For example, a master sergeant (E-7) retiring at 20 years of service in 2016 would receive $26,490 a year (before taxes) as a military pension (Department of Defense, 2016). This income would not typically be sufficient if the retired military member was the primary means of support for his or her family. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2016), the 2015 poverty line for a family of five was $28,410.

Helping ease the transition to post-military life, most Air Force installations offer a support agency known as the Airmen and Family Readiness Center (A&FRC). The A&FRC is tasked to help support the needs of active-duty members and their dependents through family
support resources, personal counseling, classes, or information on transitions, separations, deployment stress, spouse employment needs, and military lifestyle hardships. However, even more essential to military members facing upcoming retirement decisions, the A&FRC leads a required pre-separation Transition Assistance Program (TAP) course that includes: (a) required counseling; (b) Transition Goals, Plans, and Success (GPS) workshop; (c) Veteran’s Affairs benefits briefings; and (d) a Capstone form (DD Form 2928) that must be signed by a commander, or approved designee, to ensure that the member is ready with a 12-month post-separation budget plan, resume, etc. (Air Force Personnel Center, 2015).

Yet even with the internal counseling support and separation advice, 75% of military members, from all branches, worry about leaving the military (Meyer, Writer, & Brim, 2016). Most Air Force Senior NCOs reach retirement and enter a competitive job market where higher paying jobs require a four-year degree. According to the Air Force Personnel Center (2016a), 62% of active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs do not have a bachelor’s degree or higher, even though 91% hold at least a two-year degree in one of 68 CCAF degree programs (Hollis, 2016). The dilemma is whether an associate’s degree—along with the substantial military leadership experience—will be enough of a combination to help Senior NCOs to qualify for reliable, post-retirement employment after they retire. Since the majority of those who retire are between 38 and 48 years of age, finding meaningful work can be a difficult task as they would be middle-aged without a bachelor’s degree.

In 2015, a large military lifestyle survey was conducted of 6,291 military family members, including active-duty service members and veterans. Led by the Blue Star Families nonprofit organization, in collaboration with Syracuse University Institute for Veterans and Military Families, their survey found that roughly half of all service members that separated
from the military after 9/11 (i.e., September 11, 2001) were not working in their preferred career field (Blue Star Families, 2015). The survey also indicated that the highest levels of financial stress were found among active-duty military members closest to retirement age, with the top stressors identified as being: (a) uncertainty about job security, (b) retirement benefits, (c) financial security, and (d) future employment prospects for service members and their spouses (Blue Star Families, 2015). According to the Economic Policy Institute, Americans with four-year college degrees made 98% more per hour in 2013 than those without a college degree (Leonhardt, 2014). Consequently, highly skilled Air Force Senior NCO leaders face the daunting reality of unemployment or underemployment.

**Background**

Without strong family structures and perceived support, students who attend college either part time or after a period of non-enrollment will likely struggle in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. The literature refers to these delayed students as nontraditional students and usually meet one or more of the following criteria: (a) delayed enrollment into post-secondary education, (b) attend part time, (c) financially independent from parents, (d) work full time while enrolled, (e) has dependents other than a spouse, (f) single parent, (g) or does not possess a standard high school diploma (Choy, 2002). According to Park and Choi (2009), nontraditional students are more likely to drop out of college without strong support from their family, regardless of the student’s academic preparation and goals. While research has addressed many of the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors of military students and higher education (Ady, 2009; Bibus, 2013; Fuller, 2011; Greig, 2008; Hayek, 2011; Morreale, 2011; Reason, 2009), none have focused on the perception of spousal support for the military member in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. Also, numerous studies have examined the role of parental family
support and academic persistence (Bean and Metzner, 1985; Coy-Ogan, 2009; Guastella, 2009; Minnick, 2007; Tinto, 1994, Zelbovitz, 2013); however, this study intended to explore the perception of social, emotional, and psychological support military students perceive from their spouses and how this support influenced their academic persistence decisions.

In discussing the role of spousal influence and support, an understanding of motivation is critical. Ryan & Deci (2000) provided helpful operational definitions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. *Intrinsic motivation* is doing an activity for its own satisfaction rather than an external or separable consequence. The behavior is interesting, satisfying, or enjoyable. A person might take dance, music, or art class for intrinsic reasons with no goals of pursuing full-time work in these areas. Intrinsic motivation is higher when the individual has a higher sense of competence, confidence, and self-determination (Greig, 2008; Morreale, 2011; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). Senior NCOs, as nontraditional students, have had their competence and skill confirmed within the Air Force culture by their career promotion within a hierarchical military environment. This, however, does not inevitably mean they are similar to other nontraditional students, as military members and their families often have to face more instability due to frequent moves and deployments (Bibus, 2013; Blue Star Families, 2015; Clever & Segal, 2013; Hayek, 2011; Keenan, 2012; Starr-Glass, 2013). Additional research has indicated that nontraditional students rely more on intrinsic motivational factors for learning and persistence than extrinsic motivators (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Griswold, 2014; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013, Taylor & House, 2010).

*Extrinsic motivation* involves doing an activity as a means to an end, or because the activity leads to a separable outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). Grades, recognition, promotion, rewards, and even fear of failure are all forms of extrinsic
motivation. Spousal support and social encouragement are also forms of extrinsic motivation, but have been shown to also enhance a person’s intrinsic motivation (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). In other words, extrinsic—or external—encouragement can drive up a person’s confidence, which can eventually lead to less reliance on external encouragement. Based on prior research (Ady, 2009; Bibus, 2013; Fuller, 2011; Greig, 2008; Hayek, 2011; Morreale, 2011, Tinto, 1997), extrinsic motivation that comes from family or social support can play a factor in higher education persistence. Park and Choi (2009) found that students are more likely to drop out of college without strong family support. There was, however, a gap in the literature regarding the role of spousal support and the military student. What has not been explored in the research was whether senior enlisted military students were similarly motivated by extrinsic factors, or whether spousal support played an important role in degree persistent behavior.

Greig (2008) examined active-duty Air Force members who completed a CCAF associate’s degree to discover what extrinsic and intrinsic motivational factors played a significant role in their subsequent decision to pursue a bachelor’s degree. Only three variables in Greig’s (2008) quantitative study showed a significant correlation to academic persistence: personal commitment to learning, commissioning opportunities, and the availability of distance learning opportunities. Greig (2008) analyzed (a) 100% TA, (b) support of military leadership, (c) availability of distance learning colleges and universities, (d) Air Force emphasis on education, and (e) availability of support for educational goals as extrinsic motivational variables.

While supervisor support might seem to be essential to academic persistence in a highly hierarchical military structure, Greig (2008) found that perception of supervisor support was not statistically significant for Air Force members pursuing a CCAF degree. This corroborated an
earlier study by Savage (2005), whose study of \((n = 443)\) active-duty Air Force MSgt (E-7) also found perceived supervisor support to be insignificant in their pursuit of a CCAF degree (p. 127). Though spousal support was not analyzed as a variable, Greig (2008) did include family support as variable worth exploring in future studies and proposed that spousal support and the typical demands of family life may have a significant impact on CCAF graduates’ persistent participation in school activities. The present study of active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs and their perception of spousal support and degree persistence helped to fill such a gap in the research.

This research references several other empirical studies, described in more detail in Chapter Two, that address persistence and attrition behaviors of college students. Though researchers define these terms differently based on context, the term persistence was defined in this study as “the progressive reenrollment in college, whether continuous from one term to the next or temporarily interrupted and then resumed” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 374). Closely related to persistence research is the study of attrition, students who drop out of college and do not reenroll the following semester (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1994).

Hoyt and Winn (2004) attempted to identify four sub-categories of student attrition behaviors by identifying characteristics of drop-outs [or dropouts], stop-outs, transfer-outs, and opt-outs: (a) “drop-outs” do not reenroll in the same college in which they were enrolled (with no plans to return); (b) “opt-outs” attend college primarily for training but drop out without completing a degree or certificate; (c) “stop-outs” stop attending college for a term or more with the intent of returning to college; and (d) “transfer-outs” begin their college career at one college, but transfer to another institution (Hoyt & Winn, 2004, pp. 397-398). For the purpose of this study, attrition was simply defined as: student behavior that reflected consistent non-enrollment
in a college degree program. The term *consistent* may seem subjective, but it was necessary to provide some margin of flexibility in the definition based on the participant’s own understanding of the phenomenon of degree enrollment, persistence, and attrition behaviors. This definition also considered how nontraditional students commonly take breaks in their college pursuit for a semester or more, while also recognizing differences in admissions policies among higher institutions (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Hebert, 2006).

Military students share many of the same stresses as other nontraditional students, but they also face higher levels of family instability, deployment separation, training requirements, and spouse unemployment (Bibus, 2013; Blue Star Families, 2015; Hayek, 2011; Keenan, 2012; Starr-Glass, 2013). The perceived support from spouses, and possibly even children, may play a more significant role for Senior NCOs if they feel conflicted about pursuing personal educational goals while working long hours and being away from home more than desired. Being a military family not only requires physical separation, but also can include a sense of separation from the rest of society.

In his *U.S. News and World Report* story, Noonan (2013) observed:

Inside, troops and their families live and work on massive military bases, separated geographically, socially and economically from the society they serve. Outside, Americans live and work, largely unaware of the service and sacrifice of the 2.4 million active-duty and reserve troops. Discussions of the civil-military divide often blame civilians. But the military’s self-imposed isolation doesn’t encourage civilian understanding, and it makes it difficult for veterans and their families to navigate the outside world.
Military and other nontraditional students often struggle with guilt for putting their loved ones through separation, isolation, and stress (Bibus, 2013; Jorgenson, 2010; Powers, 2010). This may explain whether Senior NCOs feel they can pursue personal educational goals in addition to being away from family members because of long hours at work or mandatory family separations for training or deployment. The key factor is how Senior NCOs perceived spousal support for their educational pursuits. Keenan’s (2012) research on military spouses and college degree persistence found that support from family and friends was the only statistically significant predictor of academic persistence. She recommended future research be done with active-duty military members, since they would share a similar culture, lifestyle, and challenges as their spouse.

However, rather than study the role of motivation and academic persistence in military members as a group, I explored the role of spousal support among Senior NCOs, the highest ranking enlisted leaders in the United States Air Force. Senior NCOs are promoted to their leadership ranks largely because they have been recognized by the Air Force as displaying significant competence, expertise, and leadership (Department of the Air Force, AFI 26-2618, 2012). As high achievers, Senior NCOs would be more likely to demonstrate a higher internal locus of control, indicating less reliance on external forms of motivation, and more reliance on their intrinsic drive, resilience, and sense of personal control (Coy-Ogan, 2009). Thus, this phenomenological study of Air Force Senior NCOs provides important awareness about the role and influence of spousal support for active-duty enlisted leaders. The results of this study can add value to Air Force educational leaders, military family support agencies, and college and university military support agencies.
Situation to Self

I have served as an active-duty military chaplain for 13 years and frequently communicate with Air Force personnel on a daily basis. I became interested in the role of education and persistence after hearing numerous frustrating stories from Senior NCOs about what awaited them after retirement. As a chaplain, I would often be invited to offer an invocation prayer at Senior NCO retirement ceremonies. In discussion about post-military life goals and plans with Senior NCOs, it seemed that most who entered retirement with a higher education degree were better prepared for employment than those without. Those without higher education appeared to face more anxiety and uncertainty, unless they were highly skilled in a unique technical area that could translate into better employment opportunities. When I realized that most active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs face retirement without a bachelor’s degree and would be starting a second career in their late 30s and 40s, I began to listen more intently to what Senior NCOs were considering. How would they manage post-military family priorities, educational goals, and plans for future retirement? I also realized that I had an opportunity to research the role of extrinsic influences, which may help motivate some of these enlisted leaders to pursue and persist in their educational goals. I chose this hermeneutic phenomenological study in order to analyze and better understand the lived experiences of Air Force Senior NCOs in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. I wanted to find out more acutely what Senior NCO perceptions of spousal support were as they made enrollment persistence and attrition decisions.

Bean and Metzner’s (1985) theory of Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition helps researchers better understand the role that family and social support plays in the attrition decisions of military students. Their theory is especially suited for nontraditional students who rely less on the integration and support of educational institutions, and more on
other external motivational variables. This study’s findings provided needed insight about how enlisted leaders rely on elements in both intrinsic and extrinsic variables of motivation. It was important to research why a majority of Senior NCOs have yet to complete their bachelor’s degree (Air Force Personnel Center, 2016a). While a bachelor’s degree is not required to promote to any enlisted rank, official Air Force guidance does expect enlisted leaders to continue personal development through available on- and off-duty education (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2618, 2012).

Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012) focuses on four factors (also known as coping capabilities) that help determine whether people take on new transitions, such as enrolling or dropping out of school, and influence how people interpret and manage transition: (a) situation, (b) self, (c) social support, and (d) strategies. How adults cope with change is helpful in describing how they experience transition events and whether their transition is considered a success or failure. Military members often have to move frequently, known as Permanent Change of Station (PCS), deploy, or separate from family for Professional Military Education (PME) courses and temporary duty assignments (TDY). Active-duty military personnel move an average of once every two to four years, which is seven times more often than their civilian counterparts (Blue Star Families, 2015). This requires a high level of flexibility and resilience from both the military service member and their family. My oldest son, for example, started college in 2014 after attending 10 different schools (from kindergarten to high school) in a 10-year period. Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012) model helped provide a theoretical framework to better understand Senior NCO academic persistence and attrition experiences.
Problem Statement

A current problem facing Air Force Senior NCOs is the 62% that do not have a bachelor’s degree, or higher, leaving them vulnerable for unemployment and underemployment after they retire from military service (Air Force Personnel Center, 2016a). While several studies have examined motivation in pursuing higher education (Ady, 2009; Bibus, 2013; Fuller, 2011; Greig, 2008; Hayek, 2011; Hegarty, 2011; Morreale, 2011; Murphy, 2007), the literature on the role of family influence and perceived social support is sparse. Research was needed to explore the role of spousal support and influence among Air Force Senior NCOs concerning their past and present decisions to pursue a bachelor’s degree. Additional data, provided through this research, was needed to help inform USAF leaders about possible reasons why most Senior NCOs stop pursuing higher education after earning their associate’s degree. Understanding how the transient, and often stressful, military culture affects spouses and their ability to provide positive support was also worth exploration.

While there is an abundance of quantitative research on academic persistence, more qualitative research is needed in order to understand the role that external factors play (family responsibilities, spouse support, financial pressures, etc.) on nontraditional students in their academic persistence decisions (Deggs, 2011). Bean and Metzner’s (1985) early research on nontraditional student attrition found that encouragement played a larger role for nontraditional students since their peers were more likely to be outside the context of the school environment.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological research is to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of spousal support as an extrinsic motivational influence on active-
duty Air Force Senior NCOs in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. For this study, extrinsic motivation was defined as engaging in an activity as a means to an end, or because the activity led to a separable outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). Spousal approval or support, professional advancement, guilt avoidance, and external rewards are all examples of extrinsic motivators because the person is satisfying an outward demand or externally imposed reward contingency (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A definition for spousal support, used in this study, is the perception of positive motivational support that participants receive from their spouses. Understanding how military culture influenced spouses of active-duty USAF Senior NCOs in their ability to provide positive support was also an essential facet of interpreting the lived experiences of participants.

**Significance of the Study**

Higher education is an important qualification for employment prospects. Military veterans cannot simply rely on experience to ensure post-retirement employability. David Leonhardt (2014), managing editor of politics and policy for *The New York Times*’ website, observed that the amount of education required will increase as the economy becomes more technologically complex. Since 62% of Air Force Senior NCOs do not have a bachelor’s degree or higher (Air Force Personnel Center, 2016a), military education leaders and college/university military affairs administrators would greatly benefit by receiving more information about the motivational influences that propel these senior enlisted leaders to enroll in a higher education pursuit. Attending college after military service is not necessarily easier than pursuing a degree while on active duty because numerous students from a military background struggle connecting with younger peers right out of high school. Not only are there differences in age and experience as nontraditional students, but also, military students struggle connecting with other students
because they do not feel that others can relate to their experiences in the military (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). Several studies have examined the inherent stresses, obstacles, and instability that many military families face (Bibus, 2013; Hayek, 2011; Keenan, 2012), but there is a gap in the current literature regarding the role of military spousal support and academic persistence of senior enlisted Air Force leaders. It is possible that Senior NCO academic experiences varied from other nontraditional students due to the added stress of military life. Information gleaned in this study about spousal support of enlisted Airmen will also provide invaluable information for USAF family support agencies and counselors as they try to provide critical information about education incentives and retirement planning advice to Senior NCOs.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were proposed for this study in order to provide Senior NCO perceptions of spousal support as an extrinsic motivational influence on their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree:

**Research Question 1**: How has perception of spousal support, if any, contributed to the decisions of Senior NCOs to begin pursuing their bachelor’s degree?

**Research Question 2**: How has perception of spousal support, if any, influenced Senior NCOs in their academic attrition and persistence decisions?

**Research Question 3**: How has military culture influenced perception of spousal support and degree pursuit among Senior NCOs?

The perception of spousal support may be a critical component of external environmental support and is identified as an environmental variable in Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition as playing an important part in student persistence and attrition decisions. The role of family support has also been identified in Schlossberg’s Adult
Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012) as a supporting resource, which is vital in helping adults make decisions during periods of transitions. Supporting resources are important as individuals weigh the assets and liabilities of making important transitions in life. Table 2, below, helps demonstrate how each research question aligns with the theoretical models affecting persistence decisions. While persistence decisions are based on numerous internal and extrinsic variables, the research questions sought to explore how spousal support serves as a persistence motivator.

Table 2

*Theoretical Framework and Variables of Persistence Motivation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Theoretical Framework</th>
<th>Variables of Motivation</th>
<th>Spousal Support Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ1</td>
<td>Bean and Metzner</td>
<td>Background (i.e., demographic), Academic, Environmental, and Social Integration</td>
<td>Environmental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition (1985)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ3</td>
<td>Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012)</td>
<td>Self, Situation, Coping Strategies, and Support</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ1</td>
<td>Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012)</td>
<td>Self, Situation, Coping Strategies, and Support</td>
<td>Situation, Coping Strategies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the first two research questions focus more directly on how spouses may motivate USAF Senior NCOs in their decision to pursue a bachelor’s degree, the third research question was evaluated primarily through the lens of how the frequent transitions and instability inherent in military culture influenced the Senior NCO in their perception of spousal support. Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012) identifies four factors that help determine whether people will take on new transitions, such as enrolling or dropping out of school: (a) situation, (b) self (internal resources), (c) external supports, and (d) strategies for
coping (Anderson et al., 2012). Thus, if active-duty USAF Senior NCOs believe that deployments, training exercises, frequent moves, or military cultural demands have created tremendous stress on their spouses, it may create internal conflict and guilt about continuing to pursue a bachelor’s degree. Schlossberg’s (Anderson et al., 2012) descriptions of external supports and coping strategies will be especially relevant in understanding how spouses influence Senior NCOs in their academic enrollment and persistence decisions during periods of instability and change.

Research Plan

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Air Force Senior NCOs and their perceptions of spousal support with regard to the decision to pursue a bachelor’s degree. I used three primary data gathering tools; online survey (see Appendix D), personal interview (see Appendix E), and a written timeline (see Appendix G). As a hermeneutic phenomenological study, the primary goal was to better understand a lived experience by gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning of the participants’ everyday experiences (van Manen, 1990). Meaning cannot simply be understood as finding a statistical correlation; rather, it must be understood in context of the participants’ own experience. Several quantitative and qualitative studies have researched the role of motivation as an influence in higher education as a factor in persistence and attrition (Ady, 2009; Bibus, 2013; Fuller, 2011; Greig, 2008; Hayek, 2011; Hegarty, 2011; Keenan, 2012; Mentzer, 2014; Morreale, 2011; Murphy, 2007); however, the role that military spouses play in serving as an extrinsic motivational support has been unexplored. Instead of examining military students through the same lens as all other nontraditional students, this research needed to explore the role of motivation and support among enlisted leaders that work in the unique USAF military
subculture. This involved discovery and exploration with regard to the phenomena of spousal influence among senior enlisted USAF personnel and their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree.

Moustakas (1994) explained that the goal of phenomenological research is to determine what an experience means for the participants who can provide a comprehensive description of their experience. The emphasis of this research was on the experiences of active-duty USAF Senior NCOs who explained their educational enrollment and persistence decisions through survey, interview, and written timeline instruments. My perspective as an active-duty officer in the USAF provided needed context to help me interpret the process. It also required that I was intentional about pulling out the participants’ perspectives and description of the phenomenon, rather than relying purely on my own perspective or understanding. A hermeneutic phenomenological design allowed my own thoughts, experiences, worldview, and assumptions to be embedded into the process of interpreting the experiences of the participants (van Manen, 1990).

This study explored the perception of spousal support of active-duty USAF Senior NCOs (E-7 through E-9) that had earned at least six credits towards their bachelor’s degree. They could have completed a bachelor’s degree while on active duty, or simply have at least six earned college credits towards a bachelor’s degree. My initial aim was to collect data from eight male and eight female Senior NCOs in each of the four major Air Force career fields: (a) operations, (b) maintenance, (c) medical, and (d) support. I was planning to obtain participants through solicitation information sent out by a large Christian university’s Military Affairs office. After that initial plan of action did not work out, I changed my target sample size to at least \( n = 12 \) active-duty Senior NCOs, still hoping for an equal split between genders.
Participants were allowed to be enrolled either in-residence (i.e. traditional classroom setting), online, or hybrid delivery format involving both classroom and online requirements. Through an online survey, a face-to-face interview (although Skype™ video capability was offered), and a written timeline project, I found numerous recurring themes, concepts, and patterns that helped explain the shared phenomena. The collected surveys and interview data was entered in Dedoose™ Web-based software, which helped me highlight, code, and bracket the data. I then planned to identify 25 to 30 codes (Creswell, 2013) with the intent of analyzing the information through the lens of Patton’s (2002) pattern, theme, and content analysis. Patton is the former president of the American Evaluation Association and has been referenced widely in qualitative research and design. Similar to Moustakas’ (1994) seven-step analysis process, Patton’s pattern, theme, and content analysis is a simplified—although rigorous—process of analyzing data collected, identifying themes, and drawing conclusions about meaning of themes and content. Patton’s process is less formulaic, yet it is built on the premise that no rigid rules can prescribe what data to gather to investigate a problem or phenomena (Patton, 2002).

**Delimitations**

For this hermeneutic phenomenological study, there were a few delimitations based on target audience. First, participants needed to have been married at least five years or more to their current spouse. This allowed for the newness of married life to dissipate, while allowing for a higher chance of children and military transition to possibly affect the family. Having five years of marriage as a minimum was not determined based on any research, but was simply chosen because it allowed for a higher chance of children entering the life experience. Nearly 75% of married military members have dependent children (Bibus, 2013). Child-raising responsibilities may serve as an additional factor of stress, and have been shown in several
studies as being a reason why nontraditional students do not finish college (Bibus, 2013; Hayek, 2011; Keenan, 2012; Tinto, 1994; Tons, 2011; Womak (as cited in Greig, 2008)). This was important to consider in the present study, which assessed and analyzed perceptions of spousal support as an extrinsic motivational factor.

Secondly, the Air Force divides its jobs or career fields into AFSCs, which are broken into four major categories: (a) operations, (b) maintenance, (c) medical, and (d) support. Within the major categories are job subcategories of more than 40 career fields. Each AFSC career field has its own particular knowledge and unique challenges that need to be mastered. Since the study only aimed to understand the experiences of 14 active-duty USAF Senior NCOs, most career fields were not represented. While I initially hoped to ensure good representation of diverse life experiences and perspectives, I was only able to gather participants from two major career fields: maintenance and support. While it was not in the scope of this study to statistically distinguish differences in spousal influence across the various AFSCs, I paid attention, nonetheless, to possible themes and codes that may have had career specific influence on spousal support and/or military culture.

**Limitations**

Limitations for this study consisted of sampling Senior NCOs from a limited number of colleges and universities. Since there was no university-specific criterion, results varied from participants that attended a variety of regional, national, online, and classroom settings. Another limitation is that the qualitative data used for analysis came from the participants’ own input.

Participants can be affected by social-desirability and provide answers deemed socially favorable, thus skewing accuracy of responses. They may understate their challenges and overstate their socially desirable behaviors. The use of an online survey helped provide an
avenue that allowed participants time to respond, as opposed to relying on conversational responses supplied during the one-to-one interview. Self-administered forms, such as a survey or questionnaire, have been shown to produce less social desirability bias on some items (Fowler, 2014; Morreale, 2011). Internet surveys can provide sound data, even though participants may be anonymous (Hill, 2011). I offered participants anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, which both protected the privacy of participants while also building trust and rapport between us (Creswell, 2013, 2014).

As the researcher, I was the only one who knew which data would be attributed to the different participants. I also needed to be diligent during the live interview to avoid leading questions to include both verbal and nonverbal cues so that participants did not feel that their answers were interpreted by me, as the researcher, in a more positive and desirable light. Finally, my experience as an active-duty USAF officer may have created a limitation in gathering data objectively. I attempted to guard against reading my own experiences or interpretations of active-duty USAF culture, education, and spousal support into the participants’ actual responses.

**Definitions**

In order to help the reader understand concepts and terms that may not be clear, the following list includes key words along with their definitions:

**Active Duty:** A member of the U.S. military engaged in full-time service in a military branch (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard) under the authority of the DoD (Bibus, 2013, Steele et al., 2010).

**Attrition:** Students who drop out or quit college before completing a degree (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1994). This does not include students who transfer to another college or are not
enrolled, since dropping out of college for a semester is common among nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Hebert, 2006). Attrition, therefore, refers to student behavior that reflects consistent non-enrollment in a college degree program.

**Department of Defense**: Comprised of military members from the active-duty branches of the Army, Marines, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force. This term also includes personnel serving in the Coast Guard, as well as the reserve and guard components of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, n.d.).

**Dual Military Marriage**: A military member in one service being married to another military member in the same or different branch of service (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, n.d.).

**Nontraditional Student**: Even though age is the most common defining criteria for classifying students as traditional or nontraditional (Wyatt, 2011), this study uses the definition used by Choy (2002) in her research on nontraditional undergraduate students for The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Choy is cited frequently in literature for her definition of nontraditional students as meeting one or more of the following criteria: (a) delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, (b) attends part time, (c) is financially independent from parents, (d) works full time while enrolled, (e) has dependents other than a spouse, (f) is a single parent, or (g) does not possess a standard high school diploma. Most active-duty military students are considered nontraditional students because they tend to be older, are independent of parents, and are only able to attend school part-time due to full-time military service requirements.

**Persistence**: Successfully continuing towards academic goals and objectives, regardless of the obstacles or circumstances that might make continuance difficult (Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 1997, Tripodi, 2010). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) defined persistence as “the progressive re-
enrollment in college, whether continuous from one term to the next or temporarily interrupted and then resumed” (p. 374). Similar to attrition, persistence tends to be more forward-focused, while attrition commonly analyzes behaviors after students have dropped out (Tripodi, 2010).

**Senior Noncommissioned Officers (Senior NCOs):** The highest-ranking enlisted military personnel, holding the grades of E-7 through E-9. While the officer ranks typically require a four-year college degree for commission, Senior NCOs, whether having an earned college degree or not, typically earn their leadership ranks through a competitive, weighted performance process. Although often abbreviated in Air Force Instructions as the shorter “SNCO” (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2618, 2012), this paper will use the longer “Senior NCO” abbreviation to enhance clarity and readability (Air Force Pamphlet 36-2241, 2013).

**Spousal Support:** Blending a family social support definition by Cheng, Ickes, and Verhofstadt (2011), and a family support definition provided by Peterson (2014), *spousal support* refers to the perception of emotional, social, and psychological support and encouragement that an individual receives from his or her spouse. While the term *family support* is often used in persistence research to include spouses, parents, siblings, and other relatives, the term *spousal support* will only refer to the support offered by one’s husband or wife.

**Veteran:** An individual who has served in the armed forces, but is no longer on active duty (Morreale, 2011). This definition would include members of the guard or reserve components that were placed on active-duty orders for deployment purposes or to fill stateside manning billets. Although some researchers choose to include active-duty members in their definition of *veteran* in order to avoid subgroupings (Vachi, 2012), for the sake of this study, the term *military student* will refer to those on active-duty orders, while *veteran* will refer to those no longer on active duty.
Summary

Despite renewed emphasis and investment by the DoD on military members and their education, current demographics of Air Force Senior NCOs reveal that 62% lack a bachelor’s degree or higher, leaving them at risk of being underemployed after they retire from active duty (Air Force Personnel Center, 2016a). While most research on the military learner focuses on veterans that leave active duty and take up studies as a new focus, this study aims to understand the lived experiences of active-duty USAF Senior NCOs nearing the final portion of their active-duty service commitment and their perceptions of spousal support in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree.

This chapter addressed the importance of understanding motivational influences that could influence Senior NCOs in college enrollment decisions during their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. Since no other studies have looked at the role of spousal support as an extrinsic motivational influence on active-duty USAF Senior NCOs, this study provided valuable information and insight. Additionally, this study explored perceptions of USAF senior enlisted leaders as to whether they regarded spousal influence as either a barrier to or a positive influence on their academic decisions.

This chapter addressed the purpose of this research study, helping understand the problem behind low educational persistence among active-duty USAF Senior NCOs while focusing more specifically on their perceptions of spousal support. Chapter Two addresses the theoretical framework behind nontraditional student persistence and attrition, along with the role of social support during periods of personal and professional transition. Chapter Two will also depict the obstacles and challenges of nontraditional students, the unique perspectives of military students, the challenges of military culture on military personnel, and the role that social and
spousal support play as a motivational influence. Chapter Three explains the methodology used in this hermeneutic phenomenological study to include research procedures, participant sample, setting, data collection and analysis, and trustworthiness steps.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

“You can kiss your family and friends good-bye and put miles between you, but at the same time you carry them with you in your heart, your mind, your stomach, because you do not just live in a world but a world lives in you” (Buechner, 1977, p. 3).

—Frederick Buechner, author and theologian

Overview

The primary purpose of this study was to discover the influence spouses have on the military learner and whether that influence was a positive motivational factor for persistence or a barrier leading to attrition. In order to understand the factors of motivation, spousal support, and persistence, it is important to look at the military student as a subgroup within the nontraditional student context.

For this study, the definition of a nontraditional student is taken from The National Center for Education Statistics (Choy, 2002) and used as the standard definition by the U.S. Department of Education in its statistical analysis of nontraditional undergraduate students (Horn & Carroll, 1997). A nontraditional student is identified by the presence of one or more of the following seven characteristics:

- delayed enrollment in postsecondary education;
- attends part time;
- is financially independent;
- works full time while enrolled;
- has dependents other than a spouse;
- is a single parent; and
- does not possess a high school diploma (Horn & Carroll, 1997, p. i).
Not only are most military students considered nontraditional students, but also, they have other pressures related to their work, making college assimilation and integration difficult. To this end, this chapter will explain the theoretical framework found in Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition and Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012). The chapter will then explore recent literature regarding: (a) nontraditional student persistence, (b) characteristics of the military student, and (c) the influence of social or spousal support on student persistence. The chapter will conclude with a summary of how the literature informed the present study.

Table 3 identifies areas in persistence research that addressed nontraditional student persistence, and Table 4 addresses issues in persistence research specifically related to military students. Both tables are aligned with extrinsic motivational variables as described in Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition and Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012). Note that family support in prior research frequently includes parental support.
Table 3

*Research Regarding Nontraditional Students and Social Support*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Bean and Metzner’s Nontraditional Student Attrition</th>
<th>Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory</th>
<th>Social/Family Support Variable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tinto (1975)</td>
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Table 4

*Research Regarding Military Students and Social Support*

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<th>Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory</th>
<th>Social/Family Support Variable</th>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rumann and Hamrick (2010)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuller (2011)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morreale (2011)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibus (2013)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentzer (2014)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Theoretical Framework

One of the earliest theorists to research the factors of student persistence and attrition was William Spady (1970), whose sociological model of college dropouts was built upon Durkheim’s theory of suicide. Spady’s early sociological dropout model posited that the social and environmental factors that trigger suicide also paralleled those of students who decided to drop out of college. Spady proposed five variables which influenced student dropout:

- academic potential;
- normative congruence;
- grade performance;
- intellectual development; and
- friendship support (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011).

Spady (1970) believed that social integration could be linked to a student’s attrition decisions based on variables of fulfillment and commitment (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Tinto (1975), a professor from Syracuse University, spent more than 30 years researching and writing on student persistence and attrition. His earliest Student Integration Theory, built upon the ideas of Spady, Durkheim, as well as Dutch anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, emphasized the differing expectations and motivations of students entering college (Maroney, 2010). Tinto believed Durkheim’s suicide framework was too limiting and did not explain how or why people choose to adopt certain types of dropout behavior. Taking the concepts from Van Gennep’s tribal rites of passage theory, Tinto compared the transition from high school to college as a form of social puberty (Maroney, 2010). The necessary stages of student integration—and ultimately persistence—were identified as separation, transition, and incorporation (Maroney, 2010). In addition, Tinto addressed a student’s background
characteristics and believed they were predictive of how a student engaged with an institution’s social and academic systems. The more students engaged within the social and academic aspects, the more integrated they became to the college (Wyman, 2012). While Tinto’s Student Integration Theory has been the predominant one about student retention, integration, and attrition in higher education for over 30 years, it does not, however, necessarily apply to nontraditional students or the military learner (Wilson, Smith, Lee, & Stevenson, 2013). Tinto has overlooked some of the external environmental factors that more heavily impact nontraditional students—environmental factors such as family and social support (Gary, 2008; Hayek, 2011; Keenan, 2012; Maroney, 2010).

With the growth of online courses and degree programs, students have become less reliant on face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers. Tinto’s (1975) concept of Separation, for example, required traditional students to disassociate from previous relationships and social ties (i.e., parents, family structure) and form new social and physical ties with the college institution in order to develop persistence behaviors. Failure to separate, transition, and incorporate into the new college community would lead to higher rates of attrition and dropout behaviors. Conversely, nontraditional students tend to be older, more mature, and bring their own family social support system with them through the phases of integration. They may rely less on integrating into the life and identity of the college and more on other extrinsic motivational variables such as job enhancement, portability of degree offerings, and ability to meld classwork into family life.

Bean and Metzner’s Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition

Senior NCOs, as nontraditional military learners, typically bring their social support structures with them through the phases of persistence in decision-making. Meyer, Bruwelheide,
and Poulin (2009) addressed how Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition describes students as being less reliant on social integration and places greater influence on the usefulness of the education coursework, as well as greater influence on encouragement from family and friends. Bean and Metzner concentrated their research on nontraditional students that were older and often likely to pursue college only part-time. Nontraditional students were different than traditional students in that they had less interaction with the social structures of the college and greater interaction with their non-collegiate environment (Bean and Metzner, 1985). Bean and Metzner considered students nontraditional if they met at least one of the following criteria:

- at least 24 years old;
- commutes to campus;
- financially independent of parents;
- works full-time; and
- attends college part-time (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Marrero, 2013; Vickery, 2013).

Table 5, below, lists conditions and criteria cited most often when defining nontraditional students distinct from traditional students.
Table 5

*Definition of Nontraditional Student with Criteria*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Researcher(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delayed enrollment</td>
<td>Choy, 2002; Horn &amp; Carrol, 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 24 or older</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985; O’Riley, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commutes to campus</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985; Covert, 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time employment</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985; Choy, 2002; Horn &amp; Carrol, 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attends college part-time</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985; Choy, 2002; Covert, 2002; Horn &amp; Carrol, 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financially independent from parental support</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985; Choy, 2002; Horn &amp; Carrol, 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has dependents other than spouse</td>
<td>Choy, 2002; Horn &amp; Carrol, 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent (not married or separated)</td>
<td>Choy, 2002; Horn &amp; Carrol, 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not earn high school diploma</td>
<td>Choy, 2002; Horn &amp; Carrol, 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not greatly influenced by institutional environment</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985</td>
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</table>

Nontraditional students were less influenced by the social integration dynamics, as proposed by Tinto (1975) and Spady (1970), and more influenced in dropout decisions by external factors. Bean and Metzner (1985) sought to describe four primary variables that affect nontraditional students more than the typical traditional college student. One set of variables is related to academics. Students who display better study habits and earn better grades are thus expected to persist more than students who struggle (Bean and Metzner, 1985). A second set of variables is psychological outcomes. Students having a stronger internal commitment to earn their degree will be less influenced by poor grades or other obstacles. Stress, internal satisfaction, and intent to leave also make up a part of the psychological variable (Bean and Metzner, 1985). A third set of variables includes background and defining variables. Student age, gender, ethnicity, educational experience can all play a role in a student’s decision to drop out. Finally, Bean and Metzner (1985) describe environmental variables to include variables
such as family roles and responsibilities, work responsibilities, finances, and sources of encouragement. Sources of encouragement will be important in helping to understand all three of the research questions, and may reveal what the perception of a strong supportive spouse plays in the Senior NCO’s decision to persist or drop out. Table 6 displays external, or environmental, variables that have been shown to support academic persistence decisions.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Researcher(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-college academic performance</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College/University academic performance</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional support</td>
<td>Tinto, 1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family support</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family responsibilities</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-school work responsibilities</td>
<td>Spady, 1970; Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial support</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic background (i.e., age, ethnicity, gender, educational experience)</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological commitment (i.e., student intention, goals)</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intent to leave</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Bean and Metzner’s (1985) research, higher educational institutions, though important, are of less effect and impact in persistence decisions for nontraditional students. For the nontraditional student, the environmental support variables compensate for weak academic support, but academic support, even if strong, will not compensate for weak environmental support (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Thus, a strong family or social support network would have a stronger influence on a student’s decision to persist than merely getting good feedback in terms of grades or faculty support (Locke III, 2011). High grades will motivate a student to persist as long as they also have positive environmental support. For example, if a student is receiving good grades and school support but has personal anxiety from family relationships or child-
raising responsibilities, the student may be more likely to drop out since environmental issues play a heavier role in persistence decisions. Nonacademic factors may compensate for low levels of academic performance and results, but high academic results will only lead to continued attendance as long as the psychological outcomes of the school are positive. A student who is heavily encouraged by a spouse or friend will more likely persist, even if their academic results are poor. Figure 1, below, illustrates the four primary variables of motivation and how they can lead to persistence and attrition decisions.

![Figure 1. Bean and Metzner's Model of Student Dropout. Image © by Gramling, T. (2013). Used with permission under Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License.](image)

External variables are a central theme in Bean & Metzner’s (1985) theory and help explain why some students drop out, even if they are earning good scores. If a student cannot make reliable childcare arrangements, pay for tuition, or find a workable schedule that
encompasses both work and school, they will not persist school regardless of good academic support (Bean and Metzner, 1985). Several researchers have referenced Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition to better understand variables of influence in nontraditional student attrition decisions (Barnhart, 2011; Byun, 2000; Fuller, 2011; Hayek, 2011; Lerner, 2009; Long, 2007; Maroney, 2010; Minnick, 2007; Oden, 2011; Park & Choi, 2009; Pearson, 2000; Peterson, 2014; Tons, 2011; Vickery, 2013; Wyman, 2012).

Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory

A second theory, which applies to nontraditional students as well as to the military student subgroup, is Nancy Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012). Developed in 1981 and later expanded with new evolving theories and counseling applications, Schlossberg strove to offer a way for caregivers and counselors to provide more accurate support for adults in transition (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). She analyzed how people successfully adapted to transitions such as graduation, marriage, childbirth, and even death or loss of a loved one. Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012) provides a framework of how adults make decisions and the role others play in those decisions during periods of transition. A transition is defined as any event, or non-event, which brings about a change in a person’s relationships, roles, and perceptions (Anderson et al., 2012). Adults are always experiencing transitions, whether they are moving in, moving through, or moving out of a transition. Since not all transitions affect people equally, individuals need to interpret the type of transition they are experiencing, the context in which the transition takes place occurs, and how transition events will impact them (Anderson et al., 2012). Figure 2 helps illustrate the various stages of transition.
Figure 2. Schlossberg’s Integrative Model of the Transition Process

When adults move into a new experience or situation, they have to learn new roles, develop new relationships, and get used to new schedules and expectations. For nontraditional students, schools must articulate what is expected of their new enrollees so that they will feel comfortable in their new academic experience. The next stage is important for retention as students finally get acclimated to their new environment and begin to interpret their new experience as either a benefit or obstacle (Anderson et al., 2012). They analyze whether the new experience is worthy of continued time and energy. If a student struggles with their first few classes, for example, they may question whether they made the right decision or become discouraged. Finally, moving out is when adults end one transition phase and start exiting from roles, relationships, and routines. Military families do experience more transitions, as they move seven times more often than civilian families (Blue Star Families, 2015). In a five-year study of military families, 47% of active-duty families with a deployed member reported three or more moves within a five-year period (Jackson-Lynch, Garcia, & Hwang, 2014).

Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012) is structured around four sets of coping capabilities, which influence how people interpret and manage transition: (a) situation, (b) self, (c) social support, and (d) strategies. These four sets of coping variables,
known as the “four S’s”, describe how adults experience transition events and whether their transition is considered a success or failure (Anderson et al., 2012; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Powers, 2010; Rumann, 2010). The Situation applies to what event is taking place and whether the transition is one characterized by high or low stress. If a Senior NCO decides to pursue a bachelor’s degree after a new child is born, or shortly after returning from a deployment, the multiple stressors on family life may make the decision to pursue college coursework too much of a liability. Success could be harder to obtain if the extra time and money necessary for college coursework create too much personal or family stress.

The Self variable describes to whom the transition event is happening. This describes the psychological make-up, demographics, and personal characteristics of the individual. For example, if a Senior NCO is the sole source of family income and has a child heading to college, the economic stresses may make a personal decision to pursue a bachelor’s degree more stressful and problematic. Since Senior NCOs make up 79% of all military members that retire (Department of Defense Office of the Actuary, 2016), the stresses of facing major changes in finances, job, location, and work environment may create an added incentive and urgency to persist in degree pursuit, regardless of perception of spousal support or circumstance. Social Support focuses on the network of family and social support people receive during transition events. Those with healthier social and family support systems are more likely to successfully navigate periods of transition. The Strategies coping capability refers to the individual’s abilities, whether consciously or subconsciously, to adapt and respond effectively to stressful situations and transition events.

Schlossberg’s (Anderson et al., 2012) model has been used by caring professionals (i.e., counselors, therapists, and psychologists) to help adults successfully adapt to change. The “4
S’s” coping capabilities are seen as either assets or liabilities and can be used in a fluid and
dynamic fashion rather than a static or inert process (Anderson et al., 2012). Citing a study done
by Cheng and Cheung (2005), Anderson and colleagues (2012) noted that managing stress
improved when participants used several different flexible strategies to meet varying stressful
circumstances. Several researchers have found Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory
(Anderson et al., 2012) to be a helpful theoretical model in understanding motivation and
academic persistence (Bibus, 2013; Covert, 2002; Diamond, 2012; Ford & Vignare, 2014; Gary,
2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Lackaye, 2011; Lopez, 2011; Morreale, 2011; Powers, 2010;
Robertson, 2010; Rumann, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Since
the military milieu requires so much transition, instability, and uncertainty, Schlossberg’s Adult
Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012) provided a useful theoretical framework in
understanding how active-duty USAF Senior NCOs make academic enrollment decisions during
periods involving change and transition.

**Bandura and Self-Efficacy**

While not central to the theoretical framework of this study, it is important to
acknowledge Albert Bandura’s (1993) research on motivation and persistence behaviors.
Bandura’s (1993) research on social-cognitive functioning and motivational processes found that
a person’s beliefs regarding their ability to accomplish something worthwhile affected whether
they were interested and determined enough to pursue a specific course of action. In other
words, a person’s beliefs about their ability to achieve a worthwhile goal influences his or her
self-efficacy beliefs; i.e., his or her thoughts about his or her ability to influence outcomes.
These self-efficacy beliefs play an important role in a person’s ability to stay motivated and
resilient when he or she sets goals and face challenges in reaching those goals. The higher a
person’s self-efficacy beliefs, the more likely he or she will persist in the face of difficulty or obstacles.

Bandura (1993) indicated that people develop stronger self-efficacy beliefs through mastery experiences, modeling, psychological/emotional makeup, and social persuasion (Capps, 2010; Mattern & Shaw, 2010; O’Riley, 2012). Bandura’s (1993) research has been heavily studied in fields of cognitive psychology and motivational theory as a reference for how individuals interpret their competence and abilities, which in turn influences outcomes (Bibus, 2013). Self-efficacy beliefs were considered as important, but partly assumed since each of the participants for this study has been promoted to the top enlisted ranks in the USAF. Their promotion required competence, mastery, and leadership, which would likely have been exhibited in each participant.

Social persuasion forms an essential part of the environmental support variable in Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition, and would also help identify the role that spousal support and encouragement played in motivating Senior NCOs to persist in their college coursework. Since active-duty USAF Senior NCOs represent the highest levels of enlisted leadership, they would possess higher levels of autonomy and organizational influence and control. Higher autonomy and control should be predictive of more self-determined self-efficacy beliefs and result in more motivated behaviors (Morreale, 2011). Bandura’s (1993) social-cognition model was considered as a possible theoretical framework of this study, yet I chose to consider Bandura’s model through Bean and Metzner’s (1985) theoretical framework and through Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012). However, while self-efficacy beliefs may provide insight into a person’s motivation, this study paid particular attention to the environmental role that spousal support and military
subculture played as variables of influence in Senior NCO academic enrollment decisions. Bean and Metzner (1985) and Schlossberg (Anderson et al., 2012) provided sufficient frameworks for this study in helping to identify and understand participant social support perceptions and necessary coping strategies during difficult periods of personal and professional transitions.

**Related Literature**

In order to understand the complexities of Air Force Senior NCO college persistence decisions and spousal influence, I needed to examine the literature along several themes:

- nontraditional student characteristics;
- nontraditional student persistence;
- military students as nontraditional students;
- military culture and higher education;
- military students and persistence;
- deployments and academic resilience;
- military family challenges;
- motivation and pursuit of higher education;
- spousal support, extrinsic motivation, and persistence; and
- spousal support and persistence.

**Nontraditional Student Characteristics**

With the present offerings of online courses, colleges and universities have noticed how important access and convenience is to nontraditional students. In 2003, roughly 10% of students took at least one online course, but by 2010 that slice of student participation grew to 30%, with an estimate that half of all students will take online courses by 2014 (Christiansen,
Horn, Caldera, & Soares, 2011; Reese, 2014). By 2017, the U.S. Department of Education expects that more than 8 million of the 20 million college enrollees in the United States will be nontraditional students (Wyatt, 2011), leading to ever more reliance on flexible delivery methods. As Bean and Metzner (1985) pointed out in their earlier research on nontraditional student attrition, nontraditional students have less intensity and duration in their interaction with either faculty or their peers. Life does not revolve around the institution for nontraditional students. Rather, coursework is only responsibility amongst many vying for attention and energy.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reviewed over 2,600 studies on how colleges influence and impact students and they found that student persistence behaviors were influenced by variables such as extracurricular activities, school integration, peer and faculty relationships, and academic success (Oden, 2011). Yet, while they found some consistent variables that influence persistence behaviors among college students, they concluded that the numerous studies and findings are unreliable, inconsistent, and do not show clear causal linkages on persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Part of the challenge for this study was recognizing that a limited amount of research exists on the military student and persistence (Fuller, 2011), due partly to the difficulty in securing military members as participants. Unless the researcher has access to the installation where military members work, it is extremely difficult to study military personnel as a population sample without getting approval and authorization from installation leadership. Another factor in persistence research is that results can be hard to generalize since students are more engaged in their subcultures and environments (Reason, 2009). The influences of
environment, student individual characteristics, and institutional context matters and may lead to different findings.

For example, earlier research on demographics indicated that gender, race, and socioeconomic status affected higher education persistence. Yet when taken into account within-group variances, findings were hard to interpret and seemingly useless in practice (Reason, 2009). Studies in persistence theory must account for a variety of settings, student characteristics, and variables while showing how the variables interact with persistence decisions and behavior (Reason, 2009). Colleges and universities will never fully understand the issues surrounding why students choose to persist or drop out since the issues are embedded in the very core of each individual’s unique experience (Lackaye, 2011; Minnick, 2007). It was beyond the scope of this particular study to account for all possible variables, but by honing in on the educational experiences of active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs, an understudied and precise subgroup of nontraditional students, and their perceptions of spousal support (an understudied variable), this research added value to the current literature by seeking to better understand the academic persistence and attrition behaviors of this specific military student subgroup.

Some researchers have studied the background characteristics of nontraditional students to determine whether these characteristics could be predictive on academic continuance. Harrell and Bower (2011), for example, focused their research on whether student characteristics could be predictive in determining whether students persist in their community college online courses. They studied students \( N = 225 \) from five community colleges in Florida taking online courses and examined their background, learning style, locus of control, computer skills, and demographics. Through logistic regression analysis, Harrell and Bower (2011) found statistical significance in three variables (auditory learning style, grade point average, and basic computer
skills), which were predictive in online success and persistence. Auditory learners—those who process materials verbally better than in written format—had a higher attrition rate than the norm. Since online courses frequently require self-motivation in comprehending written assignments and information, a student’s learning style may conflict with the institutions online delivery, and may lead to frustration and withdrawal (Harrell & Bower, 2011). College grade point average (GPA) was a factor in higher student persistence behaviors. Those with higher GPAs were more likely to persist in their online college courses than students with lower GPAs (Harrell & Bower, 2011).

This finding affirms Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012) by indicating how confidence and competence influence persistence and resilience. Another finding relevant to the present study was Harrell and Bower’s (2011) conclusion that marital status was not a factor in persistence. This study, however, looked more deeply than a marital status demographic variable by exploring whether the perception of spousal support played a role in Senior NCO degree persistence decisions.

**Nontraditional Students and Persistence**

In Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition, nonacademic factors play a major influence in determining whether a nontraditional student decides to persist. Deggs (2011) conducted a phenomenological study using online text-based interviews to students ($N = 21$) enrolled in an accelerated online degree program at a Mid-South research university. His only goal was to understand what perceived barriers the adult learners encountered in their program. The participants had at least five years of work experience and were juniors or seniors by academic credits. Results indicated three prevailing barriers: (a) intrapersonal; (b) career and job-related; and (c) academic-related barriers.
Intrapersonal barriers were identified as time-management issues, money management, family responsibilities, as well as physical and emotional resources. Career barriers included meeting job expectations and lack of workplace support. Academic barriers were described by participants as challenges in understanding technology, preference for face-to-face modality, lack of faculty feedback, and balancing the academic load. Deggs (2011) found that nontraditional students can be more vulnerable than traditional students because they have more responsibilities apart from their college requirements. The necessity of juggling family responsibilities, work, and school are inter-related and present continuous challenges for the nontraditional student. Colleges and universities need to recognize nontraditional student barriers because nontraditional students play multiple roles in life, which require them to continuously overcome those barriers (Deggs, 2011). The methods a college uses today may need to change tomorrow in order to meet new demands and perceived barriers. Degg’s (2011) research provided further insight into the multiple challenges of Senior NCOs, who juggle supervisory roles, family responsibilities, and the pressures of completing a degree before filing for retirement.

Working full-time is one of the toughest environmental challenges that influences persistence decisions among nontraditional students. In an empirical study of traditional and nontraditional students \( N = 228 \) and their retention patterns, Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) found that students that hold either permanent or temporary jobs have a significantly higher chance of dropping out after the first year of college. The authors suggested that students attending college, while also pursuing work, are in a state of transition that requires successfully implementing effective coping strategies (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Since active-duty military students are employed full-time, by definition, they may according to research (Bean &
Metzner, 1985; Capps, 2010; Tons, 2011), face higher dropout rates unless they have strong contextual coping strategies for persistence (Anderson et al., 2012).

Another interesting finding in Gilardi and Guglielmetti’s (2011) study was that those who claimed to have had a lower level of difficulty in their first year of coursework were more likely to drop out than those who admitted the challenges and difficulties of college. The study highlights the fact that student perception does not necessarily correlate with accompanying persistence behavior. Perception could be skewed or affected by desired effects, not realistic behaviors. Finally, another finding by Gilardi and Guglielmettie (2011) pointed to the increase in nontraditional student retention if they engaged in building relationships with other students and faculty. Even though previous research indicated that relationships with faculty members was less meaningful for nontraditional students (Bean and Metzner, 1985), Gilardi and Guglielmettie’s (2011), research indicated that nontraditional student relationships with faculty, even in a non-residential context, serves as a protective effect against attrition.

**Military Students as Nontraditional Students**

Military students would fit the definition of nontraditional student described by Bean and Metzner (1985), but they take on additional stresses due to their military commitments. While research on military student needs is relatively limited (Hayek, 2011), more and more colleges and universities are taking efforts to become “military friendly”—a new term used to describe institutions embracing practices that help address the unique needs of military students (Benson, 2009; Brown & Gross, 2011; Morreale, 2011). Military-friendly campuses attempt to remove barriers to either active-duty, guard, or reserve students, as well as veterans that no longer have military service commitments. Examples of support efforts would include offering flexible enrollment deadlines, generous credit transfer policies (including credit for some military
training), minimal residency requirements, deferred tuition payment plans, military scholarships or tuition discounts, veteran lounges or military affairs offices, and support groups (Benson, 2009; Brown & Gross, 2011; Morreale, 2011).

Military students share many of the same characteristics of other nontraditional students—namely having family and work responsibilities. Family responsibilities can be a barrier to higher education for some nontraditional students. While nursing students differ from military students, Griswold’s (2014) study of nursing student attrition may prove helpful in understanding the role of nonacademic family stress as it relates to attrition. Griswold (2014) studied (N = 40) first and second year nursing students to determine what academic and nonacademic factors played a role in attrition decisions. With (n = 10) 25% of the students withdrawing from the program, Griswold’s (2014) cross-sectional quantitative study found that levels of self-efficacy, perceived faculty support, bullying behaviors, and outcome expectations play a significant role in retention. Students that were overwhelmed with the academic workload required in nursing programs were at a higher risk of attrition. All of the participants in Griswold’s (2014) study that were unmarried stayed in the program, while married students were significantly more likely to withdraw. This could help explain why the perception of spousal support and the juggling of military demands affect attrition.

Military Culture and Higher Education

As the youngest military branch in the DoD, The United States Air Force separated from the Army Air Corps with the National Security Act of 1947. The newly formed DoD created the Air Force to be a separate, but equal, entity along with the Army and Navy. The Marine Corps, while a distinct branch, actually operates under the direction and command of the Secretary of the Navy. The Air Force is comprised of 16 major commands (MAJCOM) and offers more than
350 career specialties, or jobs, for enlisted members and 250 specialties for officers (Harrison, 2012). Since inception, each branch has emphasized entry-level training through their distinct basic training or “boot camps.” Here, the new recruit learns military history, weapons handling, discipline, and behavioral expectations known as “customs and courtesies.” They participate in rigorous physical exercises and endure psychological pressures aimed at breaking the member down so that the military can rebuild the recruit into the type of Soldier, Airmen, Sailor, or Marine that the military needs (Naphan, 2011). As one Marine described, “They pretty much strip you of all freedom, and then slowly give it back to you over the course of the basic training.” (Lackaye, 2011, p. 84). Lackaye (2011) noted that the experience of basic training is contrary to the world of academia since the military emphasizes the whole, rather than the individual, and conformity rather than thoughtful independence.

After successfully completing boot camp, military members are shipped off to separate bases that are specifically geared for their military occupation. This technical training aims to make the member equipped to complete his or her jobs before being sent to the first duty assignment. For the first several decades, technical training was simply seen as being necessary for job proficiency; however, the Air Force established the Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) in 1972 to offer college credit for training and encourage military members to earn their associates degrees (Hauer, 2006).

The CCAF, based at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery (AL) and accredited through Air University by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, is the world’s largest federally recognized community college system with 482,766 degrees awarded, 108 CCAF affiliated schools, and 6,546 affiliated faculty (Hollis, 2016). The CCAF, with an active registration of 270,597 students (Hollis, 2016), grants more than 22,000
Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degrees annually from 68 degree programs (Air University, 2015b). The CCAF degree requires 64 semester hours taken in five areas: (a) technical education, (b) leadership management and military studies, (c) physical education, (d) general education, and (e) elective (Air University, 2015b). Enlisted members are expected to pursue a CCAF degree, evidenced by a 91% completion rate by active-duty Senior NCOs (Hollis, 2016).

To help promote a pathway from an associate’s degree to a bachelor’s degree, the Air Force launched a program in 2007 known as the Air University Associate to Baccalaureate Cooperative (AU-ABC). The program cooperates with 59 civilian colleges and universities to offer more than 200 baccalaureate degree programs for CCAF graduates (Culbert, 2015). The AU-ABC program allows students from all 68 CCAF AAS degrees to take no more than 60 additional semester hours to earn a bachelor’s degree from commensurate field of study programs (Culbert, 2015). For example, if a CCAF graduate earned their AAS degree in Information Management, they would be able to earn a bachelor’s degree in a similar field by taking no more than 60 additional credit hours. The AU-ABC program does require coordination with each installation education office in order for students to link their AAS degree with specific bachelor degree programs. Airmen that participate in the AU-ABC program receive a binding degree completion contract that locks transfer credits and provides a list of remaining degree requirements specified by participating colleges and universities (Bergquist, 2007). The Army, Navy, and Marine Corps branches participate in a similar program known as the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges; however, the Air Force operates independently due to the educational accreditation and oversight of the CCAF.

Even though education officer counselors can help provide all necessary information regarding continuing an education beyond a CCAF associate’s degree, only 38% of active-duty
Senior NCOs have obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher (Hollis, 2016). This creates the potential for uncertain job prospects when Senior NCOs retire. They enter retirement or separation potentially unprepared academically for the competitive job market. Almost half of military members that separate do not end up working in their preferred career field (Blue Star Families, 2015). Numerous Air Force installations offer education centers staffed with trained education counselors that advise Air Force members about financial assistance, degree programs, and class offerings both on and off base. Education support programs are required by both the DoD and the Air Force (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2306, 2011; Department of Defense, 2014). Additionally, each installation A&FRC employs staff trained to help active-duty USAF members effectively transition to civilian life.

While there is no official policy mandating at least a bachelor’s degree for promotion, Air Force leaders are constantly encouraging enlisted members to complete coursework and engage in other self-improvement activities that enhance the member’s value as a military citizen (i.e., whole person concept) and make them more competitive for promotion (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2502, 2015). Education is an integral part of serving, improving skills, and personal development (Bibus, 2013; Covert, 2002). As a minimum, Air Force master sergeants (E-7) that want to be promoted to senior master sergeant (E-8) need to at least have a CCAF degree in order to stand out among their peers (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2618, 2012; Hauer, 2006). Upon notice of selection for promotion to master sergeant, MSgt (E-7) “selects” are advised to immediately enroll in the Air Force Noncommissioned Officer Academy (AFSNCOA) distance learning course (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2618, 2012, p. 14) and hopefully be selected to the seven-week residential AFSNCOA course.
With 91% of Senior NCO’s already holding a CCAF, most realize that one way to continue to stand out from their peers is to earn a bachelor’s or master’s degree (Hollis, 2016). Although research on military student motivation related to higher education is limited (Harrison, 2012), studies have revealed that enlisted members are motivated to earn a college degree for promotion and advancement (Ady, 2009; Benson, 2009; Bibus, 2013; Covert, 2002; Harrison, 2012; Starr-Glass, 2011).

**The GI Bill**

While the military has built up 2.4 million active-duty and reserve troops since the Global War on Terror (GWOT) began in 2001, more than 2.8 million military personnel have made the difficult change from military to civilian life, with education being a critical component of military life and transition (Blue Star Families, 2015).

Historically, the DoD has used educational benefits as a tool of recruitment and retention for young recruits (Benson, 2009). The Department of Veteran’s Affairs, commonly referred to as “The VA,” oversaw educational benefits of more than $12 billion to 300,000 plus active-duty, guard, and reserve military members and their families in fiscal year 2013 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). These benefits were distributed through eight education programs:

1. Post-9/11 GI Bill;
2. Montgomery GI Bill — Active Duty;
3. Montgomery GI Bill — Selected Reserve;
4. Veterans Retraining Assistance Program (ended March 2014);
5. Survivors and Dependents Educational Assistance;
6. Post-Vietnam Era Veterans Educational Assistance Program;
7. Reserve Educational Assistance Program; and
8. National Call to Service Program.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill makes up the largest portion of benefit payments (more than $10 billion) and is the primary plan used by active-duty military members. Passed by Congress in 2008, the Post-9/11 GI Bill added more tuition dollars and benefits than the previous Montgomery GI Bill — Active Duty (Ford & Vignare, 2014; Rumann, 2010; Steele et al., 2010). It applied the benefits differently based on where the student attended school and provided additional living allowances and book stipends based on whether the military member separated or was attending part-time (Steele et al., 2010).

In addition to the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the DoD offers a military TA program, which authorizes 100% tuition assistance payments up to a per credit cap, presently at $250 per credit. While TA has been offered since 1948, the payment amounts fluctuated greatly (Hauer, 2006). In 2014, the DoD provided revised guidance in DoD Instruction 1322.25, Voluntary Education Programs, making it more stringent for the military member to take advantage of the TA funds. In short, the new regulations require more advanced planning and preparation by the military student in order for him or her to have tuition expenses paid. TA offers a very valuable financial benefit for active-duty members hoping to save their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits until after retirement or transfer to their family members. A total of 66% of active-duty and veteran service members indicated that they intend on transferring some or all of their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to a spouse or child, 35% indicated that have already used or plan to use the benefits themselves, and 17% were unsure how they would use their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits (Blue Star Families, 2015). The Post-9/11 GI Bill offers flexibility for military personnel that want to use some benefits for their own educational needs, while also allowing the option of transferring some (or all) benefits to dependents. While transferring benefits does require a service commitment
extension, TA has been used by members to help earn associate’s, bachelor’s, and master’s degrees. When TA dollars were reduced in the past, military student enrollment in college declined (Hauer, 2006).

Military Students and Persistence

Military students face the same types of obstacles as nontraditional students, but they also have unique challenges and cultural variables that can influence persistence. Similar to nontraditional students, military students are affected by financial difficulty. In a study of military benefit recipients and support variables (i.e. financial, social, and academic) on student persistence, Mentzer (2014) found that military students were negatively affected by student loans and financial aid. The more they depended on financial aid, the less likely they were to persist toward achieving their degree goals. Mentzer (2014) also found that social support was not statistically significant in contributing an affect towards student persistence. Mentzer’s (2014) research did confirm Tinto’s (1975) earliest work about the importance of academic support. While social and financial support did not correlate to positive persistence behaviors in Mentzer’s (2014) study, academic support and institutional commitment provided significant contributions to persistence.

Since military members are required to go through extensive training and military education, Senior NCOs may have more confidence and discipline than their peers in the classroom. Bibus (2013) suggested that due to their military training, many military students have become confident in their ability to learn in a formal setting, an attribute necessary when they consider pursuing higher education. This would definitely apply to Senior NCOs, who represent the top levels of enlisted leadership. They were promoted based on their ability to lead,

Grieg (2008) conducted research on Air Force members and their persistence decisions following graduation from the CCAF. He found that intrinsic motivation was an essential variable for Air Force personnel in their persistence decisions. He also concluded that the extrinsic factors of TA, leadership approval, and Air Force emphasis on education were statistically significant. However, Grieg (2008) did not consider the role of spousal support, and suggested that future research explore the influence of family on future CCAF graduates’ participation in four-year degree programs. This study aligned very closely with Grieg’s recommendations for future research, as we focused specifically on perception of spousal support and Senior NCO pursuit in a four-year bachelor’s degree program.

Many Air Force Senior NCOs have built strong and successful military careers through effective and consistent leadership skills, established management of junior enlisted Airmen, and have demonstrated the ability to work long hours in deployment and home base environments. Unfortunately, the professional success may have come at the expense of a strong and cohesive family structure. My hope is that this research helps readers discover how Senior NCOs balanced the professional, family, and educational needs and responsibilities. It was also worth exploring whether successful USAF Senior NCOs faced educational decisions with the full backing of their spouses, or if they relied less on family variables of support by putting a higher priority on intrinsic motivational factors (Morreale, 2011; Park & Choi, 2009; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013; Taylor & House, 2010; Wyatt, 2011). Figure 3 helps to illustrate the role of spousal support and types of motivation.
Figure 3. Role of Spousal Support and Motivation

While military students share some of the same obstacles and challenges as other traditional and nontraditional students, they also have unique challenges in their degree pursuits. One area identified in the literature is the struggle many military students have in connecting with traditional college students, not only because they are older—a factor which all nontraditional students share—but also because they tend to be more interdependent on others with shared military subculture. Rumann and Hamrick (2010) interviewed (N = 6) combat veterans about their transition experiences in the classroom and found that most struggled with the social dimension of support. As one veteran shared, “It’s kind of like we’re a different breed of person after we get back” (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010, p. 446). Another veteran that enrolled in college within a year after separating expressed his difficulty trying to identify with classmates:

It was kind of a bit of a learning experience, seeing things from their perspective. But, uh, I do remember there were a handful of times we were talking about life experiences and I was in a classroom of 18-19 year olds and I’m like what do you know about life experiences? You haven’t lived yet! (Diamond, 2012, p. 88)
Educators must remember that some of the experiences faced by military students have transformed their outlook, perspectives, and worldview (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Many veterans have to get used to a new normalcy and outlook post deployment. As a veteran of the infantry in Iraq said, “I have to constantly remind myself not to view everything through the lens of a cynical door-kicker” (Noonan, 2013, para. 7). Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012) will help the educator understand some of the motives behind why military students struggle with resuming school work and persist in their academic goals.

While some military students face duties and challenges distinctive with their roles and responsibilities, it cannot be assumed that all military student challenges are unique. Fuller (2011) conducted a quantitative study to examine academic persistence among U.S. Army National Guard (ARNG) members. Unless ARNG personnel are on active-duty orders, on training, or deployed, they will typically serve two days per month and two weeks per year while maintaining a posture of readiness—similar to those in the ANG and the AFR. The two days of service per month are usually served over a weekend, thus the tag most guard and reserve members receive as “weekend warriors” (Blaisure, Saathoff-Wells, Pereira, Wadsworth, & Dombro, 2012, p.7). Fuller (2011) sought to determine if unique military factors had an effect on academic persistence. By using a non-probability sample of soldiers (n = 119) while on a weekend drill, Fuller did not find a statistical significance of unique military factors affecting academic persistence. However, his research did find that 55% of the participants had childcare duties at home. Of those with childcare duties, 42% identified their family responsibilities as affecting their ability to pursue off-duty education in some way. This is enlightening as active-duty members would probably consider their workload to be more intense than ARNG members. Fuller (2011) concluded that military members having to juggle both work and childcare
responsibilities face more time constraints, which can prove insurmountable if they want to attend college. Since guard and reserve members face schedules typical of non-military members, this study would more closely resemble the external factors and responsibilities faced by nontraditional students. Of particular importance was seeking to understand whether family responsibilities served as a deterrent to degree persistence among participants in this study.

**Deployments and Academic Resilience**

In addition to unique military subculture variables, military students often face the likelihood of deployments and the reliance on distance education models of delivery. Military education centers have sites located in numerous installations located in combat zones. These education centers usually offer computers, reference books, and Internet access available to military students for their educational use while deployed. A soldier, for example, may begin his or her day on patrol in the streets of Baghdad or Kabul and may end it by spending several hours accessing course materials online or studying for an exam in a class that will count toward the completion of a baccalaureate degree (McMurray, 2007, p. 146).

The challenges are unique, though, and do play a factor in persistence. Research shows that trying to complete coursework through deployments is such a difficult task that most military students do not actually complete their degrees until after they leave the military (McMurray, 2007). Results on deployment frequency and degree persistence are mixed. Savage (2005) found deployment frequency was insignificant for \( n = 443 \) Air Force master sergeants in their persistence decisions while pursuing a CCAF degree. While deployments can be more straining, Hauer’s (2006) research indicated that 13% of deployed Air Force members said they could devote more time to working on CCAF degree. He found no statistical significance for Air Force members in NCO and Senior NCO ranks (E-5 through E-7) concerning how deployment
frequency affects CCAF degree completion. However, Hauer (2006) discovered a significant statistical finding for junior enlisted Senior Airmen (E-4). Senior Airmen typically have very little, if any, supervisory responsibilities, with 28% in Hauer’s (2006) study indicating that they had more time to work on their CCAF degree while deployed. While beyond the scope of the present study, more research could add value on deployment frequency and degree persistence decisions of Senior NCOs.

While deployments do cause periods of family separation for those on active duty, they can be even more disruptive for guard and reserve members that are not as fully engaged in the military culture and lifestyle. Naphan’s (2011) qualitative study of military veteran students (N = 11) that experienced overseas deployments highlights just how disconnected some combat-experienced students feel around other students. While Naphan’s (2011) study examined veterans in a traditional university classroom setting, the personal feelings of disconnection may also play a factor for active-duty service members attending online courses with peers from nonmilitary backgrounds. Identity, connection, support, and institutional understanding have been identified as being central to student integration (Tinto, 1975). Some veterans feel distant from their classmates, not only because they are likely older and more mature, but also because they have experienced deployment as an outsider in another culture and will still feel like an outsider (due to their unique experiences) in their classroom (Naphan, 2011).

Military Family Challenges

Military families face more stress and instability than typical families due to the frequency of short-notice deployments, frequent moves, and long periods of separation from friends and family. As mentioned earlier, the average military family will move six or seven times in a 20-year career, leading to periods of family instability (Clever & Segal, 2013).
Frequent transitions can add tremendous stress on military families who must continuously say goodbye to friends and make new ones. In a 2009 survey of nearly 2,800 military spouses, 94% of military families agreed completely or somewhat with the statement, “The general public does not truly understand or appreciate the sacrifices made by the service members and their families” (Keenan, 2012, p. 19). When military spouses expressed satisfaction with the military lifestyle, the DoD had more success in recruiting and retention of active-duty forces (Keenan, 2012). According to the Employee Research Council, moving is the third most stressful life event, behind only death and divorce (Wuorio, 2014). The frequency of transitions is not only difficult on the family members, but also has been perceived by military members as being an obstacle to academic persistence (Covert, 2002; Murphy, 2007). Covert’s (2002) research of educational obstacles among active-duty Army NCOs identified frequent relocations as one of three primary barriers to participation in higher education coursework.

In addition to frequent relocations, military spouses sometimes have difficulty finding steady work and consistent childcare. The anxiety of family separation and the basic transitory lifestyle can wear down the family morale (Keenan, 2012). Too often, the military member is praised for their service, while the family sacrifices are overlooked. A common saying in the military is “when one person joins, the whole family serves” (Starr-glass, 2013, p. 356). According to a survey of military members from all branches and their families (N = 6,291), 71% of active-duty military spouses not currently working were distressed (Blue Star Families, 2015). Furthermore, 75% of active-duty spouses said that a lack of childcare options has negatively impacted their ability to pursue either employment or education (Blue Star Families, 2015).

Yet in spite of the family challenges inherent with military service, research has discovered that such challenges are not necessarily barriers to education if the military member
has perceived that the pursuit of education is worth the sacrifice. Lindsay Bibus (2013) conducted a qualitative study by interviewing nontraditional students (N = 20) that were active-duty military members, military spouses, or civilians hired by the military. Each participant was asked to describe their journey towards earning an associate’s degree—a journey that lasted more than 10 years for most. Although most of the participants were not interested in pursuing college immediately following high school, they required a combination of perceived need and realistic opportunity until they were able to develop strong enough motivation start pursuing their degree (Bibus, 2013).

Bibus (2013) cited several older studies, which indicated that nontraditional students delayed their college enrollment due to family and work responsibilities, while also pointing out that family may eventually be less of a barrier if the adults find a pragmatic reason to return. In fact, Bibus (2013) discovered that when life circumstances permit, older students display a high degree of persistence until finished (Bibus, 2013). If a college degree enhances opportunities for positive change or family benefit, the adult may decide to pursue a degree. Thus, work and family responsibilities are not truly barriers, but rather, are life circumstances that need to be managed if the student is to succeed (Bibus, 2013).

Instead of finishing college, starting a family and building a career, the participants in Bibus’ (2013) study flipped the paradigm and actually found that military life established an essential part of their college journey. The military environment consistently promoted the value of higher education, but also provided numerous military training courses, promotion incentives, financial incentives, and a culture of discipline. The military created a social climate with strong values, which encouraged higher college participation (Bibus, 2013).
Military Spousal Support and Persistence

One of the important factors in the present study was whether perceptions of a strong and supportive spouse played any role in the USAF Senior NCO’s academic persistence decisions. Spousal relationships may provide extrinsic motivation to pursue personal goals, but may also create guilt if the student feels that his or her spouse and children are being ignored in the process. Don Murphy’s (2007) quantitative study explored barriers and deterrents experienced by Marine Corps noncommissioned officers in their pursuit of associate’s or bachelor’s degrees. He collected data from a random sample of Marine Corps students ($N = 131$) with ($n = 63$) not participating in college coursework. Of the non-participants, ($n = 29$) were married, and ($n = 9$) those people (31%) indicated that time with family was a higher priority than taking classes (Murphy, 2007). Yet of the ($n = 68$) Marine Corps participants in college, ($n = 43$) were married (63%), leading the author to conclude that marriage status does not predict college participation even though marriage can be either a motivator or a barrier to persistence (Murphy, 2007).

Murphy’s (2007) research aids the present study by helping in my exploration of participant perceptions of spousal support as a motivational factor in persistence. Nontraditional students do rely on encouragement and support from spouses and family members, but are not as reliant, as Tinto (1975) maintained, on the institutional or scholastic environment as a primary source of integration. Nontraditional students do not consider engagement with other college students as being essential to their college experience since school obligations were just another part of their busy lives (Wyatt, 2011).

As this study sought to discover active-duty USAF Senior NCO perceptions of spousal support, a review of military spouses and their educational aspirations proved helpful. If both spouses had similar educational goals, they might provide more extrinsic motivation for their
partner. Lisa Keenan (2012) studied military spouses \((N = 752)\) as a subgroup of nontraditional students with unique stressors and challenges due to their military lifestyle. She sought to determine factors that motivated and enabled spouses to earn a college degree. After multiple regression analysis of the convenience sample survey, Keenan (2012) concluded that social support from family, friends, and co-workers was the only significant predictor of persistence. Social support, outside of the college environment, proved to be significant for military spouse persistence decisions.

Traditional students frequently utilize numerous campus programs and offerings that help to supplement a feeling of community and social support, but nontraditional students rely less on school integration and more on intrinsic motivational factors (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Griswold, 2014; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013, Taylor & House, 2010; Wyatt, 2011). Yet even intrinsic motivation can be supplemented by social relationships. Social encouragement, a type of extrinsic motivation, actually enhances a person’s intrinsic motivation (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). Keenan’s (2012) findings are worth both continued quantitative and qualitative research on the role of spousal support on the active-duty member. Keenan (2012) noted that most studies about student retention were built on a traditional view of students, and therefore, required further research in order to explore the military subculture and the possible role that spouses play in military student persistence. This present study was conducted to help fulfill one of Keenan’s (2012) primary recommendations for future research.

In a 2010 study on military wives and educational attrition, Jorgenson (2010) noted that approximately 87% of female active-duty military spouses list education as a personal goal. Jorgenson’s (2010) mixed-methods study of female military spouses \((N = 151)\) of active-duty military members that dropped out of college found that financial hardships and military
instability (uncertainty with moves) created too much stress and led to their decision to drop out of higher education. Part of the demographic data that I found could be significant was the impact of having children. Confirming earlier studies done on parenting and education, Jorgenson (2010) noted that one of the top reasons women drop out of higher education is due to childcare responsibilities.

Parenting roles can be a very real barrier to enrollment and persistence in higher education. Institutions would benefit by helping to alleviate these barriers so that parent and spouse enrollment will increase (Jorgenson, 2010). This was relevant for me during this study to observe whether Senior NCOs would describe weak spousal support for their educational pursuits, and if so, whether that lack of support was due to resentment or frustration over their parenting roles. Another significant finding in Jorgenson’s (2010) study was that spouses were significantly more likely to be enrolled in higher education if their husbands held higher enlisted (E-6 and up) or officer ranks. This may be the result of mutual motivational support, pressure to prepare for post-military life, or simply shared life experiences. The findings deserve more research to help explain a connection between spouse degree pursuit and military member degree pursuit. Educational background was one of the questions pursued in the present study, since it could shed light into Senior NCO degree persistence.

Although too much family stress and interference can bring about attrition decisions, Lerner (2009) found that family responsibilities actually increased the likelihood of nontraditional students to persist. Using a sample set of nontraditional students \( N = 2,068 \) from the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD), Lerner (2009) examined the role of social support among older community college students. Nontraditional students that were married had higher GPAs as well as higher course completion rates. Nontraditional students
with children had a higher course completion rate. While it was not the scope of Lerner’s (2009) research to find statistical significance of family demographics, she nonetheless concluded that marriage is a motivational factor in student persistence and that those who are married actually have less stress and can take on additional roles more successfully. This ability to multitask and manage roles and responsibilities can increase the student’s likelihood to complete school.

While needing additional research, this enriched hypothesis suggests that married students are proficient at constantly juggling personal tasks, and are thus at ease with taking on new academic roles and responsibilities (Lerner, 2009). While it could be argued as to whether nontraditional students with families have lower stress, personal resilience could be higher if the student has high confidence or self-efficacy beliefs, experience with hardships, and personal coping resources, which enable persistence behaviors. The present study explored how Air Force Senior NCOs perceived their efforts in balancing stress with their academic goals. If marriage helps lower stress and enable the member to take on additional tasks, would Senior NCOs feel that they were more able to pursue a four-year degree?

Motivation and Pursuit of Higher Education

One area of research that proved to be relevant to this study was realizing that some nontraditional students are more intrinsically motivated than extrinsically motivated. Using the Academic Motivational Scale (AMS), Shillingford and Karlin (2013) studied nontraditional undergraduate students ($N = 25$) to help determine the motivational influences that drive them towards degree completion. Feelings of competence and self-determination played a higher role in the sample group than external factors such as career advancement, family support, or reward incentives. Yet, the lines of demarcation between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation cannot be so clearly divided. Researchers have disputed how much external rewards influence intrinsically
motivated behaviors (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). Shillingord and Karlin’s (2013) research highlighted how positive social or family feedback can serve as a reward and actually enhance a person’s self-confidence and perception of self-determination. Their participants had higher intrinsic motivation for learning than traditional students and relied more on intrinsic motivation for their degree pursuit. Thus, research may not simply be looking at whether a student is more intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. Rather, it might help determine how significant a person’s perception of self is influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. A strong marriage relationship, for example, may produce higher levels of external praise and support, which could lead to higher feelings of confidence, competence, and motivation. Thus, a student’s personal identity perception plays a critical role in their academic motivation behaviors (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013).

**Spousal Support, Extrinsic Motivation, and Persistence**

While some students are highly motivated by an internal drive and desire to succeed, others rely on more external sources for motivation. Encouragement and support from family and friends can directly motivate students to persist in school. For example, Mattern and Shaw’s (2010) study of students ($N = 107,453$) from 110 colleges and universities found that self-confidence and self-assurance leads to higher second-year retention rates. Their research highlighted how encouragement plays a significant role in student self-confidence through positive comments and feedback. The first two research questions used in the present study were intended to help explore whether spouse support and encouragement played any part in the participant’s decision to start college or persist in college.

Contrary to Tinto’s (1975) Student Integration Theory, military students, like other nontraditional students, do not necessarily rely on the face-to-face interaction of fellow students
to provide vital social support. They are more likely to receive social support from immediate family members. Spousal support is an essential variable for married military students since they are in a different stage of life than the typical traditional student. In Edwards’ (2013) study of nontraditional students \( N = 11 \) that attended a community college, one of the most consistent responses of nontraditional students was a pervasive feeling of being different from younger traditional students. Wyatt’s (2011) qualitative case study of nontraditional students found that nontraditional students did not just feel different because of their age and experience, but also, they sometimes felt angry with traditional college students primarily because of their immaturity and disrespect for their professors (Wyatt, 2011). Nontraditional students also face a level of disorientation going back to college at an older age.

Martina Ady (2009) conducted a quantitative study to find factors that contributed to the academic success of enlisted active-duty Army soldiers. The participants \( N = 158 \) answered surveys, while enrollment data was compared with survey responses. Surprisingly, Ady (2009) discovered that as the soldier’s time in service increased, their degree progression decreased. The less years a soldier had served, the faster they progressed towards a college degree. No other variable—including rank, deployments, credit hours, GPA, or demographic characteristics—was a significant factor. The present study helped to identify the unique challenges senior enlisted members face with their work responsibilities. Ady (2009) also found that soldiers with fewer years of service had more free time to pursue college coursework because their lower rank does not require heavy supervisory or work responsibilities. Higher rank brought more supervisory responsibilities, which can often lead to longer hours, weekend duties, and frequent demands for time and feedback. Pertinent to the present study, Ady (2009) also surmised that soldiers with more years of service tend to be older and have more family
responsibilities requiring additional attention, which can be time-consuming and challenging. Ady (2009) recommended that future research explore the role of family support on degree progression and academic success. Even though this study concentrated on perceptions of spousal support, participants were free to discuss parenting roles and responsibilities.

Without positive spousal support, married military students are likely to drop out of their degree program due to family obligations. In a 2013 mixed-methods study of college dropouts (n = 15) that were later readmitted, Zelbovitz (2013) found that even though every participant had the intention of completing their degree, they dropped out due to overwhelming obligations such as pregnancy, financial pressures, transportation issues, legal problems, and family medical emergencies. Most were angry at themselves for dropping out, but they had an overwhelming personal event that needed to be resolved. Their personal issues were of a higher priority in time and resources than continuing their degree goals. Every participant felt positively about the support they received from the college; however, Zelbovitz (2013) did conclude that most students made attrition decisions during a time when they did not have family support. Her study involves members of both the immediate and extended family and highlights the role of social and family support during periods of stressful circumstances. Zelbovitz noted that few students could withstand the challenges of higher education without the support of their family. Most of the participants in her study explained that completing college was not simply a goal for career advancement, but also sent a valued message to their families. This study provides a look at how Senior NCOs interpret their responsibilities arising from military demands. For example, if they view deployments and training as a negative personal issues, they may decide to drop out of college until they perceive that they have the necessary spousal support and resources to enroll again. Zelbovitz’s (2013) research sheds light on whether Senior NCOs perceive that the spousal
support they receive will be enough to manage work stress, family obligations, and the additional time constraints involved in pursuing a college degree.

Morreale’s (2011) quantitative study of military veteran students (N = 176) attending undergraduate courses in Arizona sought to explore whether academic success had a statistical correlation with student self-concept and personal motivation. Her results indicated that military students are motivated externally; they rely more on rewards, punishments, or social pressures. Even though intrinsically motivated learners tend to show more motivation and persistence behaviors than those driven by extrinsic factors (Bye et al., 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013), a student’s social and family support may provide significant influence in a person’s decision to either persist or drop out. Finally, while outside the primary scope of this research, Morreale (2011) recommended future research aimed at engaging with family members of military students since research involving military families is missing from the current research literature. Further exploration involving family members of military personnel will also enable colleges and veteran organizations to provide better support to military students. Although this current study focused on the lived experiences of Senior NCOs and their perceptions of spousal support, further studies with family members are needed.

In order to truly understand the psychological motivation that drives many military students, a reinterpretation of Tinto’s (1975) Student Integration Theory is essential since military students are more committed to the military social construct than to the collegiate social structure. Wilson et al. (2013) interviewed Army soldiers (N = 13) about their commitment and integration to college and found that military students showed little to no interest in traditional features of college. Soldiers did not discuss taking classes for the educational or knowledge aspects to be gained; rather, courses were useful for promotion. The military community
replaced the college community in Tinto’s (1975) framework of integration. What seemed especially relevant in the study was the suggestion for institutions to provide family-friendly processes and to include an orientation process to inform family members about how to contribute to the academic success of their military spouse (Wilson et al., 2013). This recommendation could have merit since military students are more socially integrated with their military and family community than with the college community.

**Spousal Support and Persistence**

In researching spousal support and persistence, some filtering of the current literature was critical. Numerous studies of family support are based around parental support of traditional and nontraditional college students (Bean and Metzner, 1985; Coy-Ogan, 2009; Guastella, 2009; Minnick, 2007; Tinto, 1994, Zelbovitz, 2013). Tinto’s (1975) earliest findings examined the path that traditional students took as they separated from their parents and siblings and acquired a new family comprised of faculty and students in their collegiate environment. For nontraditional students, the specific meaning or definition of “social support” has not been clearly defined by researchers (Lerner 2009). Social support may include encouragement from friends or family members. In Carolyn Hart’s (2012) review of more than 130 articles on student persistence in online programs, she discovered that student roles in balancing work and family demands is a pervasive and recurring theme in the literature. Furthermore, perceptions of family support have been shown to help student overcome barriers to persistence and complete online coursework successfully (Hart, 2012).

Since the objective of this research was to better understand the perceived support of spouses by active-duty USAF Senior NCOs, this section of the literature review will focus on those aspects of social and spousal support, which might apply to members of the military
subculture. While military students will undoubtedly share many of the same characteristics as other nontraditional students, belonging to a unique military culture does present different family and lifestyle variables. Since active-duty military students are highly transient, moving every two to four years (Blue Star Families, 2015), they are more likely to complete at least part of their degree online than other nontraditional students (Ford & Vignare, 2014).

Military students in the present study may rely on support from both spouses and a supportive military environment. Park and Choi (2009) studied nontraditional students’ decisions to persist or drop out of online courses. They analyzed data collected from students (n = 147) that either completed or dropped out of online courses at a large Midwestern university. They created an instrument to measure family and organizational support while also using a motivational measurement survey to analyze internal and external motivational factors that might have bearing on persistence. Using logistic regression analysis, they focused on three main variables: (a) individual characteristics (age, gender, employment status, and educational background), (b) external factors (family and organizational support), and (c) internal factors (perceptions of satisfaction and relevance with coursework). Based on their findings, Park and Choi (2009) concluded that there was no statistical significance based on individual characteristics, but they did find higher persistence rates among those with higher means in perception of family support, organizational support, and those with a higher perception of satisfaction and relevance. Their results predicted with 89.8% accuracy, based on the variables above who would persist in coursework. Whether the family support variable is transferable to perceptions of spousal support by Senior NCOs is unknown, but the present study did address issues related to perceptions of family support. Park and Choi’s (2009) research provided
necessary insight into the perception that Senior NCOs of their military lifestyle and whether the lifestyle was a barrier to degree persistence.

Park and Choi (2009) concluded that external variables such as family issues, absence of organizational support, occupational changes, and workload are important factors that influence students to drop out of their online coursework. Additionally, lack of family or organizational support leads to a higher dropout rate regardless of the student’s academic preparedness and completion goals (Park & Choi, 2009). Internal motivation was not enough to overcome poor external motivational influences of family and organizational support. This may be a factor as to why some military students frequently start and stop coursework over a period of several years. Non-academic family or work issues influence a student to drop out of an online class, but a strong support by family and classroom social connections can help mitigate attrition decisions (Hart, 2012). External family circumstances, outside the realm of control by school instructors or admissions personnel, can create new barriers during enrollment that increase the likelihood of attrition. The written timeline instrument requested participants describe any family, personal, or work issues that may have had an influence during their enrollment decisions.

Simply having a family structure is not enough to establish a perception of support, because the health and quality of the relationship can affect student anxiety as well as academic persistence. In a qualitative case study of nontraditional community college students (N = 11), Edwards (2013) found a consistent theme of stress on the student in combative or ineffective family relationships. Sometimes family members felt resentment towards the student spouse because finances can be limited. School could be seen as a luxury pursuit when the family is pressured by finite financial resources (Edwards, 2013). Edwards (2013) described one nontraditional female student whose husband wanted to divorce her because of her college
commitments, making an intentional point not to help her with anything school related. Hearing from participants about perceptions of spousal support was essential in this research as it provided further insight into family dynamics, cohesion, and support—all variables worth investigating as to possible influence in participant persistence and attrition behaviors.

Since military students are, by definition, nontraditional students, they may also be less likely to experience the typical first generation student conflict of becoming integrated into the college milieu and develop new college family and friend connections. Coy-Ogan’s (2009) quantitative study of first generation, first-year college students (N = 348) found that family influence (i.e., parental support) and preparation for college were less powerful factors affecting their degree persistence than first-year college students from college-educated families. Students from college-educated families have knowledge, experience, and reinforcement about the value of higher education from their parents—factors that may provide motivational influence. College-educated parents have familiarity and experiences that have been proven to be a critical pre-college characteristic, regardless of their socioeconomic status (Coy-Ogan, 2009). Thus, in exploring the lived experiences of Senior NCOs, familiarity with college expectations and challenges may be a factor based on whether they were informed, prepared, or encouraged by their spouses. While parental educational background was considered, the scope of this study focused primarily on the role of spousal influence.

Need for Research

While much research has been done on the subject of student motivation and persistence, most if it has been conducted using quantitative methods with the focus on developing predictive models of persistence behavior (O’Riley, 2012). Several studies have examined the inherent stresses, difficulties, and volatility of military life, (Bibus, 2013; Hayek, 2011; Keenan, 2012).
Other research has examined motivation and family support (Ady, 2009; Bibus, 2013; Fuller, 2011; Greig, 2008; Hayek, 2011; Morreale, 2011, Tinto, 1997). Nonetheless, there is a gap in the literature regarding the role of spousal support and academic persistence decisions of senior enlisted Air Force personnel. Park and Choi (2009) discovered that students are more likely to drop out of college without strong family support, and their conclusion may also apply to military students. However, since Air Force Senior NCOs are in the top 13% of enlisted leadership (AFPC, 2016a), they may also demonstrate more intrinsic motivation with less reliance on external forms of support, such as spousal support. This study helped fill a gap in research by ascertaining how the perception of spousal support serves as an extrinsic motivational influence in military enlisted leaders’ academic persistence and attrition decisions. Table 7 identifies the research questions, data needs, sources, and analysis as aligned with the Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985), while Table 8 identifies the same data information from the framework established in Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012).
Table 7

*Bean and Metzner’s Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition (1985)* Data Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Needs</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>Data Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ 1: How has perception of spousal support contributed to the decisions of Senior NCOs to begin pursuing their bachelor’s degree?</td>
<td>Recurring themes and comments indicating spousal support during active enrollment decision by Senior NCO</td>
<td>Interview and written timeline</td>
<td>Pattern, theme, and content analysis (Patton, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ 2: How has perception of spousal support influenced Senior NCOs in their academic attrition and persistence decisions?</td>
<td>Recurring themes and comments indicating environmental spousal support with intent to pursue a bachelor’s degree.</td>
<td>Interview and written timeline</td>
<td>Pattern, theme, and content analysis (Patton, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ 3: How has military culture influenced perception of spousal support and degree pursuit among Senior NCOs?</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree enrollment decisions during periods of stress, deployment, training and/or transition arising from military culture and responsibilities.</td>
<td>Survey, interview, and written timeline</td>
<td>Pattern, theme, and content analysis (Patton, 2002)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8

*Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012)* Data Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Needs</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>Data Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ 1: How has perception of spousal support contributed to the decisions of Senior NCOs to begin pursuing their bachelor’s degree?</td>
<td>Active enrollment during period of family or professional transition</td>
<td>Survey, interview, and written timeline</td>
<td>Pattern, theme, and content analysis (Patton, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ 2: How has perception of spousal support influenced Senior NCOs in their academic attrition and persistence decisions</td>
<td>Recurring themes and comments indicating spousal support or lack of support during academic persistence decisions.</td>
<td>Interview and written timeline</td>
<td>Pattern, theme, and content analysis (Patton, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ 3: How has military culture influenced perception of spousal support and degree pursuit among Senior NCOs?</td>
<td>Descriptions of spousal support and triggers (events and non-events) arising from military culture and responsibilities.</td>
<td>Survey, interview, and written timeline</td>
<td>Pattern, theme, and content analysis (Patton, 2002)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bean and Metzner’s Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition (1985) served as a key theoretical framework, which helped identify themes and variables that may have influenced the participants during their enrollment attrition behaviors. The research questions
helped to identify what role, if any, perception of spousal support played as a motivational influence on Senior NCOs with their academic decisions. Since official Air Force guidance and instruction (Department of the Air Force, 2012) necessitate the need for senior enlisted leaders to obtain a CCAF associates degree, the decision to pursue a bachelor’s degree will likely involve other sources of motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic.

Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012) was also a relevant theoretical framework for this study as it allowed a structured approach to understanding the influence of a person’s coping abilities and sources of support during periods of transition. Since the military lifestyle is often perceived by family members as being stressful, transient, and even unstable (Bibus, 2013; Blue Star Families, 2015; Hayek, 2011; Keenan, 2012; Starr-Glass, 2013), the research questions shed light on how Senior NCOs made enrollment and degree pursuit decisions. It also helped portray whether participants considered support from their spouses as an asset or a liability. Any delay in pursuing a bachelor’s degree, at any time during periods of transition, needed further analysis in order to determine what variable may have influenced it. Of course, motivation is often the combination of personal (i.e., spousal support) and professional (i.e., demands of military lifestyle) factors.

Summary

In an effort to explore the lived experiences of Senior NCOs and their perceptions of spousal support in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree, an overview of two theoretical lenses was essential in order to understand the possible influences that shaped the educational journey of nontraditional military students: Bean and Metzner’s Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition (1985) and Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012). Following an overview of the theoretical and conceptual framework, this chapter concluded by
exploring applicable literature surrounding nontraditional student persistence, the challenges faced by military student, and the role of family and social support as a motivational influence. Although generalizations may be offered based on a cursory reading of the literature, there is no body of research yet that explores the role of spousal support and Air Force senior enlisted leaders in their academic persistence decisions. This research is intended to help fill this gap in the literature by exploring the lived experiences of Senior NCOs and their perceptions of spousal support as either a barrier or motivational influence in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

“It wasn’t curiosity that killed the cat. It was trying to make sense of all the data curiosity generated” (Patton, 2002, p. 440).

—*Halcolm, fictional character created by M.Q. Patton*

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of spousal support among active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. This chapter outlines the hermeneutic phenomenological research design, provide research questions, and explain my role and perspective as researcher. The chapter also defines the participants for the research, the research setting, and explains the data collection procedures and analysis steps.

Design

I chose to apply a hermeneutic phenomenological research design in order to better understand the lived experiences of Senior NCOs that have pursued or are presently pursuing a bachelor’s degree, and the role that family influence played in their education persistence and attrition decisions. While a quantitative design may have revealed statistical significance in relation to spousal support and Senior NCO persistence behavior, a quantitative approach would not have provided some of the descriptive (phenomenological) and interpretive (hermeneutic) results necessary to understand the essence, meaning, and experiences of the participants (van Manen, 1990). Qualitative research sees the world in terms of people, circumstances, actions, and the processes that are interconnected (Maxwell, 2013). Phenomenological research is most appropriate in helping us find vivid and insightful descriptions about the way we experience and describe our world before we attempt to categorize, classify, or reflect too deeply about the
phenomena (van Manen, 1990). Moustakas (1994) noted that a phenomenological study method adds to a researcher’s own exploration of personal perceptions and descriptions of the phenomenon in a fresh and open manner. As a military chaplain, I have had numerous encounters with USAF Senior NCOs that are pursuing a bachelor’s or master’s degree and have listened to many describe the intense stress and difficulty they were under while trying to manage their professional career and personal family commitments. I have also listened to and counseled Airmen of all ranks as they described their personal educational goals with the hopes of someday pursuing them if only more time was available and circumstances favorable. Phenomenological research offers the best framework for exploring the experiences of the participant’s personal and passionate involvement in the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Most of the literature I read on military and nontraditional students and academic persistence used a quantitative research design with the intent of finding statistical significance among the variables. While many of the quantitative studies were informative, qualitative research that explores the meaning, interpretation, and collective experiences of military students was sparse. While quantitative research provides evidence of relationships, a hermeneutic design approaches the data with the goal of understanding and describing the meaning and nuances of meaning behind the relationships. Spousal support of USAF Senior NCOs in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree was completely void in current qualitative research. Rather than focus primarily on uncovering data among variables, my research will add understanding as to the why and how of the phenomenon (Locke III, 2011).

Other methods were also considered before deciding on the phenomenological approach. If my purpose was to study the Senior NCO population as a specific subculture, I might have considered using the case study (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014) or ethnography approach (Creswell,
2013; Moustakas, 1994; Wolcott, 2008). My intent, though, was to study the lived experiences as participants relate to the phenomena of spousal support in their academic pursuit. A narrative model (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2013) is too restrictive of participant sample size, while the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013) focuses too much on the development of a new theory during the analysis stage.

This study used a hermeneutic phenomenological design (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1990) in order to understand the experiences of the participants in such a way that the essential significance and meaning of an experience would be revealed (Deggs, 2011). A hermeneutic approach involves researcher interpretation and did not require me, as the researcher, to completely bracket out my own experience and understanding of the phenomena during the interview process (Creswell, 2013). A hermeneutic lens allowed my own thoughts and feelings to help shape part of the data-gathering process, even while the focus was on understanding, and then interpreting the participants’ experience (Patton, 2002). Hermeneutic design differs from the heuristic design (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002) in that heuristic analysis places a researcher’s experiences, insights, and reflections at the forefront (Patton, 2002). Researcher and participants reflect together on the shared experience and try to mutually describe the nature and meaning of the phenomenon.

As an officer, I could not completely relate with Senior NCOs as enlisted leaders pursuing a bachelor’s degree. I entered the military as an officer. Receiving an officer commission in the military requires at least a four-year degree. To join the USAF Chaplain Corps, I had to have a Master of Divinity, or equivalent, theological degree. Hermeneutic analysis allowed for my own context and situation to be taken into account primarily for the sake
of trying to interpret and understand the experiences of the participants (van Manen, 1990; Patton, 2002).

The transcendental approach is another way to approach qualitative research; however, this approach requires a complete bracketing out of researcher views and perspective before exploring the views of others (Creswell, 2013). Transcendental research is mostly interpretive without researcher interpretation and involvement. The hermeneutic approach allows the researcher to acknowledge assumptions and explore the phenomena with the embedded researcher experience and perspective (Laverty, 2003). Bracketing out all researcher assumptions and preconceptions seems nearly impossible without acknowledging at least some type of subconscious influence surfacing even in the way the research is conducted. Van Manen (1990) proposed that the best approach is to make clear the researcher’s understandings, views, preconceptions, and assumptions while attempting—to the best of the researcher’s abilities—to suspend one’s personal beliefs in order to study the essential elements of the phenomena. This is a delicate balance of recognizing personal perception without letting bias interfere with accurately capturing participants’ lived experiences.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is intended to understand the lived experience and transfer it into a textual expression of the essence. As the researcher, the hermeneutic approach allowed me to relive the participants’ own experience with an attempt to interpret his or her understanding so that I could help relay that experience for the reader. Although other research designs were analyzed, none seemed to fit the goals of this study as closely as a phenomenological design. Table 9, below, describes other research methods examined.
Table 9

Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design Method</th>
<th>Research Design</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Central Consideration</th>
<th>Reason for Rejection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive between-subjects</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Creswell (2014)</td>
<td>Quantitative research aims to confirm a hypothesis, validate relationships, or provide statistical significance among the variables.</td>
<td>Most research on nontraditional student motivation has been quantitative in design (O’Riley, 2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed-Method</td>
<td>Quantitative and Qualitative</td>
<td>Creswell (2014)</td>
<td>Design examines both open-ended qualitative data and quantitative results requiring both types of data analysis.</td>
<td>Mixed methods design is considered a new methodology and is not presently encouraged for use by the LU education department.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Studies</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Yin (2014)</td>
<td>Case study methodology focuses on a particular case, or several cases, within the boundaries of time and place.</td>
<td>Case study focuses more on a process or activity, while the present study aims to explore the shared experiences of several participants as they make meaning of a shared phenomenon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnography</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Wolcott (2008)</td>
<td>This methodology examines a specific subculture, usually a cultural group different than the researcher. It aims to understand the culture in depth and the behaviors, practices, and interactions within the cultural group.</td>
<td>While this research does focus on a subgroup of nontraditional learners, the focus is less on participants as a subculture, and more on the experiences of the phenomena they share.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded Theory</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Corbin &amp; Strauss (2008)</td>
<td>This methodology aims at developing a new theory through a sociological lens.</td>
<td>The present study does not intend to use data to form and generate a new theory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Clandinin &amp; Connelly (2000)</td>
<td>Narrative research focuses on the life of one participant and uses data to re-tell the story.</td>
<td>Narrative research focuses on the life of an individual, while the present study looks to explore the experiences of several participants with shared educational goals.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Questions

This hermeneutic phenomenological study answered the following research questions:

**Research Question 1**: How has perception of spousal support contributed to the decisions of Senior NCOs to begin pursuing their bachelor’s degree?
**Research Question 2:** How has perception of spousal support influenced Senior NCOs in their decisions about degree persistence?

**Research Question 3:** How has military culture influenced perception of spousal support and degree pursuit among Senior NCOs?

**Participants**

The original plan was to collect data from at least \( n = 12 \) active-duty USAF Air Force Senior NCOs (E-7 through E-9) having at least six earned credit hours towards a bachelor’s degree. In qualitative research, there are no rules for sample size (Patton, 2002). Creswell (2013) noted that he has seen phenomenological studies involving 1 to 325 participants; however, the size of the sample must be large enough to gather rich information. Minnick (2007) suggested a smaller sample size due to the time involved in data transcription and analysis; however, the goal was to maximize information gathering until redundancy started and no new information surfaced (Patton, 2002). I hoped to collect data from \( n = 6 \) males and \( n = 6 \) females. I also hoped to solicit participants from each of the four major Air Force career fields found on most installations: (a) operations, (b) maintenance, (c) medical, and (d) support.

Both residential and online students would be used and selected through purposeful criterion sampling. Criterion-based sampling is essential to a phenomenological study and is useful for quality assurance (Creswell, 2013). The first criterion required all participants to have been married at least five years or more to their current spouse. This helped ensure that the perception of spousal support was not as affected based on the newness of a marital relationship. Having several years of marriage increased the likelihood of at least one or more military moves or deployments, while also increasing the possibility of couple negotiation of roles,
responsibilities, and priorities. Since it takes an average of 18 years for an Airman to reach the Senior NCO ranks (AFPC Static Reports- Enlisted, 2015), this criterion was not difficult to meet.

A second criterion required participants to have one or more children. Since nearly 75% of married military members have dependent children (Bibus, 2013), this criterion was also not too difficult to meet. While research has shown childcare responsibilities to be a factor in female student attrition (Jorgenson, 2010), Lerner’s (2009) research indicated that parenting also can be a motivational variable for persistence. Though parenting roles were not addressed in the survey or interview questions, participants were able to speak freely about their parental responsibilities and what influence that had as either a barrier or motivational persistence variable.

A third and final criterion required participants to have at least six earned credit hours towards a bachelor’s degree; i.e., credits beyond a two-year associate’s degree. This was critical since 91% of Senior NCOs already hold a CCAF associate’s degree, yet only 38% continue to persist and earn a bachelor’s degree, or higher, while on active-duty status (Hollis, 2016). Official Air Force Instruction 36-2618, paragraph 5.2.1 (Department of the Air Force, 2012) underscores that Senior NCOs should complete the CCAF two-year associate’s degree, if not already earned, in their career field specialty (i.e. AFSC). Senior NCOs are not only expected to pursue on- and off-duty education, but are also supposed to provide encouragement regarding education to their subordinates. While the criterion could be any number of credit hours as a minimum, requiring at least six hours of credits towards a bachelor’s degree demonstrates a level of prolonged commitment and persistence which this study aimed to explore.

Random sampling was not necessary as this study required specific criteria in order to participate. What might normally be considered a bias in statistical sampling is actually a strength of qualitative research. Homogeneous purposive sampling helped gather a participant
pool of Senior NCOs that shared similar USAF culture, family and work commitments, and length of military service. Purposive sampling was also important to ensure a higher chance of transferability and accuracy in shared experiences of spousal support.

The first step before actual data collection involved securing IRB approval. After IRB approval, a general newsletter and social networking invitation would be sent through a large Christian university’s Military Affairs Office. I also planned to send a solicitation email through USAF Education Centers at two Royal Air Force (RAF) installations located in the United Kingdom: RAF Lakenheath and RAF Mildenhall. Both installations employed thousands of USAF personnel. Additionally, potential participants would be gathered through informal referrals from professors that teach at a large Christian university.

The Christian university’s Military Affairs Office offered to help me solicit support by providing a general invitation to military students rather than a targeted email—due to privacy concerns. In addition to seeking to gather participants through the university Military Affairs Office, the two USAF Education Centers, and informal referrals from university professors, I hope to gather participants through personal contact with Senior NCOs at my installation, RAF Mildenhall, and ask them to recommend other Senior NCOs that might fit the criteria for this study. Gathering 12 Senior NCOs that fit the criteria did not seem like an impossible task given that the USAF heavily emphasizes the importance of education for both professional advancement and leadership development.

Senior NCOs that responded and fit the criteria would be sent more information about the study, as well as an online consent form, participant criteria, and information about scheduling the interview either in person or through Skype™ video chat software. In addition, participants would be asked to identify other participants, a method of participant selection known as
snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). Snowball sampling relies on references from participants of other potential participants that fit the research criteria. For example, the first participant will refer someone who will then be asked to refer someone else (Patton, 2002; Sue & Ritter, 2012). Purposive sampling of hard-to-reach subgroups often relies on snowball sampling techniques to help find other participants that may meet the study criteria (Patton, 2002; Trochim, 2006; Wilson et al, 2013). To ensure anonymity of participants, pseudonyms would be used.

**Setting**

I collected data through personal contacts with Senior NCOs at RAF Mildenhall in the United Kingdom. My initial plan was to collect data from a large Christian university that enrolls thousands of military students through both residential and distance-learning delivery. Since online learning modality includes students from all geographic areas, there were no initial specified geographic boundaries or research sites. However, when the original research site did not work out, I focused on seeking out participants at RAF Mildenhall and RAF Lakenheath. Located roughly 30 minutes north of Cambridge and 90 minutes north of London, RAF Mildenhall and RAF Lakenheath are located less than five miles apart in a rural area of northeastern England. More than 8,500 active-duty Air Force members serve on either of the installations.

**Procedures**

I received conditional approval from the Liberty University IRB (see Appendix H) to gather data from participants at RAF Mildenhall and RAF Lakenheath, provided that I secure written permission from installation leadership at both bases. As typical in processing documents needing military leadership signatures, this was not a short process. My first step was sending information about my research to the RAF Mildenhall Staff Judge Advocate office for
an official legal review. The legal review was important to help ensure that I would not violate any known Air Force guidelines and policies. I also needed clarity about how not to confuse my role as a student with my official officer and chaplain role. I received a favorable legal review on December 21, 2015, from the Staff Judge Advocate’s office to interview Senior NCOs on RAF Mildenhall (see Appendix J). My next appointment was with the Command Chief (CMSgt) for RAF Mildenhall. The Command Chief is the senior ranking enlisted member on the installation charged with advising leadership while also managing, mentoring, and advocating for enlisted affairs. I received written permission from the Command Chief on January 6, 2016, (see Appendix I) and submitted documented approval to the IRB for full approval to proceed. The IRB provided approval on January 13, 2016 (see Appendix K).

Since it took 45 days to secure necessary permissions to proceed at RAF Mildenhall, I sent a Change in Protocol request (see Appendix L) to remove RAF Lakenheath as a research site since they recently had a change in the Command Chief leadership position. Since I was not stationed at RAF Lakenheath, I realized that getting approval could potentially take much longer and necessitate several more layers of administrative approval. The IRB provided approval to drop RAF Lakenheath on January 13, 2016, allowing me to proceed with soliciting participants at RAF Mildenhall.

The first step was simply talking with Senior NCOs, with whom I visited while working on the installation. To those meeting criteria, I sent a pre-consent email (see Appendix A) with a link to a Google Forms™ page where they could read more about the study and provide informed consent necessary for me to proceed (see Appendix B). The consent form also included contact information and a suggested pseudonym, which was necessary to help ensure
privacy. After participant consent, I followed up by sending participants a pre-survey email (see Appendix C), which contained the link to the actual survey instrument (see Appendix D).

Participants completed the 15-question survey about their educational journey and perception of spousal support. The last block on the survey page provided a text box where participants recommended a convenient time at which to conduct the face-to-face or Skype™ interview. All interviews in this study were conducted face-to-face. I received permission from the RAF Mildenhall Education Center to conduct each interview session in one of the available classrooms. I met with \(n = 12\) of the \(n = 14\) participants in one of the Education Center classrooms. In each of these cases, I changed out of my military uniform into civilian dress in order to reinforce visibly that I was conducting the interview as a graduate student, and not as an officer or chaplain. The other \(n = 2\) interviews took place at the participants’ office due to work demands and a request for short-notice accommodation. Although I was not able to change into my civilian attire in these instances, I began both interviews by covering my rank and chaplain’s cross reminding them that I was conducting the interview as a student, and not as an officer or chaplain. Both participants nodded in agreement, confirming this distinction, which was also described on the Informed Consent form.

I recorded each interview with a digital audio recorder and through the Voice Record Pro™ application on my personal iPad™. I also wrote down personal observations, which further served as a fourth source of data collection and personal reflection. All \(n = 14\) participants were interviewed in person, negating the need to use Skype™ capability. At the end of each interview, I provided each participant with verbal information about the final data collection instrument: the written timeline (see Appendix G). I sent each participant a blank written timeline by email. Next, I transcribed each interview and emailed each participant a
copy of the transcript along with their survey answers for their review and member checking (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994).

After receiving all three forms of data from recipients, I then began the process of pattern, theme, and content analysis (Patton, 2002). This included coding, finding patterns, identifying recurring themes, and placing content into meaningful categories (Patton, 2002). Dedoose™ software helped me in tracking, highlighting, coding, and labeling frequently repeated themes, words, and ideas (Creswell, 2013). Figure 4, below, illustrates the hermeneutic phenomenological research process from start to the data analysis step.

Figure 4. Research and data collection flowchart
Following data analysis, I spent several weeks pouring over the data and confirming or redefining categories. I watched for recurring themes, which could be understood through the lenses of Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition and Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012). Finally, after identifying, interpreting, and writing about the lived experiences of the \((n = 14)\) active-duty USAF Senior NCOs, I described the phenomena in relation to the research questions, along with implications from theory and empirical literature and recommendations for application and future research.

**The Researcher’s Role**

I currently serve as an active-duty chaplain in the United States Air Force. Prior to entering the military, I taught four years of high school and also served as an adjunct communication professor for two years at Walla Walla University. As an active-duty military chaplain, I communicate daily with men and women in uniform, including Senior NCOs. Unfortunately, I have listened to too many disheartening stories of Senior NCOs who served their country faithfully, yet entered their post-military retirement years unprepared for the job market because they lacked a bachelor’s degree. My own bias about the importance of pursuing higher education is partly the result of the many conversations I have had over the years with enlisted leaders unprepared for life beyond the military. I have been highly impressed by the level of supervisory leadership Senior NCOs provide to the military, yet their experience does not necessarily translate into reliable employment after their military service has ended. Military veterans have a higher unemployment rate than the general public (Wilson et al., 2013; Young, 2012). Additionally, 69% of active-duty military members, from all branches, indicate the highest rates of financial stress among all age groups (Blue Star Families, 2015). My role in sharing part of their USAF culture was to learn from the top enlisted members on RAF
Mildenhall, and hopefully paint an accurate portrait of their experiences and perceptions of spousal support during their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. It is my hope that the results of this study will inform Air Force education leaders about how to better prepare our dedicated USAF senior enlisted leaders for post-military life.

**Data Collection**

I originally intended to gather data from 12 participants, but was pleased to have (n =14) Senior NCOs agree to participate. I also originally attempted to solicit equal numbers of male and female participants, along with a balanced representation from each of the four major Air Force career fields (i.e. AFSCs) found on most installations: (a) operations, (b) maintenance, (c) medical, and (d) support. Unlike most Air Force installations, RAF Mildenhall did not have assigned personnel representing the medical corps. Medical care and treatment for RAF Mildenhall personnel took place at nearby RAF Lakenheath. Though RAF Mildenhall operated a small dental clinic, assigned military members belonged to the RAF Lakenheath installation. Thus, I did not have any Senior NCOs from the medical career field participate. Additionally, while I recruited several potential participants from the operations career field, I was not able to secure any Senior NCO consent to participate.

Data collection took place between February and July 2016 at RAF Mildenhall. The length of time was longer than initially expected due to delays in participant responses, and gaps between each data collection method. Participants work in units spread across the entire installation and are used to juggling dozens of tasks and duties. Each participant’s specific squadron was masked in order to preserve privacy. Also, listing the participant’s job title could reveal their identity because many supervisory positions at the Senior NCO level are “one-deep” positions occupied by only one individual (i.e., Superintendent of XYZ Squadron).
Overall, I received 22 verbal expressions of interest in participating, which led to 19 Senior NCOs providing informed consent to proceed with data collection. Of the 19 who provided consent, only \( n = 14 \) were able to fully meet study criteria and complete all three data collection instruments. One Senior NCO had valuable data, but had completed his bachelor’s degree before entering military service. Another participant completed both the survey and interview, but would not turn in a written timeline, even after several attempts and reminders. After numerous unsuccessful efforts to gather the final piece of data, I had to remove the participant for not completing the final necessary data collection tool.

Of the \( n = 14 \) Senior NCOs that participated in this study, \( n = 11 \) were assigned in a support squadron, while \( n = 3 \) worked in an aircraft maintenance field. One of the maintenance career field Senior NCOs was recently selected for a special duty assignment in a support career field. However, for the sake of consistency, experience and timing of the interviews, I assigned the “dual-hatted” participant to his maintenance AFSC. Senior NCOs are encouraged by policy to pursue re-training or special duty opportunities (i.e., Military Instructor, First Sergeant, Recruiter) to help the Air Force balance the mission and personnel requirements (Department of Defense, AFI 36-2618, 2012). Thus, it is not uncommon to find Senior NCOs taking short assignments outside their primary career field.

**Informational Meeting**

Within a few days of sharing the purpose of this research, two leaders from the RAF Mildenhall “Top Three” organization approached me with an invitation to share information about my study at their next fellowship meeting on February 10, 2016. The Top Three, found at many USAF installations worldwide, is the installation’s professional Senior NCO organization for enlisted leadership development and fellowship. I accepted their invitation and delivered a
15-minute presentation outlining the problem, purpose, and significance of my study to approximately 30 Senior NCOs in attendance. Speaking with the Top Three was also approved by the legal office during their review of my study (see Appendix J), and it turned out to be a tremendous way to get the word out to senior enlisted leaders on base. Immediately following the presentation, I was approached by several Senior NCOs that were interested in participating. Though many expressed interest in participating, most were not able to meet the following study criteria:

(a) active-duty Air Force Senior NCO;

(b) have at least six credit hours earned towards a bachelor’s degree;

(c) have five years or more years of marriage to your current spouse; and

(d) have one or more children.

I received \( n = 9 \) of my \( n = 14 \) participants as a result of the Top Three presentation. The rest were gained through snowball sampling and personal contact. Additionally, the president of Top Three asked if I could provide the Google Forms™ link through their Facebook™ page (see Appendix M). They wanted to solicit potential participants that were unable to attend the February 10 meeting. Through the initial contacts, the Facebook™ post, and snowball sampling referrals, 19 Senior NCOs provided informed consent to participate in this study. However, only \( n = 14 \) participants fully met criteria and provided necessary data through the three data collection instruments: surveys, interviews, and written timelines.

In order to ensure reliability, multiple sources of data were used. This approach is commonly referred to as data triangulation and involves using different sources of data collection to help validate a study (Merriam, 2009). The aim was not to yield identical results, but rather to help test for consistency and catch nuances or inconsistencies through differing kinds of data.
(Patton, 2002). The use of multiple sources in qualitative studies helps validate findings when different data sources produce corroborating evidence on codes, themes, or perspectives (Creswell, 2013). The present study relied on survey, interview, and timeline data to help support the purpose of this research and explore Senior NCO lived experiences that correlated to the research questions. The sequence of data collection methods (survey, interview, and timeline project) are listed below in order of expected completion time—shortest to longest.

**Survey**

The first data collection tool I used involved the use of an online Google™ Forms survey (see Appendix D). The survey allowed me to gather participants’ demographic information and opinions, code them, and analyze their responses more quickly with the help of the data automation inherent in the survey tool. The use of surveys as a methodological tool in gathering data is commonly found in quantitative, mixed-method, or case study research; however, surveys prove useful in hermeneutic phenomenological research by allowing the participant more time to reflect on their experiences and answers prior to a face-to-face interview (Fowler, 2014). Survey research, according to Sprenkle and Piercy (2005), is a method of gathering data from a specific group about a particular topic of interest that can help the researcher draw some generalizations about the larger population (Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005). Similar to the use of interviews, surveys can be an initial way to gather facts about participants’ thoughts, opinions, motivations, and behaviors (Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005).

This study gathered participants’ opinions and perspectives, similar to the survey method used in other phenomenological studies (Buice, 2012; Wyman, 2012; Starr-Glass, 2013). The risk in using surveys, as in other self-reports, is that the answers can be skewed if participants answer questions based on how they think the researcher wants them to respond (Lantta, 2013).
One of the advantages of using a survey, as opposed to an interview, is that the survey provides more unstructured time and freedom before answering—allowing for the possibility of more in-depth responses and perception statements. Participants can complete the survey asynchronously at the time and location of their choice, with an estimated completion time of 20 to 30 minutes. I analyzed survey results for any gaps in the initial criterion used to select the sampling pool and allow filtering of sample pool if necessary.

In addition to basic demographics, the survey instrument informed me about participant characteristics, economic factors, deployment history, academic history, and perception of spousal support. The data collected through the survey instrument enabled me to explore Research Question 3 regarding the stresses and culture of the military environment and how the military culture may have influenced perception of spousal support among Senior NCOs.

**Survey Questions:**

1. What is your age?
2. What is your rank?
3. How many years on active duty have you served?
4. What is your primary career field: (a) operations, (b) maintenance, (c) medical, or (d) support?
5. How long have you been married to your current spouse?
6. How many children are in your home?
7. How many years have you been working towards your bachelor’s degree? Please include the time you started earning credits toward your CCAF or other associate’s degree.
8. How many colleges and universities have you attended on your road to a bachelor’s degree?
9. Did you have to make any enrollment decisions (i.e., enroll or drop out) while deployed? If so, please describe.

10. Does your spouse already hold a bachelor’s degree (or higher)? If not, are they currently enrolled in a degree program? Please describe.

11. How has your spouse provided motivation to you in your pursuit of a bachelor’s degree?

12. Please describe how your spouse may have hindered or influenced a delay in your pursuit of a bachelor’s degree?

13. Have your military responsibilities ever created the type of family stress that caused you to drop out of your academic program? If so, please describe.

14. Please describe the pros and cons as a Senior NCO in the Air Force as it relates to pursuing your bachelor’s degree?

15. What was the most difficult challenge for you personally in the decision to pursue a bachelor’s degree?

Written Timeline

The written timeline followed procedures as outlined by Adriansen (2012), a qualitative researcher and associate professor at Aarhus University in Denmark. Each participant was asked to complete a written timeline of his or her college journey (Appendix G). The timeline helped me explore Research Question 1 regarding motivation and family influences during initial bachelor’s degree enrollment, and Research Question 2, which examined persistence and attrition decisions and transitions involving spousal influences. There may be several significant points along the timeline, which help explain professional, personal, and educational decisions.

I emailed each participant clear instructions, asking them to identify chronologically key education related events such as identifying when they began pursuing higher education
(associate’s and bachelor’s degree), dropout decisions, and other college-related enrollment decisions. Then participants were instructed to provide brief descriptions of any significant family, personal, or professional events that took place around the same time of their key education event. The timeline added to the development of a deeper understanding, which complemented the other data collection methods (Lytje, 2011). The timeline was used to help capture the process many military learners face in stopping and starting their degree programs within the context of personal and professional transitions. The timeline also allowed participants to share their life story through events and perceptions. This enabled me to understand a more holistic context that connected the participants’ public and private lives (Adriansen, 2012).

Senior NCOs who completed, or were presently pursuing, a bachelor’s degree were able to identify if and when they had to drop out of their college degree pursuits due to military or personal influences. It is common for military members to face requirements for (a) mandatory pre-deployment training, (b) computer-based training, (c) residential military education courses, and (d) additional duty training. The written timeline illustrated the intersection of events, along with perceptions of the events, trends of spousal support, and student persistence within a larger context of a participant’s life experiences (Adriansen, 2012). Adriansen (2012) identified four ways that a timeline helps the researcher explore the experiences of the participant:

First, it can provide a chronological overview of a story. Second, the visual representation allows a number of stories to be told along the same line and provides space for multiple representations instead of a singular language. Thirdly, it can affect the interview situation in a positive way by engaging the interviewee in the interview process.
Fourthly, it can assist an interviewee without a narrative packed and ready to be told. (p. 52)

The timeline was analyzed and compared with the interview and survey data to help identify recurring ideas, themes, and patterns. The purpose of the timeline project was to help me, as the researcher, explore the role of life events among Senior NCOs and how their perception of spousal support influenced their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree.

**Interview**

The third method of data collection involved using a general interview guide approach, which is also known in the literature as the “semi-structured” interview. Patton (2002) describes three basic types of interviews: the informal conversational interview, the general interview guide approach, and the standardized, open-ended interview. The general interview guide approach involves delineating a set of issues that need to be explored with participants before actual interviews begin (Patton, 2002). The 10 primary interview questions provided some basic structure and process to the interview, which allowed me to understand the phenomenon related to the research questions. Follow-up questions may be used, but the general interview guide approach allows the researcher the freedom to explore, investigate, and ask questions that may clarify the topic under discussion (Patton, 2002). The questions were open-ended enough to allow for participant reflection and researcher follow-up (van Manen, 1990). Another advantage of the general interview guide approach was the systematic and semi-structured method, which helped delimit the areas and issues which were discussed. While participants could take their perspectives and lived experiences in numerous directions, the interactions did have some structure and focus.

**Interview Questions**
Perceptions of Spousal Support and Enrollment in a Bachelor’s Degree Program

1. Please describe your decision to pursue a bachelor’s degree.

2. Please describe what role your spouse has played in your decision to enroll in a bachelor’s degree program.

3. Has your spouse ever played a role in your decision to either drop out or persist in your bachelor’s degree program? If so, please explain.

4. Describe how you have managed your military, family, and school responsibilities.

5. Did you ever have to drop out and re-enroll in your degree program? If so, please explain any factors that may have played a part in that decision.

6. Describe your spouse’s educational goals or degree completion and discuss if that played any part in you starting or persisting in your degree program.

7. How has the military lifestyle affected you and your spouse with your goals of pursuing a bachelor’s degree?

8. Has your senior enlisted status played any part in your pursuit of a bachelor’s degree?

   Please explain.

9. What have been the greatest challenges and obstacles to continuing in your pursuit of a bachelor’s degree?

10. Is there anything else you would like to mention about your experience as an active-duty Senior NCO pursuing a degree?

Questions 1 and 2 were specifically designed to understand the role of spousal support as a resource for individuals going through life transition events. This framework of support is interpreted upon the framework of Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012), which looks at the assets and liabilities of individuals making important transitions in life.
The framework of social or environment support also helped explain how the participants viewed spousal support as a motivational influence.

Questions 3 and 4 aimed to identify possible family role responsibilities to see if they were a deterrent to degree pursuit. Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition identifies environmental factors (family, jobs, finances) as having a greater impact on student departure decisions than academic variables.

Question 5 was intended to help me identify Senior NCO perception of spousal support if attrition and re-enrollment decisions took place for any reason. Question 6 sought to discover whether spouse educational experience and attitude were a motivational factor in any way. Research by Womack (as cited in Greig, 2008) found that family responsibilities were a factor that prohibited Air Force members in their completion and progress towards an associate degree, while McGivney (2004) and Park and Choi (2009) identified family support as a factor in adult learner persistence. Senior NCOs tend to be older and hold higher rank and authority than the typical Air Force student working towards an associate degree; however, these questions were helpful in understanding persistence and attrition decisions.

Question 7 helped me understand the interplay of military lifestyle challenges and their potential impact on family stability and cohesion. Keenan (2012) addressed how military spouses are often discouraged from pursuing education because of the uncertainty of future moves. Military spouses interested in pursuing higher education need the flexibility of portable degree offerings because of the challenges of military lifestyle.

Question 8 addressed if the participant’s Senior NCO rank played a part in pursuing a bachelor’s degree. This was intended to discover if future promotional goals were triggers to
enrollment or persistence, although it also provided insight from the vantage point of a seasoned enlisted leader.

Finally, questions 9 and 10 allowed the participants to discuss any specific challenges or experiences not previously discussed. These open-ended questions were important because they allowed the participant to feel free to share stories or experiences not previously covered.

**Data Analysis**

After obtaining participant data through interview, survey, and a written timeline, I used pattern, theme, and content analysis (Patton, 2002) to provide structure in classifying data results and to help in putting recurring themes into consistent codes and categories. The first step was to collect and organize the data for reading and “phenomenological reflection” (van Manen, 1990, p. 77). Next, I identified patterns, themes, and recurring content (Patton, 2002). Third, I simplified the data by putting patterns and themes into manageable codes and categories (Denscombe, 2010; Patton, 2002). A sample code might be “deployment hardship” or “break in education.” When participant’s words are used as code categories, it is referred as *in vivo* coding (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). The fourth step involved interpreting the data, being careful to “let the data tell their own story” (Patton, 2002, p. 457). This led to the final step in presenting the findings, drawing focus to the “substantive” significance of the phenomena (Patton, 2002, p. 467).

The reader may also make their own judgments about meaning of the data, but my own judgment and beliefs about the research findings are essential. The researcher’s "analysis-based opinions and speculations deserve to be reported and are usually of interest to readers given that you’ve struggled with the data and know the data better than anyone else” (Patton, 2002, p. 504). Figure 5, below, presents Patton’s (2002) simplified research and data analysis process.
Figure 5. Patton’s (2010) qualitative research and analysis process

The first step involved preparing and organizing the data-collection process. I used Dedoose™ Web-based software as a tool to help identify and highlight significant statements, ideas, and topics. The second step involved reading and transcribing all of the interview data. I read and reread each participant’s survey, interview, and timeline data prior to drawing any conclusions. Though Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2014) have provided a more structural flow of data analysis, I followed Patton’s (2002) inductive pattern, theme, and content analysis approach because of his emphasis on openness and exploration of the qualitative inquiry process. This meant that instead of immediately coding the data and generating themes, I sought to focus initially on fully understanding each individual experience before combining or aggregating data thematically (Patton, 2002; van Manen, 1990). This approach required patience and “considerable flexibility and openness” (Patton, 2002, p. 44). After initially seeking to reflect and understand participant experiences, I then wrote down observations of recurring words,
ideas, and patterns labeling them with identifiable codes (step three). Creswell (2013) suggests using approximately 25 to 30 codes, but the number of codes depends on the data.

The fourth step involved interpreting the data. It was important during the interpretation phase not to let my voice, as the researcher, overshadow the voice of the participants. Patton (2002) advocates using the actual words in reporting the data so that readers can make their own analysis and interpretation—“What people actually say and the description of events observed remain the essence of qualitative inquiry” (p. 457). Also, I was attentive to discovering whether any lived experiences could be understood through the formal theoretical lenses identified in Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition and Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012). The final step required me to present the synthesized findings of participants in a clear and concise manner.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness determines whether this study is both credible and dependable. This research relied on the use of several different types of sources, methods, and theories to help provide supporting evidence and ensure trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013). Different ways of looking at a phenomenon adds credibility by solidifying confidence and reliability of conclusions (Patton, 2002). In addition to various sources, methods, and theories, I provided participants a transcribed copy of the interview, which allowed member checking to ensure accuracy of their content and experiences.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability involves a process that can be seen as externally reliable with openness about researcher biases (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2013). It involves pulling back the curtain of study methods, data processes and procedures, researcher assumptions and biases, and
consideration of rival conclusions. Creswell (2013) asserts that confirmability is more desired than objectivity in establishing reliable data value. To ensure confirmability, I used triangulation data collection methods (interview, survey, and timeline), added participant quotes, took detailed notes, and addressed my potential bias and assumptions.

**Member Check**

I transcribed each interview and combined it with survey data. Then I emailed each participant a copy of their survey and interview so that they could member check and confirm the content. According to Moustakas (1994), member checking helps increase the validity of the narrative and helps ensure accuracy of the interpretation. Creswell (2014) suggested that member checking does not entail deleting or taking back the transcript, but allows the participant to examine the major themes and findings from the interview.

**Dependability**

Dependability relies on the assumption that the researcher’s data would provide consistent and dependable results (Merriam, 2009). Dependability, though similar to confirmability, involves whether the “process of the study is consistently stable over time and across researchers and methods” (Miles et al., 2013). Creswell (2013) notes that keeping an audit trail, or running log, will help achieve both dependability and transferability. I kept an audit trail that included details about each participant, dates and types of communication with them, and information about the data collection tools.

**Transferability**

Transferability refers to whether what is discovered in one context is applicable in another context. It also implies transcending the particular in order to understand the general (Miles et al., 2013; Wyman, 2012). Transferability may be difficult with the topic for this
research, but I took thick descriptions of the participants’ voice and observable emotional responses to allow the reader to compare the phenomena with their own experiences (Shenton, 2004). Thick descriptions, according to Creswell (2013), allow the reader to determine transferability based on shared characteristics. Spousal support data that applied to Senior NCOs, for example, may also apply to junior grade enlisted members, although the differences in responsibilities due to rank could involve different levels of work stress. Purposive sampling was also used to help provide transferability context. Credibility was enhanced by my role as a chaplain, which included prolonged engagement with military members, including Senior NCOs. Data source triangulation also helped establish credibility (Creswell, 2013).

**Ethical Considerations**

Since this research sought to analyze the lived experiences of Senior NCOs, there was the potential that participants could mistakenly reveal sensitive personal and family information. Those who serve in the military are used to keeping information “For Official Use Only” and are used to working around information that may need to be classified or protected. I required each participant to use a pseudonym to help provide anonymity.

I asked the RAF Mildenhall Staff Judge Advocate to conduct a legal review to ensure that my role as an officer wouldn’t violate any legal or ethical rules. I also requested a legal review to help ensure that my dissertation process and data collection procedures would not violate any legal or ethical regulations or policy. All material research data (typed, electronic, and audio) was stored in a locked office or in a locked file with oversight and access available only by me. After audio interviews were transcribed, the audio files were deleted in accordance with the IRB application. Research data files were kept on a private computer with password protection and will be deleted three years after completion of the study.
Finally, I provided research information to each participant and specified the rules of engagement in the online consent form (Appendix B). Each participant agreed to participate voluntarily, with no expectation of financial remuneration. Participants were notified that their decision to participate would not affect their current or future relations with the Air Force or Liberty University. Also, participants were informed that they may decide not to answer any questions and could withdraw from the research study, at any time, without reason. They were given the freedom to provide notification of their desire to withdraw by email, or during the interview, with all information collected on and by the participant deleted and destroyed. Finally, to help ensure accuracy and ethical compliance, I sent each participant a transcript of their survey and interview data so that they could member check their descriptions.

**Officer Enlisted Factors**

As an active-duty chaplain, the only people I was supervising during data collection were two chaplains, both Captains (O-3), and two SSgt (E-5) chaplain assistants. If, for any reason, I was to work closely with or supervise a Senior NCO, I would have immediately eliminated them from participation due to the potential conflict of interest. This was not needed. Each participant participated voluntarily and provided informed consent in advance. Additionally, the participant’s anonymity helped mitigate any perception of personal or professional gain by participating in this study.

Finally, I was attentive to ensure that no classified information was discussed or transcribed if any subjects came up in the data involving sensitive intelligence or potential top-secret information. If any potentially sensitive information did surface, I was prepared to take data to an intelligence officer to preview materials so that no classified information was

Summary

In this chapter, I reiterated the purpose of this study and provided reasons for selecting the hermeneutic phenomenological research design. I gave descriptive steps regarding the research process, participant selection, data collection procedures, and analysis steps. Fourteen active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs (E-7 through E-9) that have earned at least six credit hours towards their bachelor’s degree were selected to provide responses to an online survey, an audio recorded interview, and a written timeline project. Patton’s (2002) pattern, theme, and content analysis data analysis was followed providing direction in collecting, coding, and interpreting the data. While several studies have examined the stresses and challenges that military families face (Bibus, 2013; Hayek, 2011; Keenan, 2012), there is, at the present time, a gap in the literature about the extrinsic motivational role spouses may have on Air Force Senior NCOs in their degree pursuit. Understanding how positive or negative spousal support affects Senior NCOs in their degree pursuit will give insight to Air Force leaders and education professionals who hope to see the 38% bachelor degree completion rate improve. With more understanding and insight, these dedicated senior enlisted leaders may be given better preparation for life and work after their military service commitment.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

“Education is the most powerful weapon, which you can use to change the world” (Koller, 2011).

—Nelson Mandela

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of spousal support as an extrinsic motivational influence on active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. An additional, though essential, part of this study included exploring how the military culture influenced Senior NCO perception of spousal support and degree pursuit. Since 62% of Air Force Senior NCOs do not have a bachelor’s degree or higher (Air Force Personnel Center, 2016a), this research may help provide perspective and insight to military educational leaders as they try to increase Senior NCO higher education participation and prepare them for post-military professions.

Research Questions

This hermeneutic study explored the lives of \( n = 14 \) active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs in an attempt to better understand their experiences through the framework of the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** How has perception of spousal support, if any, contributed to the decisions of Senior NCOs to begin pursuing their bachelor’s degree?

**Research Question 2:** How has perception of spousal support, if any, influenced Senior NCOs in their academic attrition and persistence decisions?
Research Question 3: How has military culture influenced perception of spousal support and degree pursuit among Senior NCOs?

As previously discussed in chapter one, education is a high priority for enlisted Air Force leaders. In order for active-duty Airmen to reach the highest enlisted ranks, they must complete a Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) associate’s degree in their career field specialty (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2618). While 91% of Airmen in the top three enlisted USAF ranks have earned a CCAF associate’s degree, only 38% further their educational goals by completing a bachelor’s degree or higher (Hollis, 2016).

This chapter will explore the lived experiences and perspectives of \( n = 14 \) active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs stationed at RAF Mildenhall, United Kingdom. Following background information of study participants, this chapter will describe several of the recurring and prominent themes that surfaced in surveys, interviews, and written timelines. Listening to the participants as they described their journey towards earning a bachelor’s degree is important to understand why such a high number complete their associate’s degree, yet fail to finish a bachelor’s degree before retiring from active-duty service.

Participants

Initially, I had planned to collect data from a large Christian university that enrolls a high number of military students. Although the university’s Military Affairs office provided me with written permission to offer support in finding potential participants, the office decided to retract its offer shortly before securing IRB approval. This led a short delay until I determined a new source for gathering participants. I next considered securing approval to gather participants from RAF Mildenhall, where I am assigned, along with nearby RAF Lakenheath. I did not know
whether these sites would be viable since securing approval on military installations can be a time-consuming task involving numerous steps for approval.

I requested approval from the IRB to solicit research participants from both military installations; however, I decided to first attempt to gather all participants from RAF Mildenhall. I received conditional IRB approval (see Appendix H), dependent on written approval from installation leadership. This is no small feat as my next step required securing a legal review from the RAF Mildenhall Judge Advocate Office (JAG), a process that took three weeks to secure. The legal review was important to help ensure by due diligence that I was not violating any known Air Force guidelines and policies, nor bringing confusion with my role as a student instead of communicating with participants as a chaplain. I was then able to secure written permission from the 100th Air Refueling Wing, RAF Mildenhall, Command Chief, the highest office for enlisted leadership affairs. After receiving JAG, Command Chief, and IRB approval (see Appendices I, J, &K), I began plans to solicit participants at RAF Mildenhall. I only planned on securing approval for RAF Lakenheath if I had trouble gaining enough participants.

I gave a presentation to the RAF Mildenhall Top Three, a Senior NCO organization comprised of the top three enlisted ranks stationed at RAF Mildenhall. The Top Three leaders invited me to give a 15-minute informational presentation on February 10, 2016, and follow up with a Facebook™ page post about the study. I received \( n = 9 \) of my \( n = 14 \) participants following the presentation, and gathered the rest by snowball sampling and word of mouth. I received verbal responses from 22 people interested in participating with 19 Senior NCOs providing informed consent to proceed with data collection. Of the 19 who provided consent, only 14 were able to fully meet study criteria and complete all three data collection instruments. One Senior NCO had valuable data, but had completed his bachelor’s degree before entering
military service. Another participant completed all steps except the written timeline. After numerous unsuccessful efforts to gather the final piece of data, I had to remove the participant for not completing the final necessary data collection tool.

For this study, participants will not be identified by specific squadron (i.e., Communications, Civil Engineering, Aircraft Maintenance), but by one of the following four major Air Force career fields, as identified in chapter one: (a) operations, (b) maintenance, (c) medical, and (d) support. Unlike most Air Force installations, RAF Mildenhall did not have assigned personnel representing the medical corps. Medical care and treatment for RAF Mildenhall personnel took place at nearby RAF Lakenheath. Although RAF Mildenhall operated a small dental clinic, assigned military members belonged to the RAF Lakenheath installation. Thus, I did not have any Senior NCOs from the medical career field participate.

While I recruited several potential participants from the operations career field, I was not able to secure any Senior NCO consent and participant. Of the \( n = 14 \) Senior NCOs who participated in this study, \( n = 11 \) were assigned in a support squadron, while three worked in an aircraft maintenance field. One of the maintenance career field Senior NCOs was recently selected for a special-duty assignment in a support career field. However, for the sake of consistency, experience, and timing of the interviews, I assigned the “dual-hatted” participant to his maintenance AFSC. Senior NCOs are encouraged by policy to pursue re-training or special duty opportunities (i.e., Military Instructor, First Sergeant, Recruiter) to help the Air Force balance the mission and personnel requirements (Department of Defense, AFI 36-2618, 2012). Thus, it is not uncommon to find Senior NCOs taking short assignments outside their primary career field. It is also not uncommon to find Senior NCOs with two earned CCAF degrees: their primary career field, and their special duty assignment career field.
Data collection took place between February and July 2016 at RAF Mildenhall. The length of time was longer than initially expected due to delays in participant responses and gaps between each data collection method. Participants work in units spread across the entire installation and are used to juggling dozens of tasks and duties.

Each participant provided informed consent through a Google Forms™ link and selected a pseudonym chosen and agreed to by both the participant and myself to help provide another layer of privacy. Each participant’s specific squadron was masked in order to preserve privacy. Also, listing the participant’s job title could reveal their identity because many supervisory positions at the Senior NCO level are “one-deep” positions occupied by only one individual (i.e., Superintendent of XYZ Squadron).

After gathering survey, interview, and timeline data from each Senior NCO, I read through each participant’s descriptions in order to try to grasp the individual and collective phenomenological essence (van Manen, 1990). I then analyzed data using Patton’s (2002) pattern, theme, and content inductive analysis, resulting in writing down observations and detecting recurring words, experiences, and ideas. Significant codes and categories were developed to help identify similar patterns and themes. I uploaded data content into Dedoose™ qualitative software, which helped provide structure in classifying data results and place recurring themes into color-coded categories.

Twelve participants were male, and only two were female. While four female Senior NCOs provided consent to participate, only two were able to finish each of the data collection steps. One participant completed two of the three data collection steps, but moved to a new assignment without completing his written timeline. After several attempts to reach him, he chose not to continue with the study. While I was hoping for an even split of male to female
participants, a 14% female participant pool is a little lower than the actual active-duty Air Force average of 19% enlisted females (Air Force Personnel Center, 2016a). As indicated in Table 10 below, nine participants were Caucasian, three were African-American, and two had Asian ethnicity. Their average age was 39 years old, they had been on active duty an average of 19 years, and they had been married to their respective current spouses an average length of 13 years with an average of two children per family.

Table 10

Participant Profile Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Grade/ Rank</th>
<th>Career field</th>
<th>Years on active duty</th>
<th>Years married to current spouse</th>
<th>Number of children in home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>E-7 (MSgt)</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betsy</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>E-7 (MSgt)</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>E-7 (MSgt)</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CJ</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>E-8 (SMSgt)</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>E-9 (CMSgt)</td>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarence</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>E-7 (MSgt)</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>E-7 (MSgt)</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JB</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>E-8 (SMSgt)</td>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>E-7 (MSgt)</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>E-8 (SMSgt)</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mikel</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>E-7 (MSgt)</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MJ</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>E-7 (MSgt)</td>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>E-8 (SMSgt)</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trey</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>E-8 (SMSgt)</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVERAGE</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As of August 2016, 84% of active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs were married, with 20% comprising a “dual military” family (Air Force Personnel Center, 2016a). Dual military families are identified as one military member being married to another military member in the same or different branch of service (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, n.d.). Four \((n = 4)\) of the \((n = 14)\) participants in this study \((29\%)\) were from dual military marriages, each spouse also an active-duty Air Force Senior NCO. The four dual military married participants were all MSgts (E-7) married to SMSgt (E-8) spouses. None of the military marriage spouses that fit the study criteria chose to participate in the research. Finally, although only 20% of active-duty Air Force personnel (of all ranks) are stationed overseas (Air Force Personnel Center, 2016b), 100% of this study’s participants were stationed at RAF Mildenhall, United Kingdom.

**Participant Profiles**

The following participant profiles—along with Table 10, *Participant Profile Data*, and Table 11, *Participant Bachelor’s Degree Pursuit*—are not intended to provide exhaustive narratives or biographies. Rather, they are intended to provide a brief introductory portrait of the study participants’ personal, professional, and academic status.

**Anne**

Anne is a 39-year-old, Caucasian master sergeant who has been married to her active-duty Air Force Senior NCO husband for 20 years, the second longest duration among participants, and has three children. Anne is passionate about education, both as a student and as a military supervisor. She enrolled in a bachelor’s degree nursing program at Louisiana State University (LSU) soon after her high school graduation. She met and married her active-duty Air Force husband a year later, followed by receipt of military orders requiring a move overseas to
Incirlik Air Base in Turkey. Forced to make an enrollment decision, Anne chose to withdraw from her LSU nursing program and instead moved overseas with her husband. Yet despite putting her initial college plans on pause, Anne persisted over the next 14 years at four different colleges and earned only earn her Bachelors of Science degree in Business Management from Phoenix University, but also two CCAF associate’s degrees along the way. In 2014, she enrolled in an MBA program in Strategic Leadership through Trident University.

**Betsy**

Betsy is a 39-year-old, African-American master sergeant who has been married to her husband, also an active-duty Air Force Senior NCO, for 16 years. She participated in this survey only two months before her retirement ceremony to honor her service of 20 years in the Air Force. She and her husband have two children and were making plans to move from the United Kingdom to Nevada shortly after her retirement for her husband’s next assignment, and Betsy’s goal of completing her degree. Betsy has been enrolled in five different universities over the past 10 years in her bachelor’s degree pursuit. Part of the delay was, she admitted with laughter, due to switching degree programs several times. Yet she expressed confidence that her current bachelor’s program in Marketing at Columbia Southern University would be a good fit. Betsy was very expressive and cheerful as she described the challenges of pursuing her degree over the last decade through multiple deployments and frequent separation from her spouse through back-to-back deployments.

**Christopher**

Christopher is a 35-year-old, Asian-Pacific master sergeant of 17 years. He has been married to his current wife for eight years and they have two children. He has been working for 15 years on his bachelor’s degree having attended six colleges. He is currently enrolled in an
Operations Management bachelor’s degree program at Arizona State University. A primary factor in his persistence decision with his bachelor’s degree program is hearing from former Air Force colleagues who separated or retired out of the Air Force, but ended up having a difficult time finding a job they want. His wife is a stay-at-home mom, which has allowed him to pursue his academic and professional goals. Like other Senior NCOs, Christopher is heavily task-saturated both at work and in his volunteer activities for the installation.

CJ

CJ is a 41-year-old, Caucasian senior master sergeant who was promoted to chief master sergeant shortly after participating in this research. He has served 22 years, has two children, and has been married to his current wife (his second marriage) for 12 years. CJ took 20 years to earn his bachelor’s degree, graduating in 2014 from American Military University with a degree in Criminal Justice.

CJ has had 10 short-tour or “remote” assignments in his 22 years of service. This is quite high as remote assignments are usually unaccompanied by family members. Some short-tour assignments allow for family members to accompany the military member, but the length of assignment is then typically doubled to 24 months. CJ originally joined the Air Force so that he could receive the GI Bill and help finance an education beyond high school. None of his family members pursued higher education beyond technical degrees, and CJ hopes to go further than his family members.

CK

As the only chief master sergeant among study participants, CK is a 40-year-old, Caucasian maintenance career field leader who has served 22 years on active duty. He has been married to his wife for 19 years, and they have three children. CK graduated from Southern
Illinois University at Carbondale with a Bachelor of Science in Work Force Education. While it took six years to earn his bachelor’s degree, he started taking college classes 18 years before earning his degree with most of his early credits applying towards his CCAF associate’s degree. He had to take courses at four colleges and universities, and only had to drop a college course shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks when he was called to work with the Security Forces Squadron as an augmentee. CK’s wife has a bachelor’s degree in English and a master’s degree in Education, with certification to teach middle or high school.

Clarence

The newest Senior NCO among participants, Clarence is a 34-year-old, Caucasian father of two who has been married to his current spouse for eight years. He completed his Bachelor of Science degree in Occupational Safety through Columbia Southern University in 2013 after 13 years of college courses at two universities. His wife has a master’s degree in Early Childhood Development and has had to keep her teaching certifications current by taking six credits every three years, even while stationed overseas. Clarence did have to drop out of his bachelor’s program one time due to a short-notice deployment tasking to a Forward Operating Base (FOB) in Afghanistan. He said that he wanted to take extra time to focus on his family and make sure they were taken care of during their time apart. Clarence noted that the decision to pursue a bachelor’s degree was an easy one; He knew that he had to do it to be both competitive in the Air Force and prepared for life after his separation from active duty.

Greg

Greg is a 38-year-old, Caucasian master sergeant who has been on active duty for 18 years. He has been married to his wife for 10 years, and they have two small children. Greg currently serves his squadron as a First Sergeant. The First Sergeant job is a special-duty
assignment for Senior NCOs that requires them to serve as a “dedicated focal point for all readiness, health, morale, welfare, and quality of life issues within their organization” (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2618, 2012, p. 17). This position often includes long hours advising commanders, providing resources for Airmen, solving problems, reviewing Enlisted Performance Reports (EPR), and working with other Senior NCOs and the installation command chief master sergeant to help ensure that Airmen needs are met.

Greg started college immediately after his high school graduation in 1996. He loved the college atmosphere, but said, “those pesky classes just got in the way” (Greg, personal communication, 2016). After a year and a half of college, he came to the conclusion that he wasn’t ready. The college lifestyle was “too wild and unstructured” (Greg, personal communication, 2016). Instead, he dropped out of his college path and joined the Air Force. He would take a class “here and there” for the first seven years, but finally earned his CCAF associate’s degree in Electronic Systems Technology in 2003. He got married in 2006 after his fiancée completed her Master of Social Work degree. In 2007, Greg was tasked with a short-tour remote assignment to Turkey and started work towards his bachelor’s degree again—picking up where he dropped off 10 years earlier. Since that time, he has had several extended delays in his program during periods of personal and professional transition, but hopes to finally graduate in 2016 with his bachelor’s degree.

JB

JB is a 41-year-old, Caucasian senior master sergeant who has served for 19 years on active duty. Married to his current wife for 11 years, they have one child in their home. JB graduated third highest in his high school class and entered college with a full ride at age 19. However, he pulled a GPA of 0.0 for two semesters in a row due to prioritizing “partying over
college.” He moved around a little and tried to find work over the next several years, but joined the Air Force in 1997 in an effort to “figure out what I was going to do” (JB, personal communication, 2016). His military recruiter appealed to making a four-year military commitment in exchange for the GI Bill where he could go back to college and get on the right path. JB laughed during the interview, relating that it makes for a great story when he counsels junior enlisted Airmen who only plan on staying in for a few years. “Well, so was I” (JB, personal communication, 2016), he reminds them.

JB completed his CCAF degree in 2005, a year after moving to Sheppard Air Force Base to serve as an Aircraft Maintenance instructor. Instructors were required to complete an associate’s degree within one year of instructor duty in order to maintain schoolhouse accreditation. When he looked around at his fellow instructors, he noted that “80 to 90% of pipeline instructors at Sheppard are in a college bachelor’s or master’s program” (JB, personal communication, 2016). Sheppard’s proactive education climate motivated JB to pursue his bachelor’s degree in Business from Wayland Baptist University, where he graduated in 2007. He immediately enrolled in a Master’s of Business Administration Degree program, but ceased pursuit in 2009 in order to prioritize his family and work responsibilities.

Luke

Luke is a 41-year-old, Asian-American master sergeant who has served on active duty for 20 years. He and his wife, also a Senior NCO, have been married for 7 years, the second marriage for both. Together, they have two children in their home. He enrolled in the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) in 2009, completing coursework necessary to earn his CCAF degree in 2013. Following his CCAF degree, he was selected for promotion to master sergeant and decided to stay on with UMUC and continue taking classes towards a bachelor’s
degree. Feeling that he was going in the wrong direction, he transferred to Grand Canyon University in 2015 in order to major in Psychology.

Luke initially discounted a degree “thinking I could just retire and continue working for the government” (Luke, personal communication, 2016); however, his wife inspired him to go for a bachelor’s degree. Luke’s wife was promoted to senior master sergeant in Spring 2016, having recently completed her own bachelor’s degree program in Business Management through UMUC. Shortly after sewing on her new rank, she left the United Kingdom in order to attend the seven-week AFSNCOA course, while Luke manages long days at work, full evenings with the children, and working on homework until midnight.

Michael

Michael is a 42-year-old, Caucasian senior master sergeant who has been on active duty for 24 years. He and his wife have been married for 22 years and have four children, the oldest of which is a 2015 high school graduate. Michael spent nine years taking classes from nine colleges and universities until he received his Bachelor of Science in Business Management from National Louis University in 2003. He has had to enroll and transfer more frequently than any of the other participants. He had received acceptance notices from Troy State University and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, prior to enrolling, but when he officially applied to take classes during a deployment to Afghanistan, both colleges denied his enrollment.

Michael’s wife was in her first year of college when they met, but dropped out when she married Michael and moved to another state during a PCS. Though she has never returned to college, she has been a stay-at-home mom “by choice” (Michael, personal communication, 2016) so that she could home-school their four children. This is partly why Michael has worked to earn
a bachelor’s degree—so that he could still provide for the family when he eventually leaves the Air Force.

**Mikel**

Mikel is a 37-year-old, Caucasian master sergeant who, at the time of the interview, was serving in a special-duty assignment as a First Sergeant for one of the largest squadrons at RAF Mildenhall. He came on active duty 17 years ago, and has been married to his active-duty spouse, also a Senior NCO, for eight years. They have two children living at home.

Mikel was motivated to pursue his education after noticing many of his peers having trouble getting jobs after separating from the Air Force. He was also motivated by his two brothers, who graduated with their Bachelor of Science degrees in chemistry and chemical engineering. Mikel also started to pursue his bachelor’s degree in chemical engineering before he entered the Air Force. He has had to pause in his bachelor’s degree pursuit 11 times over a period of eight years due to the need to focus on studying for promotion, learn a new job as a First Sergeant, PCS moves, two family vacations, and lack of reliable Internet service during deployment. At the time of the interview, Mikel was five courses and a capstone assignment away from completing his bachelor’s degree through American Military University.

**MJ**

MJ has served most of his 17-year career in the Aircraft Maintenance career field, but was transferred in 2016 to serve in a special-duty assignment with support squadron. A 35-year-old, African-American male, MJ has been married to his spouse for 16 years and is the father of two children. He has attended five colleges and universities over the period of six years in his pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. He initially joined the Air Force as an alternative route to attending college, but upon noticing that his high school classmates were finishing their college
degrees, he became motivated to keep up with his friends. MJ also credits his supervisor, who told him that in order to get a good EPR report, he would have to go to school. “So she made me go to school,” he recalled. “Once she made me go, I started and it all went from there” (MJ, personal communication, 2016). He completed his Bachelor of Science in Organizational Management through Voorhees College (SC) in 2007, and went on to complete a master’s degree in 2012.

Rich

Rich, a 44-year-old, Caucasian senior master sergeant, served 25 years on active duty and retired from the Air Force shortly after this interview took place. He and his wife have been married for six years, and they have two small children in their home. He graduated in 2000 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Human Resources from Mount Olive College. Unlike other participants, Rich was the only participant in this study to have only attended only one college or university on his path to earning his bachelor’s degree.

When Rich initially joined the military, he hoped to serve his required enlistment commitment of four years, and then separate and use money from the Montgomery GI Bill to attend college. “That was my goal. Twenty-five years later, I’m still in” (Rich, personal communication, 2016), he explained. When was asked three years in whether he was going to stay in the Air Force or separate, Rich determined that he did not have enough GI Bill funds to finish a college degree, so he decided to stay on active duty with a re-enlistment commitment. His spouse has a Bachelor of Science degree in Graphic Design and has been a strong proponent in motivating Rich to earn his bachelor’s degree.
Trey

Trey is a 39-year-old, Caucasian senior master sergeant who has been on active duty for 20 years. He and his wife of 19-years have two children in their home. Trey works in a highly deployable, support-career field, having deployed 10 times during his first 10 years in the Air Force. This instability early on explains why it took six years to earn a two-year CCAF associate’s degree. Trey has only had to deploy once in the last 10 years, which helped provide more stability and routine. He only deployed once while working on his bachelor’s degree, and with his associate’s degree transfer credits, was able to complete his bachelor’s degree in only two years. During his associate’s degree pursuit, he dropped classes six times, but did not have to drop coursework while working on his bachelor’s degree.

Trey’s experience in earning his bachelor’s degree is different from most of his peers in that Trey did not merely take one or two classes a semester—he enrolled full time. Shortly after having their first son, Trey began pursuing a bachelor’s degree full time, which meant going to school every night, Monday through Friday, for three to four hours, after working a full shift during the day. He would take a Saturday class from noon until 8:00 p.m., two classes, two hours each, on Monday and Wednesday evenings, followed by two more two-hour classes Tuesday and Thursday evenings. He would do his homework on Fridays and Sundays, which ultimately left very little time for family involvement. Table 11, below, provides more details about each participant’s journey towards earning their bachelor’s degree.
### Table 11

**Participant Bachelor’s Degree (BD) Pursuit**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Years working towards BD</th>
<th>Colleges/ universities attended</th>
<th>BD complete?</th>
<th>Spouse active duty?</th>
<th>Does spouse have completed BD?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y (SMSgt)</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betsy</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y (SMSgt)</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CJ</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarence</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>Y (MA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>JB</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y (SMSgt)</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mikel</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y (SMSgt)</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MJ</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trey</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AVERAGE</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>-</strong></td>
<td><strong>-</strong></td>
<td><strong>-</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Major Themes**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of the Senior NCOs in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree, while also hoping to capture the essence and meaning of those experiences in the context of spousal support and military culture. Participants provided information of the phenomena through an online survey, a personal interview with semi-structured open-ended questions, and a written timeline of their educational journey. Research data provided a “reliving” of the phenomena, which enabled me to best translate the lived experience for the reader.

The majority of Senior NCOs in this study indicated that they were driven to pursue a bachelor’s degree through a combination of intrinsic (internal) and extrinsic (external) motivational variables. Since this phenomenological study explored participant’s “lived experience,” it was not surprising that several variables factored into their enrollment and
persistence decisions. Responses went beyond a quantitative binary response (i.e., A or B: “yes” or “no”) and included several streams of motivation.

I discovered nine predominant themes through an analysis of participant survey, interview, and timeline data:

- Personal goal fulfillment,
- Enhanced promotion opportunities,
- Supervisor influence,
- Pausing is not quitting,
- Transitions influence enrollment decisions,
- Spousal support key to persistence,
- Duties constricted family cohesion,
- Military financial aid enhanced persistence, and
- Priority of CCAF degree.

Appendix N displays an enumeration table of identified codes and themes. Each of the nine themes will be explained through the participants’ voice in relation to the three research questions. These recurring life stories provided a salient perspective of the experiences of active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs and their perception of spousal support in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. Figure 6 illustrates how eight of the nine themes were associated with the research questions, and also identifies the unexpected theme regarding the priority of the CCAF degree.
Figure 6. Major themes of perceived spousal support
Research Question 1

How has perception of spousal support, if any, contributed to the decisions of Senior NCOs to begin pursuing their bachelor’s degree?

While the purpose of this study has been to explore and understand the lived experiences of active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs and their perception of spousal support in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree, most participants did not attribute his or her spouse with any predominant influence regarding an initial enrollment decision. However, there were a few (n = 3) participants that acknowledged a degree of extrinsic motivational spousal support and encouragement to begin pursuing a bachelor’s degree. There was also (n = 1) participant that attributed a delay in his college enrollment to prioritizing his wife’s educational goals ahead of his own.

Luke: Sometimes I kind of discounted a degree altogether, thinking I could just retire and continue working for the government. Blue collar, basically. And I married my wife, who was full of aspirations, that inspired me to go after it myself… she embodies the drive that I have always wanted, but never pursued for various reasons.

Clarence: She knew how I felt that I wanted to get a degree before I got out of the service, whether that be after eight years or 20 years, that I wanted to have a bachelor’s degree at that time. She encouraged me to get started… she encouraged me a lot in getting the ball started.

Greg earned his CCAF associate’s degree five years after joining the Air Force. However, he stopped pursuing his educational goals until four years later when he was assigned to a one-year unaccompanied (i.e., remote) tour of duty to Turkey. His job allowed him some extra time, and
he admitted to getting bored and started to look for “enriching activities” (Greg, personal communication, 2016).

**Greg:** My wife was always of the opinion that I should work to get my bachelor’s, at a minimum. Not because the world says so, but because she thought I was smart enough to do it, and she wanted the rest of the world to acknowledge that… while I can’t say that her influence drove me to take up my bachelor’s degree, what I will say is that it’s been 10 years since I’ve taken up the mantle, and we’re celebrating our 10th anniversary this summer. So clearly she’s had some effect, if only subtly.

Only one participant, CJ, attributed his decision to delay pursuing his bachelor’s degree to his former spouse. CJ has been married 12 years to his current wife, but he met and married his first wife while stationed in Turkey in 2000. Though they later divorced in 2004, CJ commented that he supported his first wife’s educational goals ahead of his own, so what little money he had as a junior enlisted Airman went to paying for her college expenses. Thus, his delay was more of a family prioritization issue, rather than a perception of receiving support from his first spouse.

Although CJ lacked funds to attend college himself, he heard about the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) where students could earn college credits by challenge exams. CJ took and passed nine CLEP tests during a three-month period, which earned him 27 college credits towards his CCAF associate’s degree. When a military education counselor asked him why he was taking so many tests, he replied “I have no money. I’m putting that towards my wife’s education” (CJ, personal communication, 2016). Though CJ’s had an initial delay in pursuing his academic goals, his fast track credit-by-exam approach actually helped accelerate him in earning his CCAF degree within two years. He enrolled in a bachelor’s program at Washington State University two years later, transferring most of his CCAF associate’s degree
credits. Although participants did not ascribe their spouses with heavily influencing their decision to begin a bachelor’s degree program, they did identify three primary motivational variables: (a) *Personal Goal Fulfillment*, (b) *Enhanced Promotion Opportunities*, and (c) *Supervisor Influence*.

**Personal Goal Fulfillment.** More than half \((n = 8)\) of the 14 participants indicated that earning a bachelor’s degree was primarily to fulfill a personal goal. Other variables were also mentioned by these participants, but their language and descriptive accounts suggested that the decision to pursue a bachelor’s degree was largely intrinsically motivated. Additionally, joining the Air Force was frequently perceived as temporary means to the end goal of graduating from college.

**Betsy:** I’ve always had goals to have a bachelor’s degree. I just think that I would have had it by now… I knew that I wanted to eventually get my bachelor’s degree. Being married to a military person, I knew that it was going to be hard, but it was just something that I wanted to do.

**Christopher:** It’s [pursuing a bachelor’s degree] always been a personal goal. It’s one of the reasons why I mainly joined the Air Force. When I came in, it was 75%, and now that it’s 100%, it is more of an incentive for me to pursue my bachelor’s degree.

**Clarence:** The decision [to pursue a bachelor’s degree] was easy for me. I knew I had to do it... I knew all along that I absolutely wanted to have a bachelor’s degree before I got out of the Air Force—just to make myself competitive in the market.

**CJ:** I originally came in for the ability to have an education beyond high school. No one in my family pursued anything beyond a technical degree… [the decision to pursue a degree was] internalized motivation.
**JB:** It was a personal failure of mine for not [pause] coming out of high school on top and not making it through college and succeeding because high school was easy. Never studied, I just went to class, did my homework in class. It was easy. Way too easy. And then failing. I had some personal issues to get through. So getting my bachelor’s was a proving to myself. I guess you could say.

**JB:** I have to go back to high school. That’s really when it started. I grew up and college was where I was supposed to go. I was very academic in school. I graduated third highest in my class. That’s where I was headed… I was going to do four years and get out so I could go back to school and get on that path that I was supposed to be on. I was a four-and-out guy. Makes for a great story when I’m counseling Airmen [laughter]. When they say, “Well, I’m getting out” then I say, “Well, so was I.”

**MJ:** My decision to pursue a bachelor’s degree was for personal [reasons] at first because when I first came in the Air Force, I came in because I didn’t want to go to school… When I did come in, I noticed that people I graduated high school with were finishing their high school degrees. That made me make it a personal goal: to finish a bachelor’s degree.

**Rich:** When I initially came in the military, that was my goal—I wanted to get my bachelor’s degree and get out. That was my goal. Twenty-five years later, I’m still in. So when I came in, I knew I wanted to get a degree. I knew that I wanted to get a degree, that was my goal before I even came into the military. [Pause] That was why I came in. I wanted to get money to go to college. My ultimate goal was to get that money and go to college, and see where that took me.
Mikel’s motivation was a mix of personal ambition and need for future career options. His two brothers graduated with their Bachelor of Science degrees: one in chemistry and the other in chemical engineering. Mikel attended college for a year with the intent of earning a degree in chemical engineering. Yet, even though he took a detour by enlisting in the Air Force, he still felt an internal drive to complete his degree in order to keep up with his brothers, ensure he’s professionally competitive with his peers, and to provide for future family stability.

Having earned two CCAF associate degrees, Mikel decided to focus on earning his bachelor’s degree while serving as a First Sergeant. First Sergeant duty is considered a special Senior NCO position with the focus on unit readiness and welfare, along with leadership advisement (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2618, 2012). As a First Sergeant, Mikel noted “needing a degree down the road [was] something that I wanted to do. It was partially driven by my job decision in the Air Force, but also knowing that I needed it on the outside” (Mikel, personal communication, 2016).

**Enhanced Promotion Opportunities.** Career progression was a factor that several participants identified as an influence to enroll in a bachelor’s degree program. The Air Force, as part of a hierarchical DoD meritocracy, promotes Airmen based on a variety of performance evaluation scoring models. Promotion usually includes expanded spheres of influence, more responsibility, higher pay, and consideration for special job assignments. Performance is the most important variable for promotion and is critical for “development of skills and leadership abilities and in determining who will be selected for advancement through assignments, promotions, and other personnel actions” (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2406, 2015, p. 8).
While all Air Force personnel are required to undergo an annual evaluation, Senior NCOs are assessed annually with an extra layer of scrutiny than junior enlisted airmen (E-1 to E-4) and NCOs (E-5 to E-6). While there are minor variances for MSgt (E-7) and SMSgt (E-8)/CMSgt (E-9) promotion consideration, Senior NCOs face a two-phase evaluation process that takes into account the member’s Weighted Airman Promotion System (WAPS) score and an annual central evaluation board score (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2502, 2015). The central evaluation board, comprised of a general officer, a colonel, and two chief master sergeants, uses an evaluation process to assign each eligible Senior NCOs a board with the purpose of “reflecting their assessment of relative leadership potential” (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2502, 2015, p. 46).

Slightly over half ($n = 8$) of the participants indicated that enrolling in a bachelor’s degree program was heavily influenced by enhanced promotion opportunities. Earning a bachelor’s degree would help with awards packages, EPRs, and hopefully, higher board scores for promotion in the Senior NCO ranks.

**Anne:** I know it’s different, but in the military you have to separate yourself from others. And that [happens] with schooling. I have a lot of Airmen, and I know they aren’t going to be career Airmen—“What are you going to do when you get out?” Yes, CCAF is wonderful. It is an accredited associate’s degree, but it’s only going to get you so much.

Although Betsy was primarily driven to pursue her bachelor’s degree as a personal goal, she shared her insights on the importance of needing a higher degree for promotion opportunities. When speaking about her husband, a SMSgt (E-8), she commented,

*But as long as you have your certain box checked, you have your CCAF. That’s a box you have to check to become a Senior NCO… I think now at the rank he’s at [SMSgt],*
when they look at his packages and stuff now, that was always the biggest thing for them. “Your package looked good, but you need more education.” That kind of kicked him into gear like “Okay, I’ve done all that I could do to get to this rank, but now I need to step it up a notch and get the education portion because most SMSgts this day and age already have a bachelor’s degree.” So you’re working against those folks.

CJ: It’s no secret that your education is not data masked on your board briefs for promotion. It’s also no secret that they’re always pulling statistical data on the number of personnel who have been promoted with a bachelor’s degree. So, yeah, it was definitely a focus of mine.

CJ described how his completed bachelor’s degree data did not make it on his board brief the first time he tested for CMSgt (E-9). His degree was on his EPR, but not on his board brief. “My board score was not where I wanted it to be” (CJ, personal communication, 2016), he said. However, the following year, his bachelor’s degree was part of his board brief. CJ commented, “I jumped 60 points in my board. That can’t just be because I managed to get a stratification. The education had to play a part” (CJ, personal communication, 2016).

CK: I actually had a self-assessment chart for making senior [master sergeant] and chief [master sergeant] that if you had a bachelor’s degree, it could help you with your board score, which was really what it was all about. That was the whole purpose of me getting my degree, to be honest. I still don’t have a desire to truly use my degree.

Clarence: I needed an education bullet for an awards package, so I thought it was a good time to get the ball rolling on my bachelor’s degree… I see a lot of MSgts starting to sign up for bachelor’s programs now. They’re saying, “This will make me viable when the promotion board comes around.” …A lot want to improve themselves from a
management standpoint, to get management degrees, and I hope to do that as well, but there are also a lot of folks who get into it simply because it does look good on a promotion board package.

**Greg:** [I] took the odd class here and there because they [the Air Force] encourage you to. I got my CCAF in those first seven years, and it wasn’t until about 2007 that I just realized that I had become ready. I was a SSgt at the time. I already ticked off the boxes (for promotion factors) that I needed to, and I found that if I was going to have to take these classes, because we appreciate continuing education, it made no sense to do so without a path… It gets a little bit harder now, since they’ve now changed the rules to make a CCAF mandatory to obtain certain ranks. It was always highly suggested before. Now it’s mandatory.

**Luke:** With more rank, comes more expectations and responsibilities. As a Senior NCO pursuing a bachelor’s degree this late in the game, it has become my main focus. This tends to look bad, as it takes priority over my professional enhancement.

**Michael:** I completed my bachelor’s as a Staff Sgt…. even though I was a SSgt, I was looking forward to becoming a Senior NCO. I knew that the board I had to meet to be promoted was coming, and the board would look back 10 years. I have to be able to say, “If I want to make it as a MSgt [E-7] first time, or relatively quickly, then I need to set myself up for success 10 years backwards.” That’s what I was doing: setting myself up. I was forward-thinking as a Jr. NCO, as if I was sitting on a board wanting to hire a TSgt [E-6] to become a MSgt [E-7], “What would I be looking for?” What is going to make me standout Jr NCO among other Jr. NCOs? Sure my testing ability on WAPS is one
thing, but there’s somebody out there who can test like me. I need that little extra and getting my degree was that extra.

Trey discussed with his wife that pursuing a bachelor’s degree would not only help with promotion within the senior enlisted ranks, but could help if he decided to pursue becoming an officer.

**Trey:** Soon the requirement came out that to get past MSgt [E-7], you needed to have a CCAF. Which meant that I accomplished the educational requirement to make CMSgt [E-9]. I thought, “Well, officers make more than enlisted,” and I thought about the benefits for my family long term, so I continued to go to school and pursue a bachelor’s… I sat down with her, and we discussed the differences between enlisted and officer, and she didn’t fully understand the differences between stripes and bars, but she knew that I would do whatever I loved to do.

**Supervisor Influence.** While the role and influence of supervisors was not addressed in any of the survey or interview questions, several participants mentioned that they were heavily influenced to start working towards earning their bachelor’s degree by their supervisor’s mentorship and prodding. Several (n = 6) participants described how their military supervisors helped motivate them to enroll in a bachelor’s degree program.

**Anne:** I had my mid-term feedback with my supervisor. He says, “Yay! You have two CCAFs. What else are you going to do?” And I was like, “Well, you know I’d like to get a bachelor’s [degree], but I don’t know what I want to do it in.” At the time I was 31, and having a CCAF, you know, you’re basically half way there. He knew it would take 18 to 24 months to finish my bachelor’s [degree]. “Well, do you want to be 32—just 32—or do you want to be 32 with a bachelor’s degree?” I know this is supposed to be about
spouses, but of course, my spouse was there too. Because I said, “Yes, I want one.” He gave me a timeline and made me pick a school by a certain date. He made me pick a degree plan by a certain date, and he made me pick a class by a certain date… he pushed me towards it.

Not only did Anne describe how her supervisor played a role in her picking a college to begin her bachelor’s degree plan, but also, she mentioned that having a supportive supervisor was just as important to a supportive spouse.

**Anne:** Basically, having a supervisor who supports you is just as important as having a spouse support you. It really is, because if your leadership at work is just as supportive as your husband or wife is, it makes a big difference… You know, having a supervisor who is just as invested as you are, personally, and your spouse is, I think it’s really vital. And that’s why I encourage all my Airmen.

**Betsy:** Like all of us, you have mentors that look at your package. When you test you’re like, “I’ve done everything I possibly can to make rank. What else do I need?” And they say, “Ok, you have all your blocks checked, but the only thing that I see could be holding you back is this degree.”

**Mikel:** [Supervisors] would look at the EPR and say “Self-improvement,” “Development,” “Try and take a couple of CLEPs [College Level Examination Program].” But there was nothing pushed beyond that. Supervisors and Flight Chiefs would occasionally say, “You should get your education. It’s free in the Air Force.”

**MJ:** [Someone who] had a huge influence was one of my supervisors. She’s retired now. She had a master’s degree at the time and she told me during one of my feedback sessions, “In order to get a good performance report from me, you’re going to have to go
to school.” So she made me go to school. Once she made me go, I started and it all went from there.

**CK:** As I progressed, I had supervisors who constantly told me that college was needed to get promoted in the military. First is your CCAF degree, or Associate’s degree, and I knew I needed a bachelor’s degree if I ever wanted to be perhaps a SMSgt [E-8] or CMSgt [E-9] in the Air Force.

**Rich:** I’ve always been afforded great supervisors, even if we had to work late. If I had a class, I used to have some supervisors who’d let me go. They’d say, “Hey, you have a class to get to. Guess what, you should be enrolled in school, if you want to leave early.” I had some supervisors who were really helpful in that aspect.

**Research Question 2**

_How has perception of spousal support, if any, influenced Senior NCOs in their academic attrition and persistence decisions?_

All Senior NCO participants (n = 14) in this study expressed gratitude for the support they received from their spouses while pursuing their bachelor’s degree. No participant identified any spousal influence which led them to either drop a college class, or drop out of a degree program altogether. When asked if spouses played any role in the participants’ decisions to drop out of their bachelor’s degree program (Interview Question 3), participants consistently denied any spousal influence. Participants were also asked whether his or her spouse may have hindered, or contributed to a delay in, their bachelor’s degree pursuit (Survey Question 12).

Participant data revealed several themes regarding spousal support and whether it played a role in Senior NCO attrition and persistence decisions: (a) _Pausing is Not Quitting_, (b) _Transitions Influence Enrollment Decisions_, and (c) _Spousal Support_.
**Pausing is Not Quitting.** As discussed in Chapter 1, there are several possible definitions of attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Hebert, 2006; Hoyt & Winn, 2004). This research used an operational definition of attrition to refer to student behavior that reflects consistent non-enrollment in a college degree program. For example, if a participant dropped out of a college program because of an overseas move or deployment, they weren’t identified as dropping out unless they personally interpreted their “lived experience” as intentionally dropping out of a degree program, or if they remained in an inactive status for an indefinite period of time. Participants were seen as persisting in their bachelor’s degree if their survey, interview, and written timeline data revealed “the progressive reenrollment in college, whether continuous from one term to the next or temporarily interrupted and then resumed” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 374).

Every participant in this study dropped either a college class or a degree program, at least temporarily. Several \((n = 3)\) participants interpreted their personal attrition behaviors as dropping out of their degree program, while \((n = 11)\) participants considered their withdrawal actions as merely a temporary break, or pause, in their degree pursuit. Participants used various terms to describe their actions in withdrawing from either a college course or degree program:

- a “pause” (8 participants),
- a “break,” (6 participants),
- a “delay,” (3 participants),
- “time off,” (1 participant), and
- a “hiatus” (1 participant).

Michael recorded 11 “Pause in Education” comments on his timeline where he took breaks for professional and personal reasons. However, I noted that he did take breaks in his coursework
six times when he was studying for promotion or attending PME courses. He took a “pause” in his studies during the same time when three of his four children were born. He further commented that he “delayed” his bachelor’s degree pursuit when he felt that his studies were taking up too much time away from his family. Michael did not attribute any of his enrollment breaks to his wife’s influence, instead commenting that she wanted him to stay enrolled. “She has assured me that this was something I needed to do for the family. [It] took me years to accept that” (Michael, personal communication, 2016).

**Michael:** I once worked for a Major that [sic] told me, “If I have time to go to school, then I am not giving him enough time at work.” He made it so difficult to go to school, I simply did not go… There’s never been a point where I said with all seriousness, “I can’t do it anymore. I’m out. I’m done.”

**Anne:** I never dropped out of a course in my bachelor’s degree.

**Betsy:** I wouldn’t say “drop out” actually. I would just say “on break” because the schooling now is as long as you’re not inactive for a year, you’re normally good. So I would just take a break with classes. It’s a pause… my military obligations are always first, so when I realize that work was getting hectic, I just decide to take a break.

**Christopher:** I have only dropped out due to ops tempo down range.

**CK:** I never really dropped out. There were times where I put it on pause because I was PCSing, or cross-trained to become a First Sergeant for a little while—learning the new skills I needed to be a First Sergeant. I kind of put stuff on pause. The only time I signed up for a class and didn’t finish it was when I was just getting started in 2001. [The terrorist attacks of] 9/11 hit. and I was in the middle of my psychology class. I loved the
class. But I got called up to be a Security Forces augmentee and just couldn’t get away for school.

**Clarence:** [Dropped a class] Just one time, and I re-enrolled in that one class when I reached my deployed location about a month later… I’ve only dropped out of one course ever, and that was because I was hit with a short notice deployment. I wanted to take that time to focus on my family to make sure they were taken care of.

**Greg:** I’ve taken the odd semester off here and there, but never had to drop an entire program. I did withdraw from a single class [and it] turned out to be far more work than I had anticipated. I was re-training to become a Shirt [First Sergeant] at the time, and it was just too much. I later re-took the class and earned my one and only “B” since coming back to school.

**JB:** The only enrollment decision I made in relation to deployment was to **NOT** [emphasis added] enroll. I did not continue to pursue and complete my bachelor’s degree until I was in a non-deployable billet as an instructor at Sheppard AFB.

**Luke:** The only time I had to drop a class was when I transferred from UMUC to Grand Canyon University. That was because I no longer needed the class—it was a writing class—for the degree plan I was going for. Other than that, I’ve taken a leave of absence because I was PCSing.

**Mikel:** I dropped a class that started prior to deployment and then would have finished during the deployment. The time and requirements of out processing, and then the uncertainty of Internet availability to complete the online assignments while traveling and arriving to the deployed location, as well as the unreliability of the internet at deployed locations, influenced this decision.
**Rich:** [I] was struggling in a math class, then I had to miss two classes back to back due to an exercise. When I returned to the class, I had missed an exam, and the class was a chapter ahead of me. I withdrew from the class; which TA had covered. However, if you fail the class, or in my case withdraw, I was required to pay the Air Force back.

**Luke:** The classes are continuous. There are no breaks, so if need a break, I have to request it. For whatever reason, if it’s more than two weeks at a time, they basically just push “pause,” and then, as soon as you’re ready to start back up, they roll you right back into the following start-up.

Trey acknowledged that he dropped out of his associate’s degree program after getting deployed six times in his first six years of military service. His unit, known as Red Horse (Civil Engineering), is a highly deployable career field. Trey wrote that he withdrew from class every time he deployed, eventually dropping out of the associate’s degree program. However, even though Trey twice described his actions as “dropped out,” his actions reflected more of a temporary delay since he immediately “re-entered upon returning from each deployment” (Trey, personal communication, 2016). Hoyt and Winn (2004) would categorize Trey as a “stop-out” student since Trey continuously re-enrolled to complete his studies.

Even though Greg commented that he never had to drop out of an entire college program, he did take a year off when his wife gave birth to their first son, he changed jobs, and the family experienced a PCS move stateside from overseas. “All of a sudden,” Greg wrote, “free time was out of the question, and there was SO [emphasis added] much more to do” (Greg, personal communication, 2016). Even though Greg interpreted his lengthy delay as “took some time off” and “took the year off” (personal communication, 2016), his lengthy, three-year delay in college coursework was more than “temporarily interrupted” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 374).
CJ dropped out of his bachelor’s degree program while on active duty, crediting his attrition decision to a demanding new job assignment working as an action officer on a MAJCOM staff. This leadership staff position required him to be away from home an average of 247 days a year over a four-year period.

CJ: The focus was work. That means that I had to prioritize. It benefitted me, obviously, career-wise. But I had to sacrifice... People say, “Well, you have to sacrifice.” But it also depends on the job. Being a TSgt [E-6] when I started on a MAJCOM staff, and we were in the middle of transforming our entire career field. And, I was on the cusp of that. I was able to be part of that. I didn’t have time to focus on education outside of that. It just wasn’t there, so that was the choice – I don’t regret it.

**Transitions Influence Enrollment Decisions.** As shown earlier in participant profiles (see Table 11), \( n = 13 \) participants attended more than one college or university with an average attendance at four colleges or universities. Only Rich stayed with only one college for his entire degree program. Further data analysis indicates that of the \( n = 13 \) multi-institution participants, \( n = 12 \) switched enrollments from one college or university to another during periods of transition involving a PCS move or deployment. Required military transitions created conditions, both personal and institutional, that triggered an enrollment change among colleges and universities. Anne and Rich were the only Senior NCOs who did not transfer institutions during PCS and deployment events (see Table 12); however, Anne did enroll and dis-enroll from Montana State University after taking one required course for her CCAF degree.

Michael, for example, had to drop out and re-enroll in college seven times in 24 years due primarily to PCS moves. When Michael was deployed to Afghanistan, he wanted to take courses at Troy State University where he was previously accepted. He was denied, however, due to his
deployment. While still in Afghanistan, he applied to take classes at the University of Nevada Las Vegas since he took classes through them before entering the military. He was rejected again “because I was deployed.”

**Michael:** You’ve to go through the whole process of having your transcript sent over, and you have to pay for them, anywhere from $2 to $10 per school, per transcript. You have to research them all [verbal sigh]; mail all the applications in; have them all evaluated… It is really disheartening, and the process is overwhelming.

Michael hoped to finish with UMUC where he attended classes in Germany. However, when he and his family to Washington, DC, the UMUC admissions office wouldn’t accept all of his classes. “UMUC would not transfer all credits from UMUC in Germany to UMUC in D.C.” (Michael, personal communication, 2016), thus, requiring him to take additional classes. This frustration triggered Michael’s final bachelor’s degree college enrollment transfer.

**Michael:** At this point, I went to National-Lewis University, which was another university that had a campus on the base in Washington, DC. I walked in and said point blank, “I have been going to university for 10 years now… I don’t care what my degree is in, anymore. I want you to tell me what can you offer me, and guarantee I will graduate. National-Lewis University admissions staff laid out an 18-month plan to graduation, and Michael switched his university yet again because “they have a college campus that met where I was, and they had a plan for me, and a goal I could see” (personal communication, 2016). Michael completed hybrid classes requiring both traditional face-to-face classroom instruction combined with online requirements. While Michael’s enrollment and transfer difficulties were higher than most participants, his experience does provide a window into the reasons behind why some military members switch colleges during transition periods.
**Betsy:** The eight credits that I lost with Columbia, I had similar classes with Phoenix, but they didn’t transfer over. If you look at the background of the classes, they are literally the same class but they had somewhat of a different name. [Talking to self] “I feel like I’ve done this before,” but they didn’t agree.

Further analysis also discovered (n = 11) participants who dropped one or more classes when faced with deployment, PCS, work-related obstacles, or course difficulties.

**Clarence:** Just moving so frequently… that takes time. When I’m moving, my family, they depend on me. It’s all the little things that accompany a move. It takes time away from education. I think for me, it’s been the biggest obstacle I’ve had.

Anne, JB, and MJ never dropped a class while actively enrolled in college. Trey, on the other hand, deployed six times from 1996 to 2001 and withdrew from his classes every time. Yet he later deployed for eight months and continued taking his bachelor’s degree program class. When Trey’s wife wanted to have a second child, he became even more driven to complete his degree as soon as possible. Table 12 further delineates participant attrition behaviors taken from survey, interview, and written timeline data. The table describes personal and professional triggers that led to enrollment changes to include switching colleges, dropping courses, and dropping out from a college program, altogether.
Table 12

*Participant Attrition Behaviors*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Dropped associate’s (AA) or bachelor’s (BD) degree pursuit</th>
<th>Dropped class(es): Spousal influence</th>
<th>Dropped class(es): PCS or deployment related</th>
<th>Dropped class(es): Work-related</th>
<th>Dropped class(es): Course-related</th>
<th>Switched institutions during PCS or deployment</th>
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Although participants in this study did not indicate any perception of spousal influence that contributed to an attrition decision, whether dropping degree program or college classes, participants did indicate repeatedly that spousal support was motivational in their degree persistence decisions. I analyzed descriptive language and phrases used by participants, and found three recurring types of spousal support: (a) domestic support, (b) emotional support, and (c) spousal (academic) competition.

**Spousal Support Key to Persistence.**

*Spousal Competitive Support.* An interesting and unexpected discovery was the frequent comments of spousal competition, primarily academic, that helped motivate Senior NCOs to persist. Half (n = 7) of the Senior NCOs in this study described how they were motivated by positive spousal competition. Betsy’s husband, also an active-duty Senior NCO (SMSgt (E-8)), was also enrolled in a bachelor’s degree program when I collected data.
Betsy: Early on in our relationship I was going to be the one that was only going to be in a couple years, retire, then pursue school. So, he pushed me and pushed me to do that. We’re kind of at the same level now [laughter]. He caught me… We motivate each other to get it done.

Christopher: She’s played a very supportive position. She’s already in this with her degrees, so she is highly encouraging me to finish mine… she went straight from high school and finished her college degree. I joined the military right out of high school. It’s kind of like a carrot for me. I want to catch up to her so that I can equally contribute to her in an education area.

CJ’s second, and current wife, had already earned a bachelor’s degree in economics when they married. She provided consistent encouragement for him to finish his bachelor’s degree in order to catch up to her.

CJ: [My wife] consistently reminded me, “I’m here already. You’ve got to catch up.” It was never anything more than her making sure that I achieved my goals that I told her about that I could get—that I should’ve had a long time ago… she helped push that to me and made it a challenge. She basically said, “You know, I’m a college graduate. You should be as well. You’ve got the skillset. You’ve achieved as much as you can now. Why don’t you turn towards your education?”

CK’s wife was enrolled in college when they first met. She went on to earn her bachelor’s degree in English, and then completed a master’s degree in education. Her academic achievements provided healthy competition for CK to catch up.

CK: Yeah, there was a little bit of competition between her and I [sic]. Initially I thought I would get my bachelor’s degree before hers. She was a stay-at-home mom, so she put a
lot of her college stuff on hold to be a stay-at-home mom. But she now has a master’s
degree in education. She’s qualified to be a middle school or high school teacher. She has
certification to teach. As well as her bachelor’s degree is as an English major. Watching
her get that definitely drove me to match that.

**Clarence:** I procrastinated for my first enlistment to actually get enrolled until I married
my wife. She actually has a master’s degree through Marshall University. Being that
educated was one influence… she’s a lot smarter than me. So there’s that. And I can’t do
a lot to change that, but I can [bring] my education up to her level. Indirectly, I wanted to
aspire to some of the credentials that she had. In that way, she provided encouragement to
me constantly.

Greg’s wife had a master’s degree when they married. While he indicated that he wasn’t in
competition with his spouse, his wife fostered a mental dissonance regarding where she thought
he should be academically:

**Greg:** I’ve always known my spouse is smarter than I am. She, on the other hand, would
disagree, saying that we’ve simply led two different lives. When I was frustrated at the
level of education I was receiving, and explaining that I didn’t think I was getting good
value for my investment of time, it was she that pointed out that after almost two decades
of experience, I’m no longer operating at the undergraduate level. If I would just finish
out my bachelor’s, then I could start work on a master’s, which is likely more at my
current level.

Mikel’s wife is also an active-duty Senior NCO (SMSgt (E-8)) with 20 years of service. Both
were presently pursuing their bachelor’s degree when data was collected.
Mikel: When we were dating, she was enrolled in her bachelor’s degree but had been stalled for a while. We just graduated [from] the NCO academy. She was talking about getting enrolled in hers [bachelor’s degree], and we made a mutual decision to start pushing each other, and it kind of clinched my decision that this is the right time and place to get it done, and support each other along the way… she was pretty critical, reminding me to sign up when I’d get down to the time limit to register for my next class. We’d kind of goad each other along and encourage each other.

Spousal Persistence Encouragement. Participants seemed to become the most animated and enthusiastic during interviews when they described the extrinsic motivational encouragement they received from their spouses to persist in their bachelor’s degree program. Of the \((n = 14)\) Senior NCOs interviewed, \((n = 13)\) provided descriptive examples of spousal support that helped motivate them to stay resilient and persistent in pursuing their bachelor’s degree.

Anne: There were times where I felt like I wanted to drop out, or where I felt like I had way too much going on right now; and maybe I should drop it. And he would say, “No. You’ve got this!” And he would talk me out of dropping out and push me forward… he is my best friend. We’ve been married 20 years now, and we’ve been together 21 [years] this month. And I couldn’t have done it without him. And, like I said, having everything that I had going on, there were times where I was so overwhelmed that I thought, “I just can’t do this.” And, he was like, “Oh, yes you can!”

Anne: [Smile, pause] You’re making me reflect back on stuff that you don’t realize at the time [laughter]. I couldn’t have done it without him. There’s no way. There’s just no way I could have done it without him.
**Betsy:** My spouse always pushed me because early on in our relationship, I was going to be the one that was only going to be in a couple years, retire, then pursue school. So, he pushed me and pushed me to do that.

**Christopher:** My wife has always been an inspiration for me to complete my degree. As far as dropping out, she’s never told me to stop taking classes, she’s always been an encourager for me… to make sure that I have time so that I can pursue my goals. She’s always been pushing me to take a class. She knows my schedule, so she knows my down time. She’s constantly making sure that it’s filled properly [laughter].

**CK:** She encouraged me and reviewed my papers and writings. She’s been 100% persist. When I didn’t feel like doing any more college classes, she helped me pick the college classes to get back into it. When the time came and I just needed a little bit extra push, whether it was studying or just an extra set of eyes on a paper, I wrote… she’s definitely the reason why I completed my bachelor’s degree.

**Clarence:** Because she was educated, I felt like she encouraged me heavily.

**Greg:** On a regular basis, my wife constantly pushes me to keep going—to finish out. She reminds me how close we are to the finish line. She tells people how proud she is of me. So persistence is key. I can say that the entire time that I’ve been taking classes, since I re-started taking classes, 10 years ago, I’ve only had to drop one [class].

**JB:** Anytime it got rough, she’d just give me that “Suck it up Buttercup!” She’d push and help give those motivational… you know.

**Luke:** Once I got motivated to do some of my own self-improvement, it was helpful to have somebody who had the same type of motivations. I think she inspired me. I just
couldn’t sit around and watch her further herself, while me… I’d just sit around and not do anything about myself.

**Michael:** I think she was always there to encourage me. Every time we moved bases, [she encouraged] me to find a university that works, and enroll and keep going. Pick up and go.

**Mikel:** Never drop out. She’s always been very supportive. She’s been an encouragement. “Go ahead and get enrolled in that next program.” Though take an occasional break. My classes start about once every month, so I can overlap courses or take a one-month break, depending on leave or work situations. She was pretty critical, reminding me to sign up when I’d get down to the time limit to register for my next class. We’d kind of goad each other along and encourage each other.

**MJ:** She was very supportive of me in being persistent. She never gave me the inclination of “Hey, I don’t want you to go to school anymore because it’s taking up too much time away from the family.”

**Rich:** My spouse has been a very strong supporter, probably even more than myself. Sometimes I would be a little bit like, “Should I take one class?” “Should I take two?” “If I take two, I’ll finish sooner.” And my wife would always be like, “Yes, take as much as you can handle. Let’s get it done as fast as possible.” Yeah, she was awesome, probably more than me. I would say she was a very good supporter.

**Trey:** If we didn’t have a sit down and discuss it, and if she didn’t trust me that it [pursuing a bachelor’s degree] was the best thing for us, and if she didn’t support me, I would not have been able to get my education. I doubt I would be SMSgt [E-8], anyways. The fact that she trusted me, which could be viewed negatively, and say “Who
else would she trust.” But it is huge that she did trust me with this, and that it was the best thing for the family in the long term.

**Domestic Support.** While every participant in this study expressed appreciation for spousal support, \( n = 10 \) Senior NCOs expressed the importance of domestic support, especially in carrying more household and childcare responsibilities. This type of support provided the participant with extra time and freedom needed to study, without feeling as if they have abandoned their spousal and parenting commitments.

**Anne:** So, three days a week I was doing something outside of the house. It was very helpful to have my husband be so supportive. He was my biggest fan. He encouraged me when I wanted to give up. [He was] behind me when things were going rough, or having a hard time, you know, “Hey, you got this. I’ve got the kids. I’ve got you. We’ve got each other.” Having that support is amazing.

**Anne:** My husband suffered more, probably, than the kids did. I’d come home; I’d feed the kids; we’d have dinner or whatever; we’d have a little bit of nighttime; and they’d go to bed. Then I would go do schoolwork. That’s why it was so important to have that conversation with my husband before I started, because he’s the one who suffered more than anybody, because the kids have to have the attention… there were times when I didn’t even see him. So it was like almost being like a single parent at times.

**Christopher:** The type of steps that she does, is that she takes care of our children. Right now she doesn’t have a job, so it allows me to focus mainly on my career and my personal goals.
Clarence: At home, my wife was great. We had two toddlers—a lot of work. But she allowed me to have time to work on that… she also performed a lot of household chores that we typically share in order to free up time for me to study.

JB: Encouraging me, letting me prioritize school. Being okay with me prioritizing school during those two, three, four nights a week where instead of getting up when I’m on mid-shift and spending time with the family having dinner, it was like “food in the mouth, out the door, see you tomorrow.” So it was supportive and encouraging like that, absolutely.

Greg: She sacrifices her time to watch the children while I study and has always been supportive when I impulsively sign up for this class or that. Finally, when I told her at the beginning of the year that this was it and that it would be hard, but I wanted to double up on classes and just push through. She simply smiled and told me to go for it.

Michael: She’s was a stay-at-home mom, and she home-schools our children. If she went to get her degree, she wouldn’t be home-schooling our children. She’s a stay-at-home mom by choice, so it makes more sense for me to get the degree so that when I do leave the Air Force, I can still provide for our family.

Mikel: Throughout the time we have been enrolled, we both have encouraged each other and provided support in and around the household so could take the time needed to complete our coursework. We swap days taking responsibility for chores around the home so the other can focus on school; and we also will declare homework days where we keep each other on task and make sure we both take appropriate breaks during the day.

MJ: My spouse is more in a supporting position because I have two kids. Our kids were much younger back when I was doing my bachelor’s degree, so we needed childcare in
order to do that because she worked, and I had an Air Force job. She was more being supportive, and us just working together to work out the daycare issues and giving me time to do my homework.

Rich: She has always been an excellent proponent in assisting me in whatever way she can. For example, I would stay late after work to finish a paper; she would cook dinner, feed the kids, and put them in bed if necessary.

Trey: And she was going to support me, when she saw that it was time to study, that she would not try to interfere, unless somebody was bleeding in the house.

Research Question 3

How has military culture influenced perception of spousal support and degree pursuit among Senior NCOs?

Several participants in this study indicated that their military responsibilities, as Senior NCOs, were extremely time consuming. This led to shared feelings of guilt, remorse, and regret for many participants. Their voices painted a picture of the difficulties in trying to manage their personal academic goal with work demands and family commitments.

Six data collection questions provided avenues for participants to share their experiences, and enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of their “lived experience” (van Manen, 1990). Survey Question 13 addressed possible family stresses resulting from military responsibilities, while Survey Questions 14 and 15 addressed challenges and obstacles participants have observed or experienced regarding pursuing a bachelor’s degree. Interview Question 4 explored how participants managed military, family, and college responsibilities; Interview Question 7 addressed whether the military lifestyle impacted participants’ persistence goals; and Interview Question 9 provided an opportunity for participants to discuss the greatest challenges and
obstacles, from their perspective, in pursuing a bachelor’s degree. I found two recurring themes that highlighted the delicate interplay of belonging to a military subculture and how this impacted perception of family stability, cohesion, and perceived support: (a) Senior NCO duties constricted family cohesion, and (b) military financial aid enhanced persistence.

**Senior NCO Duties Constricted Family Cohesion.** The most frequently cited difficulty of bachelor’s degree pursuit among Senior NCOs was the heavy workload associated with a leadership position. Higher rank brings with it expanded responsibilities, more influence, additional training, and less discretionary time. Most Senior NCOs in this study \( n = 11 \) addressed personal challenges in trying to balance work, college, and family commitments. Keeping the family connected and cohesive was hard while working and living in a military subculture.

Anne: The greatest challenge and obstacle with my bachelor’s [degree] was finding the time to get my classwork done. When you work as long of hours as I did, and you have young kids [pause]... so, I would get home from work, and my kids go to bed at eight. What happened was [that] my husband suffered. My husband suffered more, probably, than the kids did. I’d come home; I’d feed the kids; we’d have dinner or whatever; we’d have a little bit of nighttime; and they’d go to bed. Then I would go do schoolwork... there were times when I didn’t even see him. So it was like almost being like a single parent at times.

Anne, married to an active-duty Senior NCO spouse, was very mindful of the sacrifices that her family endured while she attended school. During the interview, there was a pause when Anne reflected on her bachelor’s degree graduation day.
Anne: He wanted me to get it as much as I wanted to get it. We both sacrificed in order for me to get it... I remember graduating [pause]—I can’t believe I’m getting emotional about this [pause]. I remember graduating and he kept hugging me, and kissing me, and telling me how proud he was of me the whole day [tear, smile]. For him to sacrifice as much as he did just for me to do something that I [emphasis] wanted to do; that, to me, is the biggest, you know, obstacle. I couldn’t have done it without him. There’s no way.

Betsy suggested that the greatest hindrance to her family cohesion was the frequent transitions (i.e. deployments, PCS moves, training) that she and her military husband, an active-duty SMSgt (E-8), experienced. On her written timeline, she wrote about a difficult year that she and her husband faced in 2006. Betsy deployed overseas for six months while her husband had to attend required training. They made a mutual decision to send their son to live with grandparents for eight months. Two years later, in 2008, they faced another difficult period of separation. Betsy’s husband received orders to serve a one-year, unaccompanied remote tour to Korea while she had to manage selling their home, prepare the family to move overseas to England, and attend a six-week training course. This feeling of family instability required Betsy’s sister-in-law to fly to South Dakota (from Germany) to take care of the two children while Betsy was away during her training course.

Betsy described taking several “breaks” from her college classes when military duties required separation from her husband and their children. In 2010, her spouse deployed to Afghanistan for 10 months, and shortly after he returned, Betsy deployed overseas for several months. In 2012, Betsy’s husband deployed yet again, this time for 10 months. Only 10 days after returning from his deployment, Betsy departed on a six-month deployment herself. Shortly before her participation in this study, Betsy and her husband faced yet more family separation
when they both deployed overseas for six months to separate locations. Upon her return, Betsy applied for retirement. She had hoped to earn her bachelor’s degree during her active-duty service status, but with retirement in the summer of 2016 and another international family PCS (from United Kingdom to Nevada), she moved her bachelor’s degree completion goal to the end of 2016. Betsy’s experience paints a picture of the recurring family sacrifices that Senior NCOs have had to make in trying to balance military duties, college aspirations, and family responsibilities.

**Christopher:** Personally, I have noticed that my time spent at work has drastically increased as I make my way through the rankings. When I was an A1C, I was able to work the typical duty hours, 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. Compare that to now, as a MSgt [E-8], I go to work and force myself to go home at what I think is a reasonable hour, 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. I haven’t really found the advantage of being a Senior NCO pursuing my degree.

CK discussed how frequent deployments prolonged the time it took to earn his degree, even though not having some of the same family responsibilities while deployed allowed for extra time to study. Giving up family time was the biggest downside in his degree pursuit. The frequent moves also inhibited his wife from her studies. He noted that she had to pause her studies on several occasions due to getting the family settled after a PCS move.

**CK:** It took me 18 years to get my bachelor’s degree. It was quite a balance between deployments—I’ve been on something like 10 or 11 deployments in my career. It’s been difficult. I took a lot of classes [while] deployed, because believe it or not, a lot of times it was easier to take them than at home station where I did have to balance the family.

Clarence said that biggest obstacle in military service has been “time away from family” (Clarence, personal communication, 2016). Part of his goal in earning his degree is to provide
future family stability with reliable employment. Clarence has served on active duty for 12 years, less than all the other Senior NCO participants in this study; however, his family experienced seven PCS moves during that time span. Shortly before deploying in 2010, he dropped a course in order to help “prepare my family for the separation” (Clarence, personal communication, 2016). Clarence took another break in 2011, a “hiatus,” in order to adjust to his new job, house, and environment. The challenges of family separation, along with frequent PCS moves, provided motivation for Clarence to complete his bachelor’s degree as soon as possible.

**Clarence:** There are times when she grew frustrated with me not being available to her or our kids because I had to focus on school work… when I was out there away from my family, I found out that my wife was pregnant with my second kid—while I was deployed. I was like, “I’ve had enough of this. I don’t want to do this anymore. So I really want to buckle down and get this degree.” Like I said, originally, I did not want to get out until I completed my bachelor’s degree. So it was the military lifestyle, and the fact that I was away from my family. At that point, I decided that I’m going to buckle down, work hard, and finish this thing.

Greg discussed the personal sacrifices he personally absorbed while trying to manage his duties and responsibilities as a Senior NCO and as a First Sergeant.

**Greg:** I have so much work that I often have to take it home, eating into what time I have there. Senior NCOs, myself included, have so many commitments that it becomes nearly impossible to fulfill them all. One needs to prioritize, and it is easy to put education in the “only benefits me” category, and therefore, not give it the time it deserves… I tried very hard to avoid giving up my family time. Once I had finished my daily work, and put my children to bed, had dinner, and had a few words with my wife (somewhere around
9:00 p.m. at night), that’s when I would sit down and do my school work. And I just got into this habit around 9:00 p.m. to midnight, sometimes 1:00 a.m.—that was my school block. I’d sleep from 1:00 a.m. to about 5:30 a.m. or 6:00 a.m., and I’d get up and do it again. [I] can’t speak to the health of it, but over the years, that’s how I’ve developed a sleep pattern that only lasts four or five hours a night.

**JB:** After a 10- to 12-hour day at work, it is a difficult decision to take away from family time to study or attend class… we were going through some marital issues because I was going work, school, family. That was my priority, one-two-three. I figured out it needed to be family, work, school. As a Senior NCO now, with the scope of responsibility that I have… I get to work at 6:00 a.m. or 6:30 a.m. I actually feel a little dirty if I leave before 5 p.m., even though that’s [laughter] an 11-hour day.

**JB:** I was allowed to prioritize work and school over family for a bit. Now, family calls. I’m going to stop what I’m doing and prioritize family. Because, at the end of the day that’s all you got.

Luke’s wife was a newly promoted SMSgt (E-8) during the time of the interview and was attending a seven-week AFSNCOA course. After she returns, she is expected to deploy for six-months. When asked how Luke managed his military, family, and school responsibilities, he laughed and said, “Separately!”

**Luke:** So it’s pretty hectic when we get home. You know, we don’t seem to have time for much… The higher in rank you go, the busier you get, the more kids you have, and that sort of thing. But it’s about, “How much of your home life are you willing to take away from in order to get your studies done?” For me, for example, it might be a little bit
of family time and also some sleep time that I’m giving up to make sure that I can keep up.

**Michael:** We [Senior NCOs] are over tasked and expected to “just make it happen.” The leader is the first to work and the last to leave. The leader looks around, and if the employees have their work done, then the leader lets them have an early release. However, it is the leader that stays behind to close up because if the leader left, then he/she becomes a hypocrite and lends him/herself to criticism. So if the Senior NCO is expected to solve problems, manage huge projects, and lead and inspire people—all while completing the myriad of additional duties—when is the Senior NCO supposed to have time to go to school, see their family, have time for themselves in the form of physical, mental and spiritual fitness? It just can’t happen, and something will give. Usually, family relationships will decay or personal, mental, spiritual, and physical fitness will dissolve, or all of them will cascade into oblivion… you’ve got to find time for your family, and then yourself.

**Mikel:** Bottom line, time is a premium that is often scheduled out of your control. As a Senior NCO, your daily duties for your job typically prevent any time being dedicated to school work, even on lunch breaks. Senior NCOs also have an unwritten obligation to work past normal duty hours—and evenings or weekends—to ensure the primary job is done properly, but also to take care of administrative responsibilities to their subordinates in the form of EPRs, decorations, awards packages, and items such as assignment and job applications and requests. Then there is the time to teach and mentor subordinates on these issues. If there is a personal crisis with any subordinates, this creates even more involvement during typically non-duty hours and days.
Mikel did not exude feelings of frustration during the interview as much as a resigned acceptance that he and his military spouse, an active-duty SMSgt (E-8), have had to make family sacrifices. He identified the most difficult personal challenge in pursuing his degree as “giving up the occasional evening or weekend event to complete schoolwork and taking even more time away from my family to read and complete coursework” (Mikel, personal communication, 2016).

Mikel and his spouse would frequently pick a day off and, along with their two teenagers, do homework all afternoon instead of go into town on a family outing. “It kind of impacts our ability to experience Europe, where we’re stationed, but it’s something that we support each other in” (Mikel, personal communication, 2016). Mikel said that the most difficult personal challenge in pursuing his bachelor’s degree was giving up evenings and weekend events to complete schoolwork, thus taking even more time away from family.

**Rich:** Military and family are enough on their own, let alone school… you know, time away from family, so it’s hard. I don’t know how to balance them. I don’t know if there is a balance, because some are required. I’m not sure if there is a real balance on that, like military obligations. There’s not a lot of play in that. So, you just have to fit it in however you can… I can tell you, for sure, that I’ve turned in some sub-par [school]work, because of time constraints.

Trey also felt the need to get his bachelor’s degree done as soon as possible so that he could focus more time on family. Unlike other participants in this study, Trey took a full college credit load while also working full time. He would attend class from 12:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. on a Saturday, take two classes daily from Monday through Thursday (two hours each), and do his homework on Fridays and Sundays. When asked if he felt that working full time while also
taking a full college course load was too much, he answered, “It’s what a single man does, not a married man.”

Trey shared a personal regret about “wasting” a three-day weekend on a 15-page paper. He encouraged his wife to take their two sons to her mother’s house to have a good time away, while he stayed at the house working on his schoolwork. Yet, he struggled with hearing later how great the weekend was when his wife took his sons to the lake. Missing family time was a definite drawback for Trey. Trey said that while he experienced initial positive support from his wife while attending school full time, she began to provide feedback “in the form of a sad face during enrollment because she knew that I was going to be more dedicated to school for the next few months” (Trey, personal communication, 2016). His wife wanted him to slow down.

**Trey:** She wanted to have a larger family, and wanted to make sure I was there to be with our children. She could see that my first son was being neglected on learning things that father’s teach. So, she wanted me to be there… The time spent going to school every night away from your family, you will never get that back. The worst thing would be for someone to recognize that after their children move out.

**Military Financial Aid Enhanced Persistence.** Senior NCOs \((n = 8)\) discussed the benefits of military financial assistance that they received primarily through TA or the GI Bill. While lack of finances may be a factor in degree enrollment or persistence decisions, Senior NCOs in this study primarily described how military financial resources enabled and enhanced their degree persistence.

**Betsy:** In the military, you’ve got to take advantage of your resources, and the GI Bill and TA. When I first got in, it wasn’t the whole percent—it was 75%—but the money is there. It’s free schooling. Of course, you would want to take advantage of that.
**CJ:** Since we went to 100% TA, financially, it has not been a burden obviously. I’ve managed to transfer two of the four years of my GI Bill to my wife so she could pursue her master’s, and I can pursue mine. So that’s been a bonus.

**Mikel:** The fact that we have TA, the Education Office, schools on base, and other support that the Air Force provides is definitely a reason why we’ve stayed enrolled, because we might not have otherwise have had the means to continually take back-to-back classes, and pay for tuition without changing other plans, such as saving for retirement, purchasing vehicles, purchasing our house, which have done in the past.

Michael started going to college immediately after high school and wasn’t doing well. He realized that he might end up in a “dead-end job” (Michael, personal communication, 2016), and that fear drove him to pursue stability through the Air Force, which also enabled him to pursue his degree goals.

**Michael:** I wanted to eventually get married, have children, and I knew that education would provide that income, that stabilization needed for a family, versus watching my sibling who was mixing paint for a living as a university dropout. He wasn’t going to be able to do all I wanted to do if he stayed in that position. To be a stable adult who can provide for a family that I was yet to have, I needed my degree and a steady profession. I knew that I needed to not live with my parents, get out of Las Vegas, where I grew up, and make a new life for myself, because I was just failing out of university while watching my plans for a successful life quickly fade away. I joined the Air Force and tried to go back to school immediately.

**MJ:** Now I graduated with these same people from high school to college, they have a mountain of student loan debt. I have none of that… I know a guy who graduated with
$80,000 in student loan debt, and I have nothing. I had TA, the Montgomery GI Bill… I had no debt when I graduated. None. That’s a big determining factor in the role the military played in my bachelor’s degree.

**Rich:** I used TA and, any excess I paid myself. So my degree ended up costing me, I don’t know, maybe $3,000 or something. Maybe $2500. However much, I just paid $180 per class, or something.

When Trey completed his CCAF degree, he knew that he accomplished the educational requirements to make CMSgt. His decision to pursue a degree was partly motivated by promotion from enlisted to officer, which could only happen if he completed a bachelor’s degree for applying to become an officer.

Senior NCO military families have weathered frequent moves, family separations, numerous deployments, and competing work demands. The military culture, in this study, did not appear to affect participant’s perception of spousal support (Research Question 3), but it did create stress by cutting into the limited time that each participant could personally devote to their families. Participants sensed a need to expedite their degree pursuit in order to provide future family and financial stability after retiring from military service. Military financial aid, in the form of TA and the GI Bill, helped provide some stability for members in this very transient subculture.

**A CCAF Degree is the Air Force’s Primary Degree**

An unexpected theme emerged, unrelated to the research questions, highlighting the priority that the Air Force places on its CCAF associate’s degree program above higher degrees. As an official Air Force program, the CCAF’s mission is to enhance the readiness and retention of enlisted members (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2406, 2013). While a CCAF degree
(in any discipline) is not required by Air Force policy to test for promotion to MSgt (E-7), it is a requirement to be promotion eligible for the ranks of SMSgt (E-8) and CMSgt (E-9) (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2502, 2015, p. 11).

Before a CCAF degree is entered into a member’s records, Air Force policy requires that the CCAF registrars’ office, located at Air University (Montgomery, AL), and the local installation education office, must validate that specific CCAF degree requirements are met (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2406, 2015, p. 8). Just earning enough college credits, whether by testing or attendance, is not sufficient. Other degrees (i.e., B.A, M.A., Ph.D., etc.) do not necessarily fulfill the requirements for CCAF degree completion (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2406, 2015, p. 8).

Every participant in this study completed one or more CCAF degrees and were typically supportive of CCAF degree requirement for senior enlisted leadership promotion consideration. Table 11 identifies \( n = 9 \) participants that have earned their bachelor’s degree, with \( n = 5 \) still pursuing their bachelor’s degree. Of those having already earned their bachelor’s, \( n = 2 \) are currently pursuing a master’s degree, and \( n = 4 \) have a completed a master’s degree. Having a CCAF degree, they reasoned, demonstrates to the promotion board and wider Air Force leadership that the member has invested time and effort developing expertise in their primary career field. Ten \( n = 10 \) participants shared their perspectives regarding CCAF degree prioritization, offering differences of opinion about whether a CCAF associate’s degree should have more weight than a bachelor’s degree, or higher, in promotion considerations.

For example, when Anne joined the Air Force, she was pursuing her bachelor’s degree and had already earned numerous college credits from two colleges. However, since the Air Force places a higher priority on a CCAF degree, her supervisors advised her to shift focus
towards completing her CCAF first. They told her that a CCAF “separates you from your peers when it comes to EPR ratings” (Anne, personal communication, 2016). While she knew that she could complete her two remaining classes quickly, it took Anne three years to complete because her new job required her to train and study in order to become technically proficient in her career field. Today, as a supervisor, Anne tries to educate her subordinates to be intentional about taking classes so that college credits will count for both their CCAF associate’s degree and help them earn a bachelor’s degree.

Anne: Even today, they [leadership] push harder for a CCAF than they do for a bachelor’s degree. Myself, as a supervisor, I push for both. “Hey, you need to work towards your bachelor’s degree, and while you are working towards your bachelor’s degree you are going to be able to get your CCAF.” It’s like a half-way point. “You have to do all your core credits anyway, and those all go towards your CCAF.”

Betsy is a strong supporter of prioritizing the CCAF degree, even if that means delaying pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. She said that if someone enters the Air Force with a bachelor’s degree, that they still needed to “work backwards” towards earning a CCAF degree because “if you have your bachelor’s [degree], you most likely have everything you need for your CCAF except maybe one or two classes” (Betsy, personal communication, 2016).

Betsy: You have a job in the military to do. So you just show that you are in your job and you care about your job. And your CCAF degree is an associate’s in your job. So that means that you’re getting all the necessary training in your military career to get that. I kind of look at it as: “Okay, you’re in logistics, but you have a psychology degree.” What? I would look at someone who doesn’t have a CCAF degree less than I would look at [someone who has completed a CCAF] promotion wise.
CK: As I progressed, I had supervisors who constantly told me that college was needed [in order] to get promoted in the military. First is your CCAF degree, or associate’s degree, and I knew I needed a bachelor’s degree if I ever wanted to be, perhaps a SMSgt [E-8] or CMSgt [E-9] in the Air Force… but the bachelor’s degree has kind of fallen off because the enlisted promotion system is focusing on performance. It’s more performance-based than it’s ever been before.

Greg completed his CCAF degree as a junior enlisted Airman, a SrA (E-4). He did not enroll in a bachelor’s degree program until four years later. He was told earning his CCAF too early in his career was a mistake, since he would show several years of no progression. While Greg doesn’t object with emphasizing the importance of the CCAF degree, it doesn’t take into account people’s prior educational accomplishments before joining the military.

Greg: You might have somebody coming into the military with three quarters of a degree already in the bag. They [Air Force] are still going to emphasize completing the CCAF, just because it’s too easy to say, “This is what we do. First we focus on the CCAF. Then you can go your own way.” Again, I don’t necessarily think that’s bad. I do think that in reality, people need to be responsible for their own choices.

Greg added that if a MSgt (E-7) had a bachelor’s, or even a master’s degree, but lacked a CCAF degree, they would not get promoted.

Greg: The reasoning behind that, at the uppermost levels of enlisted leadership, you need to be a team player. You need to appreciate the things that the Air Force appreciates. And you need to be demonstrably supportive of those goals. When you don’t have a CCAF, you’re demonstrating that you have not valued that piece. It’s one of those awful
situations where you’re making a statement, whether you actively or passively make it, but it will be seen and it will be interpreted.

**JB:** You will not make senior [master sergeant] or chief [master sergeant] without having your CCAF. I don’t think you will ever make master [sergeant] now without a CCAF. I am also of the opinion that if you have a bachelor’s [degree], there’s probably no excuse for you not to have your CCAF. It’s probably a trip to the Education Office and then you’ll have it… we, as Big Blue [United States Air Force], are going to place more emphasis on the CCAF because it is an Air Force program. There’s a reason why each CCAF program is tailored to that career field. We’re looking for the benefit… It’s a condition of employment at the Senior NCO level.

**Luke:** [The CCAF degree] is optional, but don’t expect to go too far without it, especially if you’re competing with your peers. It’s not mandatory—they can’t make you get it—but it’s highly encouraged. [It] may not hurt to [make] Senior NCO, but to SMSgt [E-8], yeah, it would definitely hurt you.

When Michael entered the Air Force, he had already earned 31 college credits. Even though most of his credits applied to both his CCAF and his bachelor’s degree, not all of them did. Early in his Air Force career, Michael found himself enrolled in two colleges: University of Arkansas (Beebe campus) for his bachelor’s degree and the Community College of the Air Force for his associate’s degree. In order to avoid wasting time and money, Michael tried to taking classes that would apply to both degrees, such as a computer programming class.

One of Michael’s frustrations in trying to complete both his CCAF and his bachelor’s degree at the same time is that he couldn’t seamlessly transfer credits upon switching colleges. For example, a general math class that he completed for his CCAF did not transfer to his new
university, so he had to take it again. However, when he switched colleges again, neither of his math classes were accepted. This happened several times due to different school policies.

**Michael:** The one that counts towards your CCAF is Math 105—the bare minimum. So I took Math 105. But you can’t take 105 without 101, and for me, I couldn’t take 101 without taking 95. So to get the one three-credit course that counted for my math core, I had to take five classes. It was ridiculous. You buck it up, you do it, you press on, and then that’s it. I’m never taking another math course again

**Mikel:** The CCAF degree is, of course, now a requirement, while before it was a large incentive for the board to select you for promotion. It was seen as a prerequisite for having senior rater endorsement, an important factor in having sufficient points to promote in the eyes of the board.

**MJ:** My first CCAF was in human resource management. So by me pursuing my bachelor’s degree, I knocked out all my CCAF classes in the midst of doing that. So it worked out perfectly for me. I know it doesn’t work out that way for everybody. So I finished that first, and my CCAF essentially transferred to Voorhees [College] those credits and I was able to finish my bachelor’s degree with that.

Rich shared a story of about a Senior NCO friend, a MSgt (E-7), who was working on his Ph.D. When he went before the promotion board, he received a low board score because he did not have his CCAF degree. With laughter, Rich described how the Air Force told his friend, “You don’t have your CCAF. That shows us that everything you’re doing is for your gain and not for the Air Force’s [gain]” (Rich, personal communication, 2016).
**Rich:** I don’t want to say it’s a career stopper, but it’s a career hindrance if you don’t have a CCAF. And a CCAF, in the Air Force, has more weight than a bachelor’s, and a masters, and a Ph.D. [laughter]

While the perception and practice of CCAF prioritization does not help to directly answer the research questions in this study, it is important to address since the CCAF degree was a primary educational goal for each participant and indirectly builds on the phenomena of earning a bachelor’s degree in a military culture.

### Summary

This chapter described several important themes regarding spousal support for \( n = 14 \) active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. Through interviews, surveys, and written timelines, participants described how their decisions to pursue a bachelor’s degree were influenced, supported, or curtailed by their spouses and what role belonging to a military subculture may have played in their experiences and perspectives. After completing data analysis, nine major themes emerged: eight of which were connected to the three research questions, and one unexpected theme surfaced numerous times in research data. These major and unexpected themes were then categorized according to the three research questions. In this chapter, I attempted to write, record, and analyze as many participant perceptual and motivational factors as possible. As this study explored Senior NCO lived experiences, most participant data addressed multiple factors of intrinsic and extrinsic influence along with varying levels of perceived spousal support.

**Research Question 1** explored what role spouses played in the decisions of Senior NCOs to begin pursuing their bachelor’s degree. While several \( n = 3 \) participants noted that his or her spouse supported their decision to enroll in a bachelor’s degree program, the most frequently
cited reasons were: (a) to help fulfill personal goals \( n = 8 \), (b) enhanced promotion opportunities \( n = 8 \), and (c) supervisor influence \( n = 6 \).

Research Question 2 identified the role of spousal influence in persistence and attrition decisions. Every participant \( n = 14 \) dropped out of a college class, or degree program, at least temporarily. Several \( n = 3 \) participants interpreted their attrition behaviors as dropping out of their college program, while most \( n = 11 \) considered their withdrawal actions as merely a temporary pause. Though no participant \( n = 0 \) credited any attrition decision(s) to his or her spouse, most \( n = 12 \) Senior NCOs did make enrollment transfer decisions from one college/university to another during transition periods involving a PCS move or deployment. Finally, every participant \( n = 14 \) expressed sentiments of gratitude for the different ways that his or her spouse helped motivate them in their degree persistence decisions. Most \( n = 10 \) Senior NCO participants identified helpful domestic support, half \( n = 7 \) commented on motivation through competition with his or her spouse, and almost all \( n = 13 \) identified specific examples of spousal encouragement.

Research Question 3 explored whether the military culture influenced participants’ perception of spousal support and degree pursuit. Participants consistently described the pressures of trying to balance work, college, and family commitments. Most \( n = 11 \) participants shared their perspectives in how military duties constricted family time and cohesion. Additionally, just over half \( n = 8 \) of study participants shared how military financial aid, primarily through TA and GI Bill, helped enable them to persist in their degree aspirations.

Finally, while the purpose of this study is exploring how Senior NCOs interpret the phenomena of spousal support in their bachelor’s degree pursuit, most \( n = 10 \) participants addressed the priority that the Air Force places on its CCAF degree program.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“And, while with silent lifting mind I’ve trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand and touched the face of God” (Oliver, 2013, p. 84).

— “High Flight” by John G. Magee, WWII pilot

Overview

Chapter Five provides a summary of the research findings from data analysis for this hermeneutic phenomenological study. This chapter then examines the findings through the existing research literature and theoretical frameworks as presented in Chapter Two. Chapter Five concludes with methodological and practical implications, research limitations, and recommendations for further research.

Summary of Findings

The problem of this research was recognizing a break in higher education among active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs. While 91% of Air Force Senior NCOs possess a CCAF associate’s degree (Hollis, 2016), 62% approach retirement without having an earned bachelor’s degree or higher (Air Force Personnel Center, 2016a). This leaves them vulnerable for unemployment and underemployment after they retire from military service. I conducted this phenomenological study to better understand the experiences and perceptions of spousal support among active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. I also chose to explore the question of whether living in a military culture played a part in perception of spousal support.

I conducted interviews with (n = 14) active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs along with survey and written timeline data. Research was conducted at RAF Mildenhall, United Kingdom, where both the participants and I were stationed during data collection. Following a hermeneutic
phenomenological research design helped me better understand the essence, meaning, and experiences of participants (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1990) through an assessment and investigation relying on Patton’s (2002) pattern, theme, and content analysis methodology. The theoretical framework was informed by Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition and Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012).

I discovered nine primary themes from participant experiences and perspectives. Eight themes were aligned to the three research questions, with one theme unrelated. The following three research questions informed the study:

**Research Question 1:** How has perception of spousal support contributed to the decisions of Senior NCOs to begin pursuing their bachelor’s degree?

The \( n = 14 \) participants in this study expressed that their decision to pursue a bachelor’s degree was primarily motivated by personal goal fulfillment \( (n = 8) \), enhanced promotion opportunities \( (n = 8) \), and supervisor influence \( (n = 6) \). While \( n = 3 \) participants acknowledged spousal inspiration and encouragement to move forward during initial degree pursuit consideration, none attributed spousal support as the most important influence in pursuing a degree. Additionally, \( n = 1 \) participant credited his wife with causing him to delay pursuing his own bachelor’s degree. However, upon comparing data from all three instruments, it became apparent that the delay was a shared decision in order to prioritize the spouse’s educational goals and expenses first.

**Research Question 2:** How has perception of spousal support influenced Senior NCOs in their decisions about degree persistence?
Every Senior NCO participant \((n = 14)\) attributed a degree of academic persistence behavior to the positive spousal support each received. Most \((n = 13)\) were highly influenced by spousal encouragement, pushing, and prodding. A majority \((n = 10)\) also commented on the importance of different types of spousal domestic support they received, especially in the area of household and parenting responsibilities. Finally, half \((n = 7)\) of the participants reported that they were positively motivated through competition with their spouses, either through shared academic pursuits or by working to catch up with the spouse’s educational achievements.

In a similar manner, every participant \((n = 14)\) rejected any spousal influence on a decision to withdraw from a college classes, a degree, or a decision to switch enrollment from one college or university to another. When participants experienced transitions requiring a PCS move or deployment, \((n = 11)\) dropped a college class, while \((n = 12)\) switched enrollment to a different college or university. Additionally, when participants dropped classes during transition periods, \((n = 11)\) mentally interpreted the period of non-enrollment as a pause, break, or delay. Only \((n = 3)\) considered any of their attrition behaviors as dropping out of a college program. One participant \((n = 1)\) credited a delay in pursuing his degree goals to his wife, but it was more of a mutual prioritization to support his wife’s academic expenses instead of his own.

Research Question 3: How has military culture influenced perception of spousal support and degree pursuit among Senior NCOs?

While all Senior NCOs in this study \((n = 14)\) discussed heavy work demands, \((n = 11)\) participants described the difficult challenges they faced as enlisted leaders in effectively balancing work, college, and family commitments. No participant attributed his or her spouse with causing any weakness in family cohesiveness. Rather, participants acknowledged and demonstrated mixed emotions of frustration, regret, guilt, and even helplessness for sacrificing
quality family time and cohesion while pursuing a personal academic goal. Military financial aid, primarily through TA and the GI Bill, was an important factor in degree persistence identified by \((n = 8)\) participants.

**Unexpected Finding:** An interesting and unexpected finding, unrelated to the three research questions, was the subject of how the Air Force prioritizes the CCAF associate’s degree above all other academic degrees. A majority of Senior NCO participants \((n = 10)\) shared their perspectives on how having an earned CCAF degree “separates you from your peers” and is essential for promotion, high EPR ratings, and awards. Most participants were in favor of having a CCAF degree; however, several questioned whether the Air Force should continue to regard a CCAF associate’s degree as more important than a bachelor’s degree, or higher.

**Discussion**

The following is a discussion of the findings in this study in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature review as proposed in Chapter Two. The theoretical framework from this study could prove beneficial to Air Force education leaders, local installation education counselors, and college and university military affairs offices. By assessing Senior NCO experiences, results of this study may help fill gaps in existing research while providing implications to help increase Senior NCO post-CCAF degree completion rates. This will be essential for future career readiness and family stability.

**Implications Related to the Theoretical Framework**

Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition emphasized that nontraditional students were less reliant on traditional institutional and social integration (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975) and more influenced to persist in academic pursuit by
four key variables: (a) academic success, (b) psychological outcomes, (c) personal background and experience, and (d) environmental variables (i.e., work, family, finances, and support).

Participants in this study rarely addressed any type of academic success as a factor other than \( n = 2 \) discussing their need to get a high enough class grade so they would not have to pay back the military for TA. Participants did address both psychological and environmental factors as reasons for dropping out of classes, along with switching colleges. Although no participants attributed lack of spouse support for an attrition decision, spousal support was relied upon for persistence decisions by \( n = 13 \) Senior NCOs. Additionally, spouses provided psychological motivation in the form of friendly competition such as challenging the military student to “catch up.” Military financial aid was confirmed as a key environmental variable, without which members would have delayed entering a “non-essential” degree program. Stress, as a psychological variable, provided mixed influence. High stress due to deployment and PCS moves brought about too much instability and caused most participants to drop out, at least temporarily.

Schlossberg’s Adult Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012) provided a framework to address whether active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs make important college enrollment decisions during periods of transition. Instead of seeing change and transition as a series of independent changes, the framework asserts that people make continuous assessments and appraisals as they are moving in, moving through, and moving out of transition events (Anderson et al., 2012).

Participants in this study consistently recognized moving in decisions as intentional and voluntary. Spousal support did not factor into the decision of any to pursue a degree, but did influence \( n = 3 \) to move into the new decision soon. What was most interesting is that every
participant made *moving out* college enrollment attrition decisions during personal living transitions, usually dropping a class during deployment and PCS moves. However, Senior NCOs interpreted these changes in school enrollment, not as attrition, but as temporary transitions. They attributed moving out decisions as temporary adjustments to circumstances, while they continued *moving through* a bachelor’s degree program. Schlossberg (Anderson et al., 2012) noted that a change is only a transition if an individual interprets it as such (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Most attrition decisions were not transitions, but delays, pauses, and temporary interruptions.

Schlossberg’s (Anderson et al., 2012) framework also addressed whether individuals deemed their transitions as successful based on coping skills and interpretation of the Four S’s: (a) *situation*, (b) *self*, (c) *social support*, and (d) *strategies* (Anderson et al., 2012). A person’s assets and liabilities help determine their ability to cope during transition (Schiavone, 2013). If assets outweighed liabilities, an individual’s assessment of the transition would be less difficult.

**Situation.** Participants understood that their situations were frequently controlled, modified, and changed by military requirements. Participants did not have much of a voice in schedule and work demands. The military culture was a liability to stability. As previously discussed, military families endure moving more than seven times as often as their civilian counterparts (Blue Star Families, 2015). Senior NCOs mentally accepted life with frequent transitions, so that change and instability is normative. Most ($n = 11$) Senior NCOs had difficulty balancing home station and work demands.

**Mikel:** I have been in units where the task saturation has been so heavy that it definitely impacted my ability to do my coursework, and do it in a standard that I’m happy with, and still pass the class. There’s a potential that as I transition to a new job, at the end of
this summer, that my task saturation will go up and that may cause me to slow down my degree plan.

**Self.** The self refers to a person’s ability to cope during transitions. Findings from this study confirmed that participants were very resilient professionally, but struggled to persist academically if professional demands were too high. As Air Force enlisted leaders, Senior NCOs expressed confidence and high self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1993), but felt that PCS and deployment demands created too many unknown variables. I can confirm this—although not a Senior NCO, I have experienced five PCS moves and two deployments. These events can be draining physically, mentally, and emotionally.

**Support.** Thirteen \((n = 13)\) Senior NCOs confirmed spousal support as being essential to their academic persistence motivation. Military financial aid was also relied upon to persist. And as long as they continued to receive military and family support, participants were on a path to completion. Two participants spent 20 years working towards their bachelor’s degree, with a sample group average of 12 years. Such long delays were considered part of the process due to unavoidable circumstances. Only one participant did not have to change a college during his degree pursuit. Even when delayed, only three participants considered their behaviors as *moving out* with attrition behaviors; however, two went on to complete their bachelor’s degree under more favorable conditions, while the third expects to graduate in 2016.

**Strategies.** Strategies are a person’s resilience and coping skills. Participants typically coped with change by withdrawing from college for a period of time until they had enough perceived time to focus on studies. Participants demonstrated a wide variety of coping strategies. Trey dropped college each time during his first six deployments, but re-enrolled after he returned home. Clarence received a short-notice deployment tasking and dropped a class in order to focus
on his family. However, when he arrived to his deployment location a month later, he re-enrolled. CJ did not have money to pursue his coursework, so he opted to CLEP his way through 27 credits in only a few months. JB earned up to 18 credits through CLEP tests. Michael had to find avenues to persist while also parenting.

**Michael:** I would take my kids to their competitive swimming team practices. When they were at their swimming training, I would go upstairs with my laptop, at the pool community room, and work on my school papers. I’d do this five times a week, while they were going to their competitive swim courses. They were going through their training, and I was upstairs doing mine. I would use my cell phone as a mobile hotspot, or if there was Wi-Fi there, I would tap into that. You just have to find creative uses of time.

CK, the only CMSgt (E-9) in the study, tried to maximize his limited discretionary hours during deployments. While reflecting on his numerous deployments, he said, “I took a lot of classes [while] deployed, because, believe it or not, a lot of times it was easier to take them than at home station where I did have to balance the family” (CK, personal communication, 2016).

Although members shared their different experiences navigating changing personal circumstances, the frequent practice of temporarily interrupting college pursuit conveys that they may not have the necessary internal coping resources or external environmental support to adjust quickly to their new experiences.

**Implications Related to the Literature**

Findings in this study confirmed previous research that underscored the importance of extrinsic encouragement from family, and other social support, as factors in higher education persistence (Ady, 2009; Bibus, 2013; Fuller, 2011; Greig, 2008; Hayek, 2011; Keenan, 2012; Morreale, 2011; Tinto, 1997). Several participants identified that when they felt like quitting or
giving up, their spouses motivated them to press ahead. Spouses were not considered to be hindering degree pursuit, even though one attributed a delay to prioritizing spousal goals ahead of his own. Spousal support was more than a variable of inquiry. Some responses provided insights requiring deeper reflection of what spousal support might look like among senior enlisted members. Airmen, including Senior NCOs, need to have their voices heard, even though they are expected to be highly competent and confident.

Anne: There’s just no way I could have done it without him… [He] and I have been through [pause] —there’s no other term to use than “through hell and back.” He lost his dad early in our marriage… we’ve had multiple miscarriages. I lost a baby… when I say that “we’ve been through hell and back,” we really have!

Findings also confirm support research on the importance of promotion and career advancement as motivational extrinsic influences (Ady, 2009; Benson, 2009; Bibus, 2013; Covert, 2002; Harrison, 2012; Starr-Glass, 2011). Participants frequently discussed how getting a bachelor’s degree would help them compete for higher promotional opportunities. Qualitative data did seem to counter previous research (Greig, 2008; Savage, 2005), which indicated that supervisor support was insignificant in CCAF and bachelor’s degree pursuit. Supervisory support was essential to initiating degree pursuit among several Senior NCOs in this study, even though supervisor influence was not addressed in data collection tools as a topic of exploration. Six participants confirmed supervisory influence as being an important factor in their initial decision to pursue a bachelor’s degree. This finding could have implications for Air Force and military leadership. Supervisors will promote “Big Air Force” priorities to subordinates. Further, supervisors seem to have replaced the key parental support role that has been a
motivational influence on traditional students (Bean and Metzner, 1985; Coy-Ogan, 2009; Guastella, 2009; Minnick, 2007; Tinto, 1994, Zelbovitz, 2013).

Prior research also indicated that high achievers and nontraditional students, such as Senior NCOs, would be less reliant on external forms of motivation and more driven by intrinsic motivation variables (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Coy-Ogan, 2009; Griswold, 2014; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013, Taylor & House, 2010; Wyatt, 2011). This study confirms that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors for degree persistence. Intrinsic motivation was more of a factor when Senior NCOs discussed their reasons for starting, while social support played a factor in extrinsic motivation, though not enough to prevent temporary attrition behaviors.

Findings in this study confirm previous research regarding perceptions by military family members that the military lifestyle is stressful, transient, and unstable (Bibus, 2013; Blue Star Families, 2015; Deggs, 2011; Hayek, 2011; Keenan, 2012; Starr-Glass, 2013). Additionally, the findings support prior research on how frequent transitions are perceived by military members as an obstacle to academic persistence (Covert, 2002; Murphy, 2007). Time, money, and physical energy are valuable commodities that require continual balance and management (Zelbovitz, 2012). Although this study confirmed the active-duty member’s assessment of work stress and transience, participants did not attribute negative or low spousal support as being a factor in any attrition decisions. This finding can be used by Air Force family support agencies and counselors to advise spouses that their active-duty spouse does not place blame on them for temporary academic attrition. Support agencies and counselors can also discuss the different types of support Senior NCOs considered most important: (a) verbal encouragement, (b) domestic support, and (c) competitive prodding.
Practical Implications

The findings from this study could prove beneficial to Air Force education leaders, college and university military affairs administrators, and Air Force family support agencies (i.e., A&FRC, Family Advocacy, Chapel, and Community Service Coordinators). By assessing Senior NCO experiences, results of this study may help fill gaps in existing research regarding perceived spousal support as an extrinsic motivational influence. It may also shed light on perceptions of military demands, family time constraints, financial support, and questions surrounding the CCAF.

Recommendations for Air Force Education Leadership

Findings in this study indicate ambivalence about the direction the Air Force wants to go concerning the importance of an earned four-year degree. According to Air Force policy, the CCAF associate’s degree is the only official educational expectation necessary to make SMSgt (E-8) and CMSgt (E-9) (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2648, 2013). However, changes to the enlisted performance system, along with how board scores are calculated, have created potential confusion regarding the importance of a four-year degree within the Air Force enlisted corps.

For example, CK—the sole CMSgt (E-7) for this study—noted that having a bachelor’s degree is an “assumed requirement” to make the highest enlisted ranks, but also added that he believed the Air Force was moving away from emphasizing the bachelor’s degree as the new enlisted promotion system is placing more emphasis on performance. CJ, promoted to CMSgt (E-7) shortly after data collection, felt that his bachelor’s degree was a key factor in seeing his CMSgt promotion board score increase by 60 points, a significant jump, in one year. “Education will play a bigger part,” he suggests. “If you’re looking at a board and you see a young TSgt who
has managed to pursue their bachelor’s degree, and you see another TSgt who hasn’t… you’d be foolish to think that would be equal” (CK, personal communication, 2016).

The Commander of Air University is the governing authority of the CCAF and meets with the CCAF Policy Council annually to address recommendations concerning academic policies, standards, and programs (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2648, 2013). With advances in technology providing more portable bachelor’s degree programs, Air University leadership could consider strengthening associate’s to bachelor’s degree opportunities. Air Force Instruction 36-2648: Community College of the Air Force (2013) provides overall guidance on the CCAF program, but it does not mention any reference, incentive, or pathway for CCAF students to continue on in pursuit of a four-year degree. Educational leaders could consider revising current policies in order to provide more clearly defined promotional incentives for enlisted members who complete higher education beyond a CCAF degree.

I recommend that CCAF Program Managers seek out more civilian college and university partnerships for an associate’s to bachelor’s degree process. CCAF Program Managers are considered career-field experts that develop and maintain CCAF degree programs while continuing communication with civilian colleges and universities (Department of the Air Force, AFI 36-2648, 2013). Additionally, they are tasked with helping ensure that CCAF technical courses are translated for conversion to civilian colleges for credit. This process could also be enhanced, as findings in this study support. Six participants in this study took college credits for award bullets or as a self-improvement activity, but they weren’t put on a pathway to earning a specific degree. Thus, when they determined to focus on a degree, many of their credits did not transfer.
I would further recommend that Air Force leadership require enrollment in a four-year academic degree program upon completion of a CCAF degree. Though completion of a four-year degree may not happen while on active duty, a continued focus on bachelor’s degree pursuit could help better prepare the 62% of today’s active-duty Senior NCOs without a bachelor’s degree (Air Force Personnel Center, 2016a).

**Financial Implications.** Military financial aid, especially through TA and the GI Bill, were deemed key to over half of the participants in this study to help them pursue their academic goals. Financial pressures may increase for Senior NCOs over the next decade, especially with the recent changes authorized to the military retirement pension.

On November 25, 2015, President Obama signed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2016 (Public Law 114-92, 2015), which authorized continued funding for future Department of Defense mission requirements. In Sections 631 through 635 of NDAA FY2016 was authorization for a massive change to the military’s retirement pension plan—the first such change in decades. The new Uniformed Services Blended Retirement System, also known as the Modernized Retirement System or Blended Retirement System, will not affect any Senior NCOs in this study, nor will it be mandatory for those already serving on active duty on December 31, 2017. Rather, it will be offered as an opt-in for those having served 12 or fewer years by the end of 2017. However, all new officer and enlisted recruits will be mandatorily enrolled in the new program on January 1, 2018 (Department of Defense Office of the Actuary, 2016).

This could potentially create new financial pressures on future Senior NCOs, especially those who enter retirement without a bachelor’s degree. Future retirees will have their military
retirement pensions lowered by 20% in exchange for a matching contribution program to a retirement savings plan (similar to a federal 401(K)).

Several articles have been published describing the advantages and disadvantages of the new system. Most authors concur that the new system will benefit the roughly 85% of service members that separate before reaching retirement eligibility (Montanaro, 2016). However, future Senior NCOs hoping to make military service a career could realistically lose out on up to six figures of lifetime retirement income in the new system (Montanaro, 2016). The Congressionally mandated Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission reported that the DoD is projecting lifetime retirement income for an eligible MSgt (E-7) retiree to be $1.1 million dollars under the new system. However, the commission projected a more accurate estimate to be closer to the $200,000 range. When the committee asked military service members from all branches about the impact of changing the military retirement system from a defined benefit to defined contribution plan, 40% indicated they would be less likely to serve and complete a 20-year career (Blue Star Families, 2015). In April 2016, the American Academy of Actuaries sent a letter of concern to the Pentagon over the misinformation being presented.

The new blended retirement system has implications that would affect every future active-duty Air Force Senior NCO reaching retirement. As presented in Chapter One, a MSgt (E-7) retiree, in a household of five, would receive a retirement pension in 2016 that falls under the minimum poverty line (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Continuing meaningful employment and service will be necessary for most. Trimming another 20% off of a retiree’s pension, even with minor cash lump sums, will undoubtedly cause future financial hardships unless service members are highly prepared for the post-military job market.
Future Senior NCOs, in all military branches, will likely face even greater pressure to complete a bachelor’s degree, or higher, before retirement. And, as participants in this study revealed, discretionary time at the senior enlisted level is in short supply. They might also put more pressure on their spouses to find reliable employment. The challenge to this is reflected in the voice of an active-duty Navy spouse who said:

The reduction of services and uncertainty related to pay, retirement contributions, and budget cuts have been a large source of stress for me as a spouse. I have felt that it is my responsibility to make up for these decreases, and have experienced great difficulty finding and keeping jobs that pay me at a comparable rate to civilians and allow for flexible childcare. (Shiffer, 2015, p. 25)

I recommend that Air Force education leaders consider further how saving DoD retirement pension dollars will impact the quality of life for future enlisted leaders. I recommend consideration of incentivizing higher education, beyond the CCAF associate’s degree, as a matter of career, family, and financial readiness.

**Recommendations for Air Force Military Family Support Agencies**

The findings offer implications for several family support stakeholders whose mission it is to enhance morale and quality of life for Airmen and their Families. Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James identified developing people as the Air Force’s No. 1 priority—above aircraft and equipment: “It means protecting family programs, achieving a work-life balance, which is hard for a lot of people in the Air Force, because there is a lot of work and it’s hard to get that work-life balance in there” (Lamance, 2014). Findings in this study indicate the Senior enlisted leaders are struggling with achieving that balance while also pursuing academic goals.
Air Force support agencies such as Airman and Family Readiness Centers (A&FRC), Family Advocacy, Community Service Coordinator, Chapel, and Force Support Squadron, to name a few, should continue advocating for manpower and funding to help support Airmen and their families. It is common in Air Force culture to focus extra energies on junior enlisted members, who are a high-risk group for impulsive behaviors. But we must not overlook the stresses our senior enlisted members are under in trying to navigate looming retirement decisions while trying to balance family, work, and time limitations.

For example, while completing this study, our RAF Mildenhall chapel staff advocated and received funding to lead two Family Care retreats at a nearby leisure park in summer 2016. The chapel covered the costs for lodging, food, and relationship resources. It included several hours of family interaction, family cohesion lessons, and free time to pursue family activities at the park. We prioritized families of service members deploying, those recently returned, and single parents. The two retreats in summer 2016 also prioritized First Sergeants. As previously described, First Sergeants are heavily tasked Senior NCOs who are always on call to help advise leadership and solve people and mission issues. The chapel received very high marks from First Sergeants that attended. Our Air Force programs and funding can easily overlook these Senior NCO members because they are enlisted leaders. They are primarily tasked with mentoring and leading junior enlisted Airmen. However, findings from this study indicate that Senior NCOs do experience family pressures and transition challenges that cause academic interruptions.

In addition to quality of life and family cohesion efforts, I’d recommend continuous assessment by A&FRC staff, who typically lead the Air Force’s TAP program. TAP is the official DoD program aimed at helping service members transition to civilian life successfully. I’d recommend some intentional curriculum addressing similar TAP curriculum shortly after Air
Force members become Senior NCOs. Addressing continuation towards a four-year degree will be worth serious discussion for new Senior NCOs as they continue both active service and preparation for life after the military.

**Christopher:** Being in the Air Force, I’m not going to have this uniform forever. One day it’s going to have to hang up. I’ve got to be able to go out and still get a second job. My retirement isn’t going to be that much. I already have pretty solid investments. I try to be money savvy as much as possible. But I still want to continue on with a career after the Air Force.

**Luke:** I’ve looked at people who’ve gone before me, who have retired in recent years. I see them struggle to find work outside of the military. That’s always a big concern: “What’s going to happen to me when I retire?” If I’ll be able to find work. It’s kind of unfortunate, because I see a lot of people with no plan but to possibly continue to work for the government if they, you know, luck out. I see people talk about applying for a certain position and just not getting it… over and over again.

**Recommendations for Higher Education Military Affairs Administrators**

Senior enlisted leaders in this study had mixed reviews about their college experiences. The more favorable responses were directed towards the colleges and universities that allowed for greater flexibility with enrollment and credit transfer processes. Even though a college may fit criteria to be considered a “military friendly” school, only one participant did not need to switch schools while earning a four-year degree. I recommend that Higher Education Military Affairs administrators, offices, or commensurate admissions departments to advocate for higher retention policies based on frequent transient experiences. This may require more frequent contact with military students or better tracking of upcoming family transition events.
Mentzer (2014) recommended reinforcing institutional loyalty and belonging, along with institutional commitment to degree completion, in order to enhance persistence among military students. I would concur and recommend enhancing communication with military students during transition events, while increasing enrollment loyalty and continuity. When military members receive PCS orders, for example, Military Affairs offices can try to enhance communicate frequency and offer loyalty incentives for continued enrollment. Likewise, if military members provide a deployment address (not always allowed due to the need for operations and information security), Military Affairs offices can provide additional reminders and incentives for family members.

Higher education Military Affairs administrators could consider advocating for participation in the AU-ABC program, if not already participating. Only 59 colleges and universities are aligned with the CCAF degree program. As in Michael’s case, he needed to see a clear pathway for degree completion. Participants averaged 12 years to complete their bachelor’s degree (see Table 11). Concerted and focused information and degree completion plans that include completion of both CCAF and bachelor’s degree requirements in a shorter period may have more success with admissions and retention. Additionally, clearly communicating degree options to Junior NCOs may help lead to an eventual increase in Senior NCO bachelor’s degree completion as necessary courses will have been completed prior to reaching the Senior NCO tier.

Furthermore, administrators can help shape institutional policy so that military students will have more generous credit transfers, flexibility with deadlines, portable online asynchronous delivery, and discounted tuition. Continuous enrollment during member deployments and PCS moves could enhance retention. This study indicates that Air Force Senior NCOs are vulnerable
to make changes during these transitions. Taking breaks from enrollment was not deemed to be negative, other than that it prolonged degree completion. The act of changing enrollment wasn’t as much of a factor as the obstacles some Senior NCOs encountered during change. Colleges that enabled continuous enrollment during military moves and deployments helped provide needed stability.

**Luke:** The classes are continuous. There are no breaks, so if I need a break, I have to request it. For whatever reason, if it’s more than two weeks at a time, they basically just push “pause,” and then, as soon as you’re ready to start back up, they roll you right back into the following start-up.

While “military friendly” schools tend to offer more flexibility in order to accommodate service members, the frequent enrollment changes in this study are worth exploring for potential policy revisions. I would recommend a similar approach presented by (Mentzer, 2014). If colleges want to enhance retention with military students, a generous enrollment and credit transferal process would be worthy of further study. I recommend that college and university Military Affairs administrators continually assess current institutional policies regarding transferal of credits, enrollment interruptions, and re-enrollment procedures. Michael had to take five classes to fulfill a basic, three-credit math requirement due to difficulties in transferring college credits. Betsy lost eight credits when she changed colleges, even though she felt that the credits were for the same classes only under different names. As nontraditional students, Military students should not simply feel catered to or accommodated. Rather, they need to feel that their experiences are normal and that seamless credit transfers and enrollments delays are not exceptions. Greg’s experience aptly described the difficulty with enrollment when he said, “I did
withdraw from a single class [and it] turned out to be far more work than I had anticipated” (personal communication, 2016).

**Greg:** I think as time goes by you will see more and more and more schools catering to the non-traditional student, until the non-traditional student is no longer non-traditional. Once we get over this idea that education has to be an A to B to C route, eventually you get to a point where anybody pursuing a degree is simply “a student.”

**Limitations**

Relying on self-reporting data collection tools (survey, interview, and written timeline) was a known limitation in this study. Self-reporting data may be overly optimistic and may underestimate difficulties or problems if participants aim to provide answers based on how they think the I, as the researcher, want them to respond (Lantta, 2013; Marsden & Wright, 2010). However, in this study, the use of pseudonyms provided a level of anonymity that may have helped reduce social desirability risks. In addition, the survey and interview instruments presented similar questions enabling participants to expand on their perceptions and experiences.

Another limitation was the sole source of data collection from only one military installation in the United Kingdom. Air Force installations have different requirements, policies, mission focus, and operations tempo. Geographical factors may also affect family support agencies, off-base activities, employment opportunities for spouses, and other variables affecting quality of life perceptions. For example, Senior NCOs attached to a Space and Missile Wing may differ in perceived morale and stress than Senior NCOs stationed at a Special Operations Wing.

Additionally, many careers fields (AFSC) differ in work demands and deployment frequency (i.e., Civil Engineering, Security Forces, and Special Operations). This study lacked two of the four desired career fields: Operations and Medical. Also, only one CMSgt (E-9)
participated, even though a SMSgt (E-8) promoted to CMSgt (E-9) shortly after data collection. Research could have provided different emphasis and experience if ranks were more evenly represented. Additionally, CMSgts (E-9) have typically been enlisted for more years and could provide a wider macro viewpoint of family support dynamics and enlisted leadership responsibilities. Since scope of responsibility increases commensurate with rank, we cannot seamlessly transfer MSgt (E-7) experiences to those holding SMSgt (E-8) and CMSgt (E-9) responsibilities.

Finally, college and university admissions policies are variables outside of my decision-making capability. As participants attended an average of four colleges and universities (see Table 11), their experiences differed due partly to enrollment and credit transfer policies, institutional setting, delivery method, accommodation policies, and other college related variables.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study focused on active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs and their perceptions of spousal support and bachelor’s degree pursuit. Implications and recommendations were made for Air Force education leaders, Air Force family support agencies, and higher education military affairs administration. Below, I discuss recommendations for future research.

First, while this study addressed active-duty USAF Senior NCO perceptions, I recommend a cross-sectional study be undertaken to survey USAF retirees at the five- and 10-year marks. Responses from retired USAF Senior NCOs regarding employment, academic, family cohesion, and post-military lifestyle decisions and perceptions could be compared and analyzed. Of the more than 2 million non-profit organizations in the United States, 45,000 serve military personnel and their families (George W. Bush Presidential Center, n.d.). With transition
to civilian life proving to be a highly stressful issue among active-duty personnel (Blue Star Families, 2015), a mixed-methods approach could provide helpful data about employment, income, and family lifestyle indicators of Senior NCO military retirees after their separation from active-duty military service. Additional research could provide further insight as to the perceived value regarding whether retirees were happy with their academic decisions while on active duty. Further research could also follow up with Air Force retirees five or 10-years after retirement to gauge whether their academic decisions regarding pursuit of a bachelor’s degree were considered essential to their perception of stability, family lifestyle, and employment. Would those who completed their bachelor’s degree, for example, perceive that the sacrifices endured while on active duty were worth their time and family hardships? Sample groups could control for CCAF, bachelor’s, and master’s degree completion and could also include data with spousal employment, cost of living, AFSC career field, and other lifestyle variables.

Second, I recommend a similar study be conducted to compare college persistence and support variables for active-duty military single parents. There were several single parent Senior NCOs that heard about this current study and expressed an interest in participating, but they did not meet criteria. A similar study could analyze how active-duty single parents demonstrate resilience while balancing work, job, and college commitments. Data from July 2016 shows that 28% of all active-duty enlisted Air Force families with children are identified as divorced, widowed, or single parent service members (AFPC demographics, 2016). This demographic deserves additional focus and research. Additionally, research of single parent enlisted leaders could include data from different military branches in order to compare quality of life and perception of personal and professional support variables.
Third, I recommend that future research address how bachelor’s degree persistence and attrition behaviors are associated with certain highly tasked and highly deployable USAF career fields (i.e., Security Forces, Civil Engineering, Maintenance, or Special Operations). Variables of interest could include perception of job satisfaction, family stability, supervisor support, financial assistance, and deployment frequency. Results could be used to advise higher education admissions and military affairs administrators in their efforts to enhance retention among military students in highly deployable units. Finally, I recommend that follow-up research replicating the current study be conducted among a wider pool of career fields, dual military demographic, or mid-tier USAF NCOs (E-5 and E-6). Results could enhance precision marketing and messaging by USAF education leaders and local installation Education Center administrators in order to help increase service-wide participation in a four-year degree program.

Summary

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological research was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of spousal support as an extrinsic motivational influence on (n = 14) active-duty Air Force Senior NCOs in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. Results of survey, interview, and written timeline data indicated that spouses did not factor as a primary extrinsic motivational influence for initial bachelor’s degree enrollment decisions. Participants were motivated towards pursuing a bachelor’s degree primarily through personal goal fulfillment, enhanced promotion opportunities, and supervisor influence. Additionally, Senior NCOs in this study described their lives as a series of transitions. Academic persistence and attrition decisions were heavily influenced during periods of transition, especially those involving or requiring a deployment or PCS move. Attrition decisions were considered “dropping out” or “quitting,” but were reframed as taking “intermittent breaks” or “pauses” until circumstances improved.
Spousal support was a positive and essential motivational influence for degree persistence for every participant. Spouses were never blamed by participants as triggering or causing an attrition decision. Not once. Participants described the difficulty trying to balance personal and professional demands effectively. The military culture created both feelings of anxiety regarding constrained time for family and gratitude for the military financial aid used to pay for tuition. An unexpected finding centered on the USAF’s prioritization of the CCAF degree. While most study participants were in favor of having a CCAF degree, several questioned whether a CCAF degree should be more valuable than a four-year or post-graduate degree.

Findings from this study will hopefully enhance understanding of what Patton (2002) described as the essences of shared experiences, which were “core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced” (p. 106). While I have frequent interaction with Senior NCOs in my job as an active-duty USAF chaplain, this phenomenological study deepened my appreciation for the resilience and persistence these leaders endured during periods of change. While the military community helps provide benefits of belonging, support, identity, and financial aid, there were, nonetheless, expressions of anxiety about family cohesion and transitioning to civilian life after retirement. Research indicates that 75% of military members worry about leaving the military (Meyer, Writer, & Brim, 2016). Changes to the military retirement compensation plan, due to be implemented in 2018, may potentially cause even more active-duty Senior NCOs—of all branches—to prioritize higher education as a matter of career, family, and financial readiness. As former President George W. Bush stated, “Our warriors are the one percent of America who kept the 99 percent safe. We
have a duty to help make their transitions as successful as possible” (George W. Bush Presidential Center, n.d.).

My desire is that this phenomenological study will help fill a current gap in the literature regarding spousal support and military student academic persistence. More importantly, I hope this research will add value to military and civilian education leaders in discussions regarding the importance of enlisted personnel and their academic goals. As Greg profoundly summarized, “An education may be the single greatest discriminator in terms of who you are and what you can do with your life. To not pursue it is to limit yourself both in mind and career” (personal communication, 2016).
REFERENCES


Buice, S. M. (2012). *Why students are choosing not to participate in Honors and Advanced Placement classes: The phenomenon in one Georgia high school* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from DigitalCommons@Liberty University.


APPENDIX A

Pre-Consent Email

Dear [name of Senior NCO],

Thank you for considering participating in my doctoral research project about Senior NCOs and their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. Please follow the link below to read more information about the research. The information will also provide a way for you to give consent for us to proceed.

Google Forms™ link:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/18ANdkTR8-DCPqmJgJ7NNEExkBgRQVEpR7BIJO5JedXw/formResponse

I am conducting this research as a Liberty University student in the Doctor of Education program, not as a chaplain. Thus, while anonymity will be upheld and pseudonyms used for all participants, I am not providing a place for confidential communication through my Air Force chaplain role. I am conducting this research as a doctoral student. If, at any time, you would like to go into issues needing confidential communication, please let me know in advance, and I can refer you to another chaplain and withdraw you from participation in this research.

Please let me know if you have any questions. Thank you again.

Cordially,

Randy Croft
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University
racroft2@liberty.edu
Skype™ name: ******
APPENDIX B

Informed Consent: Senior NCO Degree Progression

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/18ANdkTR8-
DCPqmJgJ7NNEExkBgRQVEpR7BIJO5JedXw/formResponse

Informed Consent- SNCO Degree Progression

The Influence of Spousal Support on Air Force Senior Noncommissioned Officers’ Pursuit of a Bachelor’s Degree: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

Randy Croft
Liberty University
Department of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of Air Force Senior NCOs and the influence of spousal support on academic decisions. You were selected as a possible participant because you meet several criteria:
(a) active duty Air Force Senior NCO,
(b) have at least six credit hours earned towards a bachelor’s degree,
(c) have five years or more years of marriage to your current spouse, and
(d) have one or more children.
I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Randy Croft, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Continue »

20% completed

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Report Abuse - Terms of Service - Additional Terms
Informed Consent- SNCO Degree Progression

Purpose
The purpose of this study is to discover the experiences and perceptions of spousal support among active duty Air Force Senior NCOs in their pursuit of a bachelor's degree. Since only 35% of Senior NCOs have a bachelor's degree or higher, this study aims to better understand the role of family influence as either a barrier or motivational influence in the decision to both pursue a four-year degree and also persist in studies through obstacles and challenges.

Informed Consent- SNCO Degree Progression

Procedures
If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Provide contact information for follow-up

2. Provide informed consent on the last page of this Google Forms™ document.

3. Complete a 15 question survey lasting approximately 20 minutes

3. Meet with researcher for live interview, either face-to-face or through Skype™ video chat software. Interview will consist of 15 questions lasting approximately 30 minutes

4. Complete a short written timeline, which charts your educational, professional, and family journey. This will last approximately 20 minutes

5. Following your consent and information below, researcher will contact you via email for follow-up information and instructions.
Informed Consent - SONCO Degree Progression

Payment and Benefits
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will receive no payment for your participation. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the Air Force or Liberty University.

Airmen have the potential to benefit from this study if the results reveal factors of motivation which Air Force educational leadership can use to help implement incentives and programs to aid Senior NCOs to pursue a bachelor's degree.

Risks and Confidentiality
The only known risk involved in this study would be if your personal information was made public without your consent. However, several safeguards will be used to ensure that your identity will be known only to the researcher. The records of this study will be kept private. All data will be stored in a password secured document, available only to the researcher. The interview will be recorded, but transcribed as soon as possible into a password protected document. The audio recorded interview will then be immediately deleted. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. Also, pseudonyms will be used for all participants. If you have a pseudonym preference, please feel free to add a suggestion in the box below. If no pseudonym is suggested, you will be offered suggestions for approval from the researcher. While your identity will remain confidential, the data we collect and results of this study may be used in future research studies or with other researchers; if we share the data that we collect about you, we will remove any information that could identify you before we share it.

Keep in mind that while I am an active duty Air Force chaplain, I am only conducting this study as a doctoral student. Thus, by providing informed consent, you are acknowledging and waiving your right to confidential communication (in accordance with Military Rules of Evidence 503) in your communication with me for this study. If you need to discuss personal information requiring confidential counseling with a chaplain, please notify me in advance. The study will be terminated immediately, and you will be given appropriate counseling avenues for support.
Informed Consent - SNCO Degree Progression

* Required

**How to Withdraw from Study**
If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time, and all information provided will be deleted. If you choose to withdraw, at any time, please contact the researcher at the email located at the bottom of this document. All audio recording and data associated with you and/or your pseudonym will be deleted completely. If you have any questions before providing your consent to participate in this study, please contact the researcher at the email address below. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at itb@liberty.edu.

**Statement of Consent**

**By clicking Yes, I agree to participate in this study.** *
- Yes
- No

**By clicking Yes, I agree to be audio recorded during the interview.** *
- Yes
- No

**Full Name** *

**Suggested Pseudonym for this Research**
If left blank, you will be contacted by email with suggestions.
Date *

E-mail address *

Phone Number *

Skype™ Name (if applicable)

When would be the best time to set up the interview?
For example: Weekends, Wednesday evenings, etc.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at any time.

Thank you,

Randy Croft
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University
racroft2@liberty.edu
Skype™ name: [redacted]

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.
APPENDIX C

Pre-Survey Email

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research project. Please complete the first step, which is a Google™ Forms survey by following this link:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1nJyOr24DyrkdYOJNp-q4RrCNS7PMLiMVZvI8sqe0ImY/viewform

The survey should take approximately 20 minutes and will ask you to think and respond about your educational journey thus far. Please try to be as thorough as possible.

Following the survey, we will set up a face-to-face (or Skype™) interview. On informed consent, you noted that the best time would be (insert date/time). Are you available on (insert date/time)? It should last approximately 20-30 minutes, and will be transcribed and audio recorded. I will ensure that the notes and audio recording is destroyed three years after successful defense of the dissertation. I will also use a pseudonym in the dissertation to help ensure your anonymity.

Please reply to this email if (insert date/time) will work for you, or if you have any questions. I look forward to reading your responses and talking with you during our interview appointment.

Cordially,

Randy Croft
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University
racroft2@liberty.edu
Skype™ name: *******
APPENDIX D

Survey: Senior NCO Degree Progression

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1nJyOr24DyrkdYOJNp-q4RrCNS7PMLiMVZvI8sqe0lmY/viewform

1. Please provide your responses to the following 15 questions.

2. Survey should last approximately 20-30 minutes; however, please feel free to take as much time as you need.

3. Following survey, you will receive a follow-up email to confirm face-to-face (or Skype™) interview. Thank you for your time. If you have any questions, please email Randy Croft at racroft2@liberty.edu.

   **Please provide your email:**  
   Answer:

   **Please provide your Pseudonym used for this research:**  
   Answer:

1. What is your age?

2. What is your rank?

3. How many years on active duty have you served?

4. What is your primary career field: (a) operations, (b) maintenance, (c) medical, or (d) support?

5. How long have you been married to your current spouse?

6. How many children are in your home?

7. How many years have you been working towards your bachelor’s degree? Please include the time you started earning credits toward your CCAF or other associate’s degree.

8. How many colleges and universities have you attended on your road to a bachelor’s degree?
9. Did you have to make any enrollment decisions (i.e. enroll or drop out) while deployed? If so, please describe.

10. Does your spouse already hold a bachelor’s degree (or higher)? If not, are they currently enrolled in a degree program? Please describe.

11. How has your spouse provided motivation to you in your pursuit of a bachelor’s degree?

12. Please describe how your spouse may have hindered, or influenced a delay in your pursuit of a bachelor’s degree? If so, please describe.

13. Have your military responsibilities ever created the type of family stress that caused you to drop out of your academic program? If so, please describe.

14. Please describe the pros and cons as a Senior NCO in the Air Force as it relates to pursuing your bachelor’s degree?

15. What was the most difficult challenge, for you personally, in the decision to pursue a bachelor’s degree?

**When would be the best time to set up the personal (or Skype™) interview?**
*For example: Weekends, Wednesday evenings, etc.*

Answer:
APPENDIX E

Interview Questions: Senior NCO Degree Progression

Perceptions of Spousal Support and Enrollment in a Bachelor’s Degree Program

1. Please describe your decision to pursue a bachelor’s degree.

2. Please describe what role your spouse has played in your decision to enroll in a bachelor’s degree program.

3. Has your spouse ever played a role in your decision to either drop out or to persist in your bachelor’s degree program? If so, please explain.

4. Describe how you have managed your military, family, and school responsibilities.

5. Did you ever have to drop out and re-enroll in your degree program? If so, please explain any factors that may have played a part in that decision.

6. Describe your spouse’s educational goals or degree completion, and discuss if that played any part in you starting or persisting in your degree program.

7. How has the military lifestyle affected you and your spouse with your goals of pursuing a bachelor’s degree?

8. Has your senior enlisted status played any part in your pursuit of a bachelor’s degree? Please explain.

9. What have been the greatest challenges and obstacles to continuing in your pursuit of a bachelor’s degree?

10. Is there anything else you would like to mention about your experience as an active-duty Senior NCO pursuing a degree?
APPENDIX F

Post-interview comments

“Thank you for your time with the interview today/tonight. The final item is for you to enter key events in a timeline template, which I will email to you within the next 48 hours. The goal is for you to simply provide a year of each significant education related decision. Examples would include initial enrollment in Community College of the Air Force, dropping out, re-enrolling, or switching schools. You will also be asked to note if you also had any significant family or professional events that took place around the same time. You determine what would be considered significant, but any context you provide will help add depth to this research.

Your anonymity will continue to be preserved through the use of your pseudonym. After you send me the timeline, I will send you a transcription of today’s interview for you to review. I will also save your timeline with password protection until three years after the dissertation is complete, at which time it will be deleted.

Do you have any questions for me before we end this call?

Please contact me by email if you have any questions. Do you have my email address?

Again, thank you for your time and perspective. Your input is valuable to this research.

Goodbye”
APPENDIX G

Written Timeline: Participant Sample

Written Timeline Instructions

Your Pseudonym: Betsy

1. Please fill out a timeline below of your college journey by including all significant college decisions and events. At a minimum, include all enrollment, drop-out, re-enrollment, and graduation dates. Please also list any significant family or professional events which happened around the same time (you determine what would be significant).

Anonymity will be preserved through use of your pseudonym. When complete please email a copy to Randy Croft at racroft2@liberty.edu. File will be password protection for three years after completion of dissertation, at which time file will be deleted. Please contact me if you have any questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant College Decisions/Events</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Significant Military Event?</th>
<th>Significant Family Event?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example 1: Enrolled in BA program through NAU</td>
<td>2005-2006</td>
<td>6 Month long deployment started until January 2006.</td>
<td>Husband had to go to attend NCOA as well, so we had to send our son to live with his grandparents for 9 months.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 2: Had to take a few months break from classes</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Returned from Deployment, son returned home, Got Promoted to TSgt/</td>
<td>Suffered 2nd Miscarriage, Husband Deploys for 6 months.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 3: Continued with classes</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Husband returns from 6 months deployment</td>
<td>I got pregnant with our 2nd child and delivered in Oct, 2007.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 4: Continued taking classes one at a time</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Husband received orders and left for a 1 year tour to Korea. I had to attend NCOA for 6 weeks</td>
<td>My husband has PCSd to Korea now I have to try sell our home and prepare to PCS our family to England without him with me having to small kids, I had to bring my sister-in-law to South Dakota to take care of my kids while I was away for those 6 weeks. She flew in from Germany.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 5: I had to put school on hold until I PCSd.</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>PCSd to England</td>
<td>Husband had to leave for SNCOA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 6: Switched from NAU to University of Phoenix</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Husband Deployed for 10 months to Afghanistan</td>
<td>My Aunt died and I had to return to the States for her funeral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 7: Continued taking 1-2 class every few months</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Husband returns and I deploy for a few months</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 8: Took a break a few months</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Husband deploys for 10 months when he returned I left for a 6 months deployment 10 days later.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 9: Switched from University of Phoenix to Ashford. I lost quite a bit of credit so I was trying to catch up.</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>I was deployed until May of 2013 and continued with my degree. My mother's baby sister died June 2013 so we had to return unexpectedly to the states to attend her funeral.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 10: Switched from Ashford to Columbia Southern University</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>I continued my degree with CSU. My uncle was killed and I had to return home to the states for his funeral</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 11: Continuing my BA degree through CSU. Only 9 classes left to complete</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>My husband and I both had to deploy for 6 months. I was not able to attend school at my location. I applied for retirement for 1 Aug 2016.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 12: I am still enrolled, but have not been able to take any classes since I returned from my deployment</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Retirement date is approved for 1 Aug 2016. We are PCSing June 2016 to Nellis, AFB. I plan on continuing my degree program once I retire. My goal is to be complete within 4 months.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX H

Conditional IRB Approval Letter

November 20, 2015

Randy Croft
IRB Conditional Approval 2355.112015: The Influence of Spousal Support on Air Force Senior Noncommissioned Officers’ Pursuit of a Bachelor’s Degree: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

Dear Randy,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been conditionally approved by the Liberty IRB. Conditional approval means that your complete approval is pending our receipt of certain items, which are listed below:

- Documented approval on letterhead from each research site you are enrolling in your study

Please keep in mind that you are not permitted to begin data collection until you have submitted the above item(s) and have been granted complete approval by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board. Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well as you continue working toward complete approval.

Sincerely,

[Blank]

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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APPENDIX I

100th Air Refueling Wing Command Chief Approval

MEMORANDUM FOR RECORD

FROM: 100 ARW/CCC

SUBJECT: Permission to Interview Senior NCOs

1. Maj Randy Croft has permission to interview Senior Noncommissioned Officers (Senior NCOs) as part of his personal educational research in accordance, and compliance with, the Department of Defense (DoD) Addendum F50559 (Liberty University) of the Department of Health and Human Service’s Federalwide Assurance (FWA) Number 00016439.

2. Providing space and approval for Maj Croft’s educational activity does not include, nor imply, endorsement from either the DoD or the United States Air Force (USAF).

3. If there are any questions, please contact the RAF Mildenhall Education office at (44) 01638543173.

CMSgt, USAF
Command Chief Master Sergeant

“Square-D Away”
MEMORANDUM FOR 100 ARW/HC

FROM: 100 ARW/JA

SUBJECT: Legal Review – Request to Gather Data for Doctoral Dissertation

1. SUMMARY: You requested a legal review concerning your proposal to gather data for your doctoral dissertation by conducting interviews and surveys on Air Force personnel. I have reviewed the proposal and find it legally sufficient.

2. BACKGROUND:

   a. On 22 November 2015 you requested a legal review to conduct a study during which you would gather data from AF personnel. The stated purpose of this study is to understand the influence of spousal support on SNCOs as they pursue a bachelor’s degree. Your research would be aimed at answering three questions: (1) how has perception of spousal support contributed to the decisions of SNCOs to begin pursuing their bachelor’s degree; (2) how has perception of spousal support influenced SNCOs in their decisions about degree persistence; and (3) how has military culture influenced perception of spousal support and degree pursuit among SNCOs.

   b. Your study would involve interviewing twelve SNCOs from RAF Mildenhall and RAF Lakenheath. You would hold a higher rank than participants, but, as a chaplain, you would have no supervisory or command type authority over them. To gather participants, you plan to brief at Top 3 meetings. The study would primarily be done using public space provided by the Education Office at both installations. All data collected would be held on a private computer with password protection and would be deleted after three years. All physical data, including audio recordings, would be stored in a locked drawer or safe with access and oversight only by you.

   c. The criteria for your study would be married SNCOs with at least one child that have earned six or more credit hours towards their bachelor’s degree. All SNCOs would participate voluntarily, in their personal capacity, and receive zero compensation. Additionally, their names would be replaced with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Finally, each would be verbally advised of the following: “Keep in mind that while I am an active duty Air Force chaplain, I am only conducting this study as a doctoral student. Thus, by providing informed consent, you are acknowledging and waiving your right to confidential communication (IAW MRE 503) in your communication with me for this study. If you need to discuss personal information requiring confidential counseling with a chaplain, please notify me in advance. This study will be terminated immediately, all data collected from you for this research will be destroyed, and you will be given appropriate counseling avenues for support.”

   d. On 20 November 2015, you obtained the written conditional approval of Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Complete approval will be granted by Liberty
University’s IRB upon documented approval on letterhead from each research site you are enrolling your study.

3. LAW:

   a. DoDI 3216.02, Protection of Human Subjects and Adherence to Ethical Standards in DOD Supported Research, and AFI 40-402, Protection of Human Subjects and Adherence to Ethical Standards in Air Force Supported Research, govern the responsibilities for the protection of human subjects in research activities. IAW paragraph 11, Primary Investigators (PI) must:

      (1) Manage and be responsible for supervision of all research conducted under the PI.

      (2) Promptly comply with Institutional Review Board (IRB) direction and local requirements.

      (3) Prior to start of an activity that is or may be research involving human subjects, obtain written determination from an appropriate IRB, and the PI’s Institutional Official (IO). PIs are not authorized to make such determinations for their own activities.

      (4) Notify the IRB, in accordance with applicable requirements and local policies, and in writing when possible, of unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or others (UPRTSOs) and non-compliance. Propose protocol changes to minimize risks to subjects related thereto.

      (5) Report conflicts of interest to the IO and IRB before engaging in human subject research and when conflicts arise during the conduct of research.

      (6) Maintain research records (e.g., protocol, signed informed consent documents, IRB correspondence, and data) for at least three years after the research ends or for the length of time specified in applicable regulations, or institutional or sponsor requirements, whichever is longer.

      (7) Provide research records for maintenance, in accordance with local policy, to the assured institution under which the research is conducted upon completion of the research or reassignment, whichever comes sooner.

4. ANALYSIS:

   a. I find your request legally sufficient for the following reasons:

      (1) You are the Principal Investigator for your study. As such, in your IRB application, you acknowledge and accept that you must manage and be responsible for supervision of all research conducted. You indicated that this study will be done in your personal time by you, and will not involve the use of any AF funding, resources, or personnel to assist you in the management of your study.
(2) On 22 November 2015, in your request for a legal review you acknowledged and accepted that you must promptly comply with IRB direction and local requirements. Specifically, your study is governed by DoDI 3216.02 and AFI 40-402. Based on the facts above, I have found no indication that your study would violate either DoDI 3216.02 or AFI 40-402.

(3) On 20 November 20125, prior to start of your research, you obtained written conditional approval from Liberty University’s IRB. Your compliance with their instruction to obtain complete approval is necessary before your study commences.

(4) In your IRB application, you acknowledged and accepted that you must notify the IRB, in accordance with applicable requirements and local policies, and in writing when possible, of UPIRTSOs and non-compliance.

(5) You indicated in your IRB application that a conflict of interest could potentially exist because you are an AF Chaplain and will hold a higher rank than all of the participants of your study. To mitigate the risk that a conflict will arise, you indicated that you will use a disclaimer for each participant. This disclaimer will inform each participant that “while [you are an] Air Force chaplain, [you are] conducting this study as a doctoral student.” Therefore, participants are waiving their right to confidential communication (IAW MRE 503) by participating. If the participants require chaplain services, you will terminate the study, along with all data collected, and provide the participants with the appropriate counseling avenues for support. Additionally, you acknowledged and accepted that because you are conducting this study in an unofficial capacity that your rank and position should not be used to order or give the impression that participation in your study is a duty requirement.

(6) You state in your IRB application and your request for legal review that you will maintain research records for at least three years after the research ends or for the length of time specified in applicable regulations, or institutional or sponsor requirements, whichever is longer.

(7) You state in your IRB application that you will provide research records for maintenance to the assured institution under which the research is conducted upon completion of the research or reassignment, whichever comes sooner.

5. RECOMMENDATION: Based on the factors discussed above, I find your request legally sufficient. Please contact me at 314-238-2028 with any questions or concerns.
APPENDIX K

IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 13, 2016

Randy Croft
IRB Approval 2355.011316: The influence of Spousal Support on Air Force Senior Noncommissioned Officers’ Pursuit of a Bachelor’s Degree: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

Dear Randy,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

[Name Redacted]
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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APPENDIX L

Change in Protocol: Removal of Research Site

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Change in Protocol Form

Instructions for submitting a change in protocol form:
1. Complete each section of this form.
   a. Please be sure to use the grey form fields to complete this document.
   b. Do not change the format of the application.
   c. Please provide as much detail as possible to facilitate the review process.
2. Email the form and any accompanying materials (i.e. consent forms and instruments) to irb@liberty.edu.
   a. Please cc your faculty advisor/mentor when submitting this form.
   b. Please note that we can only accept our forms in Microsoft Word format.
3. In addition, please submit one signed copy of page 2 of the form. This item can be submitted by email as a scanned document to irb@liberty.edu or by fax to 434-522-0506.

IRB Approval Number: 2355.112015

Project Title:
The Influence of Spousal Support on Air Force Senior Noncommissioned Officers' Pursuit of a Bachelor's Degree: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator (PI): Randy Croft

Professional Title: Chaplain
School/Department: Education

Mailing Address: 

Telephone: 
LU Email: 

Check all that apply:
[ ] Faculty [x] Graduate Student [ ] Undergraduate Student [ ] Staff

This research is for:
[ ] Class Project [ ] Master's Thesis [x] Doctoral Dissertation
Faculty Research □ Other (describe):

Faculty Advisor/Chair: Dr. Jennifer Courduff, Online Adjunct Professor

School/Department: Liberty University/School of Education

Telephone: [Redacted]
LU Email: [Redacted]

Anticipated start and completion dates for collecting and analyzing data: 2 Feb 2016, but hopefully before the end of January 2016.

1. Please provide a detailed description of the changes you wish to implement.

**Due to new leadership at RAF Lakenheath, request removing RAF Lakenheath from study as site, and begin recruiting participants from RAF Mildenhall and through snowball sampling method described in research application**

2. Please describe why these changes are necessary.

**RAF Lakenheath installed new leadership in the Command Chief position. The Command Chief is the top Senior NCO on the installation in charge of enlisted matters. It took 45 days to receive approval for recruiting participants from my own AF installation, with established relationships already built. It will likely require a resubmission of all files for legal review and routing to RAF Lakenheath, where I am not stationed. If the RAF Mildenhall Command Chief helps introduce me to RAF Lakenheath leadership, I may be able to get approval in less than 45 days. However, it could also take even longer due to military routing that is often required for approval. If I can secure written permission sooner from RAF Lakenheath, I will resubmit Change in Protocol Form for approval to secure participants at RAF Lakenheath. In the meantime, I request approval so that I can begin recruiting participants from RAF Mildenhall and elsewhere through snowball sampling.**
3. Will these changes result in additional risks to participants? Please describe why or why not.

None. The only difference is one of location. RAF Mildenhall and RAF Lakenheath are located approximately five miles apart.

**When you submit this form, please submit any supporting documents (e.g., updated consent document, recruitment materials, or debriefing documents, and documentation or permission) needed as a result of this Change in Protocol.**

Randy Croft
Principal Investigator (Printed)

12 Jan 2016
Date

FOR IRB USE ONLY:

CATEGORY: □ EXEMPT □ EXPEDITED □ FULL
ACTION TAKEN: □ APPROVED □ DISAPPROVED
APPENDIX M

RAF Mildenhall Top 3 [Three] Facebook Post

Last week at our Top 3 meeting, Ch. Maj Randy Croft presented us with a research project about academic persistence for Senior NCOs. He needs feedback from up to 12 Senior NCOs to participate in providing feedback that will be part of a groundbreaking study seeking to better understand the spousal/family motivational factors of active duty Air Force Senior NCOs and their decisions to pursue a bachelor's degree. Participants can be either working towards their bachelor’s, or have already completed their bachelor’s degree.

More information, study criteria, and steps to participate can be found at the Google Forms site linked below. Though an active duty Air Force chaplain, this study is a private educational doctoral research activity, and does not imply endorsement of either the Air Force or DoD.

Informed Consent- SNCO Degree Progression
The Influence of Spousal Support on Air Force Senior Noncommissioned Officers’ Pursuit of a Bachelor’s Degree: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study
Randy Croft
Graduate Researcher
Department of Defense

DOCS: GOOGLE.COM

Like Comment Share
APPENDIX N

Enumeration Table of Identified Codes and Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open-Codes</th>
<th>Frequency of codes across data sets</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Betterment/Example</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Personal Goal Fulfillment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Motivation</td>
<td>37</td>
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<td>Goal Fulfillment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-Military Motivation</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher Promotion to Senior NCO</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Enhanced Promotion Opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early BD Enrollment</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Supervisor Influence</td>
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<td>Supervisory Influence</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning Environment (Unit)</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attrition Decisions/Dropped Course</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Pausing is Not Quitting</td>
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<td>Pause/Break/Temporary</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persistence Decisions</td>
<td>51</td>
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<tr>
<td>Switching Colleges</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Transitions Influence Enrollment Decisions</td>
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<td>Deployment factors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Military Lifestyle</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Convenience/Accessibility</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spousal Academic Support</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Spousal Support Key to Persistence</td>
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<td>Spousal Hindrance</td>
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<td>Domestic Support</td>
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<td>Spousal Competition</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>Spousal Emotive Encouragement</td>
<td>73</td>
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<td>Parenting Factors</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Duties Constricted Family Cohesion</td>
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<td>Time Stress</td>
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<td>Need for Balance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work Stress</td>
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<tr>
<td>GI Bill/Tuition Assistance</td>
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<td>Military Financial Aid Enhanced Persistence</td>
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<td>Financial Motivation</td>
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<td>Required Military Education</td>
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<td>Priority of CCAF Degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCAF Completion Essential</td>
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Note. Codes and themes were identified through survey, interview, and written timeline data.