

PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF THE AIR FORCE GRADUATES
REGARDING THE DEGREE'S INFLUENCE ON EMPLOYABILITY: A CASE STUDY

by

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Liberty University

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Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this single embedded case study was to answer the central question: How do CCAF graduates perceive the impact of their degree in enhancing their employability for the civilian workforce? Because veterans have historically suffered from high unemployment (Kleykamp, 2013), veteran employment is a highly politicized problem considering the large number who have discharged (Burnett-Zeigler, Valenstein, Ilgen, Blow, Gorman, & Zivin, 2011; Humensky, Jordan, Stroupe, & Hynes, 2013; Kleykamp, 2013; Loughran, 2014). This study used a theoretical framework of the transition theory to better understand the issues airmen faced when leaving the Air Force as well as hope theory to understand their motivations to complete their degree. Participants included currently serving enlisted airmen who were within a year of transitioning out of the Air Force and airmen who have separated/retired within the last two years. At the time of separation or retirement, the airmen had completed a CCAF degree. Data were gathered using field notes, interviews, a survey, and focus groups. The two groups of airmen were used for a cross-case synthesis in order to compare the changes in perceptions between the groups. Data analysis resulted in four directly related themes and three indirectly related ones. The former included the followings: a. The CCAF degree provides an impetus for further education; b. A college degree and certifications along with experience and skills are crucial to being viewed as employable; c. Preparing early and often, including attaining a degree and/or certification, is vital for a successful transition to the civilian workforce; and, d. Currently serving airmen valued the CCAF degree differently than those who had already separated/retired.

Keywords: veteran, employability, Community College of the Air Force, hope theory, transition theory, Air Force, military education

Copyright

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this to my daughter, Anna. Throughout this very long process, she has been my champion, cheerleader, and occasional task master. She was always ready with words of encouragement and willing to take on more chores when I was engrossed in this study. She even put up with me when the stress of completing this degree made me grumpy. I am so proud of the young woman she is becoming.

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List of Abbreviations

Air Force Credentialing Opportunities OnLine (AF COOL)

Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC)

Air University-Associate-to-Baccalaureate Cooperative (AU-ABC)

College Level Examination Program (CLEP)

Community College of the Air Force (CCAF)

Defense Activity for Nontraditional Education Support (DANTES)

Department of Defense (DoD)

Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI)

Military Tuition Assistance (MilTA)

National Capitol Region (NCR)

Office of Personnel Management (OPM)

Senior Non-commissioned Officer (SrNCO)

Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Veteran unemployment remains a high interest issue for both the White House and Congress as the numerous summits, roundtables, veterans' advocacy groups, and legislation attest to. The Federal Government has made a concerted effort to establish programs and policies to help veterans find civilian employment. Although noble, there is little research on how the recipients of these programs perceive their utility. This study attempts to bridge this gap by understanding the role of a degree—specifically the Community College of the Air Force Associate of Applied Science degree—is perceived in enhancing veteran employability to obtain a civilian job. This study requires first, understanding the perceptions enlisted airmen have about how the Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) associate's degree helped them become employable. Secondly, it is necessary to understand why airmen pursue completion of their CCAF degree. These perceptions about the role of the degree in economic success may provide insight into degree programs adult learners prefer and if these really do enhance their economic wellbeing. If there is a significant difference between perception and reality, Air Force educators, counselors, and leaders can provide better guidance to students or amend policies or programs to better meet airmen's needs. Airmen can also benefit from the perceptions of those who have gone before by establishing realistic expectations or gaining awareness of the challenges of securing civilian employment thereby being able to plan earlier and more deliberately for the transition. Counselors and leaders may be better able to guide airmen's decision making if they understand airmen's perceptions and motivations inspired by hope for completing the CCAF degree.

This chapter will introduce the issues surrounding veteran unemployment and lay the ground work for further discussions in subsequent chapters. Specifically, this study intends to understand how airmen perceive how their associate's degree earned through the Community College of the Air Force enhanced their employability for successful transition to the civilian workforce. A single embedded case study using cross-case analysis was used to compare the perceptions of airmen who are in the process of transitioning from the Air Force with those who have made the transition to civilian jobs.

It is important to understand how military-connected academic programs support the transition of airmen into the civilian workforce since veteran unemployment remains a concern for the White House, Congress, and the Services. There is no clear connection as to how the resources expended on academic programs have any postservice utility. The results of this study may provide Air Force senior leaders and budget proponents with the tools and information necessary to improve or better define goals associated with not only the Community College of the Air Force, but other Air Force programs. It will also provide education and transition counselors, mentors, commanders, and supervisors with real life information to guide airmen in their career choices. And, of course, airmen are the most important stakeholders. Airmen well equipped with training, education, and skills that are relevant to their successful transition will enjoy greater postservice success. This study could lead to further research that begins to quantify CCAF's success, including its impact on how well airmen transition into gainful civilian employment.

All researchers have biases. My own are rooted in working for years in higher education in the Air Force as both a counselor and an administrator. While I no longer work with CCAF on a regular basis and have not counselled airmen in years, I still value the program and what it

has done for airmen. In this chapter, I will provide a brief background on the issue and then discuss the problem with which this study is concerned (i.e., enlisted airmen's perceptions of how the Community College of the Air Force degree may help in enhancing their employability for civilian employment). This is followed by an overview of how the research was conducted (i.e., a qualitative approach using a case study method), including the problem statement, purpose, and research questions.

Background

After over a decade of waging the Global War on Terror in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States military experienced a significant draw down of its operations in these countries with former President Obama's reductions in troops (Garamone, 2011). With the shift away from combat, more troops are returning home. Consequently, the Services are drawing down their active forces to levels more in tune with a peace time force (Kleykamp, 2013). These servicemembers are now facing the prospect of obtaining civilian employment after over a decade of war.

Finding employment for thousands of servicemembers discharged every year—over 186,00 in 2016 (Military One Source, 2016)—within a short period of time is nothing new. Often after wars, the Service components draw down their forces and release thousands of their members back into civilian life (Cook & Kim, 2009; Faurer, Rogers-Brodersen, & Bailie, 2014; King, 2012). The challenge is how to absorb these new job seekers into an economy that is just beginning to recover from years of recession and high unemployment (Faberman & Foster, 2013; Faurer et al., 2014). In addition to economic concerns, servicemembers must overcome the prejudices civilian employers may have about the ability of veterans to adjust to civilian employment (Loughran, 2014). Servicemembers also may not have the skills or education

needed to join the civilian workforce due to having careers focused on combat arms. In addition, servicemembers themselves may have preconceived ideas about their ability and readiness to enter civilian employment.

There is a slowly growing body of research on veteran unemployment including discussions on higher veteran unemployment rates (Kleykamp, 2013; Loughran, 2014; Szelwach, Steinkogler, Badger, & Muttukumaru 2011) and the challenges facing veterans seeking civilian employment during a recession (Faberman & Foster, 2013; Faurer et al., 2014). The issue of veteran unemployment is further exacerbated by the fact that the military is experiencing a significant drawdown (Cook & Kim, 2009; Faberman & Foster, 2013; Faurer et al., 2014; King, 2012).

However, there is a dearth of research on the causes of veteran unemployment despite the various programs established to assist veterans in finding jobs. One aspect that has received almost no attention is the role higher education that is gained during servicemembers' military careers has in helping them attain civilian employment postservice. All the Services provide robust academic programs to help their members attain higher education. There is little research to indicate how these programs aid in veterans' postservice transition to civilian life and, specifically, in getting a job.

In addition, many servicemembers take advantage of these academic programs but not all. For those that do, this study uses hope theory (e.g. Snyder, 1994; 2000a; 2002) and transition theory (e.g. Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012) to better understand the motivations for pursuing higher education and how that can ease the transition to civilian life. This study will add to the research by providing a possible link between a specific academic program (the Community College of the Air Force (CCAF)) offered by the Air Force and its influence on

veteran employment. No such links have been made in current research, yet it is important to helping airmen maximize their resources to make a successful transition.

This study fundamentally is concerned with the problem of veteran employment and how education can help reduce high veteran unemployment. High veteran unemployment is not new (Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2011; Humensky et al., 2013; Kleykamp, 2013; Loughran, 2014). Yet, for the first time, a major drawdown in troops has occurred during a major recession (2008-2014) and with an all-volunteer force (Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2011; Faberman & Foster, 2013; Loughran, 2014; Martorell, Miller, Daugherty, & Borgschulte, 2013). Servicemembers who have volunteered to serve during a time of war and served honorably, often after repeated deployments, have found themselves struggling to find jobs. The White House, Congress, the Services, and the nation were challenged to develop remedies to help veterans find meaningful jobs. Additionally, the Services were faced with exorbitant unemployment compensation costs to veterans who did not have jobs after leaving. Tighter budgets exacerbated by sequestration, placed pressure on the Services to assist servicemembers in finding jobs. Finally, a nation is only as secure as it is capable of defending itself. Relying on an all-volunteer military means that the military must not only continue to provide for the health and well-being of its members during their service, it must also provide for their success after their service. Like any employer, the military must compete with other employers for the best and the brightest to fill its ranks. Providing programs while in service that have value for servicemembers postservice is one way that the military cannot only take care of its own but present itself as the employer of choice for young people.

The researcher hopes that this study will benefit airmen who are preparing to leave the Air Force as well as Air Force leaders. First, the researcher sought to understand how enlisted

airmen perceive how their CCAF degree contributes to their successful transition to the civilian workforce. Airmen are not required to complete their CCAF degree. While many do, others choose not to. Airmen may be more encouraged to complete their CCAF degree if there is a link between successful employment after leaving the Air Force and completing the CCAF degree. Secondly, Air Force leaders may be able to use this study to better understand the return on investment of the resources they put into CCAF and better understand CCAF's role in not only developing airmen for their Air Force careers but also postservice. The nation's citizens benefit when airmen return to civilian life not only ready for work but able to share positive experiences of their time in the Air Force.

Situation to Self

Qualitative researchers need to understand their own perspectives and how they influence the research in order to identify biases that may impact the results (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). This process, called reflexivity, ensures that one is conscious of one's own biases, values, and experiences (Creswell, 2013). Reflexivity is a two-step activity that involves discussing one's experiences and then describing how they influence the researcher's interpretation of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Reflexivity is taking "ownership of one's perspective" (Patton, 2002, p. 64).

One assumption I have concerns my view of the nature of reality. Reality can either be fixed or mutable (Kant, 2014). My approach for this study is to assume that reality is not fixed but, rather, depends on the individuals and the context in which they experience and frame their reality. This assumption that reality is mutable presumes a constructivist paradigm. Constructivism permits many realities resulting from peoples' own experiences (Creswell, 2013). Constructivism, then, provides the foundation for exploring and making sense of the perceptions

of the participants of this study and for drawing conclusions from the results. I also assume that having a college degree has a positive impact on developing airmen's employability skills and thus positively impacts their ability to attain civilian employment.

Secondly, my personal biases are based on my over 25 years in higher education with the Air Force. I started my career as a guidance counselor in the education centers at several bases. Over the years, I moved into policy development, culminating as the Chief of Air Force Voluntary Education overseeing the Voluntary Education program for the Air Force. In my current position, I work closely with the Department of Defense Transition to Veterans Program Office overseeing the Air Force's Transition Assistance Program and working with other federal, state, and private organizations to develop policies to ensure airmen have the best possible transition to civilian employment and life. I firmly believe that there is great value in the Air Force's higher education programs. I have personally witnessed how success in one small area of higher education has propelled airmen to persist in ever higher academic pursuits. I have a bias that higher education provides the mechanism to develop the critical thinking skills employers want (Davidovitch, Byalsky, Soen, & Siuani-Stern, 2013) as well as other employability skills. Lastly, I believe that the issue of veteran unemployment may be over thought. I do not doubt that it is a problem; however, the level of effort sustained to solve this problem may be too much and, consequently, more direct and simpler solutions may have been overlooked.

Problem Statement

Employment of veterans is a highly politicized problem considering the large number of active duty members discharged (Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2011; Humensky et al., 2013; Kleykamp, 2013; Loughran, 2014). Historically, veterans suffer from higher unemployment rates than the

general population (Kleykamp, 2013). Recently, several laws have been passed enhancing educational opportunities for veterans and active duty members. However, the role education has played in reducing employment remains unclear. How servicemembers perceive the benefit of education they receive in-service in improving their employability to civilian employers is little understood. It may be that soon-to-be-veterans place unrealistic expectations on their employability based on the perceptions they may have about the type and quality of education received in Service. Airmen receive information from a variety of sources (e.g., professional guidance counselors, fellow airmen, senior enlisted members, and commanders). Each individual has their own perceptions and biases about higher education and any of them can have a greater or lesser influence on airmen. Consequently, airmen may overstate their level of preparedness (high or low) for employment based on these perceptions.

This study attempts to help bridge the gap in the literature between a particular academic program offered by the Air Force (CCAF) and its influence on veteran employment. The Air Force spends millions of dollars on many academic programs (including CCAF) without any understanding of their utility postservice. The goal is to provide senior Air Force leaders with information on the return on investment of the CCAF degree as it pertains to postservice employment for Air Force veterans. Understanding the impact CCAF degrees have on veteran employment may help Air Force leaders make more informed decisions regarding the role and future of CCAF and other academic programs, possibly reduce the unemployment compensation costs to the Air Force, and reinforce the Air Force culture that airmen take care of airmen for life.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this single embedded case study is to understand the perceptions airmen have about the role higher education has in making them employable for civilian jobs. This

includes not only the learning acquired from a specific course of study but the less tangible skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, and embracing lifelong learning that employers are looking for in potential employees. In other words, those skills that are cultivated in an academic setting that make one employable. For this study, airmen's attainment of a Community College of the Air Force Associate of Applied Science degree will be studied to get a sense of whether airmen perceive that it has helped them become more employable. CCAF is the only federally-chartered, regionally accredited community college awarding associate of applied science degrees to enlisted airmen. The degrees are tied specifically to an airman's specialty or job in the Air Force (e.g. aircraft mechanics, computer security, health care). Attaining a college degree suggests one has a purpose or goal in mind. Therefore, this study considers the role hope has as a motivator to pursue a degree, as well as how hope and transition are factors in gaining greater employable skills. Hope theory (Snyder, 1994) and transition theory (Schlossberg, 1966) provide a theoretical framework for understanding airmen's motivations for completing their CCAF degree and how that helped in their transition to civilian life.

The focus of the study is on regular enlisted airmen (never commissioned) both currently serving and those who have transitioned out of the Air Force. In the current study civilian employment is defined as a job in the civilian sector and not federal employment. The study employed a single embedded case study design with cross-case synthesis using coding and themes as part of the analytical process. Data were collected using interviews, focus groups, a survey to validate interview responses on hope, and field notes. Interviewing both currently serving enlisted airmen as well as those who have recently left provided a before-and-after sense of how airmen's perceptions may have changed once they left the Air Force and were confronted

with the reality of finding a job. The results of the possible changes in perceptions may help Air Force leaders provide policies to bridge the gap between the two sets of perceptions.

Significance of the Study

The Air Force spends hundreds of millions of dollars on postsecondary education programs to enhance the professional and personal development of its members (Buryk, Trail, Gonzalez, Miller, & Friedman, 2015). Understanding the long-term impact of these programs postservice, how airmen perceive the role of education during and after transition to civilian employment, and their motivations may provide information to the Air Force senior leaders, policy makers, and installation counselors on how to positively affect airmen's education goal attainment, modify or update programs to better meet the needs of transitioning airmen, and, finally, help counselors shape realistic goals for educational attainment (Gilroy, 2003) and subsequent postservice job realization.

There is a growing body of literature studying the role higher education has in developing employability skills, defining what employers want in employees, and in trying to define employability. There is also a modest amount of research on veterans' unemployment. However, there is very little research that attempts to tie together the postsecondary education members receive while in the military with their success in obtaining civilian employment. This study adds to the literature by studying how the attainment of a particular postsecondary education program (CCAF) in-service helps the successful transition of airmen to civilian employment by improving their employability.

The military today is a highly technical force needing smart, adaptive servicemembers who can perform well in combat and other high stress situations. Since the end of the draft, the United States has relied on an all-volunteer process to fill the ranks of the Services. Like any

employer, the Air Force has to compete with other employers for the best and the brightest. The Services are challenged to constantly refresh its workforce by tens of thousands each year because of constant turnover in military personnel either through force reductions or the normal cycle of retirement and separation. Airmen who believe that their time in the Air Force was wasted because they cannot find jobs will be less willing to encourage others to join the military. This reduces the pool of technically proficient, smart citizens who want to take a chance on joining the military. Without these citizens, the readiness of the Services is degraded, as is their ability to fight the nation's battles in defense of the Constitution. Providing programs that help bridge Air Force employment with civilian employment is one way to take care of those who serve and encourage others to do the same.

Research Questions

Research questions should be substantive, novel, and should help tell a story (Stake, 2010). When possible, they should be continually honed down to questions that are realistic within the constraints of the study and then, even further, “finally to a focused list of essential and necessary questions” (Patton, 2002, p. 225).

Central Research Question

How do CCAF graduates perceive the impact of their degree in enhancing their employability for the civilian workforce?

This question contains the fundamental purpose of the study. It incorporates the discussion of the role a specific outcome of higher education (in this case, a CCAF associate's degree) has in successful employment after leaving the Air Force as well as specifically targeting the issue of veteran employment (Kleykamp, 2013; Loughran, 2014). Its purpose is to guide the discussion of the results by defining the scope of the research in order to not stray from the

purpose of the study. These perceptions may also provide the motivation or reasons airmen choose to pursue their CCAF degree. If their perceptions are not positive, they may not be motivated to complete the degree. This could impact their employability postservice. On the other hand, there may be personal attributes, such as high hope, that contribute to completing the CCAF degree, regardless of perceptions.

Subquestions

1. How do currently serving enlisted airmen transitioning to civilian employment perceive how their CCAF degree will make them more employable?

This question is meant to establish a baseline of perceptions against which the perceptions of already separated airmen and currently serving airmen can be compared. It helps to establish the cross-case synthesis that will allow comparison with the answers of the participants of the two embedded units (Yin, 2014). This is important because, if perceptions change significantly postservice, it may support the need for the Air Force counselors to help airmen to re-scope their expectations for a more realistic outcome for job attainment.

2. How do separated/retired Regular Air Force enlisted airmen perceive their CCAF degree made them more employable for civilian employment now that they are in the civilian workforce?

This question further develops the opportunity to compare and contrast the perceptions of both sets of airmen to determine how or if perceptions change postservice. The answers from the two groups will help in the development of word tables in order to look for cross-case patterns (Yin, 2014). Dependent on the results, this could assist in the development of programs to help airmen manage realistic expectations and smooth the transition to civilian employment. This question also relates directly to the issue of veteran unemployment and the concern that it is

higher than other segments of society (Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2011; Humensky et al., 2013; Kleykamp, 2013; Loughran, 2014).

3. How did prior enlisted (never commissioned) airmen's perceptions change regarding the role their CCAF degree had in their employability for civilian jobs after they left the Air Force?

This question continues to establish the cross-case analysis of this study by providing another before-and-after perspective of airmen's perceptions and how they may have changed. This gives an opportunity to expand on the previous question by asking them to focus on specific reasons their perceptions may have changed. This question is grounded in Schlossberg's (2011) contention that transitional events can change people's assumptions.

4. What did both currently serving and separated enlisted airmen hope to gain by completing their CCAF degree?

This question is directed to the reasons some airmen decide to pursue their CCAF degree. It sets the stage for using hope theory and transition theory to understand the motivations of these airmen. This information is useful in helping the Air Force frame their marketing of the CCAF degree and in how counselors can use these theories to help airmen who are uncertain about pursuing a CCAF degree. This question is grounded in the concept that those with high hope are more motivated and better able to pursue and attain their goals than those with low hope (Feldman, Rand, & Kahle-Wroblewski, 2009; Snyder, 2002). Snyder (2002) also supports this concept when he found that hope was correlated to academic success.

Definitions

1. *Airman* - "The term Airman has been historically associated with uniformed members of the US Air Force ... regardless of rank, component, or specialty. Today, Department of the Air Force civilians are incorporated into the broader meaning of the term when there is a need to

communicate to a larger audience within the Service” (United States Air Force/Air University, 2011, slide 1). For this study it specifically means enlisted members.

2. *Chief of Staff of the Air Force* - The senior uniformed Air Force officer responsible for the organization, training and equipping of 664,000 active-duty, Guard, Reserve and civilian forces serving in the U.S. and overseas (United States Air Force/Chief of Staff, 2015, para 1).

3. *Community College of the Air Force* – Federally chartered, regionally accredited community college offering associate of applied science degrees only to enlisted airmen. Degrees are awarded in an airman’s Air Force occupation and leverage military training and civilian courses to complete the degree.

4. *Department of Defense (DoD) installation* - Any active duty military, Reserve or National Guard owned, leased, or operated base, reservation, post, site, camp, building, or other facility to which DoD personnel are assigned for duty. (DoDI 1322.25, 7 July 2014, p. 59).

5. *Education advisor* - A professionally qualified subject matter expert or program manager in the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Education Services Series 1740 or possessing equivalent qualifications working at the education centers. (DoDI 1322.25, 7 July 2014, p. 59).

6. *Education center* - A DoD installation facility, including office space, classrooms, laboratories, or other features, that is staffed with professionally qualified personnel who oversee or conduct voluntary education programs. This may be located at an active duty military installation, Reserve and National Guard facility (e.g., state readiness center, armory, unit, etc.), or recruiting center (i.e., leased space inside a shopping mall or office building; DoDI 1322.25, 7 July 2014, p. 59).

7. *Employability* - “refers to the ability to gain and maintain employment and to manage employment transitions such as transitions between jobs and roles within the same organization to meet changing job requirements” (Coetzee et al., 2015, p. 2).

8. *Tuition assistance* - “Funds provided by the Military Services or U.S. Coast Guard to pay a percentage of the charges of an educational institution for the tuition of an active duty, Reserve, or National Guard member of the Military Services, or Coast Guard member, enrolled in approved courses of study during off - duty time.” (DoDI 1322.25, 7 July 2014, p. 61).

9. *Regular Air Force* - Full-time active duty as distinguished from the AF Reserves or Air National Guard.

10. *Voluntary education programs* - “Continuing, adult, or postsecondary education programs of study that Service members elect to participate in during their off-duty time, and that are available to other members of the military community.” (DoDI 1322.25, 7 July 2014, p. 59).

Summary

The 2008-2014 recession coupled with the significant drawdown of troops as the decade-long war winds down have important implications for veterans trying to find civilian employment. Despite the research on veteran unemployment there are no clear causes of veteran unemployment or even agreement on the scope of the unemployment issue (Kleykamp, 2013; Loughran, 2014). The Services provide many educational programs and services to assist members in successfully transitioning from military service, as well as many educational opportunities while in service. What is not clear is how these in-service programs help servicemembers obtain a civilian job when they separate or retire.

Pursuing postsecondary education while on active duty may positively impact veterans' ability to find work by improving their employability. But, what is unknown is what motivates servicemembers to complete a college degree and how this helps in their transition. Hope theory may provide insight for their motivation to complete their degree. This study focuses on enlisted members of the Regular United States Air Force to try to help answer these and more specific research questions. The outcomes may provide the Air Force with specific ways to reshape or develop programs, as well as understand airmen's perceptions on their readiness for postservice life. The latter can help counselor and leaders assist airmen to manage their expectations.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter will discuss the theoretical framework that was used for this study as well as related literature. It will discuss hope theory (Snyder, 1994) and transition theory (Schlossberg, 1966) as they relate to what motivate airmen to decide to pursue their Community College of the Air Force degree. It will also help to understand the context in which their postservice transitions occur. It will begin with a review of the literature pertaining to the theoretical assumptions regarding the nature of reality and how the assumption chosen for this study relates to its purpose. The chapter will include a review of related literature including veteran employment, employability, the value of postsecondary education as it relates to employment, and Air Force specific programs provided to airmen for their professional and personal development.

Theoretical Framework

The literature review that follows addresses several key components of this research. It starts with a broad discussion of reality and its ontological underpinnings. This sets the stage for how airmen perceive their readiness for civilian employment. Integral to their perceptions is how well prepared they are for the transition to civilian work and their attitudes to the possibility of success. Both of these concerns are addressed by Schlossberg's (1966) transition theory and Snyder's (1994) hope theory. In turn, these theories reside against a backdrop of significant change happening in the Armed Forces. The review continues to define the scope of this research by assessing transition theory and hope theory against the backdrop of degree completion—the lynch pin for this research. The assumption is that airmen who have a certain

level of education have the necessary “soft” skills employers prize and that airmen who have completed a college program did so because they possessed higher levels of hope than those who did not. Finally, the review will examine those programs that currently exist within the Air Force designed to help airmen be successful in their educational pursuits.

Background

Servicemembers and their families face incredible challenges while serving in the Armed Forces. Multiple moves, loss of spouse employment as a result of those moves, separation due to deployments, and uncertainty are all part of a military life. Since 2001 these challenges have increased in tempo and severity. Multiple deployments to war zones, the fear of losing a loved one, and often fundamental shifts in family dynamics all impact how servicemembers (and their families) face the future. The military life is not forever, however. For some it is a relatively short term of a few years and for others it may be a 20-year career; however, at some point, servicemembers must leave the military and enter the civilian world. Some may be able to plan their transition, but for others, departure from the military may be sudden. In either instance, servicemembers face the very real prospect of having to find a job. Their success may be predicated on several factors: how well they had planned throughout their careers for their transition; their hope for the future; and, what steps they take to control their transition to the civilian workforce. It is imperative that servicemembers are successful at making this transition since the well-being of their families relies on it.

It helps to have a clear picture of the current climate. Today the combat operations associated with the Global War on Terror are drawing to a close after over 10 years of conflict. With the shift away from combat, more troops are returning home. The budget reductions related to a move away from combat operations means that the buildup of troops required to

sustain prolonged combat operation is no longer needed (Kleykamp, 2013). Thousands of servicemembers are now facing the prospect of leaving the military—often quickly—and having to obtain civilian employment after years of war (Faberman & Foster, 2012; Faurer et al., 2014; Kleykamp, 2013). The shift from military occupations to what civilian employers desire in employees can seem to be daunting and even unreachable. Some military careers focus on gaining skills in the combat arms, skills that are not readily or easily translatable to civilian job requirements. It is important to understand the different types of skills that civilian employers want and how those learned in the military may actually mirror those sought-after skills.

This current state of affairs for the military means finding employment for vast numbers of veterans within a short period of time. This challenge is not new. Often after wars, the Service components draw down their forces and release thousands of their members back into civilian life (Cook & Kim, 2009; Faberman & Foster, 2013; Faurer et al., 2014; King, 2012). The challenge today, as then, is how to absorb these new job seekers into an economy that is just beginning to recover from years of recession and high unemployment (Faberman & Foster, 2013; Faurer et al., 2014). In addition to economic concerns, servicemembers must overcome the prejudices of civilian employers about the ability of veterans to adjust to civilian employment. Servicemembers themselves often have preconceived ideas or biases about their ability and readiness to enter civilian employment. It is with this latter issue that this study is concerned.

Employment of veterans is a highly politicized problem considering the large number of active duty members who are being discharged. Historically, veterans suffer from higher unemployment rates than the general population (Kleykamp, 2013). There are many programs that help servicemembers gain civilian employment including education, which is often seen as a route to economic prosperity (Davidovitch et al., 2013; Rury, 2002). In recent years the United

States Congress and White House have increasingly become concerned about reducing veteran unemployment. Collaboration between the Departments of Defense, Labor, and Veterans Affairs, along with the Office of Personnel Management and the Small Business Administration have resulted in programs and outreach to civilian employers to improve veteran employment. Recently, several laws have been passed enhancing educational and professional credentialing opportunities for veterans and active duty members to help them compete with nonveterans for civilian jobs.

All these efforts have highlighted the need for better cooperation between the federal government and civilian employers. What is less clear is how the programs—particularly educational programs—impact veteran employment. It is not clear the role education has played in reducing unemployment. Yet, education has always been seen as the great leveler that transcends socioeconomic status. The question for this research is whether active duty servicemembers also perceive the importance of education—particularly the education received while in the military—in improving their station in life. Their perceptions about how education impacts their employability is important in assisting veterans in making informed decisions. Soon-to-be-veterans may place unrealistic expectations on their employability based on the perceptions they may have about the type and quality of education received while in the military. Consequently, they may believe they are more or less prepared for employment based on these perceptions. The key factor is how employable airmen perceive themselves to be.

There is very little literature on the academic programs the military Services provide. There is none as far as can be determined that deal with how the education provided translates into postservice employment. The purpose of this study is to fill the gap in the literature on the role postsecondary education has in improving employability for servicemembers and,

subsequently, in servicemembers achieving postservice employment. Specifically, I will explore the issues surrounding regular Air Force enlisted airmen who received their Community College of the Air Force associate of applied science degree and their perceptions on how achieving this degree influenced their employability.

In order to understand airmen's perceptions, one must first explore the concepts of reality, the construction of reality, theories that help us understand transition and motivation, and literature related to veteran employment, employability, the value of education and its role in helping students become more employable, and military education programs. The next section will begin this discussion by looking at reality and how it is determined within the context of this study.

The Nature of Reality

The telling of any good story must contain certain crucial elements. While these elements may vary somewhat (McWilliams, 1998; Stake, 2010), there are still some common components. These include a structure or plot, characters, a problem/conflict, and a resolution (Stake, 2010). Conducting qualitative research is no different (Creswell, 2009; Freire, 1993; Rosiek & Pratt, 2013; Stake, 2010). If qualitative research is the "disciplined study of the particular" (Stake, 2010, p. 182), then telling the story of the particular is essential (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Stake, 2010; Trochim & Donnelly, 2008).

Just as a story has certain themes or ideas that flow through it to give it greater structure and substance, so too, does qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). In qualitative research, it is necessary that there is "...not only understanding the beliefs and theories that inform our research but also to actively write about them..." (Creswell, 2013, p. 15). This organization of the study-story starts with the larger discussion of the philosophical assumptions (Creswell,

2013), which provides the general structure of the story that is then filled in with greater, stronger, and deeper organization, plots, and characters. These in turn inform the theoretical framework, a conceptual framework, research questions, method, and design (Creswell, 2013; Joyner, Rouse, & Glatthorn, 2013; Patton, 2002; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Swezey, 2014). When all these components of the story (or research) come together they form an interlocking triad of philosophy, strategies of inquiry, and specific methods (Creswell, 2009), which eventually reveal the results.

The philosophical assumptions of any research are the fabric of the story. They give it structure and guide the plot (i.e., purpose). This philosophical structure has three components that help highlight the importance in understanding philosophy and, consequently, philosophical assumptions and their roles in research (and, in particular, qualitative research): (a) It helps develop the problem and research questions and provide guidance on how information is collected to answer the question(s); (b) It becomes an integral part of training; and, (c) Since readers already have philosophical assumptions, it outlines the assumptions made by the author to bridge disconnects between those of the readers and those of the author (Creswell, 2013).

Depending on the purpose of the research, the researcher has a range of philosophical assumptions from which to choose. Ontology opens the door to explore the nature of reality (particularly important when the research seeks to discover individual understanding), while other research have the goal to uncover what knowledge is (epistemology), the role of values (axiological), or the research process (methodology) (Creswell, 2013). Which the author chooses provides a guide through which further decisions about the theoretical framework, method, design, etc. are made (Creswell, 2013; Patton 2002). These decisions then form “Research strategies [that] are based on ontological assumptions. Such strategies implicitly or

explicitly make various claims about the kinds of things that can or do exist...” (Kant, 2014, p. 80).

Once the structure of the story is developed by choosing a philosophical assumption, the theoretical framework enters to provide substance. It goes hand-in-hand with the philosophical assumptions (Creswell, 2013). Researchers may choose from several overarching paradigms such as constructivism, post positivism, or critical theory (Creswell, 2009; 2013). These paradigms further focus the study and give form to the philosophical assumptions (Creswell, 2013). Narrowing down from the philosophical assumptions and paradigms of the study, the theoretical framework further orients the study (Creswell, 2009). Paradigm selection is important because of its influence on developing a theoretical framework (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014). Specifically, researchers “need to consider their research paradigm when selecting their theoretical framework and ensure that there are no inconsistencies” (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014, p. 168).

Not all researchers place value on the need to have a philosophical/theoretical basis for qualitative research, believing instead that the practical application of qualitative research is sufficient (Patton, 2002). This pragmatic approach, which includes observing and asking open-ended questions, is considered enough to “solve problems, improve programs, or develop policies” (Patton, 2002, p. 136). Perhaps at a very micro level this may be true. Parents make decisions every day on how to raise children, pay bills, etc., without referring to a specific philosophy or paradigm. However, if research is to inform beyond a particular vignette, it must have a common ground for discussion, debate, and application. Theory and philosophical assumptions provide that common ground.

The theoretical framework of research is like developing the plot and subplots of the story. Part of creating the plot of the research story is choosing the theories that will confine the story to a particular path. The theories, in turn, frame the specific research questions. These provide a lens through which the research is viewed (Douglas, 2014), and, “help solidify the purpose of the study and guide the writing of the research questions, which in turn, lead to choosing an appropriate methodology” (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014, p. 155). Theory “guides research in a problem area, it facilitates understanding and analysis of complex phenomenon, it aids practitioners in making decisions, and it provides a basis for predicting what might occur” (Hoy & Miskell, as cited in Joyner et al., 2012, p. 143). Specific theories help explain behavior, phenomena, etc. that are being studied and identify results that stray from what is expected (Joyner et al., 2013).

In the following sections I will discuss the specific philosophical assumptions, paradigms, and theories chosen to give shape and form to this research. I hope to show how each fits in with the others and (in Chapter Three) show how they drove the selection of the research questions and design.

Philosophical Assumption

If perceptions are the lenses through which people view their world, then how those perceptions are interpreted provide the basis for reality. Perceptions provide context. They provide a link to past experiences and inform future interactions. Perceptions develop one’s reality. For the purposes of this study, how one perceives their preparedness for civilian employment fits into an ontological philosophical assumption. Indeed, since the purpose for this research is to uncover the perceptions of particular groups of people concerning a single event, an ontological assumption seems most fitting.

Perceptions are “the constellation of mental processes by which a person recognises, organises and interprets intellectual, sensory and emotional data in a logical or meaningful fashion” (Miller-Keane as cited in *The Free Dictionary*, 2003). They play a significant role in defining reality and determine the way each participant of this study experiences the world around him or her. Perceptions are integral to developing a frame of reference, which in turn helps understand experiences (Mezirow, 1997). For this study, it is important to understand perceptions in relation to educational choices and motivations of the participants.

The philosophical assumption for this research rests on how reality is defined. The study of reality or ontology is “the study of reality or existence as a whole, or particular aspects of reality, for instance, monism (reality consists of one substance) or monadology (reality consists of many substances)” (Kant, 2014, p. 69). Ontology is an understanding of the nature of reality and posits that reality is not singular but has many views (Creswell, 2013). Ontology becomes a debate between a singular and a plural reality, the latter being socially constructed (Patton, 2002). A slightly different approach suggests that ontology is the creation of taxonomies that “provide a definitive and exhaustive classification of entities in all spheres of being” (Smith, 2003, p. 1).

An ontological assumption does not seek to understand how the participants know what they know (epistemology) or understand their values (although, it will not be possible to completely separate their values since they may be an underlying motivator); nor does it focus on the process of research (methodology) (Creswell, 2013). Rather, it seeks to discover or explain the perceptions (i.e. the reality) of the participants—how they view their own unique circumstances. Since the issue of individual reality is a cornerstone of understanding

perceptions, the philosophical assumption for this study lends itself to the belief that reality is mutable. The next section discusses the paradigm that gives greater clarity to this assumption.

Constructivism, perception, and reality. The story thickens as more characters and plots are added. In this case, the story uses a constructivist paradigm as the path down which the characters will go. In this study, perceptions will occur within the bounds of this paradigm because “the task of man’s consciousness is to *perceive* [italics in original], not to create reality...” (Aristotle as cited in Kant, 2014, p. 77). As such, “constructivism holds that social phenomenon are socially constructed and subject to revision by observers and researchers” (Kant, 2014, p. 72). Using a constructivist model or paradigm allows for multiple realities that are developed through lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). Reality, then, “is a social construct based on individual interpretations” (Lincoln & Guba as cited in Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014, p. 134). Social constructivism “has an established usefulness for understanding how people make sense of their experience” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 25). This paradigm is part of a larger contextual perspective in which “adulthood is viewed primarily in relation to the context within which it occurs” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 18).

The philosophical assumption for this study rests on the ontological perspective of determining what reality is. Using the social constructivist paradigm, the study is further narrowed to a particular ontological belief that there are multiple realities. This is necessary because the research problem is being viewed through the individual experiences and motivations of each participant. As such, even when looking at the same phenomenon or event “people will interpret the event differently” (Stake, 2010, p. 66). So, it becomes very important to understand how one interprets an event.

Reality as it relates to education and life transitions. A student's frame of reference is also important when it comes to education (Mezirow, 1997) since "learning requires that new information be incorporated by the learner into an already well-developed symbolic frame of reference..." (p. 10). Following this line of thought helps explain the context for learning as one in which "individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work..." (Creswell, 2013, p. 24) under a social constructivist framework. Studies that embrace this construct depend on the participants' interpretations (Creswell, 2013). In selecting a design, researchers must be aware of the implications for developing research questions and tools used to gather the appropriate data. In each person two realities exist (Stake, 2010). One is based on personal experience and the other on relationships with others.

This back-drop of the philosophical assumptions and paradigms leads to narrowing the focus of the study to the specific theories that will help further frame the study in terms of the research questions. Participants are either preparing to leave the military and seek civilian employment or are already in the civilian workforce.

At some point, a servicemember must either separate or retire from the military. This transition can be trying and even traumatic (Anderson et al., 2012). Understanding how the servicemembers perceive the challenges and the motivators they use to prepare for the change can help inform policy and develop or adapt programs to ease the stress of transition.

The military Services have many programs to help train, educate, and prepare for the inevitable transition to civilian life. However, their existence does not mean that servicemembers will avail themselves of the opportunities. Understanding what motivates some to take advantage of these resources while others do not is an important step in reaching servicemembers in time to positively affect their transition.

Transition can take many forms, including changes in personal circumstances, relationships, and/or work (Anderson et al., 2012). For servicemembers, there is also the transition from a rigid chain-of-command and daily structure form of leadership to one that may be more relaxed in the civilian community (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). There are also many factors influencing servicemembers' decision to complete a degree program, the transition into civilian employment, and their perceptions of how these affected their employability after leaving the Air Force. Understanding these may help overcome the stress inherent in moving from a regimented work style to one that is less so. This is particularly important since recent veterans have higher unemployment rates than other segments of society (Faberman & Foster, 2012; Faurer et al., 2014; Kleykamp, 2013). The next part of this chapter will address theories related to transition and motivation (or hope) and how these may apply to servicemembers.

Transition Theory

Today's world changes quickly and constantly. Often "The assumptions about adulthood that have been accepted throughout history are increasingly challenged by a landscape in constant flux. Indeed, today continuity is the exception, and adjusting to discontinuity has become the norm of our era" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 3). The speed, regularity, and complexity with which change occurs can be a significant challenge to people's ability to respond.

The question then becomes one of how one not only survives a transitional event but also flourishes. One such way is using the transtheoretical model of change (Barclay, Stoltz, & Chung, 2011). This model, first used for smoking cessation, follows a series of stages: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and termination (Barclay et al., 2011). The transtheoretical model was adapted to provide a holistic response to the concerns of job changers by addressing career and personal concerns, considering the cultural and

contextual environment of the individual, and including both intent (motivation) and action by the individual within the context of these stages (Barclay et al., 2011). This model allows for an iterative process through which clients can move back and forth between the changes (Barclay et al., 2011).

At first glance the transtheoretical model seems appealing. Its focus is almost solely on the issues surrounding job change and it provides definitive emotional stages that someone who is changing jobs will go through. It also provides a bridge between theory and counseling practice (Barclay et al., 2011). However, while it attempts to provide a holistic model for identifying the needs of midlife career changers, it does not consider the many other aspects of the individual such as the effect on relationships and the strengths they already bring to the process; nor does it consider a dimension of personal growth that can assist in future transitions (Schlossberg, 2011). It also focuses on voluntary career change and not sudden job changes brought on, for example, by involuntary separation from the military or job cuts.

Servicemembers who are leaving the military are not just changing jobs or professions; they are changing their way of life and their families are doing the same. They all may fear the loss of the close-knit military community they have known for years or the loss of a paycheck for a time. They may be worried about the loss of benefits such as the commissary for groceries or health care. Thus, within the single event of a job change, there are many facets that affect how well servicemembers and their families weather the transition (Anderson et al., 2012). It is important that there is a theory that takes all this into account.

Schlossberg's (1966) transition theory appears to encompass these overlapping events and stresses that occur during not only job changes but any transition event. The stress that one may feel may be because "Transitions are often experienced as frightening or traumatic"

(Anderson et al., 2012, p. 30). Schlossberg (2011) noted her own personal angst when changing jobs—a change that she had volunteered to experience. These transitions do not affect just one aspect of one’s life. They can fundamentally change relationships, roles, routines, and assumptions (Schlossberg, 2011). Out of these experiences and those of her clients, Schlossberg developed the transition theory, which provides a solid theoretical framework to understand the transition stresses of servicemembers.

When developing transition theory, Schlossberg (1985) looked for a way to reconcile the various adult developmental theories in order to better account for the inconsistencies in those theories. These theories highlighted different aspects of adult development such as a cultural context, stages of psychological development associated with specific ages, or life span changes (Anderson, et al., 2012; Damle, 2015; Schlossberg, 1985). Previously held beliefs about adult psychological development did not provide a complete picture of how adults develop nor how they handle change or transitions; nor did these previous theories consider changes in society (Schlossberg, 1985). For example, developmental psychology identifies certain ages in which life transitions such as marriage or retirement are expected to occur (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 1985). However, recent societal changes are influencing people to hold off marriage and children to later times in their lives while increased longevity influences when people retire (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 1985). Thus, these shifts in age and time as well as the context in which these events occur, can have much different impacts on individuals than previously thought (Anderson et al., 2012). As early as 1966 it started to become clear that there was a gap in adult developmental theory encompassing the middle third of an adult’s life (Schlossberg, 1966). Up to that time, prevailing theories viewed this time of an adult’s life as

relatively stable (Schlossberg, 1966). In subsequent years, there have been more studies on adult transitions and development (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 1985).

Schlossberg's transition theory suggests that it is the transition event that is important (Anderson et al., 2012), not simply the individual's age at which it occurs. The event must then be understood within the context and resources, as well as the age of the individual, which in turn affects how successfully an individual makes the transition (Anderson et al., 2012). The transition event also occurs in stages as one works oneself through it (each one unique to the circumstance as well as to the individual; Anderson et al., 2012). Consequently, transition theory does not ignore that age (developmental psychology), context (especially cultural perspectives), or life span changes all can affect transition (Anderson et al., 2012). Rather, these are the lenses through which transition is viewed rather than the "why" of the transition and how much of an impact it has on a person. To this last point, it is important to note that "a transition exists only if it is defined as such by the individual experiencing it" (Meyer, n.d., p. 3).

Transition theory considers two overarching phenomena: how the transition affects the individual's life and how he or she copes with it (Schlossberg, 1985). The intent was not to create a matrix of "usual" transition events but, rather, to recognize that, while each event is unique to the individual, how one understands the transition experience can be codified (Anderson et al., 2012). What is important is "the individual's appraisal of the transition" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 43). How individuals can successfully navigate the transition event—whether it is expected, unexpected, or anticipated but never actualized—by understanding their situation, knowing their inner strengths, having a support system, and using coping strategies has led to the development of what Schlossberg (1985) referred to as the 4s Model.

The early development of the transition theory focused on employment which continues to be an integral part of the theory (Schlossberg, 1985). Whether the transition event was due to work changes or whether other events had work implications, many adult transitions had a work connection (Schlossberg, 1985). Since then, the research has expanded into other transition events (Schlossberg, 2011).

This emphasis on work transitions is particularly important to the current study. Servicemembers may be leaving the military voluntarily as part of a planned decision or, more recently, they may be part of a military drawdown, injury, etc. and suddenly facing the unexpected task of finding civilian employment (Faurer et al., 2014; King, 2012). Major employment changes can be significant in that “It is no longer a simple, unidirectional move up the hierarchical ladder; it has rather become multi-directional event” (Damle, 2015, p. 62). While forced job changes may present barriers, they can also be opportunities for growth, such as with changing goals or developing new skills (Damle, 2015; Schlossberg, 1985). The strategies that people use and that are outlined in the 4s Model (Schlossberg, 2011) are of particular interest for the current study. As will be discussed further in the chapter under hope theory, the strategies, and choices servicemembers make to prepare for transition to civilian employment are important to their success.

Understanding these strategies is also important since “Transitioning from the military culture to civilian life may produce a culture shock similar to that experienced by immigrants first arriving to the United States” (Rausch, 2014, p. 90). A top priority for new veterans is securing employment quickly (Rausch, 2014). Transition theory has a three-pronged approach for handling transitions that are “modifying the situation, controlling the meaning of the problem, and managing stress after the transition” (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015, p. 75). This method

may help to better understand the challenges of veterans and understand how airmen used education—specifically the Community College of the Air Force, as a strategy to control or modify the transition to civilian employment. It is not unusual that adults in transition often return to school especially when changing careers, getting married, having children, or divorcing (Varmecky, 2012). Airmen leaving the Air Force are no different.

Transitions occur over time and may end up encompassing several events during which individuals may reassess their roles, relationships, etc. (Anderson et al., 2012). As one works through the transition, one's perspective changes, thus, "The only way to understand people in transition is to study them at several points in time" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 48) and note how their perspective of the event changes. The current study involved talking with airmen at two stages of their transition: those who are preparing to leave the Air Force and those who have already transitioned to civilian employment.

Transition theory then follows the philosophical assumptions and paradigms of the current study. Ontologically, transition theory provides a framework through which people can determine the reality and effect of transitions on themselves. Transition theory also follows the social constructivist paradigm in which each person defines his or her own reality based on experience, gender, etc. In addition, how airmen perceive the value of their degree for employability may impact how well they transition to civilian employment.

In the next section of this chapter hope theory will be explored. The intent is to understand why airmen made the choice to complete their CCAF degrees. Its focus is to understand what they were hoping would happen by choosing to pursue higher education.

Hope Theory

Hope theory is, at its essence, the joining of the determination to do something and a plan of execution (i.e. mental willpower and waypower; Snyder, 1994). It is a way of thinking that enables one to not only imagine a goal but to actively pursue and attain it. In hope theory, individuals not only believe that they can achieve a goal, but they also deliberately develop a goal and then plan to achieve that goal. Both willpower (later called agency thinking) and waypower (also known as pathways) are integral components of hope (Snyder, 1994).

Hope theory is equal parts believing and doing. It is where agentic thinking motivates people to believe that they can achieve their goals (Snyder, 2000a). In other words, it is their perception that they are able to take the actions necessary for goal attainment (Feldman et al., 2009; Snyder, 2000a; Snyder, et al., 1991). These perceptions of hope are not static but rely on outside forces that one integrates into one's thinking (Snyder et al., 1991). How one views the world and then acts on it play an important role in the level of hope one has. Those who have a positive perception that they can attain their goals not only have greater success in achieving them but tend to pursue more challenging goals (Snyder et al., 1991). An important aspect of hope theory is whether one has high hope or low hope determines several things: the level of challenge of the goals set by individuals; the ability to readjust pathways when met with barriers; and the development of multiple paths to achieve one's goals (Chang, 2003; Snyder et al., 1991)

Equally important to hope theory is the capacity to act on one's goals. People develop pathways or mental steps that outline how they will achieve their goals and then actually perform those steps (Snyder, 2002; Snyder et al., 1991). Those with high hope will develop many different strategies to achieve their goals, adjusting as necessary for success (Snyder et al., 1991). Just as it is important to believe that achieving goals is possible, nothing actually happens without a plan and then executing that plan. Thus, the development of pathways (i.e., a plan)

with agency thinking (the belief that success is possible) leaves one with the energy to move forward (Snyder, 1994). Hope theory, then, can be described as “hope = mental willpower + waypower for goals” (Snyder, 1994, p. 10). Hope as a theory is “the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways” (Snyder, 2002, p. 249). Hope, “implies process; it is an adventure, a going forward, a confident search” (Menninger, 1959, p. 484).

However, hope theory is not a linear process but rather an iterative one (Feldman et al., 2009; Snyder, 2002). Success in goal attainment boosts one’s sense of hope which in turn positively affects future goal attainment (Feldman et al., 2009; Snyder, 2002; Snyder et al., 1991). The inability to achieve one’s goals can negatively affect one’s sense of hope but usually only if one already has a low sense of hope (Feldman et al., 2009; Snyder, 2002; Snyder et al., 1991).

What hope theory is not is an emotion-based process. Hope theory is not built on emotions (Snyder, 2000a; Snyder et al., 1991). Rather, “*emotions are a by-product of goal-oriented thought* [italics in original]—positive emotions reflecting perceived success in the pursuit of goals, and negative emotions reflecting perceived failures” (Snyder, 2000a, p. 11). Instead, *thinking* is the foundation of hope theory, not emotions (Snyder, 2002a). Those with high hope will react differently to negative emotions compared to those with low hope, with the former viewing negative emotions as an opportunity to develop different pathways (Snyder, 2000a). High hope individuals “use information about not reaching their goals as diagnostic feedback to search for other feasible approaches” (as cited in Snyder, Shorey, Cheavens, Pulvers, Adams III, & Wiklund, 2002, p. 824).

In many ways, hope theory seems similar to other theories. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy may come the closest in paralleling Snyder's hope theory (Snyder, 2000a; Snyder et al., 1991). The former can be explained such that "Perceived self-efficacy influences the level of goal challenge people set for themselves, the amount of effort they mobilize, and their persistence in the face of difficulties" (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Craigez-Pons, 1992, p. 664). Self-efficacy influences effort and personal belief (agency thinking), which in turn determines the goals and their level of difficulty (outcome) and the determination (pathways thinking) to achieve the goal (Snyder, 2000a). However, hope theory gives equal importance to agency thinking and pathways thinking while self-efficacy emphasizes agency thinking (Snyder, 2000a). The difference between hope theory and self-efficacy is that the latter does not consider goal planning (Feldman et al., 2009) nor does it emphasize outcomes (i.e. goal attainment; Snyder et al., 1991).

There are other theories related to hope such as self-esteem, problem solving, optimism, and Type A personalities (Snyder, 2000a). In all of these, there are some overlaps with hope theory. However, self-esteem theories do not consider "how to change counterproductive thought patterns and behaviors to more positive patterns..." (Snyder, 2000a, p. 16) that help in goal attainment. Problem solving involves the development of courses of action (pathways) to reach a goal but does not include motivation (agency thinking; Snyder, 2000a). However, problem solving may mediate pathways thinking as it relates to depressive symptoms and life satisfaction in women (Chang, 2003). Lastly, hope theory has been compared to those with Type A behavior (Snyder, 2000a). While both share goal achievement, those who exhibit high hope are happy with their decisions and enjoy the process of goal attainment (Snyder, 2000a). In

contrast, Type A personalities tend toward hostility and do not enjoy the journey of achieving their goals (Snyder, 2000a).

One of the more obvious comparisons with hope theory is optimism; however, hope is not to be confused with optimism. Optimism leaves out a key component of hope-goal development. Similar to self-efficacy, optimism does not translate into action nor does it direct outcomes (Snyder et al., 1991). The difference, then, between hope theory and optimism is that optimism is agency (willpower) without pathways (waypower; Snyder, 1994). Snyder is not the first to disassociate hope from optimism. An early proponent of hope, Menninger (1959) also did not identify hope with optimism and instead suggested that “optimism always implies some distance from reality...” (p. 484).

Hope theory is not without its critics. Some believe that hope turns to false hope when unrealistic goals are set, thus creating overconfidence in individuals (Polivy & Herman, 2000). People who approach change with unrealistic expectations “and the corresponding unattainable criteria for success—may thus be responsible for the failure of the attempts, creating false hope and then dashing it” (Polivy & Herman, 2000, p. 129). False hope “results from inadequate assessments of the arduousness of self-change, unrealistic goal-setting, and poor coping skills...” (Polivy, 2001, p. S83). Snyder (2002) countered this argument by suggesting that the issue is not unrealistic goals but whether the individual already has a capacity for high hope. Those with high hope “see their goals as challenges and are invigorated by them” (Anderson, 1988; Snyder, Cheavens, & Michael, 1999 as cited in Snyder, 2002, p. 265).

Another criticism of hope theory is that there can be bad goals (Snyder, 2002). Hope theory, however, is intended to be value neutral (Snyder, 2002). It is a process of thinking and motivating for goal achievement regardless of the goal. While some goals may be antisocial, the

vast majority of people are raised to pursue goals valued by society—antisocial goal selection does not make the goal false (Snyder, 2002). However, false hope may simply be bad planning (Snyder, 2002). The real difference may be between those with high hope as compared to those with low hope (Snyder, 2002). It is the strategies that low hope people choose that may impede success and not that the goal itself is false (Snyder, 2002).

Hope as it relates to the current study. Hope theory provides the framework for goal selection and the motivation (agency thinking) and plans for fulfillment (pathways). Because of its focus on both internal beliefs and external acts, hope theory touches, enhances, and influences many aspects of this study. Within the context of this research, hope theory may influence two areas—the motivation to pursue higher education and the effort to find work.

The primary goal of the current study was to better understand the perceptions of airmen regarding whether attaining a CCAF degree helped them become more employable. The underlying questions are why these airmen decided to pursue their CCAF degree and what they hoped to gain by pursuing the degree. A fundamental component of hope theory is to explain “the ways that people appraise and pursue their goals...” (Snyder et al., 2002, p. 821). Consequently, understanding what motivated these airmen to choose the goal of CCAF completion is essential to this study. An underlying premise of hope theory and, thus, this research is the role perceptions play. Hope relies on a person’s perception that their goals are attainable (Snyder et al., 1991). Those who positively perceive their ability to successfully pursue their goals (Feldman et al., 2009) are more likely to have higher levels of performance (Snyder et al., 1991) and are most likely to achieve them (Snyder et al., 1991).

Airmen, as well as servicemembers from other branches, are faced with unique challenges. They share many of the same characteristics of most non-traditional students: they

attend school part time, work full time, and are often married with children (Burns, 2010; Topper & Powers, 2013). Add to this the fact that servicemembers deploy away from home for months at a time, experience combat and its related stressors, and move frequently, then college completion at any level can become even more of a challenge. Although, a study of Air Force master sergeants suggested that deployments did not significantly affect degree completion (Savage & Smith, 2007/2008), the combination of any of these factors could inhibit degree completion.

With all the demands on their time, airmen must choose between many competing interests and demands, so understanding why they chose to spend their time on completing a CCAF degree may provide a baseline for future success. Perhaps, not surprisingly, gaining an education has consistently ranked as a top reason for joining the military (Buryk et al., 2015). This hope of attaining an education may be a motivator for some airmen. Hope has been found to positively correlate to college graduation (Snyder et al., 2002). Those having higher hope scores predicted higher cumulative GPAs and a lower likelihood of being dismissed for academic reasons (Snyder et al., 2002). For others who did not have this goal, it is helpful to understand what experiences and life changes occurred to alter their objectives to now choose an academic path. Hope theory may be able to shed light on this latter group. Regardless of the level of hope (high or low) students who set goals for grades are more likely to achieve them; however, students with higher hope believe that they can achieve higher grades despite early setbacks (Snyder et al., 1991). This ability to overcome obstacles is also important in transition theory.

The relationship between hope and transition theories. There are many challenges airmen face as they transition from military to civilian employment. Fortunately, there are

several strategies that they can use to prepare for that transition. These strategies are important because the loss of employment “can be viewed as a significant, if not devastating, block to one’s goals and a threat to one’s identity” (Snyder as cited in Rodriguez-Hanley & Snyder, 2000, p. 48). As discussed earlier, even when a job change is anticipated it can have a jarring effect on a person’s roles, relationships, and identity. Planned job changes can also contribute to the failure to meet one’s goal. Expectations of job security, challenging work, and skills match are often no longer the case in today’s work place (Rodriguez-Hanley & Snyder, 2000). Airmen expecting these things may find their goals severely tested.

Failure to gain the goal of employment can hamper achieving other, related goals as well as impact other parts of airmen’s lives. Therefore, hope theory and transition theory work together to identify goals, personal barriers, and strengths toward achieving them, different paths for attaining them, and the motivation to pursue and succeed. Hope provides the back-drop for determining transition goals and the motivation to achieve them, and transition theory helps break down internal barriers for attaining the goals.

The stress of transitioning from the military to civilian life and employment can be better managed when hope and transition theories work together. Those with hope may have a personality that allows them to adjust more easily (Chang, 2003). In other words, “The appraisals made about life goals are integral to hope’s relation to the coping process” (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 580). Airmen with high hope may be more able and willing to use a variety of transition programs, opportunities, or strategies to mentally regulate themselves (Chang, 2003). As a result, people with greater hope show “less dysphoria and less negative affectivity” (Chang, 2003, p. 123). Ultimately, those with high hope are more likely to “...have greater happiness

and less distress, have superior coping skills, recover better from physical injury, and report less burn-out at work” (Snyder, 1994, p. 24).

Like transition theory, hope theory fits in with the philosophical assumptions and paradigms of this study. Hope theory provides a way through which individuals can use their personal perceptions to create their reality. The fact that hope is unique to each person and is predicated on past experiences with goal attainment puts hope theory in line with a social constructivist paradigm. Since this study is enveloped in the issue of veteran employment and the education attained in the Air Force that could facilitate the job search, the next sections will provide the contextual background of the problem.

Contextual perspective. There are several reasons that servicemembers pursue a college education: (a) It was the reason for joining the military (Buryk, et al, 2015); (b) It was necessary for promotion; or (c) It was needed to successfully transition to civilian work (Wilson, Smith, Lee, & Stevenson, 2013). Knowing these reasons provides the context for understanding the problem of this study and is a key component in social constructivism, hope, and transition theories—all of which provide a framework for this research. This juncture offers the opportunity to bring together different events that may be “intricately related to many coincidental actions and that understanding them requires a wide sweep of contexts: temporal and spatial, historical, political, economic, cultural, social, personal” (Stake, 2010, p. 31). Both hope and transition theories rely on context to give meaning to how an individual experiences a phenomenon. Hope theory is predicated on the idea that agentic thinking and pathways development begin at infancy as babies begin to react to the environment around them (Snyder, 2000b). In transition theory, counselors must understand “the client’s perceptions of the change and their own experience” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 41).

This discussion so far has emphasized the importance of context for understanding reality and perceptions. In order to better understand the context for this study, the next sections will discuss the literature surrounding veterans' employment, employability, Air Force transition assistance programs/services, Air Force educational programs such as academic counseling, as well as financial and other benefits; and the overall value of education. What airmen experience from these contexts may be significant in helping them set goals, develop paths to achieve them, and reduce the stress of transitioning to civilian life.

Related Literature

This section will examine the main issues affecting veteran employment including tracing the impact of major force drawdowns of the past, factors that may impact veterans' employment (such as deployments), and major educational programs offered by the Air Force. It is intended to provide a context in which to further explore the purpose of this study.

Issues Related to Veterans' Employment

Multiple career changes have become the norm with some estimates suggesting that individual career changes can happen every few years (Barclay et al., 2001). This is true as well for servicemembers who move regularly from one military job and geographic area to another. If airmen have to change jobs so often in the Air Force, then one would think that the career change from military employment to civilian employment should be of little consequence. This unfortunately is not the case. High rates of veteran unemployment reveal the difficulty servicemembers have in making the transition to civilian work. There are very real implications for society when veterans struggle to find employment. In fact, "There is an implied societal obligation to provide for veterans and to ensure they successfully move into civilian work life. When so few bear the burdens of war, the post-military outcomes of those who do highlight

whether veterans continue to bear the burdens of war in their civilian lives” (Kleykamp, 2013, p. 837). Since veterans have struggled with a high rate of unemployment as compared to nonveterans (Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2011; Humensky et al., 2013; Kleykamp, 2013; Loughran, 2014), assisting them in becoming more employable postservice keeps trust with their sacrifice.

Veteran unemployment becomes an even greater concern during war time. Just as the U.S. needs more materiel for armed conflicts so does it need more personnel. Consequently, “During every major American conflict, the Department of Defense has added additional personnel to its force structure to meet the demands at home and abroad” (Faurer et al., 2014, p. 56). As conflicts draw down, the opposite becomes true as fewer troops are needed. Fewer conflicts are also associated with lower defense budgets. Today, budgetary constraints are made even more difficult by sequestration requiring significant across-the-board reductions in spending (Kleykamp, 2013). Tighter budgets as well as significant draw-down in troop levels, means more servicemembers will be entering the workforce at a time of depressed employment caused by the recent recession (Faberman & Foster, 2013; Loughran, 2014; Robertson & Brott, 2013). Tens of thousands of troops have been and will continue to be released by the Services for the foreseeable future.

Finding jobs for veterans after a conflict or due to a significant troop drawdown is not new. Within the last century, there have been six major force reductions—World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, post-Vietnam, and the Global War on Terror (Humensky et al., 2013; Kleykamp, 2010; 2013). In each era, servicemembers faced their own challenges in finding civilian work, with some having more success than others. World War II and Korean War veterans tended to have little difficulty finding civilian jobs, while Vietnam and Gulf War veterans struggled (Humensky et al., 2013; Kleykamp, 2010; 2013). The differences between

the levels of success in the transition to civilian work has its roots in the various government policies in place during each of these time periods.

During World War II, the government made very few exemptions from service such that (a) Those who did not serve may have had existing problems that would have made their employment difficult anyway; (b) Since military service touched a significant portion of the population it was not viewed as disruptive; and (c) The returning veterans gained greater education (Kleykamp, 2013). In contrast, military service during Vietnam allowed for exclusions for those attending college, therefore, veterans who came from less educated, lower socioeconomic backgrounds had to compete with civilians who had opted for college versus military service (Kleykamp, 2013).

Post 9/11 veterans, like their Gulf War counterparts, are entering the civilian workforce during a time of deep recession (Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2011; Faberman & Foster, 2013; Loughran, 2014; Martorell et al., 2013). This, coupled with the advent of the all-volunteer force and tighter recruitment standards, means that fewer Americans experience military service, which may affect how employers view veterans and their experiences (Kleykamp, 2013). Veterans may also be competing against a more educated workforce (Routon, 2013). Yet many of the explanations for high veteran unemployment may not bear out. Despite Congressional interest and the media attention (Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2011; Loughran, 2014) on veteran unemployment and the plethora of programs to assist veterans in job placement (to be discussed further in this chapter), there is very little research on veteran employment, and what is available is contradictory.

Statistically, veterans seem to have higher unemployment rates than nonveterans, especially in the 18-24-year-old age group (Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2011; Humensky et al., 2013;

Kleykamp, 2013; Loughran, 2014). The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported an unemployment rate for this age group at 29.1% in 2011 (Loughran, 2014). In addition, the unemployment for all veterans aged 18-65 is higher than for nonveterans (Kleykamp, 2013; Loughran, 2014; Robertson & Brott, 2013; Wilson et al., 2013). Although the prevailing evidence points to issues with high veteran unemployment, other research shows that all veteran demographic groups were just as likely to be employable and just as satisfied with their jobs as their nonveteran counterparts (Routon, 2013). Currently, veteran employment is below the national average of approximately 5%.

Several recent studies (Faberman & Foster, 2013; Humensky et al., 2012; Kleykamp, 2013) support the contention that veteran unemployment for Post 9/11 veterans is higher than for nonveterans, even after controlling for several variables. A more recent study highlighted the most common reasons for high veteran unemployment and possible effects on unemployment (Loughran, 2014). These reasons included veteran poor health, selection, employer discrimination, skills mismatch, and job search (Loughran, 2014). Loughran, however, found the following:

- Health problems had no statistically significant effect on veteran unemployment rates.
- Self-selection into the military does not account for any differences in characteristics between veteran and nonveteran population in unemployment but may give veterans an advantage in finding employment.
- Skills mismatch may be a similar problem for both veteran and nonveterans therefore veterans are at no more disadvantage than nonveterans. Even for combat related

skills there seems to be no difference in employment, but those veterans may experience lower wages.

- Research does not bear out the existence of employer discrimination.
- The time it takes to find a job may impact veteran unemployment in the short term.

An economic recession and the fact that veterans are looking for jobs compared to nonveterans increases unemployment in the short term. While veteran unemployment is high compared to nonveterans, the causes may be limited to just one variable—time (Loughran, 2014).

A contrasting study noted four possible causes for high unemployment among new veterans: (a) They are young and undereducated, (b) poor transferability of skills, (c) poor economic times, (d) war time deployments (Faberman & Foster, 2013). The most significant factor in new veterans' unemployment was war time deployments (Faberman & Foster, 2013). Deployments may contribute to the veteran unemployment rate in several ways: (a) physical or psychological restraints, (b) training restricted to war time skills that are less transferable, (c) The need to quickly build up troops for combat may have resulted in recruiting personnel who would not normally meet physical, academic, or moral requirements, (d) High deployment rates may have encouraged personnel to leave the Services who “were best suited to a military career...” (Faberman & Foster, 2013, p. 12). In addition, unemployment rates for particular groups of veterans may exceed the average for all veterans (Faberman & Foster, 2013). For example, female veterans (especially those in rural areas) struggle more to find jobs than other veteran groups (Szelwach, Steinkogler, Badger, & Muttukumaru, 2011). Overall, female veterans have higher unemployment rates than their male counterparts (Szelwach, et al., 2011).

These unemployment rates can have considerable impacts on the Department of Defense, servicemembers, and the civilian job market. The Department of Defense has labored under the budget impact of sequestration for the last few years. Tight budgets mean that tough decisions have to be made about how to maximize the use of considerably less funding. However, federal law requires the Department of Defense to provide Unemployment Compensation for Ex-Servicemembers (otherwise known as unemployment insurance; Loughran, 2014). The cost for this compensation increased from \$232M in 2002 to \$730M in 2011 (Loughran, 2014). Thus, high veteran unemployment can cause even greater strain on already tight defense budgets.

The social impact on servicemembers could be even greater in terms of veterans' mental health (Anderson et al., 2012; Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2011), morale (Anderson et al., 2012; Rodriguez-Hanley & Snyder, 2000), and family relationships (Kleykamp, 2013). There is also concern whether the civilian job market can absorb tens of thousands of veterans during a recession (Robertson & Brott, 2013).

With this disparity in the literature as to the causes of veteran unemployment, the Department of Defense, other federal, and private programs (as well as the servicemembers themselves) are challenged in how to assist veterans in finding employment. The Department of Defense, the Services, and partner agencies assist servicemembers by providing programs in the areas of skills training and leadership, postsecondary education, and transition assistance (such as resume writing, translating military duties to civilian terms, and interview and job-hunting skills). All are aimed at the personal and professional development of servicemembers, both during and postservice.

Before discussing the programs, it is important to understand two overarching concepts concerning employment in order to give additional context to this study. First, one must

understand what it takes to be employable—to know what skills, attitudes, or attributes are necessary. Secondly, one must know how education, in general, is understood to assist in making one more employable and whether there are any benefits to pursuing a college degree. The following sections will discuss these topics.

Defining employability. How one prepares oneself for employment is critical in increasingly challenging job markets (Messum, Wilkes, & Jackson, 2015; Van den Broek, Cuyper, Baillien, Vanbelle, Vanhercke, & De Witte, 2014). With more global markets and rapidly changing technology there is a need for employees with unique skills (Coetzee, Ferreira, & Potgieter, 2015; Jackson, 2013). The dynamism of employment today means that “The classic definition of a ‘job’ has become largely whatever performance an incumbent’s immediate manager needs done from day to day or even minute to minute” (Mohuman, Mohuman, & Lawler as cited in Graen, Wakabayashi, & Hui, 2013, p. 33). This means that employees must “be able to respond to constant change” (Olson & Shultz, 2013, p. 17), the successful management of which is important in making a successful transition (and a key factor in transition theory; Anderson et al., 2012).

In order to get a job, one must be able to be employed. Exactly what it means to be employed, or employable, presents challenges (Tymon, 2013). The first distinction that must be made is between employability and employment. Employability is one’s actual ability to get a job (such as possessing desired skills), while employment is the set of external factors that may prevent one from obtaining a job despite being qualified (Holmes, 2013; Tymon, 2013). Despite one’s best efforts, “It is possible to be employable, yet unemployed or underemployed” (Wilton as cited in Tymon, 2013, p. 843). Others view employment as “an outcome/reward for a worthy candidate” (Kulkarni & Chachadi, 2014, p. 65) or as “a strategy for participating in and

sustaining themselves in society” (Coetzee et al., 2015, p. 1). Employment has also been described “in terms of occupational prestige and financial attainment” (Hogan, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Kaiser, 2013, p. 4).

Whether one considers employment to be merely having a job or something much grander, it seems that employers want to ensure that potential employees have the skills necessary to get the job done (whatever that may be) and thus, they look for those who are employable. However, just as it is difficult to define “employment” so, too, does “employability” defy an easy description. The definition of “employability” sways between an overarching, esoteric general concept (Barker, 2014; Hogan et al., 2013) to one that relies on descriptive terms such as the skills required to be employable (Holmes, 2013; Kulkarni & Chachadi, 2014; Tymon, 2013) to define it. One proposed definition of employability is “the capacity to gain and retain formal employment, or find new employment if necessary” (Hogan et al., 2013, p. 3). While this definition provides great flexibility in allowing one to interpret how employment is gained, it does not consider whether the employment attained is one that can sustain oneself financially or provide a sense of satisfaction. This latter point is becoming increasingly more important as “meaningful work [that] engage[s] the energy and focus of the individuals performing the work tasks and activities” (Olson & Shultz, 2013, p. 18) is gaining in popularity. Employability is contingent on being able to use and build upon one’s talents in a way that helps one to achieve personal and career success (Olson & Shultz, 2013). While one may argue that almost any employment is better than none at all, a more important concern is whether the job is sustainable. In other words, can the job not only provide for the financial security of the individual but also meet both the personal and professional goals of the employee

as well as the goals of the organization (Barker, 2014; Hogan et al., & Kaiser, 2013; Messum et al., 2015; Olson & Shultz, 2013).

A more direct definition provided by the U.K. Commission for Employment and Skills stated that employability is “the skills almost everyone needs to do almost any job” (as cited in Parasuraman & Prasad, 2015, p. 25). Providing a list of characteristics or skills to define employability may not be any more helpful in understanding what it means to be employable. Just as it is difficult to define “employability” so, too, is it challenging to develop a list of skills or personal attributes upon which professionals can agree (Tymon, 2013). These skills and attributes may be generally referred to as “a set of achievements—skills, understandings and personal attributes—that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (York as cited in Holmes, 2013, p. 542). Consequently, “Skill and attribute divergences are not confined to those between separate groups of stakeholders, as there is evidence to show that views also differ within groups of stakeholders” (Tymon, 2013, p. 843). Yet, there does seem to be some agreement that employability includes “soft” or “generic” skills as well as technical skills or knowledge. While soft skills can be challenging to define, in many cases, they are more closely aligned with personality traits than with the ability to perform a task well (Eden, 2014; Hogan et al., 2013; Mishra, 2014).

The definition that most captures the fluidity of what it means to be employable “refers to the ability to gain and maintain employment and to manage employment transitions such as transitions between organisations and transitions between jobs and roles within the same organisation to meet changing job requirements” (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010 cited in Coetzee et al., 2015, p. 2). Hillage and Pollard (1998) noted that people are more employable

when their "...assets comprise their knowledge (i.e. what they know), skills (what they do with what they know) and attitudes (how they do it)" (p. 2). Within the context of this study, successful transitions are key to the employment success of airmen as they leave the Air Force and enter into civilian life. If airmen have employable skills that allow them to move more comfortably from Air Force employment to the civilian workforce, they can better employ the 4s Model of transition theory. If they have the "personality and cognitive ability [that] are both important predictors of work and life success" (Kuncel, Ones, & Sackett as cited in Hogan et al., 2013, p. 6) they can successfully make the move from being an airman to being an employee. The importance of being able to manage the transition to employability is further emphasized by the idea that the technical expertise obtained in college coupled with soft or generic skills give students "a suite of skills allowing a smooth and rapid transition into a productive employee" (McIlveen & Pensiero as cited in Barker, 2014, p. 36).

What employers want. Ultimately employability skills—whether soft, hard, or a combination of the two—will be determined by employers. Employers may even compete in a "global war for talent" (Badal, 2016, Para 1) in which "human capital is becoming a competitive advantage for companies fighting to stay profitable" (Badal, 2016, Para 1). In order to stay competitive, "Companies are looking for intellectual talent that can meet the challenges of this quickly evolving business landscape" (Badal, 2016, para 2). Potential employees who have an enterprising mindset (i.e., resourcefulness, teamwork, creativity, relationship building, and resilience) are in great demand (Badal, 2016). What "employers want is the stars (the highest performing employees that create disproportionate value)" (Graen et al., 2013, p. 33). Further, considering dynamic work environments influenced by social media and the Internet, one would

imagine that employers would look for employees with skills that can adapt and change as needed. Adaptability is an important aspect of employability.

These soft skills desired by employers are supported in the research and include communication (Clark, 2013; Harder, Andenoro, Roberts, Stedman, Newberry III, Parker, & Rodriguez, 2015; Mishra, 2014), problem solving (Harder et al., 2015; Mishra, 2014), and lifelong learning (Barker, 2014; Coetzee et al., 2015; Eden, 2014; Smith, Dymock, & Billett, 2013), as well as team work, initiative, reliability, and personal responsibility (as cited in Tymon, 2013).

Taken together, “Employability should be seen explicitly as about more than skills, about developing a whole, employable *person* [italics in original] who integrates skills, qualities, values and relationships...” (Eden, 2014, p. 268). Comparing lists of skills developed from research on employability (Badal, 2016; Barker, 2014; Mishra, 2014; Tymon, 2014) begins to reveal several skills that are in common regardless of study, researcher, industry, or academic program and which contribute to a “whole person” or multidimensional employee.

Being employable is just as much, if not more, about personal qualities and abilities than about technical expertise (Clark, 2013; Helyer & Lee, 2014; Hogan et al., 2013). Technical expertise can be taught—whether one is an engineer or a writer or a teacher. The skills needed to be able to perform the tasks associated with these and other jobs can be easily identified and assessed (Clark, 2013; Hogan et al., 2013; Kulkarni & Chachadi, 2014). Whether soft skills can be taught is another question. In order to begin to answer this, there first must be a distinction between skills and personal attributes (Tymon, 2013). Skills involve the doing of a task and can be “defined as: ‘any component of the job that involves doing something’...and include[s] manual, diagnostic, interpersonal or decision-making skills” (Tymon, 2013, p. 845). However,

being “dependable, able to work under pressure, creative and enthusiastic” (Woods and West as cited in Tymon, 2013, p. 845) are personality traits that are unique to an individual and may be either innate or learned at an early age (Tymon, 2013). Whether these traits can be learned is up for debate (Tymon, 2013).

A few things stand out in this discussion on employability. Two traits regularly cited in the research that are critical to employability are lifelong learning which includes “agency in proactively managing their careers beyond those offered by the organization” (Coetzee et al., 2015, p. 2) and adaptability or flexibility. These same skills are foundational characteristics in hope theory. People who are willing to learn (even from failure) often exhibit high hope (Anderson, 1988; Snyder, Cheavens, & Michael as cited in Snyder, 2002). Those who work at developing employable skills may actually be exhibiting high hopes by not only expressing agentic thinking but by creating pathways for developing those skills of adaptability and lifelong learning (Snyder, 2002). Ultimately, “high levels of career adaptability are positively associated with future job search self-efficacy, employment status, perceptions of the future work self [and] person-environment fit” (Guan as cited in Coetzee et al., 2015, p. 3). Self-efficacy closely aligns with hope, suggesting a positive relationship between acquiring employable skills and hope for success (Snyder, 2000a).

The next section will discuss the role higher education has in improving the social and financial well-being of employees and in developing employable skills.

The Value of Postsecondary Education

A college education holds the promise for a better future. It is often seen as a gateway to the middle class and as a way for employers to rack and stack potential employees (Davidovitch et al., 2013). There is a myriad of postsecondary programs that include professional credentials,

two- and four-year college degrees, and vocational-technical training, all of which have a part in preparing people for the job market. The focus on higher education in recent years has been on gaining technical skills in order to get a well-paying job. However, as can be seen from the previous discussion on employability, this involves not only the expertise surrounding a particular subject but also broader skills such as critical thinking, creativity, lifelong learning, and leadership desired by employers (Mishra, 2004; Tymon, 2013). The value of higher education, then, may be two-fold: first, to provide the technical skills needed for employment, and, second, to develop those soft skills that make one employable.

One of the first purposes of education in the United States was to imbue a sense of citizenship steeped in the values of the enlightenment and White, Anglo-Saxon ideals (Rury, 2002). As the impact of egalitarianism was felt after the various revolutions in Europe, along with the independence bred by settling a sparse new land, education evolved to become a means for providing a level playing field (Rury, 2002). The rise of the industrial revolution and with it a need for more technical skills encouraged the belief that education was the means to a better life (Rury, 2002). Time has borne out this idea. Today, statistics show that people with a college degree make more than those without one. The difference can be substantial with “salary premiums earned by academics...over 40% higher than those of high school graduates” (Card & Lemieux as cited in Davidovitch et al., 2013, p. 39). Card and Lemieux’ research showed that this increase in salary for college graduates is consistent across countries and continents. Higher education, then, provides employees with a means to financial security (Davidovitch et al., 2013).

Many embrace this belief that education, and particularly a college education, is the way to a better life. The question is whether employers perceive the value of a postsecondary

education as well in their organization. Some employers place significance on the intangible qualities of a college degree (Davidovitch et al., 2013). Specifically, employers believe that “Having an academic degree guarantees knowledge, skills, loyalty, persistence, and other elements beyond professional knowledge” (Brown as cited in Davidovitch et al., 2013, p. 39). The role higher education has in developing employable skills is “recognised as an important part of teaching and learning for higher education” (Barker, 2014, p. 33). The combination of “technical and personal skills obtained from university...” (Barker, 2014, p. 36) with skills learned on the job helps students move more easily into the world of work (Barker, 2014).

Incorporating learning that develops skills for the workplace and in the classroom is a significant challenge for academic institutions (Eden, 2014). Colleges can influence the development of employability skills by helping students to become more resilient and reflective (Eden, 2014). Academic institutions are called on to bridge the gap between traditional learning of subject matter and recognizing that “The application of that learning, for the 21st century graduate, will be increasingly nuanced and hybrid” (Helyer & Lee, 2014, p. 352). In this vein, institutions of higher education inherently have the calling to teach skills that students carry for a lifetime.

The idea that institutions are able to and have an obligation to help students increase their employability is not accepted by everyone (Tymon, 2013). This raises two issues that are interrelated. The first issue is whether higher education should teach employability skills and, secondly, if so, whether the institutions are capable of doing so (Tymon, 2013). The former becomes a philosophical argument on the nature of higher education with some contending that “Higher education institutions are not the place to train graduates for jobs” (Tymon, 2013, p. 847), but rather one for “a broad education experience” (Tymon, 2013, p. 847). The latter

concern is one of less philosophy and more economics. Increased competition for students means that academic institutions may cater to “trendy” interests of students to draw them to their institutions while at the same time realizing that good employment numbers of their graduates also drives enrollment (Tymon, 2013). The consensus seems to be that higher education is an integral and necessary part of developing employability skills (Barker, 2014; Eden, 2014; Harder et al., 2015; Helyer & Lee, 2014; Holmes, 2013; Jackson, 2013; Kulkarni & Chachadi, 2014; Messum et al., 2015; Parasuraman & Prasad, 2015)

Following this emphasis on higher education’s role in developing employable skills, it is important that servicemembers are provided with the education necessary for successful careers, including opportunities to make them more employable both in service and in the civilian workforce. The former is important because, just like civilian organizations, the Department of Defense is also an employer. To help servicemembers meet their professional academic goals, the Services provide postsecondary programs (both voluntary and mandatory) as well as professional academic counseling. In the following sections postsecondary education (particularly community colleges and certification programs), military programs, and transition assistance programs will be discussed. Servicemembers who value the importance of education in assisting in the transition to civilian work “should expect to work hard and invest significant amounts of time and effort in academic pursuits...” (Robertson & Brott, 2013, p. 72).

Postsecondary programs. There has been a great deal of interest regarding the impact community colleges have in economic development. In 2009 President Obama called on community colleges to increase the number of graduates by five million by the year 2020. In highlighting the role the community college plays in the economic well-being of the public, President Obama called special attention to the unique features of a two-year degree including

the relative low cost, which is an emerging issue in the rising student debt crisis. More students may be drawn to community colleges because of this. An associate's degree costs approximately \$6,200 compared to a bachelor's degree which costs approximately \$158,000 at private four-year colleges and universities (Mellander, 2013). In many instances community college graduates make more money than those with a bachelor's degree (Mellander, 2013). This pay disparity may be because of the growing need for employees with "middle skills" which community colleges offer (Mellander, 2013). An advantage to servicemembers is that being in the military increases the likelihood that they will enroll in and complete an associate's degree (Martorell et al., 2013).

Another postsecondary program that is growing is certification or credentialing. Indeed, it appears "that certificates have become the second most common postsecondary award in the U.S., with more than 1 million being awarded each year" (Gilroy, 2013, para 1). As in the case of associate's degrees, certificates are less expensive and take less time to complete than bachelor's degrees (Gilroy, 2013). The Center for Education and the Workforce report on certificates found that certificate holders earn approximately 20% more than those with only a high school diploma (Carnevale, Rose, & Hanson, 2012). Certification programs are considered an important pathway to employment that can be targeted to specific growth sectors in specific economies (Gilroy, 2013).

To assist veterans in finding employment, Congress and the White House have passed several pieces of legislation concerning credentialing. Task forces have been created to develop partnerships between industry, colleges, and federal agencies to boost the credentialing programs available to servicemembers, which can be leveraged for employment in the civilian sector. These initiatives include developing gap analyses between military and civilian training for

credentials that have direct applicability to in-service jobs, paying for credentialing exams, and partnering with civilian agencies to help them better understand military training.

Academic counseling. If servicemembers are going to realize the value of higher education as a means to becoming more employable and achieving gainful civilian employment and higher salaries (Davidovitch et al., 2013), the ability and opportunity to complete the program of study is critical. Academic counseling that considers the unique needs of the various types of students (non-traditional, veteran, etc.) may lead to greater retention (Lowe, 2001). Academic counselors help servicemembers in finding a program that meets their individual needs and goals and assist them in navigating higher education nuances such as choosing the right major or understanding financing options. Therefore, the academic counseling servicemembers receive may directly impact their ability to complete their college program and improve their chances of employability.

Professional guidance counselors “can make a huge difference in helping students become a part of the academic community and in ensuring that they do not make costly mistakes in pursuing their educational goals” (Gilroy, 2003, Para. 2). This is supported by other studies (Allen, Smith, & Muehleck, 2013; Bahr, 2008; Christian & Sprinkle, 2013). With the growth in non-traditional students, it is becoming necessary for academic counselors to be aware of the various needs and approaches required by students with different backgrounds (Bahr, 2008). For example, older students prefer a more collaborative approach to counseling, while younger students prefer more prescriptive counseling (Bahr, 2008).

Students consider particular types of counseling to have greater importance than others (Allen et al., 2013). Students at community colleges preparing to transfer to a four-year university and those at the latter who had transferred from a community college preferred

academic counseling that both ensured they were taking the right courses and also helped “them in connecting their academic, career, and life goals to each other and to choices in their major or program of study” (Allen et al., 2013, p. 340). Servicemembers may be best served by counselors who not only understand the needs of non-traditional students but who also can relate to the unique needs of servicemembers. The type and quality of advising that servicemembers receive with respect to these areas may be crucial to the completion of their programs of study.

The Air Force places federal employees on each installation to provide academic counseling to airmen throughout their military career. These employees must fall under the Office of Personnel Management’s (OPM) standards for the 1740 career field (Classification & Qualifications, OPM) in support of the Voluntary Education program. Personnel hired in Education Services must have a degree (usually a minimum of a bachelor’s) and 24 semester hours in either adult education or counseling (Office of Personnel Management website, n.d.). Guidance counselors must also have a practicum in counseling through a college or university. In this way, academic counselors have the professional background and education needed, as well as the experience of working with the military required for addressing the unique needs and demands of servicemembers entering the civilian workforce.

On-installation education counselors have been cited as one of several services having a significant impact on servicemembers’ pursuit of higher education (Wilson et al., 2013). Air Force education counselors and education specialists provide one-on-one academic counseling and group education advisement to servicemembers, as well as give information to installation leaders on programs and issues affecting the Air Force Voluntary Education program. Each year select counselors are nominated to sit on the Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) Education Services Advisory Panel, which “provides a forum for addressing issues of mutual

concern to both CCAF and the education services community; its primary focus is on the student body when making recommendations” (CCAF Catalogue, 2014-2016, p. 5).

Educational Programs in the Military

Education has a long history in the United States military. As early as the War for Independence, when chaplains taught soldiers how to read to improve morale (Arminio, Grabosky, & Lang, 2015), education has been an important part of servicemember’s military career. In the Civil War, teaching soldiers to read and write freed officers from clerical work, while African American soldiers “realized the advantages of literacy in their postwar lives and subsequently advocated to Union leaders to establish schools” (Shaffer as cited in Arminio et al., 2015, p. 3). Later, marches on Washington by disgruntled veterans upset about their lack of postservice compensation highlighted the need for better care for veterans (Arminio et al., 2015). Subsequent legislation resulted in the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, establishing the first of many GI Bills aimed at, among other benefits, providing inexpensive college and vocational programs for veterans (Arminio et al., 2015; Martorell et al., 2013). Interestingly, the first GI Bill was intended to not only provide a benefit in recognition of their service but “to keep as many veterans as possible off the unemployment lines and reentering the job market” (Arminio et al., 2015, p. 8). From this early start, military education programs have grown so that “Today, training and education programs provide military members a true lifelong learning experience spanning their careers and beyond through in-service continuing professional development, voluntary education opportunities for self-improvement and advancement, and significant postmilitary educational opportunities” (Persyn & Polson, 2012, p. 5).

The military was the first to recognize the importance of adult education so that “Adult education has been a pervasive and essential influence on military training and education”

(Persyn & Polson, 2012, p. 5). All the services have “integrated adult learning principles and theory...” (Persyn & Polson, 2012, p. 6) and these principles and theories are practiced throughout the gamut of military education, including technical training and professional military education. The Air Force espouses the tenets of adult education outlined by Zacharakis & Van der Werff (2012). Specifically, “For the military, adult education is a process that mandates individual growth, maturity, and learning in order to achieve the collective goals of the organization” (Zacharakis & Van der Werff, 2012, p. 90). Military education emphasizes individual characteristics, which in turn develop many of the skills that make one employable.

The Services also embrace voluntary education programs to promote the personal and professional goals of servicemembers (Persyn & Polson, 2012). In all, there are five in-service postsecondary programs, five Veterans Administration programs (some of which can be used in-service as well as post-service), and three U.S. Department of Education programs available to servicemembers and veterans (Buryk et al., 2015). Keeping within the scope of this study, only three of the in-service programs sponsored by Air Force (Military Tuition Assistance (MilTA) and the Community College of the Air Force (CCAF), and credentialing will be discussed.

It is important to understand the commitment the Air Force has to postsecondary education. In 2014, the Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force, General Welsh, pointedly stated the importance of education to the Air Force mission when he said, “Education and training are the foundation of our airpower advantage” (as cited in Hazen, Weigel, & Overstreet, 2014, p. 84). Over the decades the Air Force has been proactive in providing many academic programs for its airmen. One way to judge the Air Force commitment to education is to examine some of the major programs in which it participates (Buryk et al., 2015), such as Military Tuition Assistance (MilTA), Defense Activity for Nontraditional Education Support (DANTES)-

sponsored exams, American Council on Education recommended transfer credit, Community College of the Air Force (CCAF), Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), credentialing, and Service Academies. The next sections will highlight three programs: CCAF, MilTA, and credentialing.

The Community College of the Air Force. The Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) is the only regionally accredited two-year associate degree offered to enlisted members and is only available to enlisted members of the Air Force (with some exceptions for Sister service instructors). It leverages technical and professional/leadership military education and training and civilian academic institution courses to provide an associate of applied science degree in the airmen's military occupations. Specifically, the "CCAF degrees are directly related to specific Air Force career fields with the goal of providing professional development through an emphasis on management and leadership and on improving job performance through an emphasis on technical skills" (Savage & Smith, 2007/2008, p. 462). This emphasis on teaching leadership in an academic setting is on par with research previously discussed whereby academic institutions are often called upon to teach employability skills. Air Force enlisted servicemembers serve as faculty in the credit-awarding technical courses. These military instructors must hold at least an associate's degree in their field to maintain accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. CCAF also directly ties in professional civilian credentials for academic credit. Thus, many airmen achieve an associate's degree that includes civilian-recognized credentials that may help in future civilian employment.

Military Tuition Assistance (MilTA) is an important component of the CCAF degree since at least 15 semester hours of the degree must be in the general education courses of English, math, the social sciences, speech, and the humanities (CCAF Catalogue, 2014-2016).

With the exception of one social science course offered by CCAF that airmen may volunteer to take, all the CCAF general education courses must be completed at other accredited colleges (or through CLEP testing). In the 2014-2016 catalogue, CCAF notes that “The goal of the CCAF General Education requirement is to stimulate critical, innovative thinking and intellectual curiosity by providing graduates the foundational skills, knowledge and attitudes expected of informed and responsible citizens” (p. 16) all of which are critical employability skills many employers seek in potential employees (Barker, 2014; Clark, 2013; Coetzee et al., 2015; Eden, 2014; Harder et al., 2015; Mishra, 2014; Smith, Dymock, & Billett, 2013). To support this endeavor, MilTA pays the cost of tuition for taking these courses at accredited civilian academic institutions.

As the single largest, multicampus community college in the world (CCAF Catalogue, 2014-2016), CCAF has a strong impact on not only the Air Force community but the public at large. In 2010, CCAF celebrated the graduation of its 350,000th student (U.S. Fed News Service, May, 2010). Each year airmen complete over 1.6 million college credits (U.S. Fed News Service, May, 2010). The success of CCAF is evident in a comparison with other Services that do not have a similar program. According to U.S. Fed News Service (Nov. 2010) “Air Force enlisted personnel represent about 22 percent of the enlisted population of the Department of Defense, yet earned 78 percent of the two-year degrees earned in the Department of Defense. Of the two-year degrees enlisted airmen earned, 77 percent were CCAF degrees” (p. 1). Recently, CCAF awarded over 400,000 associate of applied science degrees (CCAF Catalogue, 2014-2016).

These numbers are staggering, yet not all airmen complete a CCAF degree. This begs the question as to why some airmen choose to pursue the CCAF degree while others do not. A

quantitative study of a small group of Air Force enlisted personnel (master sergeants) on persistence to CCAF degree completion brought attention “...on an overlooked dimension in the retention issue: individual, psychological influences on the decisions underlying degree completion...using an often-ignored population—military students” (Savage & Smith, 2007/2008, p. 476). Using hope theory as the theoretical framework, they found that “Master sergeants with higher hope were more likely to complete a degree than are those with lower hope...for every one unit increase in level of hope, a master sergeant’s odds of completing a CCAF degree was multiplied by 1.05” (Savage & Smith, 2007/2008, p. 477). Hope may go beyond persistence in degree completion. For airmen, it may be the underlying reason for not only choosing to finish a college degree but the belief that it will have a greater positive impact on their lives postservice.

Military tuition assistance (MilTA). MilTA resulted from the National Defense Authorization Act of 1972 (Buryk et al., 2015). All the Services have a MilTA program that provide the same basic benefit—payment of tuition up to \$250 per semester hour and up to \$4500 per servicemember yearly. MilTA pays for courses from institutions of higher learning leading to the completion of associate’s (enlisted only), bachelor’s (enlisted only), and master’s degrees (officer and enlisted). These courses are offered on Air Force bases through memoranda of agreement with academic institutions, at local colleges, or online (Preventing Abuse, Congressional Hearing, 2011). In 2012, the Air Force committed almost \$200M toward payment for courses taken by enlisted and officer airmen (Buryk et al., 2015). The goals of the MilTA program are to develop critical thinking skills and to retain quality servicemembers interested in self-improvement, as well as to assist in the successful transition to civilian life (Buryk et al., 2015). As an employer, the Air Force values critical thinking as its “employees” (i.e.

servicemembers) work in often hostile and asynchronous environments where quick and judicious thinking is crucial to lives. Zacharakis and Van Der Werff (2012) noted that “The concept of mental agility and resourcefulness as a form of critical thinking and organizational learning cannot be underestimated” (p. 96) especially when modern warfare is complex, ambiguous, and ill-structured. Critical thinking is also important in vague areas of operation (Persyn & Polson, 2012). The ambiguity inherent in much of what the military does requires members who are quick on their feet and able to make sound decisions rapidly. These abilities are also favored by many civilian employers, thus making a servicemember highly employable.

The skills servicemembers learn in the military may help to gain civilian employment, but servicemembers also experience significant educational opportunities such as professional leadership schools and civilian postsecondary educational programs, which may also assist them in successfully joining the civilian workforce. The Air Force is unique in that it created a regionally accredited two-year college that incorporates enlisted Air Force training with traditional college course work.

Credentialing. In addition to the civilian credentials mentioned previously, the Air Force supports two other credentialing programs. Not only does CCAF give credit from credentials toward degree completion, it also provides information on Air Force programs that encourage participation in certain civilian technical-specific certifications. The purpose for this advocacy is to encourage airmen to attain “occupational-related credentials while serving in the Air Force to increase their Air Force occupational skills, broaden their professional development and be better prepared for transition” (CCAF Catalogue, 2014-2016, p. 92), which are all key components of the transition theory 4s Model. These targeted credentials include aviation maintenance, airframe and powerplant, professional manager certification, CCAF instructor

program (which may be accepted by some states toward teacher certification), instructional system design, aerospace technical education, and lastly, aerospace and transportation technologies (CCAF Catalogue, 2014-2016).

The vast majority of voluntary credentialing programs are managed by the Air Force Credentialing Opportunities OnLine or AF COOL program. AF COOL provides up-to-date information on civilian certifications and licenses that are directly tied to airmen's Air Force jobs. AF COOL links airmen to information from the U.S. Department of Labor's O*Net program that provides data on salaries, related civilian and federal jobs, job growth forecasts, etc. The Air Force also provides financial support for funding the exams associated with the airmen's chosen certification. As seen in the earlier discussion on the value of postsecondary programs, certifications and licenses are quickly becoming important credentials for civilian employment.

One final aspect that may entice airmen to pursue the CCAF degree is based on current trends. As mentioned in the value of postsecondary programs section, two-year degrees are gaining in popularity. The usefulness of a CCAF degree in obtaining a civilian job may be that CCAF is lock-step with the growing emphasis on obtaining associate's degrees and in its emphasis on the soft skills sought by employers. In addition, one of the reasons students pursue two-years degrees is because of the low cost (Mellander, 2013). CCAF has the unique additional bonus of being tuition free to airmen.

Summary

It is important to understand not only how well prepared servicemembers are to transition to civilian life, but also how they have planned for civilian employment so that the Services can develop or modify programs to assist. However, this is more than a statistical exercise in how many servicemembers were unemployed, or how quickly they found jobs; rather, it is

understanding how *they* perceive their own transition and their academic preparedness for success postservice that is just as important. Programs and services that are not rooted in servicemembers' reality have little value to them personally and thus will be of little effect. It is anticipated that hope and transition theories entrenched in servicemembers' individual contexts will provide a glimpse into how they perceive their employability as graduates of the Community College of the Air Force, their motivation for pursuing higher education, and how it has made them ready to enter the civilian workforce. It is also expected that how they understand the role education plays in a successful transition to civilian employment will help others to make the same decision allowing for a smoother transition out of the military.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methods used to conduct this case study. The intent is to gather data in support of the purpose of this research: to understand how airmen perceive the completion of their CCAF degree makes them employable for the transition to a civilian job and to uncover their motivation for completing the degree. This chapter will discuss in detail the choice of design, reiterate the research questions, and describe the setting and how the participants were selected. I will also outline the procedures, my role and background, and how I will collect and analyze the data. Lastly, I will discuss issues related to the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of the research design.

Design

The philosophical framework for this study looks into the nature of reality. Whether one believes reality is fixed or mutable helps determine the design of the study. There are two primary design approaches in educational research—quantitative and qualitative (Castellan, 2010). Each of these with its related view of reality will be discussed briefly. And, while each has fundamental differences, they both have important roles in empirical research.

Quantitative research rests on the assumption that reality is fixed and independent of the observer, while qualitative research assumes that reality is flexible and dependent on the observer (Castellan, 2010). Despite these differences, “Both approaches have helped educational researchers make important discoveries” (Gall et al., as cited in Castellan, 2010, p. 2). Both types of design methods have a place in educational research (Booker, 2009; Castellan, 2010). Even small studies have value. Flyvbjerg (2006) acknowledged the important role both have in providing well-rounded research based on both large and small sample sizes. She noted, “The

advantage of large samples is breadth, while their problem is one of depth. For the case study, the situation is the reverse. Both approaches are necessary for a sound development of social science” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 241). Deciding between quantitative and qualitative research should be based on the problem itself, which then determines the appropriate method (Radley & Chamberlain, 2012).

Certain types of research call for a qualitative design (Booker, 2009). Some aspects of educational research are not well suited for quantitative design (Booker, 2009). For some studies, a qualitative approach may be best in order “to incorporate a method of study...that highlight[s] the complexity and unique experiences...” (Booker, 2010, p. 389) of the participants. Stake (2010), perhaps one of the seminal spokespersons on qualitative research and case study design, believed that “All scientific thinking is a mixture of quantitative and qualitative thinking” (p. 13). The differences between quantitative and qualitative research is one of emphasis rather than on concrete boundaries (Skate, 2010).

A personal example of the interconnectedness of both quantitative and qualitative studies occurred while I was conducting research for this study. Lewis’ (2012), in his quantitative study on “The Impact of Veterans’ Preference on the Composition and Quality of the Federal Civil Service” suggested that, among other things, veterans in civil service do not advance as much as their nonveteran peers, which may result in the lowering of performance overall. After years of moving around, taking positions that they may not want, deploying away from family for months at a time, veterans may not be interested in moving up the ladder or moving to different assignments. However, in my personal experience as a career civil servant with DoD, the issue is not that veterans cannot progress, but rather that they are no longer willing to relocate for promotions. The quality of the veteran may not be the issue, but instead may be one of quality of

life. A qualitative study may have provided this insight and made Lewis's study more robust. This is just one example of how quantitative and qualitative research working together can provide a holistic view of an issue or problem.

A qualitative design is preferred for this study for two reasons. First, the paradigmatic assumption is that reality is not fixed but based on the perceptions and experiences of individuals, (i.e., that reality follows a constructivist paradigm). A qualitative research design is ideal for this. Secondly, in order to understand the reality of the individual, it is important that their reality is genuine. Therefore, "Qualitative designs are *naturalistic* [italics in original] to the extent that the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon and its participants..." (Dasgupta, 2015, p. 151)

The social constructivist view is one where meaning is determined by the social environment (Gall et al., 2007). Thus, "Features of the social environment are not considered to have an existence apart from the meanings that individuals construct for them" (Gall et al., 2007, p. 21). Other research has reaffirmed that "truth is relative..." (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). There are many realities that constantly change because reality is experienced by many people who have different viewpoints (Dasgupta, 2015).

Having many realities is necessary for qualitative research since it is in the multiple interpretations that a deeper understanding of the nuances of the problem are understood (Stake, 2010). These multiple realities are possible because qualitative research is interpretive, experiential, situational, and personalistic (Stake, 2010). One caution about social constructivism is that it "refers to constructing *knowledge about* [italics in Patton] reality, not constructing reality itself" (Shaddish as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 96). A particular type of qualitative research method is the qualitative survey (Jansen, 2010). This type of qualitative

survey design is unique in that it “does not aim at establishing frequencies, means or other parameters but at determining the *diversity* [italics in original] of some topic of interest within a given population” (Jansen, 2010, p. 3).

Ultimately, it should be the problem that drives the research design (Radley & Chamberlain, 2012). Since a purpose of this study is to discover the perceptions (i.e. the reality) of a certain group of people (airmen) about a particular part of their experiences in finding a civilian job (CCAF associate’s degree attainment), qualitative research is the best method (i.e. Stakes’ (2010) science of the particular). The next challenge is deciding which qualitative design would best fit the current study.

Kinds of Design

There are five common qualitative research designs (Creswell, 2013; Gall et al., 2007; Patton, 2002): case study, phenomenology, ethnography, narrative, and grounded theory. Gall et al., also discuss historical research, but it is less common than the others.

While all are based in learning about individual realities, only the case study is practical for this research. This is particularly so since the type of research question helps determine the research design (Yin, 2014). Specifically, there are three conditions that, depending on how they are answered, help decide the design (Yin, 2014). They are: the way the research questions are asked, whether the events need to be controlled, and, whether the study focuses on current events (Yin, 2014). For case studies, when the research questions ask “how” or “why,” a case study is indicated because these questions “deal with operational links needing to be traced over time...” (Yin, 2014, p. 10). A case study is also appropriate when the events being studied are contemporary and allow for a wide range of data collection, including direct observations and interviews of those experiencing the event (Yin, 2014).

When deciding on the best method to conduct this study two processes stood out: phenomenological and case study. At first glance, a phenomenological study appeared to be applicable, because a phenomenological study includes the participation of many people and is focused on “understanding the lived experiences of individuals around a phenomenon...” (Creswell, 2013, p. 122). Its goal is to explain or to describe. Like case studies, it can rely on several sources of data to reach a conclusion (Creswell, 2013). Since this research also uses the experience of participants to describe something, phenomenology seemed a viable method. However, phenomenological studies have a distinct feature from case studies, in that they do not attempt to understand a specific issue, rather the experiences of individuals experiencing issues without regard to specific places or time. Case studies, on the other hand, seek to understand a problem or issue and have clear boundaries (Creswell, 2013). To understand the differences better, phenomenology (as compared to case studies) seeks to understand how individuals experience the world, while case studies seek to “shed light on a **phenomenon** [bold in original], which is a process, event, person, or other item of interest to the researcher” (Gall et al., 2007, p. 447). The qualitative survey design is distinct from a phenomenological approach in that a phenomenological study is not concerned with the diversity of the participants but rather with finding a common theme in their experience of a particular phenomenon or event (Jansen, 2010).

When deciding on which design to use, both Stake (2010) and Creswell (2013) suggested starting with the end in mind. Outcomes (Creswell, 2013) and the research question (Stake, 2010) should guide the decision. To do otherwise, that is to put method before purpose, can only result in disconnected information or to what Stake (2010) referred to as a “hodgepodge.”

Yin (as cited in Baxter & Jack, 2008) suggested using a case study when:

- The focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions;
- You cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study;
- You want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; or
- The boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context. (p. 545)

Dasgupta (2015) offered similar reasons for pursuing case study research to include the following considerations: broad and complex issue; lack of research; desiring a comprehensive approach; and when context is critical to understanding the issue.

Critiques of case study research. However, case studies (and, consequently, qualitative research in general) are not without their critics (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Patton, 2007; Stake, 2010; Taylor, Dossick, & Garvin, 2011; Tsang, 2014). Flyvbjerg (2006) outlined five common misunderstandings about case studies:

- General, theoretical knowledge is more valuable than concrete, practical knowledge.
- One cannot generalize on the basis of an individual case
- They are useful for generating hypotheses not for hypothesis testing or theory building
- They are biased towards the researcher’s preconceived notions (verification).
- They are often difficult to summarize and develop general propositions and theories.

Flyvbjerg (2006) contended that the issue is actually about the way each of the misunderstandings incorporates theory, reliability, and validity. While she provided a rebuttal of each criticism of the case study design, her overarching premise is embedded in the learning process. In order for adults to advance in their learning, there has to be a significant and large movement from rule-governed learning associated with the quantitative method to becoming experts (Hubert Stuart Dreyfus as cited in Flyvbjerg, 2006). Further, she argued that to rely solely on quantitative research is to remain at a basic, dependent learning process and may even suggest regression in the learning process. Therefore, the case study is necessary “for the development of a nuanced view of reality, including the view that human behavior cannot be meaningfully understood as simply the rule-governed acts found at the lowest levels of the learning process... Second, cases are important for researchers’ own learning processes in developing the skills needed to do good research” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 223).

Other theorists have also addressed the criticisms of the case study design. Tsang (2014) explored the concerns about the generalizability of case studies. He contended that there is confusion about the meaning and types of generalizations (theoretical, falsification, and empirical) and the type of case study (single case, multiple case, cross-sectional, and longitudinal). Tsang proposed that case studies can be the foundation for all three types of generalizations since they can highlight different aspects of an existing theory or “form an empirical foundation for creating new theories” (p. 378). In addition, some types of case studies may not have as great a generalizability (not that they have none) as compared to cross-sectional case studies, which have the greatest generalizability (Tsang, 2014). Overall, case studies can generalize to theory, reveal cases that do not conform, and provide a means of evaluating “the empirical generalizability of results” (Tsang, 2014, p. 379).

Two other criticisms of case study design are that they are not generalizable and that they lack rigor, standards, or precision (Taylor et al., 2011). The latter, however, may simply be a case of confusing case study research with using case studies as part of a teaching methodology (Taylor et al., 2001). Since the former has already been discussed (Tsang, 2014), I will briefly discuss the issue of rigor, standards, and precision.

Using accepted methods employed by trial lawyers, Taylor et al., (2011) attempted to explain the rigor of case study as a design method. Using the legal concepts of “meeting the burden going forward” and “meeting the burden of persuasion”, the authors showed how case study design can meet components of these concepts such as “the burden of production” (i.e., detailed description of the setting), “preponderance of evidence” (e.g., case studies are intended for an in depth understanding of a problem), and “clear and convincing evidence” (e.g., include multiple viewpoints and participants, review by other researchers, and triangulation of the data: Taylor et al., 2011). There is one area by way of this legal explanation that case studies may actually lack rigor and that is when the discussion is “beyond a reasonable doubt.” However, because of “the great deal of variability from case to case...” (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 310) external validity may help persuade others of the rigor of case studies. Rigor can be achieved through “intellectual rigor, professional integrity, and methodological competence” (Patton, 2002, p. 570). A similar criticism about qualitative research suggested that qualitative research is “viewed with suspicion and associated with pejorative terms such as “soft science” or even as unscientific...” (Swezey, 2014, p. 174). However, case studies are pervasive in qualitative research (Swezey, 2014).

Other criticisms of case study research include, subjective, personal, contributions to science are slow and tendentious, there are more questions than answers at the end, does not

advance social practice, high risk, and, costly (Stake, 2010). Yet, many of these criticisms describe the actual purpose of case study design—to study human beings in natural settings without contrived barriers or obvious constraints. Therefore, they are going to be time consuming, subjective, personal, and expensive (Stake, 2010). As Stake noted, “Whether we are looking at the real world through quantitative or qualitative eyes, we reconceive the world in terms of the concepts and relationships of our experience” (p. 30).

Finally, Yin (2014) also addressed many of the concerns about case study research outlined previously including lack of rigor, which may poor work versus flaws in the design, the confusion between case studies as a teaching method versus a research method, and inability to generalize. However, Yin also stated two other criticisms that merit a brief discussion. The first has to do with what he calls “unmanageable level of effort” (p. 21). By this, Yin suggested that some may believe that case studies “can potentially take too long and that they can result in massive, unreadable documents” (p. 21). This misconception may arise because critics confuse case studies with other forms of qualitative research (e.g. ethnographies) that do take longer (Yin, 2014). Yin’s response to the unreadable critique is that as case study research transforms there are alternate ways to write the studies in which “the traditional, flowing (and potentially lengthy) narrative can be avoided” (p. 21).

Another criticism is that case studies could not compete with randomized controlled trials (RCT; Yin, 2014). A counter to that concern suggests that while RCTs could determine the effectiveness of treatments they could not tell how or why the treatment worked. Case studies in these instances are complementary to those types of studies (Yin, 2014).

Despite the criticisms of qualitative research and case study design in particular, case studies allow for an in-depth analysis of a particular problem. The intensity of a case study

rooted in the reality of real people helps to put a “face to a name” and give life to social science research. Providing a focused, deep look into motivations and perceptions of the participants gives researchers insight into behaviors and decisions that cannot always be quantified. Even the participants may not be fully aware of why they chose to complete their CCAF degree or understand the full impact of that decision. A case study may help them understand themselves better.

A case study is imperative in order to fully understand the reality of each participant. Airmen do not make their educational and career decisions in a vacuum. Outside influences such as those of mentors, other airmen, family pressures, and preconceived ideas of what it takes to be successful all have a part in their decision-making process. Their level of hope—different for each—and their ability to face transitions both big and small also inform their decisions. A person’s level of hope can be quantified, but to fully understand its impact, a case study provides the context to understand how it influences an airman’s career and educational decisions. For this study, the varied perceptions of airmen are key to understanding a part of the job search they all face when leaving the military. Case study gives both researcher and participants the opportunity to clarify not only the “what” but the “why.” Consequently, a case study is the best design considering the philosophical assumptions and constructivist paradigm framing this research.

Types of case studies. This study used a qualitative case study research approach. Qualitative research can be used in such a way that “highlights the complexity and unique experiences...” (Booker, 2010, p. 389) of the participants. Since this research attempted to understand the participants’ personal perceptions, a qualitative design approach was preferred. The research was framed within an explanatory, single case study design with two embedded

units—currently serving enlisted airmen preparing for transition and separated/retired airmen. A case study is suggested when dealing with a broad, complex issue, when there is a lack of research, when the researcher wants a comprehensive approach, and/or when the context is important to understanding the problem (Dasgupta, 2015). For this research, the considerable lack of research presumes a case study design. Yin (2014) noted that the purpose of an explanatory case study was to “stipulate a presumed set of causal links about it, or “how” or “why” something happened” (p. 147). By comparing the perceptions of these two groups of airmen (separating and recently separated/retired), I may be better able to explain the role education has in helping airmen transition to civilian employment within the bounds of the hope and transition theories.

There are many types of case studies (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). These include the following designs of single case holistic, single case embedded, multiple case holistic, and, multiple case embedded (Yin, 2014). Put simply, the differences between the single case and multiple case design is determined by whether the case is unusual, critical, or revelatory (single case) or the intention of the study is to be replicated (multiple case; Yin, 2014). The complexity of multiple case designs could be beyond the means of some researchers because of the time and resources needed (Yin, 2014).

A case study can be conducted either holistically or with different research units embedded within the study (Yin, 2014). An embedded case study design ensures that “attention is also given to a subunit or subunits” (Yin, 2014, p. 53) to provide analysis at more than one level (Yin, 2014). In contrast, a holistic case study design looks at “only the global nature...” (Yin, 2014, p. 55) of the problem.

Different types of case study designs can be determined by the intent of the analysis (Creswell, 2013). There are three types of designs based on their intent, single instrumental case, collective (multiple) case, and, the intrinsic case study (Creswell, 2013). There is some overlap with Yin's (2014) four design types in that Creswell's (2013) designs also include single or multiple case options. However, the distinctions between the two are difficult to differentiate. The intrinsic case study seems most closely aligned with the holistic single case design explained by Yin. The instrumental design appears closest to Yin's single, embedded case design. Finally, the collective case outlined by Creswell looks to share similarities with the multiple case, holistic design (Yin, 2014).

For the purposes of this study a single case embedded design was used. This design was chosen instead of a multiple case design because of the time needed to complete the study. It was also chosen so that a cross-case analysis could be conducted to allow for a greater depth of analysis (Yin, 2014) by comparing the two embedded units to provide for a before and after view of the problem.

Research Questions

The research question and its concomitant subquestions are intended to speak to two overarching issues. The central question addresses the perceived role achieving a CCAF degree has as it relates to employability; namely, how the participants believe it helped in gaining civilian employment. The subquestions are designed to understand the pre- and post-perceptions of the participants and begin to comprehend the motivation (hope) they had in the choices they made.

Central Research Question

How do CCAF graduates perceive the impact of their degree in enhancing their employability for the civilian workforce?

Subquestion 1. How do currently serving enlisted airmen transitioning to civilian employment perceive how their CCAF degree will make them more employable?

Subquestion 2. How do separated/retired Regular Air Force enlisted airmen perceive their CCAF degree made them more employable for civilian employment now that they are in the civilian workforce?

Subquestion 3. How did prior enlisted (never commissioned) airmen's perceptions change about the role their CCAF degree had in their employability for civilian jobs after they left the Air Force?

Subquestion 4. What did both currently serving and separated enlisted airmen hope to gain by completing their CCAF degree?

Setting

There were two sets of individual interviews. The first set consisted of regular Air Force airmen, within the National Capitol Region (NCR) where possible, stationed at either a local Air Force base or co-located on other Services' installations. The targeted population included enlisted airmen in their last year of service whether retiring or separating. The selected sites have a large variety of enlisted occupations including aircraft maintenance, personnel, medical, financial management, contracting, IT, and security forces. The sites also have a wide demographic range of participants including age, years of service, gender, race, and ethnicity. They all have education centers staffed by guidance counselors many of whom have been counselors for years.

Job opportunities in the National Capital Region (NCR) are also varied including, federal civil service, municipalities, education, federal contractors, and the service industry. It is a center of the arts with the Kennedy Center and many venues for music, theatre, and dance and close to other cultural magnets such as New York City and Boston. The NCR is also home to many universities and colleges including such elites as Georgetown and strong public universities such as George Mason.

Interview sites included office space in the Pentagon and the Education Center as well as via telephone. The interviews were digitally recorded using two audio recorders for redundancy.

The second group of airmen interviewed had already separated/ retired from the Air Force and either had a civilian job or were attending school. Airmen within the NCR were approached first. Later, the search area was expanded beyond the NCR to include other Air Force installations. These interviews were also conducted at office space in the Pentagon or on the telephone. Airmen's interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed for coding and the development of themes.

Participants

Both criterion-based and snowball sampling were used to select 13 enlisted airmen approximately half of whom were currently in the Regular Air Force awaiting separation or retirement and about half of whom retired or separated from the Regular Air Force within the last two years. Criterion-based sampling is one sampling method that is part of the concept of purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling in qualitative research entails the deliberate selection of participants who will provide a rich source of information and data in order to attain a deep understanding of the study's issue or problem (Creswell, 2013; Gall et al., 2007; Patton, 2002). In criterion-based sampling the researcher sets certain requirements that prospective participants

must meet in order to be considered for the study. In this study, I established two criteria. Participants must be: (a) Regular enlisted airmen who are within one year of separating or retiring and who have completed at least a CCAF degree at the time of separation; (b) Regular enlisted airmen separated or retired within the last two years who, at the time of separation or retirement, had completed at least a CCAF degree. Emphasis was placed on those who had completed only their CCAF degree at the time of separation. However, potential challenges in available data did not allow for finding airmen with only a CCAF degree. Many had advanced degrees as well.

Snowball sampling was also used. This involved receiving assistance from others to help identify potential participants including participants themselves who may recommend others (Creswell, 2013; Gall et al., 2007; Patton, 2002). In this case, the installation Airman and Family Readiness Center Directors and Education Services Officers who both work with enlisted airmen everyday may be a rich source of information on interested participants. The participants ranged in age from ~22 years to ~50 years old. Both males and females participated and represented several different enlisted career fields.

There is no specific number of participants recommended for case studies. Gall et al., (2007) suggested that “Determining the number of cases is entirely a matter of judgment...” (p. 185). Creswell (2013) recommended that it is just as important to gather as much information and detail as possible on whatever number of cases are chosen.

Procedures

Before starting any data collection, it is imperative that the study be submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB; Joyner et al., 2013). The purpose of the IRB is to ensure that there are no risks to the participants. The IRB process is important because it “requires assessing

the potential for risk, such as physical, psychological, social, economic, or legal harm” (Sieber as cited in Creswell, 2009, p. 89). One of the duties of the IRB is to assess the risk-benefit ratio in order to determine if the benefits of the study outweigh the risks to participants (Gall et al., 2007). Thus, I obtained IRB approval for this study. In addition to Headquarters Air Force Services (AF/A1S) sponsoring the current study, I also obtained permission from the office of the Air Force Chief Information Officer to use/access information and hardware, including use of official computer systems and access to airmen during duty hours, in support of this study.

Once IRB approval and permission were granted, the next step was to work with previously identified airmen and local Airman and Family Readiness Center and Education Center personnel to obtain names of interested participants. Potential participants received informed consent paperwork (Appendix A) via email (Appendix B) or phone call to explain the study and get informed consent. A follow-on email was sent if there is no response to the first one (Appendix C). Arrangements were then be made to either meet at the local education center (or other mutually agreed location) for the interview or via telephone if they were not in my local area or unable to come to the Pentagon. A second email was sent to confirm the interview; obtain basic demographic information such as enlisted grade, Air Force Specialty Code, time remaining until separation or retirement, and gender; and, to provide a survey for them to complete. All participants returned their consent forms and survey prior to the interview. The interviews were recorded using two recorders for redundancy. The interviews were transcribed and reviewed for theme development using a software program designed for this purpose.

The Researcher’s Role

I currently hold the position of Assistant Deputy, Force Support and Family Programs. In this capacity, I provide oversight of several quality of life programs for Regular Air Force,

Reserve, and Air National Guard servicemembers, their families, Air Force civilians, and Air Force retirees. The portfolio includes all Morale, Welfare, and Recreation programs; Child and Youth care, dependent education, transition assistance, Airman and Family programs, and voluntary education among many other programs. My position includes working with other federal agencies, private corporations, and academic institutions to advocate on behalf of airmen and the Air Force. For the purposes of this study, my position develops policy directly impacting the congressionally-mandated Transition Assistance Program on behalf of the Secretary of the Air Force. I work closely with strategic and operational partners at Headquarters Air Force and base level who are responsible for implementing transition assistance policies. I do not, however, have regular contact with airmen in a personal advisory role outside of what is expected of senior leaders. That is, I do not provide daily counseling, guidance, or advice to airmen who are in transition.

Prior to this assignment, I was the Chief, Air Force Voluntary Education. I have over 25 years in adult, postsecondary education and have held positions including academic guidance counselor, Education Services Officer, Education and Training Officer, and Director, Family Support. As the Voluntary Education Chief, my duties included management oversight of the Military Tuition Assistance program, membership in the White House Academic Credit Working Group, membership in the Military Life Cycle working group, oversight of the Accessing Higher Education transition track, and, oversight of the AF Credentialing program to meet National Defense Authorization Act requirements to increase employment of veterans.

The importance of the researcher in qualitative research cannot be underestimated (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002; Stake, 2010). The researcher can be considered key (Creswell, 2013) or an instrument (Stake, 2010) in a study such that “The perspective the researcher brings

to a qualitative inquiry is part of the context for the findings” (Patton, 2002, p. 64).

Understanding that context is part of uncovering potential researcher biases, etc. and working through them (Patton, 2002).

The researcher as a human instrument can affect or influence the interpretation of the results so it is important for me as well as others to know my biases and assumptions. Almost my entire professional career in the Air Force has been helping airmen go to college; therefore, I have a personal interest in the success of the programs provided by their Air Force. As a former counselor, I have been fortunate to help airmen achieve their educational goals. Now, I have a personal stake in helping them transition successfully. In my current capacity, I have no direct oversight or contact with the servicemembers as it relates to my oversight of the voluntary education and transition programs. I do not advise, counsel, or provide any educational or other services to them in any capacity.

Data Collection

As mentioned previously, one of the criticisms of qualitative research is that it is unscientific and lacks rigor. One of the ways to overcome these objections is by using several methods of data collection (Stake, 2010). There are four categories of data collection: observation, interviews, documents, and audiovisual material (Creswell, 2013). For the purposes of this research, I used observations (field notes), interviews, focus groups, and documents (survey). Using these four data collection techniques is essential for triangulating the data.

Interviews

Interviews serve three main functions: (a) to obtain unique information, (b) to aggregate information, and (c) to reveal something researchers cannot see for themselves (Stake, 2010). Interviews may provide greater flexibility in data collection (Gall et al., 2007). Interviews can

“build trust and rapport with respondents, thus making it possible to obtain information that the individual probably would not reveal by any other data-collection method” (Gall, et al., 2007, p. 228). Thus, interviews “are an essential source of case study evidence because most case studies are about human affairs or actions” (Yin, 2014, p. 113).

Since the purpose of this study was understanding the unique perceptions of airmen’s experiences in order to develop a better idea of the experiences of airmen as a whole, interviews as a source of data collection seemed most appropriate. Also, since the decision to pursue a CCAF degree was not something I could observe, an interview was a very good way to understand the motivations for pursuing and completing the degree.

I conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews when possible using open-ended questions divided into three categories—those to be asked of all participants, those only for currently serving airmen, and, lastly, those specifically for separated/retired airmen. The strength of a semi-structured interview (or Interview Guide) is that it allows the interviewers to manage the limited time available for interviews. It also ensures that “...the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions [and]...to focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined” (Patton, 2002, p. 343). An Interview Guide also keeps the focus of the interview on the purpose of the study (Patton, 2002).

It is anticipated that each interview will last one hour each—what Yin (2014) called a “shorter case study interview...” (p. 111). I developed an interview protocol to identify the characteristics of interviewees without divulging personal identifiable information and to explain the purpose of the interview. Participants were selected based on criterion-based sampling and snowball techniques. Two recorders were used to audio tape the interviews (Yin, 2004).

Using interviews to collect data is useful because it comes from a genuine relationship between interviewer and interviewee that is based on trust and respect (Kral, 2014). Since I come from an Air Force education background and spent time as a counselor, I felt that this would make the interviewees comfortable and willing to be open and frank. This is important in order to obtain the rich data necessary to not only tell their story but to have a high level of trustworthiness.

The interview questions are listed in Appendix D as well as here:

For all participants:

1. Would you please describe your experiences in attaining a CCAF degree while in the Air Force?
2. What is your understanding of what being employable or employability means?
3. What is your understanding of the link between having attained a CCAF degree in the Air Force and being employable?
4. When you felt like giving up, what kept you going and why?
5. How do you decide what your goals will be? (adapted from Lopez, Ciarlelli, Coffman, Stone, & Wyatt, 2000, p. 70)
6. When you reach your goal, what will be different in your life? (Lopez, Ciarlelli, Coffman, Stone, & Wyatt, 2000 p. 70)
7. If I were to ask your friends/spouse/parents to list three words that would describe you, what would they say? What would you say? (Lopez, Ciarlelli, Coffman, Stone, & Wyatt, 2000, p. 70)
8. What things do you consider when preparing for a personal or professional change?
9. Why did you choose to complete your CCAF degree?

10. Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give other airmen about completing their CCAF degree?

For currently serving enlisted airmen:

1. What do you see is your greatest challenge in obtaining employment post-Service?
2. How employable do you see yourself for civilian employment?
3. What do you bring to potential employers that set you apart from other job seekers?
4. What do you hope you will achieve with your CCAF degree post-Service?

For separated/retired airmen:

1. How did your perceptions of how your CCAF degree would enhance your employability for civilian jobs change after leaving the Air Force?
2. Compare your transition to civilian employment between what you thought would happen and how it actually went.
3. Knowing what you know now, how did having your CCAF degree help make you employable when looking for civilian employment?

Survey

Surveys have several advantages over interviews: cost is minimal, they can be spread over a large area, and it takes less time to collect information (Gall et al., 2007). They are also helpful in reaching a large number of people (Stake, 2010). They can even be considered another type of structured interview (Yin, 2014).

In this case study, one of the things I wished to assess was how hope influenced airmen's choices. Using Snyder's Adult Dispositional Hope Scale (Appendix E), I hoped to identify "high-hope individuals and to learn what they do naturally to maintain hopefulness" (Lopez et al., 2000 p. 61). The reliability of this survey has been validated with an overall alpha of.

between .74 and .84 (Lopez et al., 2000). In addition, Snyder et al. (2002) reported that this scale has been tested many times for validity by such means as comparing the results of this scale to others with similar concepts such as optimism, the expectancy for attaining goals, and self-esteem. It has also been negatively correlated to instruments that measure negative traits such as hopelessness, and depression (Lopez et al., 2000).

For the purposes of this study, the survey helped to verify the level of hope expressed in the interviews with the outcomes on the Adult Dispositional Hope Scale. The Scale acted as a check to either verify the accuracy of the participants' perceived level of hope or identify inconsistencies in the data.

Field Notes

Patton (2002) noted that "The fundamental work of the observer is the taking of field notes" (p. 302). Field notes are not only a detailed description of the setting, they also ensure that the observers have a way to capture their own feelings, interpretations, biases, etc. at the moment they are occurring (Patton, 2002). In addition, field notes or journals can also be a place where the researcher can express concerns, ideas, or general musings (Skate, 2010). Novice researchers should be aware of some of the challenges of taking field notes, such as becoming overwhelmed with the information, moving in and out of being a participant, and narrowing down the information (Creswell, 2013). Interviews reveal what cannot be observed while field notes balance this with what can be observed (Gall et al., 2007; Stake, 2010). It was my hope that the combination of the two along with the survey data would reveal a truth that lies in between.

For this research, the field notes included the date, time, and place of the interview or focus group as well as general demographic information of the participants (e.g., separating or

retiring; number of years of service, gender, Air Force Specialty Code, other degrees or certifications earned, and ethnicity). The field notes concentrated on building a picture of the context in which these interactions occurred such as a detailed description of the room, comfort level of the participant(s), and general appearance of the participant(s). I took on the role of partial participant engaging with participants but also observing and notating the free flow of information and conversation engaging only when the conversation veered off track from the purpose of the engagement. As soon as possible after each interview, I reviewed the field notes and filled in any gaps or injected more detail from observations (Patton, 2002). I also highlighted any personal feelings, interpretations, and/or reactions in the field notes (Patton, 2002). These personal reflections are important because “In qualitative inquiry, the observer’s own experiences are part of the data” (Patton, 2002 p. 303).

Focus Group

Focus groups provide a key source of data in case studies. They are useful in order “to get high-quality data in a social context...” (Patton, 2002, p. 386). One of the foundations of qualitative research is that it must be understood within a social context (Creswell, 2013). Thus, gathering data as part of a social—albeit structured—event makes sense. In order to do this, focus group interviews should be relaxed and congenial (Gall et al., 2007; Patton, 2002). Well conducted focus groups can provide an atmosphere that allows members to open up in ways they might not individually (Gall et al., 2007).

Since the participants in this study worked or attended school full time, three focus group were conducted to accommodate the participants’ schedules. The goal was to have an equal number of currently serving and separated airmen participating. The focus groups were digitally

recorded so that I was able to facilitate the discussion, keep the group on task, and observe the participants' reactions.

Questions that were asked of the group are listed in Appendix F and here:

1. How well prepared are/were you for the civilian workforce?
2. What can/could you do differently to make yourself better prepared?
3. Describe your experience getting your CCAF degree.
4. What things did you have to consider when deciding to finish your CCAF degree?
5. Describe your transition out of the Air Force
6. What role did hope have in helping with completing your degree?
7. Why would you consider pursuing further education?
8. Why did you consider pursuing your CCAF degree?

Data Analysis

It is important to have an analytic strategy when working with the massive amounts of data generated by the various data collection techniques (Yin, 2014). Regardless of the technique used, the goal is to glean from the data “to produce empirically based findings” (Yin, 2014, p. 132). The two techniques I used for this study were open coding and theme development.

Open Coding

Creswell (2013) defined coding as the process of “aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information...” (p. 184). The first step in the data analysis is to begin to cluster the data. This stage of the research is one in which the researcher sorts data into categories intended for “interpretation and storage more than for organizing the final report”

(Stake, 2010, p. 151). Creswell (2009) explained that “coding is the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to the information” (p. 186).

For this study, I used a computer software program to aid in searching through the transcripts for recurring patterns. Once the computer produced the categories for the data, I read the material several times to ensure that no other patterns were missed. I read the transcripts of the interviews several times. During this process, I bundled like phrases together for further analysis.

Yin (2014) discussed the use of analytical software in managing significant amounts of data. He noted that there are three levels of analysis available depending on the tool used—compiling data, disassembling data, and reassembling data (Yin, 2014). The major caution he provided was to watch for overreliance on the output of these programs. Unlike quantitative tools which have clearly prescribed formula embedded in them, the results of qualitative analytical software still require quite a bit of analysis on the part of the researcher. For this study, data analysis software was used. An Internet search comparing various qualitative data analysis software programs showed both NVivo and Atlas.ti to have similar features (Boston University, n.d.). For the purposes of this research NVivo was used since it appeared to be more robust and geared for first time qualitative researchers.

Themes

Developing themes in a case study is imperative in identifying common experiences surrounding that phenomenon. Creswell (2013) stated that themes “are broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (p. 186). I used the codes developed in the first phase of data analysis to synthesize the information into themes. For this study, themes that directly related to the research questions as well as those that emerged

independently were used to define a common shared experience or meaning. To do that, I reviewed clustered phrases and determined, based on the comments associated with them, whether they were clustered accurately. If clustering was not correct, I reallocated the phrases to other clusters or discarded them. From the clusters, I determined themes which were developed into a broader view of the issue in order to gain “a sense of the whole” (Creswell, 2013, p. 194). Finally, I described the phenomenon by providing an in-depth description of the perceptions of airmen concerning the research questions. This included identifying the themes and interpreting their “essence” in relation to the airmen’s perceptions of their readiness for postservice employment.

Cross-case Synthesis

It is important to establish internal and external validity (Yin, 2014) if the results of a study are to be taken seriously. There are five possible techniques for analyzing data (Yin, 2014). One of these, cross-case synthesis, was used for this research. Cross-case synthesis uses the patterns or themes that emerged from the various cases “to explore whether the cases being studied had replicated or contrasted with each other” (Yin, 2014, p. 167). For this study, it was informative to note if the perceptions airmen had about how the CCAF degree helped with their employability in finding civilian employment changed after leaving the Air Force. For example, counselors would find it useful in advising transitioning airmen if perceptions changed towards a negative direction due to airmen having unrealistic expectations prior to separating or retiring.

Trustworthiness

As mentioned before, qualitative studies are often viewed askance by some researchers. One reason is because they are not viewed as being rigorous (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Taylor et al., 2011; Tsang, 2014). Proving the trustworthiness of a qualitative study is important if it is to be

taken seriously. There are four factors to consider when determining the trustworthiness of a qualitative study: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Yin (2014) used the terms construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability (associated with quantitative research). Creswell (2013) and Lincoln and Guba (1982) replaced internal validity with credibility; external validity with transferability; reliability with dependability; and, objectivity with confirmability.

Credibility

In order for others to view one's research as credible, qualitative researchers use multiple sources of data and triangulate the results (Creswell, 2013). Triangulation involves using separate data collection techniques to "make us more confident that we have the meaning right..." (Skate, 2010, p. 124). It is not only necessary to use multiple observation techniques "...to validate and cross-check findings" (Patton, 2002, p. 306) but it is also important to use multiple methods in a deliberate, interactive way so that the quality of the evidence is improved (Skate, 2010). Collecting data with rich descriptions is important to the credibility of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Gall et al., 2007). Credibility is ultimately determined by whether the researcher has been honest in interpreting the data or has attempted to make it fit a pre-determined outcome (Patton, 2002). For my study, I used four types of data collection: individual interviews, a focus group, a survey, and field notes; and then triangulated them to confirm the data.

Dependability

Dependability relies on providing information so that the study could be repeated and the results are consistent (Credibility of Research Results, 2011). There are several methods to ensure the trustworthiness of the collection and analysis of data in a qualitative study (Creswell,

2013). Several of these were used for this study. To ensure the validity of the research, first, I asked a colleague with a background in case study to review the interview questions and the overall methodological process. This was to ensure the questions were both apropos to the study and were not too narrow or leading to the participants, as well as ensure that the actual execution of the design did not stray from the original (Lincoln & Guba, 1982). In other words, to have the colleague “certify that the inquiry has been adequately and fairly executed from a methodological point...” (Lincoln & Guba, 1982, p. 14). This process increases the validity by ensuring that it is “well grounded” (Creswell, 2013, p. 259). Secondly, I asked colleagues with a background in case study to review the findings and act as a “devil’s advocate” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251).

Transferability

Qualitative research is not just about “making sense of the world but also in making sense of our relationship to the world...” (Patton, 2002, p. 432). It is also important that case studies are useful to others (Gall et al., 2007). Thick descriptions are crucial in order to make the results transferable to others and, therefore, useful to them (Creswell, 2013). For this study, I used interviews and observations to develop details and in-depth results told in a rich, thick narrative such that it “enables readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred...” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252).

Confirmability

Qualitative research, or what may also be termed “naturalistic inquiry,” has the same rigor as quantitative (“traditional”) research (Lincoln & Guba, 1982). Qualitative studies can achieve confirmability because “all four of the ‘trustworthiness’ criteria that have been posed traditionally for inquiry can be met by naturalistic inquiry as well, albeit in somewhat redefined

form...” (Lincoln & Guba, 1982, p. 2). Confirmability, then, is akin to objectivity in quantitative research. As such, it is meant to confirm that the results “...can be substantiated from the data collected” (Lincoln & Guba, 1982, p. 4). In order to show that the analysis of the data meets objective standards, I asked a colleague to review my analysis by comparing it to the actual data, themes, etc. This is important so that the outside auditor (Lincoln & Guba, 1982) can “...certify that the inquiry products are properly founded on the data and have been reasonably interpreted from them” (Lincoln & Guba, 1982, p. 15)

To assist in this effort, I ensured that the interviews were taped using a good quality recorder (Creswell, 2013). The transcription from these interviews was thorough including pauses and repeated answers (Creswell, 2013). I engaged participants’ comments on themes and for missing information—member checking. Creswell (2013) considered member checking to be one of eight ways to validate qualitative studies. Finally, I discussed the phenomenon in detail and continually connected it to the philosophical premise of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations must occur at all phases of the research (Creswell, 2013). There are three ethical considerations inherent in this study. The first was to ensure that a neutral site was chosen. This is important to reduce any implications of power positions that may affect the perceptions of the participants (Creswell, 2013). Secondly, I had to be aware of how my current professional position may have influenced me (Creswell, 2013) and consistently check myself to ensure that it was the participants’ voice I was hearing and not my own. Lastly, I needed to avoid leading questions, as this may create a feeling that the participants were used (Creswell, 2013). A final ethical consideration was privacy. In order to protect the participants’ privacy pseudonyms were used instead of their real names. All participant information and input were

secured on the computer by a password only known to me. No one else had access to the computer. Despite all the rules and reviews boards to ensure ethical treatment of participants, “It is the researchers themselves who provide the bulwark of protection” (Stake, 2010, p. 206).

Summary

This chapter detailed the steps that I took to conduct this explanatory single case embedded case study. I discussed the rationale for choosing a case study design and laid out the plans for developing and executing the research including reviewing the participants and the sampling technique used to select them. I also outlined the types of data that were collected and how data collection was executed. Analysis of the data was covered including a discussion of cross-case analysis and the use of qualitative research software to assist in coding and developing themes. Data analysis was also discussed in terms of the reliability and validity of the data and how these can be achieved. The chapter ended with a review of the ethical considerations pertinent to this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

Data were gathered using field notes taken during the individual and focus group interviews, a survey, and interviews. The field notes were used in both the development of codes and themes and to develop robust descriptions of the participants. Thirteen interviews and three focus groups were conducted to gather data for analysis. While the goal was to interview 15 airmen-nine currently serving and six separated or retired, it was very difficult to find volunteers. In the end, the number of participants were still balanced between eight currently serving and five separated/retired airmen. The original intent was to conduct just one focus group; however, the sporadic availability of the participants required multiple focus groups to get the minimum number of participants suggested by literature (Patton, 2002). Three focus groups were conducted each of which consisted of those who participated in the individual interviews. In total, seven participants joined in the focus groups with the majority being separated/retired airmen. Two of the focus groups consisted of separated/retired airmen; however, two of the participants had been currently serving during their individual interview and had recently retired. One focus group had a mix of two currently servicing airmen and one retired airman; although the retired airman in this group was currently serving at the time of the individual interview. Field notes were taken during the interviews and used to develop the participant descriptions in this chapter. The Adult Dispositional Hope Scale was administered and used to determine the level of hope of each participant as well as to verify participants' comments in relation to their motivation for pursuing their CCAF degree. The first part of this chapter discusses the individual participants to develop a picture of the individual uniqueness of each. Transcriptions from both the individual interviews and focus groups were used to develop themes and are

discussed in the second part of this chapter. Participant responses and results from the Adult Dispositional Hope Scale were used to explore how the tenets of hope and transition theories factored into the participants' perceptions. Finally, a cross-case analysis was conducted and the results were reviewed.

Participants

It proved surprisingly difficult to get volunteers for this study. Despite the efforts of Airmen and Family Readiness Center personnel throughout the Air Force as well as education centers within the National Capital Region, few airmen followed up on requests to participate. I also went to several Transition Assistance classes in the Pentagon and personally appealed to the attendees; however, none chose to participate. The lack of willingness to participate is unusual given that military service emphasizes volunteerism. After over a year of soliciting participation, in the end, 13 airmen volunteered. Three of the participants were women, two of whom had separated and the other had retired. All of the currently serving participants were men. Two men were separated or retired. The highest level of education the participants had at the time of separation or retirement were: five held at least one associate's degree; five held bachelor's degrees; and three held master's degrees. At least two participants who held associate's degrees were pursuing a bachelor's degree. One participant was pursuing a second bachelor's degree and one who held a bachelor's was pursuing a master's degree. One participant came into the Air Force with a bachelor's degree while another had come in with an associate's degree and another had enlisted with some college credit but no degree. The participants came from a variety of career fields including communications, intelligence, personnel, security forces, services, and contracting.

Anna

Anna traveled an hour to participate in the interview. She is a recently separated enlisted airman with eight years of active service. She comes from a small island. Throughout the course of the interview Anna exhibited enthusiasm and interest. She leaned forward when answering questions and looked the interviewer in the eyes. She smiled regularly and would often pause to consider her responses. She used hand gestures to emphasize her points. She spoke fluently with few “ums” or “uhs” and seemed to have a wide and varied vocabulary. She entered the Air Force already possessing an associate’s degree but chose to pursue her CCAF degree to meet a variety of goals including being eligible for promotion, showing her supervisors she could stick to something, and posturing herself to help train other airmen.

Anna left her small island home to enter the military and is described by both herself and her loved ones as hard headed and goal-oriented. The ease with which she conversed during the interview also highlights her easy interaction with people, including relative strangers. She decided that her AF career was not something she wanted to continue in civilian life and took it upon herself to re-assess her desires and goals. This led to her transition out of her AF job in cyber/information systems and into full-time student status leading to a career in genetic counseling.

Anna has been working on her bachelor’s degree for 15 years. During this time, she expressed episodes of self-doubt; however, she focused on the task and found alternate ways to overcome her self-doubt. Her primary way of overcoming self-doubt was to pretend she was someone else—a close friend or life coach—and asked herself the same questions she would expect one of those people to ask her. She shared that this helped remove herself from the equation and, instead, focus on the goal.

Anna admitted to being very competitive, but she competed against herself or a standard she had set. She demonstrated this by the different paths her education has taken her: from an associate's degree in graphic design, to a CCAF degree in information systems, to now pursuing genetic counseling. She spoke eagerly of her goals, proud of how she had achieved some of them, and was excited about the plans she had for the future.

Bill

Bill is a senior non-commissioned officer (SrNCO) who is retiring after 22 years in the Air Force. He has spent his career as a three-alpha (3A) in information management. He received his CCAF degree in 2007 and his bachelor's degree in 2015. He is married with three children and is concerned that he sets a good example for them.

Bill was quietly enthusiastic throughout the interview. He is soft spoken but passionate about his work and his family. Throughout the interview he would lean forward when answering questions and made frequent eye contact.

Bill is keenly aware of his responsibilities both to his Air Force family, especially junior airmen, as well as to his own family. He believes himself to be a natural leader, enjoys people, and has a passion for helping. Bill is also always looking for ways to better himself and his career, including pursuing higher education.

Ironically, Bill joined the Air Force because he was tired of school and just wanted to get a job. At the time, the Air Force seemed like a good opportunity. He pursued his CCAF degree not only so he could get a better job within the Air Force, but so he could be competitive with his peers. His CCAF degree, however, was just a stepping stone, because for him, it was a way to save time in pursuing a higher degree. This may be because CCAF has developed partnerships through the AU-ABC program that encourage maximum transfer of CCAF credit toward a

bachelor's degree. He credits his mentor with helping him determine his career path. He noted that he always strives to push himself for something better. Bill noted that his family and friends would describe him as having a great attitude, and a strong faith, and being a good person.

Bill considers himself a planner. To start, Bill considered his family's needs. He considered the timing of his retirement with respect to his children's schooling. Once he was sure of the timing, he prepared extensively for his transition from the Air Force both mentally and professionally. Part of his mental preparation was realizing that transition was a part of life. Griffin and Gilbert (2015) referred to this as controlling the meaning of the problem. By reframing his transition this way, Bill may have been better able to handle the mental stress of the transition. To improve his professional readiness, he attended the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) to develop and improve his skills for civilian employment. He particularly concentrated on removing military jargon from his resume and doing what he needed to do to get his foot in the door. He realized that he needs to stand out to be competitive. He developed timelines and committed himself to sticking with them. He researched the job market and the various companies he was interested in. He believes being organized and careful planning are integral to his successful transition. Along with this preparation, Bill also trusts that he has what employers are looking for. He believes he brings a strong work ethic, tenaciousness, people skills, leadership, teamwork, resiliency, and IT skills to civilian employers—all desirable qualities for which employers are looking.

Bill is looking for a job in which he can be happy but will also give him financial security. He wants to be able to put his children through college and be comfortable.

Despite all this, Bill admitted that preparing for the transition has been overwhelming at times. There seems to be a lot to do and a great deal of preparation is necessary. He has

experienced fear of the unknown and the impact on his faith. His hard work has paid off. He currently has a job offer.

Tom

Tom is a senior non-commissioned officer (SrNCO) preparing to retire in a few months. At the time of his retirement he will hold a CCAF degree in Electronic Systems Technology awarded in 2015. He describes himself as a communications expert with a specialization in radio and satellite communication. He also has a great deal of computer skills and holds a specialized computer certification. Overall, he found completing his CCAF degree to be relatively straightforward and uncomplicated and fulfilling. Tom believes his experience is true for all airmen working toward their CCAF degree.

If Tom has one regret, it is not completing his CCAF degree earlier in his career. Over the course of his Air Force career, Tom has seen the Air Force change and emphasize the CCAF degree and continuing education. As a young airman, he listened to his peers and got bad advice. His peers at the time did not focus on education. There was a more senior airman in his unit who tried to convince him that advancing his education would be helpful but, being young, Tom ignored the advice. Later, he realized that he should have listened to the more experienced airman. As a result, he felt that he had to figure out on his own how to complete his CCAF degree. The base education centers helped, but he felt that his supervisors and others in his unit were not helpful in providing guidance for completing his degree.

Tom finally decided to complete his CCAF degree when he was challenged by another person in his unit who had completed his own CCAF degree. The dare made Tom realize that he had been his own worst enemy in that he allowed his preconceived ideas to keep him from pursuing his education. As he progressed toward his goal of completing his CCAF degree, he

vowed to show his challenger that he could do it. This desire to prove the other airman wrong kept him motivated to reach his goal.

This experience helps explain how Tom sets his goals. He used to think that his goals should be something that he was good at. Over time, his perspective changed to setting goals that got him out of his comfort zone. He wanted to learn to be good at things that he was not naturally good at doing. He will know he has achieved his goal by the feedback he receives from others. Tom believes that it is hard to see the change in oneself, so it is important when others recognize when he has succeeded. If he has one goal, it is to continually improve. He believes the Air Force instilled in him the drive to continually set goals that challenged him. In the Air Force, it is not good enough to meet an objective. Each objective leads to others. If they don't, then the Air Force—its people, equipment, etc.—is left behind. Consequently, once he achieves a goal he feels compelled to set another one to constantly challenge himself.

Tom struggled a bit with defining employability. At first he described it as the intersection between interest and aptitude on the part of the job seeker. When asked to describe what a potential employee would look like to an employer, he emphasized someone who aligns with the employer's values and objectives and who has the hard and soft skills to do the job. Soft skills are particularly important for those in leadership roles to help in conflict resolution and leading people. Tom believes that the Air Force teaches the soft skills and the CCAF degree provides proof of having the hard skills.

Tom prepared extensively for his transition to civilian employment. He researched at length but admits he may have spent too much time researching and not enough on analyzing. This tendency flows into other parts of his life such as taking 20 years to get a two-year degree. He has taken the Air Force Transition Assistance classes several times including the optional

courses such as Accessing Higher Education. As a new father, he has shifted his focus from how transitions affect him to how they affect his family. He realizes that he can no longer leave his family to care for themselves. He now has to consider and be aware of others' feelings as well as what he brings to an employer. It took a lot of effort on Tom's part to shift his thinking. The transition still terrifies him, but it is also an exciting time for him. He thinks about his retirement all day and looks forward to the time that it is not so scary. But, on the bright side, he is pleased that he has made it this far in his Air Force career.

Tom believes his greatest obstacle to civilian employment is himself even with his preparation and reconsideration of what is important. To try to get past this, he has spent a great deal of time reflecting on who he is and what he wants to do and be paid for. He finds irony in the fact that the Air Force encourages airmen to talk about themselves in the annual evaluations, awards packages, etc., but finds it now difficult to do so. The other challenge he sees is going from a culture that is people and mission oriented to one that is focused on profit. He is hopeful that in his civilian job he can surround himself with people who will be honest with him and trusts that everything will work out.

Despite these obstacles, Tom still sees himself as employable. He believes both the variety and depth of his skill set will help him enter into the technology industry. And, even though it is not always necessary to have a degree for some technology jobs, his certification and CCAF degree play an important part in making him a desirable candidate. The CCAF degree indicates to employers that he has done something special and worthwhile and that combines his hard and soft skills. In addition to his technical and academic background, Tom believes his loyalty, trustworthiness (which he defines as being able to discern when he should or should not

speak up), and his personal experiences learned outside the classroom separate him from other job candidates.

Dillon

Dillon is a senior non-commissioned officer (SrNCO) who has worked in personnel his entire Air Force career. He is currently working at Headquarters Air Force in the Pentagon. He is planning to retire in the next few months after 23 years in the Air Force. Dillon has a Community College of the Air Force degree in Human Resources and a bachelor's degree in Organizational Management. His current posttransition plans are to enter the federal civilian workforce.

Dillon's interview was conducted in person at the Pentagon. Dillon presented an easy-going demeanor and considered his answers carefully. In fact, some of the words used to describe him are easy-going, understanding, and a good listener who likes to soak up information. Both his family and Dillon also described him as smart, while he added driven. While not very physically animated, he was engaged and made good eye contact.

To prepare for his transition to civilian employment, Dillon set his goals based on his family's needs, where he wants to be, and the level of employment needed to ensure his family's security. At the top of his considerations are location and the availability of the types of jobs he desires. In order to make good decisions, he plans everything out. He writes down what needs to be done and ensures that each task or requirement is marked off, so nothing is overlooked or forgotten. Despite his planning, Dillon admits that it can be daunting doing things that are unfamiliar such as interviewing and writing resumes; however, he shared that it helps to get out there, network, and have friends who can ease the transition.

Dillon sees himself as very employable after he leaves the Air Force. For him, that means he has the knowledge and education backed by experience to do the job. His CCAF degree provided the impetus for him to get his bachelor's, which makes him employable. Both degrees helped him move up in the enlisted ranks. As he moved up, he gained more responsibility, which added to his overall portfolio of knowledge, education, and experience. Even when he felt discouraged, he knew that education would help him compete and increase his chances for promotion and attaining desired positions.

In addition to his education and experience, Dillon believes he brings to civilian employers unique qualities that were developed in the Air Force. His discipline, attention to detail, the ability to take things to completion, adaptability to different work environments, leadership, and communication skills make him a desirable employee in the civilian sector. He is confident that his transition will be successful.

At the end of the interview, Dillon added that the value of CCAF is how it provides a stepping stone for further education. It gives airmen an insight into how education can help them progress and be successful.

Joe

Joe is a senior non-commissioned officer (SrNCO) with almost 27 years of active service who is preparing for his transition to civilian employment. He holds a leadership position as a superintendent assigned to an organization within the Pentagon. In his position, he is responsible for the well-being of enlisted members in his organization, as well as the education, training, and general administrative functioning of his office. His work may involve assigning duties to subordinate airmen, discipline, and advising his commander on issues and concerns that may affect the general state and functionality of the office. He currently holds a CCAF and

bachelor's degree in Human Resources. He found his attainment of his CCAF degree relatively simple. He needed two resident courses in math and speech and he also used the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) to test out of the remaining requirements. However, it still took a while for him to complete his CCAF, and it took the encouragement of his training manager to motivate him to finish his remaining classes. He leveraged the AU-ABC program to maximize transfer credits from his CCAF degree to his bachelor's which helped him complete his bachelor's degree quickly. He has taken advantage of the AF COOL program to gain certifications in the human resources field.

Joe seems naturally curious. When planning for the interview he offered to come to the interviewer's office because he had never been in that area of the Pentagon. He came into the interview with confidence and enthusiasm. While not overly chatty, Joe answered the questions succinctly and thoughtfully. He made good eye contact and smiled often. He seemed eager to discuss the overall educational opportunities the Air Force provides enlisted airmen and provided additional comments at the end of the interview to the effect that CCAF should expand degree choices beyond those related to an airman's Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC). As an example, the CCAF degree in Human Resources could be expanded to include another CCAF degree in IT/computer programming since the human resources field requires knowledge and skills in these areas. Many of the AU-ABC academic partners do provide for bachelor's degrees related to airmen's CCAF degrees. CCAF does not currently expand beyond airmen's AFSC. In his personal opinion, the combination of CCAF, AU-ABC, and AF COOL are great opportunities for enlisted members.

Joe believes that having a broad educational background (i.e. a mix of degrees and certifications), along with extensive experience make one very employable. He sees himself as

very employable. He views not only his degrees and certification as being a bonus for employers, but he also brings the characteristics of reliability and being on time as improving his chances for employment postservice. Both he and his family would describe him as boring/not very sociable, loyal, and trustworthy. In the interview, he did not appear to be boring. He is relatively quiet and introspective but was willing to engage and showed animation when talking about educational opportunities afforded enlisted airmen.

His confidence extended to his readiness for transition to civilian employment. Joe characterized his transition as smooth since he is staying in the NCR. He has already made connections with future potential employers there. He chose to stay in the NCR because of the greater opportunities for civil service employment. He has been planning for his transition but that has so far entailed talking with family, thinking about the transition, and relying on his support system. He admits to the process being a little scary and is concerned that his age and length of time in the Air Force may mean he would have difficulty competing against younger prospects. At the same time, though, he concedes that his age and service may actually be a boon. His goal is to have a job that will allow him to relax and not worry about the future; one that pays well so he can maintain his current quality of life and spend more time with his family.

Troy

Troy is a senior non-commissioned officer (SrNCO), and at the time of the study, planned on retiring in March 2018. He is in the 1A8 career field meaning, he supports the Air Force mission as an airborne cryptologic language analyst. He holds a CCAF degree in Information Technology earned in 2006. Troy had been enrolled in college prior to joining the Air Force. After transferring credits and completing military training, he found he needed just one course to complete his CCAF degree. Troy is in a specialized career field that has intensive training and

security requirements. Because of this, his skills are in high demand in an albeit small civilian career field. He noted that a degree is not necessary to transfer to similar civilian work. This may be why he does not see a clear link between the degree earned in the Air Force and his employability. It may also be why he did not pursue higher education while in the Air Force. He sees himself as very employable because of his background in intelligence and sees no problem getting a job. Because the civilian career field equivalent to his Air Force one is small, it created opportunities for networking throughout his Air Force career. His CCAF degree is useful in that it can make the transition to a bachelor's degree easier and faster if needed.

Troy still feels it is necessary to plan for his transition even with his networking and highly sought-after skills. He admits to worrying and had done a lot of reading, thinking, and planning to prepare. His resume is important for qualifying for jobs. He also believes that his abilities to get along with others, to lead teams, and accomplish goals increase his desirability to employers. Both he and his family and friends would describe him as smart, nice, and conceited. He certainly showed a high level of confidence during the interview but was not offensive or pompous. Indeed, he was congenial, honest, and willing to participate. He knows it is also important to maintain relevance, stay current in his career field, and be ahead of change. Despite this, he remarks that his transition so far has been relatively painless and easier than expected.

His self-confidence is demonstrated in how he develops and pursues goals, which are determined by his family and necessity. Thus, his goals can change frequently, but he views success as a completed task. It is his mission to meet his goal. This drive makes him constantly move the goal posts. Goals lead to other goals that are constantly changing and are dynamic. Despite this, he does have an overarching goal of improving life in general. His approach to goal setting and achievement seems to be synchronous with his career in intelligence, which is hard

charging, task-oriented work where the safety of fellow servicemembers is paramount. His somewhat relaxed attitude to his transition may be the result of years of dealing with change and uncertainty in the intelligence career field.

Mike

Mike retired in 2015 after 23 years of military service. After retirement, Mike worked as a federal government employee under the GS system. He didn't find it a good fit and is now working as a contractor in the intelligence career field. This latter job fits more with Mike's experience in the intelligence field when he was an airman.

At the time of his retirement he held two CCAF degrees. One was in Computer Programming awarded in 2005 and the other in Communications Applications awarded in 2008. He originally had no plan to pursue his education while in the Air Force but in order to get an endorsement from his leadership on his annual performance report, he had to complete his CCAF degree. Since all of his Air Force technical education transferred into his CCAF degree, he used military tuition assistance and CLEP to complete the remaining requirements. Mike then changed jobs in the Air Force and received a new AFSC. This allowed him to pursue a second CCAF degree. For his second CCAF degree, Mike received additional technical education. This, combined with his general education from his first degree left him with only his 5-level on-the-job training to complete.

Mike faced many challenges trying to complete his degree while in the Air Force. The greatest factor is what is referred to as ops tempo. This is the rate at which airmen are deployed or performing tasks in support of various operations. His work in intelligence meant that he and his fellow "intel" airmen were in constant demand to provide situational awareness for each operation. The high tempo often made Mike want to quit, but he was too stubborn. He felt he

just had to get it done. In one example, Mike explained that he had to take English three times because he had to withdraw from class to meet his military obligations. Although it took him 15 years, Mike worked on his CCAF degrees and bachelor's degree concurrently. His bachelor's alone took seven years, which he completed after his retirement. His perseverance is demonstrated in the words his family and friends used to describe him: stubborn/tenacious, strong work ethic, and flexible. While Mike also described himself as stubborn or tenacious, he included problem solver and communicator on the list. All of these characteristics seemed to be on display as Mike worked toward completing his education.

While in the Air Force, Mike considered a CCAF degree as a "box checker," something he had to do for promotion. He wasn't sure how the CCAF degree helped or impacted employment in the civilian work sector. Since he has retired, his attitude towards the CCAF degree has changed. Having a two-year degree and later a four-year degree were very beneficial in gaining civilian employment. He believes having his degrees coupled with his experience made him more employable. In particular, his CCAF degrees were instrumental in salary negotiations and setting his pay with his current employer.

Mike found that there were other benefits to the CCAF degree once he retired. The highly technical nature of his current work was complemented by the CCAF degree, which emphasizes technical expertise and critical thinking. Mike believed that the CCAF degree provided proof to employers that he had the technical expertise necessary to do the job. In his experience, the CCAF degree highlighted other qualities such as the desire to improve oneself, set goals, accomplish tasks, and the ability to not give up. Overall, Mike found the CCAF degree to be more beneficial outside of the Air Force, as not only can it influence promotion decisions,

career advancement, and highlight self-improvement efforts, but it provides employers with insight into the character of an employee.

Mike also experienced a change in perspective concerning his transition to civilian employment. During his transition, Mike was concerned with financial stability and hoped his CCAF degree would positively impact that. He looked forward to opportunities that matched his long-term goals. What he found was that he missed a sense of mission and purpose. This was particularly true of his time as a federal employee. He found a need for rewarding work that also compensated well. While financial stability was still important, the quality of the work was just as important. He had not anticipated this to be an issue when he was preparing for transition.

During his transition from the Air Force, Mike set goals that focused on where he wanted to be and do five to seven years in the future. He wanted a certain level of comfort and knowledge that he was making himself better, as well as provide for his family. While he completed his CCAF degree and hoped it would help provide financial stability, he did not have a lot of confidence that it would actually help.

Trish

Trish did not retire from the Air Force but, instead, chose to separate after her enlistment leaving the Air Force in 2015. She already had a bachelor of science degree prior to entering the Air Force. While in the Air Force she received a CCAF degree in Intelligence Studies and a second associate's degree from the Defense Language Institute in a foreign language. Because of her previous education, Trish found obtaining a CCAF degree very easy. All of her Air Force technical education as well as her general education from her bachelor's degree transferred. She only had to complete her 5-level on-the-job training to be awarded her CCAF degree. The most frustrating part of getting her CCAF degree was doing the paperwork and waiting until her 5-

level was finished. She is currently attending school full time to complete a second bachelor's degree.

Trish believes that employers are interested in well-rounded employees. For her, this is a culmination of education, life experience, skills, and volunteer work focused on what the job market needs. Completing her CCAF degree showed employers that she was hard working, focused, and suited to multi-tasking. Her views on her CCAF degree did not change significantly after separation from the Air Force. In particular, if she were to stay in the intelligence field, the CCAF degree showed employers that she took her Air Force job seriously. It shows that she was willing to take the extra steps and make the most out of opportunities afforded her. She also believes that it is a discriminator and sets one apart from other employees and helps with promotions. She expressed concern about her Army friends who did not have the advantage of obtaining a CCAF degree and the increased challenge they may experience in obtaining civilian employment. What Trish found after leaving the Air Force is that the CCAF degree is a bonus for her. It emphasizes her diverse background and that she is a worldly person not easily pigeon-holed. It is tangible proof of her experience.

These views on employability seem to be in line with how Trish and her family and friends describe her. Words such as OCD, organized, perfectionist, obsessive, neat freak, and sarcastic speak to the intense, determined way she approaches her work and her education. As she mentioned, to be employable it is necessary to show herself as a well-rounded person. Not satisfied with just one or two ways to highlight this, Trish took the challenge on with a multitude of degrees and experiences. The fact that she was able to successfully juggle school, work, and volunteering while facing the challenges of a high ops tempo career field in the Air Force highlights her perfectionism and organizational skills.

Trish approached her preparation for transition in the same way. She did a lot of planning. It was important for her to know what was happening. She carried several notebooks and jotted down notes as ideas and thoughts came to her on what she needed to plan for, things she had not considered, or ways to make the transition smoother. She prepared for the transition as early as possible. Most importantly, she prepared herself mentally by realizing that school was work and she needed to approach it that way. She realized that her current needs were simple—a place to live, keep the car going, and make ends meet. This helped her prioritize her transition goals and needs and reframed her purpose for her transition. She was not ready for how much she missed the Air Force. She thought she would feel free once she separated from the military but was surprised that this did not really happen. Her feelings were more complicated than anticipated.

Trish's work, life, and academic experiences all fit into how she sets her goals. Her goals center on wanting to do something different, helping people, and being able to talk to others about her experiences. She looks to her loved ones to help her explore options and finds writing down goals five, 10, and 15 years out helps her focus on where she wants to be. While she hopes to have a comfortable life with financial stability, Trish hopes that, when she reaches her goals, she will be wiser and more appreciative of what she has been through. She hopes to see a change in herself and be able to note the progress she has made as a person. What motivates her to keep going is the sense that she has a family tradition (military service) and reputation to uphold. During her time in the Air Force, the fact that she signed a contract, in essence made a promise, kept her going during the challenges of a military career. She also felt that she was contributing to a greater good and was privileged to be part of something special. She realized that not everyone can serve in the military.

Throughout the interview, it seemed that it was important to Trish that her life be connected with others in a substantial, positive way. Her new degree will be in a field helping others.

Bob

Bob is a SrNCO who has spent most of his career in the Services career field. This career field includes programs in morale, welfare, recreation, lodging, and food services. He is currently working at Headquarters Air Force, Pentagon, in a senior advisor position. At the time of the study, Bob was approximately one year out from retiring and will have served 30 years in the Air Force. He is married with children. His wife also served in the military and retired after 20 years of service. As a military family, Bob and his wife have combined over 17 deployments in the course of their careers. Bob ruefully admitted that he was not a good student in school and was eclipsed by other siblings who went on to professional careers. However, Bob holds a master's degree as well as a bachelor's and an associate of applied science degree through the Community College of the Air Force (CCAF). Bob started school late in his career and did not achieve his CCAF degree until 2006 after he was selected for promotion to the SrNCO ranks. Completing his CCAF degree gave him the motivation to continue with his education. This is a theme that other participants had also mentioned. He also saw his peers leverage education for promotions, which gave added impetus for him to continue pursuing higher education. He has a self-deprecating sense of humor and is truly humble. He comes across as a little surprised that he has achieved his academic success.

Bob arrives at work early so the interview was set for 7 a.m. He arrived a few minutes early and we chatted briefly before moving to a private office for the interview. He seemed relaxed and expressed excitement in participating. Throughout the interview, Bob was calm and

thoughtful. He would often pause and furrow his brows as he considered his answers. While he did not use a lot of gestures to make his points, he would look the interviewer in the eye and smile. His answers were thorough and well thought out although he occasionally veered from the question. He was able to get back on track with a little prompting from the interviewer. He rarely hesitated and did not use “uhs” and “ums” when pausing or thinking. He credits his academic training for making him a better writer and speaker. He appeared eager to take opportunities to add or clarify comments and did so several times throughout the interview.

Bob is not new to transitioning out of the Air Force. His wife recently retired and he seemed to actively participate in her journey such as helping review her resume. He feels confident that he has the necessary skills and education to transition to civilian employment as well as the support of former commanders for advice. He is still anxious and worried about the process and considers it “more difficult than parenthood”. At the time of the study, he seemed to be relying on his wife’s experience to guide his preparation for transition and had not made a plan to prepare for his own transition. This is quite different from other participants who conducted extensive preparation for transition many months prior to their date of separation or retirement. He did realize that at some point he would need to begin preparing for transition but has not established a timeframe for doing so.

This somewhat laissez-faire view of transition preparation is belied by Bob’s score on the Adult Dispositional Hope Scale. Out of a possible score of 16 for pathway or planning, Bob scored 15. While this may indicate an unwillingness or inability to plan, Bob’s own words show that he may take a less “traditional” or expected course of preparation. Both transition theory and hope theory emphasize preparation. The former sees it as a way to mitigate the stress of the transition to achieve goals; while the latter views preparation or planning as a key component of

hope. Those with higher hope will plan ways to achieve goals. Those planning a successful transition will set goals to ease the transition.

Bob's take on preparation and goal setting was unique. When it comes to goal setting, he believes that the goal provides the stimulus for continued motivation. He believes that nothing will change in his life once his goal is achieved since the stimulus is the pursuit of the goal and not necessarily the outcome. Throughout the interview, Bob mentioned working in a constant state of change and uncertainty. He succeeded in his career by remaining flexible and taking advantage of the moment. Each assignment and change in his career brought on by Air Force personnel decisions brought new opportunities. He seemed to embrace each and find success. Indeed, one of the phrases he used to describe himself was "seizes opportunity." He was hesitant to use the term "opportunistic" since it had a more self-serving, negative connotation. Instead, he emphasized that when opportunities did come, he took advantage of them. He did not purposefully set himself up for opportunities or leverage his position or relationships to gain an advantage. This may be why he seems less concerned about preparing for his transition but confident that he is very employable. His varied Air Force experiences have prepared him for the next step.

Bob, like most of his fellow participants, showed great concern about the impact his transition will have on his family. When asked what he considered when preparing for his transition, his immediate response was the impact it would have on his family. He felt that he owed it to them to consider their needs as well being able to support them. It was important that they were where they wanted to be with the right income to support that desire.

He believes the combination of his skill set, technical expertise, and education gained in the Air Force all combine to make him employable. He defines employability as having the skill

set coveted by the civilian enterprise. Bob believes that, because he comes from what he sees as a very general career field, his CCAF degree may not be very impactful by itself. The real value of CCAF may be in how it motivated Bob to pursue higher education. Bob believes that his degrees tell employers that he is serious about self-development and that he takes improving his skill set seriously as well. Employers look for employees who have soft skills sets to include life-long learning. Bob's responses indicate that continued self-development is important to him and thus, makes him more competitive in the civilian employment market. Without realizing it, Bob's educational pursuits in the Air Force reinforced a lifestyle for learning throughout his life—a much desired skill by civilian employers.

Carl

Carl has achieved the highest enlisted rank in the Air Force and is set to retire at the end of 2018. At the time of his retirement he will have a master's degree and a CCAF degree in Communications Applications awarded in 2003. Carl's Air Force career has been spent in the intelligence career field, so the completion of a master's degree is impressive considering the high ops tempo required in that field. He came into the interview with a great deal of enthusiasm and seemed eager and excited to talk about his experiences.

Carl believes that employers are enthusiastic about educational accomplishments, so being able to start and complete a degree while in the military is important when seeking civilian employment. Thus, he sees the CCAF degree as a great opportunity or gateway toward higher education. CCAF sets the stage for pursuit of a bachelor's degree and demonstrates to employers that one can balance work and school. An education coupled with experience are the keys to being employable.

Carl believes he is very well prepared for civilian employment. His experience is irreplaceable. As a manager for the education and training of subordinate airmen in his career field, he has had to meet the hands-on day-to-day technical career needs of airmen. He has also had to strategically plan for the future ability of the career field to handle changes in priorities, threats, and opportunities. He brings to employers both tactical as well as strategic experiences that can move a company forward. He believes his education has also prepared him for a variety of options so he is not limited to a particular type of career field upon retirement. He believes his CCAF degree will show an ability to apply learned activities that apply to a job. By completing his CCAF and other degrees, Carl hopes employers will see characteristics such as foresight, intuition, and initiative.

Throughout the interview, Carl was positive, upbeat, and determined. He believes his family and friends would describe him as loyal, driven, and compassionate. He sees himself as passionate, driven, and fun. Drive and passion seemed to permeate his preparation for transition to civilian employment. He started by developing a sense of personal buy-in to the change. That buy-in comes from being well informed and having clear goals.

First, he established goals that made sense to him. They had to be attainable but challenging and something for which he could be accountable. To help him be accountable for successfully meeting his goals, he would tell someone else about them. That way, if he strayed or lost momentum, he had someone to encourage him and remind him what he had committed to. It was also important that his family had buy-in as well. Transition for him is a team effort and requires the commitment of all those involved.

Once the goals were established, he began an intense preparation effort. He did a great deal of research and self-education on the transition process. He would set smaller goals so that

he could measure his progress. He took advantage of the various programs the Air Force offers to transitioning airmen, including participating in the five-day Transition Assistance program and shorter workshops. He spent time practicing interviewing and participated in live ones in order to receive feedback. He has spent time shadowing or interning with civilian employers to better understand what they want in employees. He focuses on staying fit and making sure his family is secure.

It is important that he discover and understand the possible variances that could occur during the transition process and prepare as much as possible for them. He focused first on meeting primary needs such as financial stability. As he met each transition goal, he experienced a sense of accomplishment. This feeling encouraged him to try more difficult tasks. The more success he experienced at difficult tasks the greater meaning his life seems to have. Whenever he wanted to give up, he would receive encouragement from others and make a more concerted effort to focus on his goals for long-term meaning. He also relied on his background in the military to keep him focused.

Even though Carl feels very well prepared for his transition to civilian employment and believes it has gone smoothly so far, he admits that there is still some emotional stress. His Air Force career is all he has ever known since graduating from high school. Even though he is confident that he has the right attitude and aptitude, he loves the Air Force and will miss it. He anticipates that he will miss the camaraderie with fellow airmen and positively impacting airmen's lives. But, he hopes he will bring the ability to problem solve and gain people's trust fine-tuned in the Air Force to another organization and possibly have the same sense of fellowship in his new work place. As a senior non-commissioned officer who is passionate

about developing young airmen, he believes he brings not just technical expertise but a people-savvy sense as well.

As a parting comment, Carl believes the CCAF degree is very valuable, especially to those who will separate rather than retire from the Air Force. He believes he would have been very well prepared for his transition with just his CCAF degree. This is because CCAF continues to fine tune its degree programs to maintain relevance with civilian employer expectations.

Craig

Craig is a senior non-commissioned officer (SrNCO) who holds the highest enlisted rank. He retires from the Air Force in 2018. At that time, he will have a master's, bachelor's, and two CCAF degrees. His first CCAF degree was awarded in 1997 in Security Administration while he was a police officer (defender). His second is in Instructor of Technology and Military Science and was awarded in 1999 when he taught technical education courses to new enlisted airmen. He is in a unique position in that he has already been offered a job.

Craig came into the Air Force with an associate's degree in Criminal Justice, so he only needed three or four classes to complete his first CCAF degree. Craig considers the CCAF degree as a significant stepping stone to earning a higher degree. In his experience, completing a CCAF degree motivates airmen to continue their education. The CCAF degree is a springboard for educational advancement. Despite this, Craig procrastinated on getting his bachelor's degree. He became motivated to get his CCAF degree when his daughter was debating whether she wanted to go to college. He challenged his children to go to college and bet them that he would finish first. He wanted to encourage his children to better themselves and take advantage of the opportunities afforded them.

Craig's challenge to his children made him think of his own goals especially postservice. He began to consider what he wanted to be and do in civilian life and began to set goals. He was concerned about how marketable he would be and so set goals for advancing his education. He believes that in order to be employable one has to have a set of skills that are valued by society. These considerations motivated Craig to pursue more education while in the Air Force to show employers that he had great breadth of experience, especially in the realm of national security. Ultimately, he would like to be in a position where he can get his nights back after years of long hours and deployments away from his family. Having a sense of accomplishment drives him to take actions that will open more job prospects.

Craig believes his family would describe him as tenacious, understanding, and passionate, while he would describe himself as competitive, stubborn, and tenacious. The fact that he challenged his children to beat him to their college degrees and then one-upped them with a master's is testament to all of these attributes.

Craig used these characteristics to approach his preparation for transition to civilian employment. He employed a backwards planning approach that started with the end goal and then developed phases and actions necessary to meet that goal. He wants to ensure that his civilian job's pay is commensurate with his current pay and experience. He began planning and preparing 18 months before his retirement date. He researched where he wanted to live, school choices for his children, what leave he would need to take, house hunting trips and similar family-oriented goals. He also participated in the Air Force's Transition Assistance Program, attending classes and workshops, preparing to make his Veterans Administration medical claims, as well as finishing his own education. Craig found the beginning of his transition journey very stressful. He was concerned about the huge change in his life. His stress decreased over time as

he realized that the Air Force does a good job with preparing airmen for the transition to civilian employment. He likened his transition experience as starting out on a gravel road and ending up on an interstate highway.

Craig believes his education and breadth of experience make him very employable. Because of his career in the Air Force, he holds a security clearance that is desired by employers. He also has the attitude and willingness to do what it takes to finish a job. He hopes his CCAF degree will help determine his next employment level and show he is well educated in his career field.

John

John retired from the Air Force as a senior non-commissioned officer (SrNCO) in 2015. At the time of his retirement, he held a CCAF degree in Criminal Justice that was awarded in 2006. Since his retirement, he worked as a substitute teacher and completed his bachelor's degree in 2016 and his master's degree in 2017. He is currently working on a second master's degree.

John admits he procrastinated in getting his CCAF degree. He wishes he had gotten his CCAF degree earlier. He believes, if his supervisors and commanders had emphasized and pushed the CCAF degree more, he may have felt a greater urgency to complete it. However, he believes back in the mid-1990s, there was a sense that there was no rush to complete a CCAF since that was all that was expected. Now, leaders are putting a greater emphasis on completing the CCAF degree, which John believes is a good thing because having a CCAF degree does make a difference.

In 2000 he only needed two classes to complete the degree but did not complete these requirements until six years later. However, once he completed his CCAF degree it "set the

pace” for him to take other classes. The CCAF degree provided transfer credits that allowed him to quickly complete his bachelor’s degree. He believes it provided a stepping stone for further education but should not be a stand-alone degree. He believed he needed more than the CCAF degree and thus pursued higher levels of education. However, completing the CCAF degree encouraged him to pursue other educational goals. Without the CCAF degree he may not have been as eager or successful in completing his other degrees.

Completing his CCAF degree gave John a very good feeling but it was being able to show his children and family that it is never too late to go back to school that kept him going. He wanted to make them proud. John also wanted to make sure that he was employable so that he could care for his family and their future. With that in mind, he developed his goals with a definite end state in mind including looking ahead at what was needed in order to be marketable and successful. Just like when he completed his CCAF degree, he believes he will have a strong sense of accomplishment when he achieves his other goals.

Part of that sense of accomplishment will be due in part to how John prepares for transitions in his life. He likes to have a plan in place that includes a “Plan B” or alternative, in case the first plan does not work out. It is important to John that he consider his attitude and outlook when preparing for transition. He believes a positive attitude and being flexible help make the transition easier and more successful. Upon reflection, he considers his transition to civilian employment what he expected it to be. As part of his plan, he saved money and decided to move back home to be closer to family and their support. His transition preparation helped him adapt quickly. He also believes his personality helped him. He believes his family would describe him as being funny, having integrity, and being a good networker. He would use the same words to describe himself but substituted “social” for networker. These characteristics may

have encouraged him seek the help and support he needed to ease the transition to civilian employment.

Kara

Kara retired from the Air Force in 2017 as a senior non-commissioned officer (SrNCO). At the time of her retirement, she held a bachelor's degree in Business Management and a Community College of the Air Force degree in Education Technology awarded in 2000. She is currently working for a contractor doing instructional design. She worked in the base education center while in the Air Force where she helped other airmen develop their educational goals, including completing their CCAF degree. She remembers touting the Air Force technical schools as a way to quickly and easily get the CCAF degree. For Kara, completing the CCAF degree was easy since she was well aware of the requirements as part of her job in the Air Force.

Kara initially responded that she saw no link between obtaining an education in the Air Force and being employable. This belief extended to her CCAF degree. She believed it is possible to be employable without having a degree. For her, being employable means being able to do the job, whatever that is. After retirement, her views changed. She believed her master's degree made her more interesting to employers. Since she completed her master's degree after retirement, Kara's first response on how completing an education while in the Air Force is understandable. She didn't get her master's in the Air Force; however, postservice she realized that the CCAF degree, while not having much bearing on her employability in itself, laid the foundation for further education. Completing her CCAF degree motivated her to do more, to the point where she is considering pursuing a doctorate when her children get older.

Kara's persistence in completing her college degrees was motivated by wanting to be a good role model for her children. She is the first in her family to earn a college degree. She felt

that, by earning her degrees, she had more right to tell others that they could be successful in college, too. Wanting to set an example for her children and being able to mentor others kept her going when she wanted to give up.

Kara had a unique way of determining her goals. She called it doing a “gap analysis” on herself. This helped her determine what she is lacking immediately that can be fixed to meet future needs. Once she determines what her gaps are, she sets about identifying the training she needs to close the gaps and meet her goals. Her goals, however, are always changing. She needs to continually learn so that is why she keeps moving the goal posts. While she claims that nothing will be better in her life as she meets her goals, the fact that she can constantly move her goals indicates that she experiences some personal or professional growth.

Kara’s use of a “gap analysis” on herself can also explain how she approached her transition to civilian employment. When she decided to retire, she “freaked out” at first and cried. But, crying brought clarity and, along with prayer, she then engaged in a months-long process of preparing for her transition. She concentrated on building her savings account, took Transition Assistance classes and additional courses in areas such as resume writing. She spent time learning about companies and asking a lot of questions. Kara considered what the end result would look like and realized that her processes to get to the end may have to be adjusted. She knew she had to be flexible and realized that if she wanted something bad enough she could find a way.

The biggest change Kara experienced was what her vision of entering into the civilian corporate world would be like. She saw herself as a “corporate power” person in a suit and carrying a briefcase. In reality, she works in a cubicle, wears sweat pants, and feels like she

waits around for permission to do things. Unfortunately, her reality is not as glamorous as she had hoped.

Participants' Hope Scores

One of the premises of this study is that having high hope motivated the participants to pursue higher education. In order to determine their level of hope, the participants for this study were each given the Adult Dispositional Hope Scale to complete. The purpose for administering the Scale was to assess if hope had a part in how the participants approached their education and its effect on employability postservice. Hope considers both the willpower to do something and the ability to actually develop and execute a plan for success (Snyder, 1994). There are several characteristics that high hope individuals display. According to Snyder, people with high hope "...interact easily with other people and are willing to take chances to get what they want... [they are] very focused on their objectives (p. 43)." High hope people are also characterized by positive affectivity and show interest, excitement, enthusiasm, and determination among other characteristics (Snyder, 1994). These scores when combined with the answers to the relevant research questions provide a richer picture of the participants' motivation to pursue and complete their education.

All the participants returned the Scale within a matter of a few days after receipt. The standard total average for the Scale is 24, which indicates a "...strong base of hope (Snyder, 1994, p. 26)." Concomitant with an average score of 24 are the average sub scores of 12 for each pathway and willpower sub scale which "...suggests a solid foundation of hope (Snyder, 1994, p. 30)." Sub scores below 9 on each sub scale indicate low hope (Snyder, 1994). People with sub scores of 12 for each of the sub scales have enough will power to do go about achieving their goals while being able to think of a variety of ways to achieve those goals (Snyder, 1994). Most

people have these average sub scores and can be successful even when faced with impediments (Snyder, 1994).

The average total score for all participants of this study was 27.6, which is 3.6 points higher than the standard average of 24. The range of total scores was from 23 to 31, with 32 being the highest possible score. Pathway sub scores ranged from 12 to 16, with 16 being the highest possible score. Agency sub scores ranged from 11 to 16, with 16 again being the highest possible score. (See Table 1).

Table 1

Participants' Adult Dispositional Hope Scale Scores

Participant	Pathways Score	Agency Score	Total Score
Anna	15	14	29
Bill	13	11	24
Tom	16	12	28
Dillon	15	13	28
Joe	15	14	29
Troy	12	11	23
Mike	14	16	30
Trish	12	12	24
Bob	15	13	28
Carl	14	16	30
Craig	16	15	31
John	16	15	31
Kara	14	14	24
Average Total	14.4	13.5	27.6

The participant with the lowest overall score (23) had a pathway (ability to develop and execute a plan) score of 12 and an agency (determination) score of 11. Two other participants had an overall score of 24 with one having a score of 12 on both the pathway and agency subscale and the other having a score of 13 for pathway and 11 for agency. The remaining participants overall scores ranged from 28 to 31. Thirteen was the lowest scores for both pathway and agency

Without exception, the participants in this study exhibited high hope. The participants demonstrated their hopefulness both in their words and actions expressed during their interviews, as well as in their responses on the Adult Dispositional Hope Scale. One aspect of hope theory is goal setting. Those with high hope set goals that are challenging. High hope people often have difficult goals and perceive the effort to achieve them as a challenge, as something that is not only hard but fun (Snyder, 1994). They often set multiple, challenging goals that cross many aspects of their lives, fully commit to them, and believe they will attain them (Snyder, 1994). As one participant put it, it was having the belief in his own abilities and the fact that "...a lot of my friends were advancing, and I thought that I had the same type of abilities that they did" (individual interview Bob, January 26, 2018) that kept him in school. High hope people don't focus on winning but on increasing the difficulty of challenges, the chance to test skills (Snyder, 1994).

Five participants believed they would have to continually set new goals and continue to challenge themselves. As one airman put it, "...goals are things that provide the stimulus that we need...to motivate you into doing a good job and take [sic] care of the people that you are in charge for [sic] taking care of..." (individual interview Bob, January 26, 2018). Another said that his goals "...should be something that I'm not necessarily good at...getting outside my

comfort zone” (individual interview Tom, September 1, 2017). Consequently, for these participants, there is no time in life when all is accomplished. To put it another way, “As long as there’s life in me I’m going to do something. There’s always an opportunity to learn...”

(individual interview Kara, February 10, 2018). Several participants also believed achieving their goals would give them more time with their families. One hoped that achieving her goals would make her wiser and more appreciative of what she has been though (individual interview Trish, December 30, 2017).

High hope is also demonstrated in the words that they believed family and friends would use to describe them as well words they used to describe themselves. The participants listed over 45 unique words. Most described positive characteristics while only five conjured fewer positive feelings such as sarcasm, conceit, long-windedness, and obsessive/OCD behavior but these were often paired with other words that had more positive connotations. (See Table 2 for full list).

Table 2

Personal Descriptors

Family/Friends	Self
Self-critical motivated hard headed	Motivated realist long-winded
Long-winded intelligent funny OCD	Intelligent funny conceited smart
Conceited smart nice organized	Nice perfectionist obsessive fun
Perfectionist sarcastic steady	Sarcastic grabs opportunity caring
Patriotic proud integrity funny	Lucky social funny integrity
Networker great attitude faithful	Natural leader passion smart driven
Good person easy-going smart	Good listener boring loyal goofy
Understanding stubborn flexible	Trust-worthy problem-solver loyal
Strong work ethic loyal driven	Communicator tenacious driven
Compassionate tenacious loving	Passionate tenacious stubborn
understanding passionate goofy	Competitive compassionate
boring loyal trust-worthy	

Several words have similar meanings so when combined give an overall impression of the hopefulness of the participants: hard-headed/stubborn/tenacious (six responses); motivated/driven/passionate (eight responses); good person/compassionate/caring/loving (five responses); intelligent/smart (six responses); funny/goofy/fun (seven responses); and loyal/patriotic (five responses).

Both in describing themselves and in imagining how their family and friends would describe them, the participants have a high regard for their abilities and personal attributes and believe that they project those positive characteristics to those around them. One participant said that he has "...passion to help people understand what their passion is and to understand what their legacy is" (individual interview Bill, July 19, 2017). One who suggested his family would describe him as funny said, "...I would agree with that...because that would be something that I would display" (individual interview Tom, September 1, 2017). One airman explained why her husband would consider her motivated, "...he would also say motivated, because it's been a rough journey to get here, but if I would've just compromised with anything I would be in a totally different place right now" (individual interview Anna, May 12, 2017).

The words chosen to describe the participants are important when considering how hope may have played a part in their success. People with high hope are "...very focused on their objectives" (Snyder, 1994, p. 43). They display tenacity and have many solutions to a problem (Snyder, 1994). High hope people have "...positive emotions that are part of this mental set" (Snyder, 1994, p. 53). And according to Snyder (1994), "...words should reveal a story whose themes involve the components of hope...our words mirror the thoughts in our minds" (p. 74). The participants consistently demonstrated through the words they chose as well as their actions, that they possessed high hope.

Those with high hope also look for many ways to solve a problem including relying on friends and family to help. Snyder (1994) referred to this characteristic as looking outward and problem solving and calling on friends when a high hope person meets with an obstacle. High hope people "...are very facile in taking on the perspective of other people (p. 60)". Her ability to "become" a friend or life coach helped her see the problem from a new perspective, remove the emotion, and formulate an effective response.

Most of the participants noted that they had multiple plans and ways to prepare for their transition which included earning advanced degrees and professional certifications. As noted by Snyder (1994), having several different ways to achieve a goal is the sign of someone with high hope. Having high hope gave the participants the motivation (willpower) to pursue their education. Not only did their hopefulness have a part in completing their college degree(s) but it also helped in the transition.

Those with high hope, are more likely to graduate from college (Snyder et al., 2002). While most of the participants did not enter the Air Force with a college degree, and many did not start their education until later in their careers, they all held at least one college degree. Indeed, all but one held multiple degrees. Based on the participants' hope scores, this type of academic success is to be expected.

All the participants had postsecondary degrees and most had several. Their degrees were completed while on active duty, which added the stress of deployments and war to completing the degree. Indeed, one participant mentioned that he finished his master's degree while deployed (individual interview Bob, January 26, 2018). In other cases, completing a degree took many years beyond what is usual in a civilian setting. One participant noted that she had been working on her bachelor's degree for 15 years (individual interview Anna, May 12, 2017).

Another participant noted that he had to take English three times because he kept having to withdraw from the class due to the high operations tempo in his unit (individual interview Mike, December 29, 2017). However, he persevered and completed both his CCAF degree and bachelor's degree.

Those with high hope also exhibit positive affectivity. Snyder (1994) defined positive affectivity as "...a mental state characterized by full concentration, engagement, and high energy (p. 47)." High hope people are characterized by positive affectivity and show interest, excitement, enthusiasm, and determination among other characteristics (Snyder, 1994). Even when faced with a significant transition in their lives, currently serving airmen expressed excitement about the change.

The next section will discuss the results of the coding and theme development. It will also answer the research questions in terms of the themes that were developed. It will end with a brief discussion of the cross-case synthesis.

Results

This section will discuss the iterative approach taken to develop the codes used to develop the themes. These themes were then used to answer the research questions. Both a manual coding process and computer-aided software were used to develop the codes and themes. The outcomes for both were compared for similarities and discrepancies. Four directly related themes were identified as well as three that have an indirect relation to this study.

Theme Development

The purpose of this study was to better understand how airmen who are leaving the Air Force or have already left perceive the role education had in making them more employable in the civilian workforce. It particularly considered the role of the Community College of the Air

Force (CCAF) degree since this is the Air Force's premier educational program specific to enlisted members. It focused on two groups of enlisted airmen in the Regular Air Force: those who are either currently separating or retiring from the Air Force and those who have already left the Air Force. This study explored the perceptions of airmen both in and out of the Air Force and compared the results. This study explored how separating or retiring airmen perceived their CCAF degree while in the Air Force and how or if those perceptions changed once they were separated or retired. Choosing to use two cases within this study allows for a cross-case synthesis in order to determine how perceptions may change after leaving the Air Force and if these changes can inform policy or processes to help airmen make good decisions about their postservice employment during their Air Force career. These decisions are important, as the Federal Government seeks to reduce veteran unemployment and provide a successful transition of servicemembers into the civilian workforce. The study compared the responses from the two groups to determine what similarities and differences there were in their perceptions of the CCAF degree. It also sought to understand what the overall expectations of the participants were for completing their CCAF degree. In other words, what did they hope to gain by completing the degree.

Data were collected using individual interviews, focus groups, field notes, and a survey. A commercial transcription service was used to transcribed both the individual and focus group interviews. The interview questions focused on the following research question and its sub questions:

Central Research Question. How do CCAF graduates perceive the impact of their degree in enhancing their employability for the civilian workforce?

Subquestion 1. How do currently serving enlisted airmen transitioning to civilian employment perceive how their CCAF degree will make them more employable?

Subquestion 2. How do separated/retired Regular Air Force enlisted airmen perceive their CCAF degree made them more employable for civilian employment now that they are in the civilian workforce?

Subquestion 3. How did prior enlisted (never commissioned) airmen's perceptions change about the role their CCAF degree had in their employability for civilian jobs after they left the Air Force?

Subquestion 4. What did both currently serving and separated enlisted airmen hope to gain by completing their CCAF degree?

In the first phase, an iterative approach was used and 66 codes were created from the individual interviews and field notes. These codes included skills, soft skills, family, adaptability, goals, education, and experience. These were then used to develop themes to provide an overarching sense of the collective responses of the participants. The researcher then reviewed the notes that were taken during the interviews several times during the course of the data collection. The researcher reviewed each new interview separately and then compared each to the already completed interviews. As each interview was added, the codes became more defined. Finally, the researcher answered each of the individual interview questions using participant quotes and notes to further refine the codes. The researcher then reviewed the remaining codes for commonalities and bunched under larger codes such as skills, goals, and accomplishment resulting in 14 sets of codes.

From these codes themes began to emerge. However, before finalizing the themes, the interview transcripts were loaded into NVivo 12 Plus © to compare these results with those

developed by the researcher. Areas of overlap were explored as well as unique codes. Three sets of individual interviews were uploaded into NVivo 12 Plus ©. The first was all the individual interviews and the resultant codes were noted. Then the interviews for both currently serving airmen and separated/retired airmen were separately uploaded. The codes for each group generated were also noted in a chart. The overlapping codes were then compared between the codes developed for all individual interviews, the codes for the in-service interviews, and the codes for the interviews of those already separated/retired and a determination was made on whether to keep the codes based on their relevancy to the study. Codes that did not fit into all three categories (i.e., all participants, currently serving, and separated/retired) were also reviewed for relevancy. For example, two codes—things and service—appeared for both currently serving airmen and for the whole group. However, upon exploration, these were not used because they were either randomly used by participants as place holders or were part of the questions themselves. For example, for the code “things”, one participant noted that “...to say that I had my bachelor’s degree before I retire would be [sic] nice thing” (individual interview Joe, December 13, 2017). For the latter, an example would be the question: What do you see as your greatest challenge in obtaining employment postservice? The term service was rarely used by the participants and usually occurred when they were repeating the question.

Another code that emerged from NVivo 12 Plus © but was not used was “Air Force”. This appeared 22 times in nine interviews but was either part of a question or a descriptor such as Community College of the Air Force. This process continued until in the end there were several codes that all three groups had in common as well additional ones that two or more groups had in common. The researcher then used these to compare with the codes developed manually. The codes developed from NVivo 12 Plus © that were used were CCAF degree, change, college, job,

goals, and degree (see Table 3 for final list). The researcher added these to the previously manually developed codes to include such things as skills, experience, education, emotions, preparation, stepping stones, and accomplishment (see Table 4 for final list).

Table 3

Relevant Codes from Individual and Focus Group Interviews developed using NVivo 12 Plus ©

Participants			
All	Currently Serving	Retired/Separated	Focus Group
CCAF Degree	CCAF Degree	CCAF Degree	CCAF Degree
Degree	Degree	Degree	Degree
Change	Change	Change	Education
College	College	College	Experience
Job		Education	Job
Goal		Experience	Life
		Job	AF COOL
		Goal	Stepping
		Life	Certification
		Work	

N=13

Table 4

Additional Relevant Codes Manually Developed by Researcher

Participants			
All	Currently Serving	Retired/Separated	Focus Group
Skills	Stepping Stones	Education	Education
Education	Prepare	Family	Confidence
Experience	Skills	CCAF Degree	Experience
Goals	Degree	Accomplishment	Promotion
Accomplishment	CCAF Degree	Goals	Stepping Stones
Job	Confident	Start Early	Well-rounded/diverse
Stepping Stones	Employable	Prepare	CCAF Degree

Prepare CCAF Degree Emotion (anxiety, excitement, anxious, confident)	Bachelor's Experience	AF COOL	Certifications AF COOL
	Education		Start Early
	Start Early		Emotion (Loss)
<hr/>			
N=13			

The second phase followed a similar process using the focus group interviews. It is important to note that two of the participants in the focus group had provided interviews as currently serving airmen but were out of the Air Force at the time of the focus group interview. Using field notes and the transcripts, the researcher developed codes. Ninety-one codes were initially identified. These codes were checked again when the researcher provided a consolidated answer for each of the questions. From this came a consolidated list of 29 codes, which were then reviewed for commonalities. These commonalities were then lumped together to form the beginning of possible themes. As in the first phase, before the themes were finalized, the focus group transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 12 Plus ©. Just as in the manual coding, NVivo 12 Plus © provided approximately a two dozen codes including CCAF Degree, Degree, education, and goals. However, as with phase one, some of the codes were associated with a turn of phrase or were part of the question/participants' repetition of the question. Several had no relevance to this study.

The codes from the focus groups were then compared to those from the three groups of individual interviews developed by both NVivo 12 Plus © (Table 3) and manually by the researcher (Table 4). Those shared by more than one group were: Stepping stones, change, degree, CCAF degree, college, education, experience, goal, and job. Some codes that were

unique to the focus groups were: well-rounded, certifications, confidence, and loss. A final review found similarities in most of the codes. For example, AF COOL and certifications were generally associated with job, degree, and/or experience all of which are associated with attaining civilian employment.

From this effort emerged four themes directly related to this study and three themes that had an indirect relationship with this study:

1. The value of the CCAF degree is that it provides the confidence and impetus for achieving higher degrees. This theme was supported by the codes stepping stones, accomplishment, confident, promotion, and goal. During the interviews, participants noted the “good feeling” and sense of fulfillment they had when they completed their CCAF degree. Because of their accomplishment in successfully completing their CCAF degrees, they felt confident to pursue other goals such as completing their bachelor’s degrees and, in some cases, master’s degrees. This sense of accomplishment and the ease with which their CCAF degree credits transferred into their bachelor’s degrees led them to believe the CCAF degree provided a stepping stone to higher degrees. This became a consistent theme throughout the interviews.

2. Having a college degree and certifications along with experience and skills are crucial to being viewed as employable. Several codes were used in the development of this theme. These included education, experience, degree, CCAF degree, certification, well-rounded/diverse, skills, AF COOL, bachelor’s, and employable. Throughout the interviews, the participants noted the importance of having a degree—particularly a bachelor’s degree—with certifications to make them more employable. Some noted that the CCAF degree combined with other education and experience showed potential employers that they have a diverse background of interests and

capabilities that can be leveraged by their new organizations. In addition, the participants mentioned having soft skills such as team building that enhanced their employability.

3. Preparing early and often, including attaining a degree and/or certification, is vital for a successful transition to the civilian workforce. The codes used to develop this theme were prepare and start early. While only two codes were used to develop this theme, throughout the interviews both the currently serving airmen and those who had already separated/retired emphasized the need to start early to prepare not only for their transition but also in starting their education early while in the Air Force. Several participants wished they had not waited so long in their careers to complete their CCAF degrees.

4. Currently serving airmen valued the CCAF degree differently than those who had already separated/retired. The codes associated with this theme are bachelor's, job, start early, education, AF COOL, certifications, employable, and well-rounded/diverse. The currently serving airmen highlighted their bachelor's degrees and certifications as being key to finding a civilian job. This same group also believed that their certifications earned through AF COOL were important in getting a job. The experience of the separated/retired participants showed the value of the CCAF degree in its own merits.

Three other themes emerged that, while not directly related to the research questions, should be considered: a. The emotions experienced by both the currently serving airmen and those who have separated/retired are very different; b. Participants understood that employability meant finding a job but were not always clear on the role or connection their CCAF degree or any degree had in developing sought-after soft skills; and, c. The Air Force over-emphasizes the CCAF degree for SrNCO promotion instead of highlighting it as a way for

personal advancement and improvement. These themes will be further explored in the next section.

Research Questions

In this section, the subquestions will be explored first as a lead up to answering the final, central research question.

Research subquestion 1. How do currently serving enlisted airmen transitioning to civilian employment perceive how their CCAF degree will make them more employable?

These answers to this question centered around the following themes:

1. Having a college degree and certifications along with experience and skills are crucial to being viewed as employable
2. The value of the CCAF degree is that it provides an impetus for achieving higher degrees

College degrees and certifications crucial to employability. Initially, most of the participants did not see the CCAF degree itself as important to their post-service employment goals, yet, rather saw it as just a degree that could be put on a resume to separate them from other job seekers. However, when currently serving airmen were asked what they hoped to achieve with their CCAF degree postservice, most responses focused on the CCAF degree showing employers that they are "...progressing on [with their education]" (individual interview Craig, February 5, 2018) or that they "...do have experience in the field of HR " (individual interview Dillon, December 11, 2017) or are "...more marketable...to future employers" (individual interview Joe, December 13, 2017). For several, the CCAF degree itself is most helpful postservice because it is better than having no degree or it provided a boost toward completing their bachelor's degree. Two currently serving airmen weren't not sure how the CCAF degree

would help them postservice. One of these believed that since "...it's post-high school education...it's better to have it than not have it" (individual interview Bill, July 19, 2017). The other suggested that the CCAF degree is helpful in gaining employment in technical fields "...like maintenance or medical" (individual interview Bob, January 26, 2018), but not so much in "...in a general career field [where he is] sort of the jack-of-all-trades, master of none" (individual interview Bob, January 26, 2018).

Later comments made in the interviews provided more substantial examples or explanation about the CCAF degree's usefulness for employability. However, the difficulty in making the connection between the CCAF degree and employability may be one of marketing. One participant suggested that if the Air Force "...taught more about how it's accredited and how it could [lead] to other degrees, it would ...give the airman more insight as to how CCAF is able to help them" (individual interview Dillon, December 11, 2017); although he believes the CCAF degree is not enough on its own for civilian employment. Another believed that the CCAF degree in particular was an asset in that it would strengthen his resume (individual interview Tom, September 1, 2017).

One participant suggested that the CCAF degree is particularly valuable for young airmen who separate after a few years' service especially since the Air Force is "...doing a great job of updating and advancing that program in matching more of the civilian sector requirements for certification" (individual interview Carl, January 6, 2018). This same participant believes the Air Force is doing very well at preparing airmen for their transition out of the Air Force.

Another participant believed having the degrees and experience would make him more employable to the civilian sector. Another participant realized the key to expanding his experiences, such as applying for special duty assignments, while in the Air Force required a

CCAF degree to be eligible for those opportunities. He, however, did not understand this until later in his career: “Early on I didn’t really understand the value of an associate[‘s degree], early in my career...one thing I stress on all the time is start early...[as] I was looking at opportunities outside of my career field at the time and all prerequisites were -- have a CCAF degree (focus group #3, June 9, 2018”). He, along with other participants, believed that having diverse professional experiences may give them an advantage when entering the civilian workforce.

For some participants, it seemed that the content of the CCAF degree was not as important as simply having the degree to distinguish them from other job seekers. Several noted that it provided a way to “legitimize” the training and education they had received in the Air Force and to show they had both experience and education. It showed employers that “...if you have the degree and you can exhibit the skills that are in the degree.... [and] it has some soft skills” (individual interview Tom, September 1, 2017), you may be more employable. Another hoped that the CCAF degree would give him “...a foundation along with ...my bachelor[‘s] degree to show not only do I have experience in the field of HR, but also some knowledge to back it” (individual interview Dillon, December 11, 2017). Others believed that the CCAF degree’s value was in providing a stepping stone to more advanced degrees. This latter thought was emphasized by other participants in their final comments, which will be discussed next.

The CCAF degree as an impetus for achieving higher degrees. Most participants provided additional comments on CCAF degrees at the end of the interviews. They agreed that the CCAF degree has value but not necessarily in itself. In their experiences, the CCAF degree provided a stepping stone to furthering their education. One participant mentioned using the CCAF degree with the AU-ABC program (whereby the college accepted all of his CCAF credits) that meant he “...only had to get 60 credits, it [CCAF] made a big difference in my quest to go

further” (individual interview Tom, July 19, 2017). One participant suggested the CCAF degree should become a bachelor’s degree—especially in STEM—since he believes most employers are looking for at least that level of education. Another suggested allowing airmen to earn CCAF degrees in career fields that are not theirs but related. For example, someone in human resources could get another CCAF degree in a related career field such as computer programming.

Two currently serving airmen also participated in the focus groups. For one, completing the CCAF degree gave him the drive to continue his education,

And then once I got the three classes [for CCAF] knocked out it just brought in a fire in me to do a bachelor [sic] degree. And then I got that done in about two years and graduated in 2008, two and half years and then that lit a fire to do my master’s degree. And I got that done in 2013...It just built a fire and maybe some of those courses helped me to think a little bit more critically than in general PME (focus group interview #3, June 9, 2018)

Research Question 2. How do separated/retired Regular Air Force enlisted airmen perceive their CCAF degree made them more employable for civilian employment now that they are in the civilian workforce?

The answers to this question supported the following themes:

1. Having a college degree and certifications along with experience and skills are crucial to being viewed as employable.
2. The value of the CCAF degree is that it provides an impetus for achieving higher degrees.

3. Preparing early and often, including attaining a degree and/or certification, is vital for a successful transition to the civilian workforce.

College degrees and certifications crucial to employability. Participants believed that the CCAF degree showed employers that they had diverse interests or academic experiences. One participant had a bachelor's degree before entering the Air Force in a science field and then, while in the Air Force received a CCAF degree in Intelligence Studies and another associate's degree from the Defense Language Institute. As she stated, "...I have the healthcare field with a couple of associate's degrees and a bachelor's degree that are completely non-related to my new field, but it shows that I have a hugely diverse background and having that CCAF...that shows them [employers] that I'm kind of a worthy person..." (individual interview Trish, December 30, 2017). Another participant believed that cross training into another career field is important "...because you can get multiple CCAF [degrees], I think that really helps as well, because you have that diversity in your portfolio..." (individual interview Anna, May 12, 2017).

Participants also believed that the CCAF degree was important to build or enhance their resumes. For one participant, the CCAF degree was key to getting his current job and in the salary negotiations. Ironically, his employer was a former Air Force officer and specifically asked if he had his CCAF degree. This same participant believed that having the CCAF degree showed employers that:

you got out and your [sic] done something on our own...[employers] can look at that and [say] yes, you are able to independently set goals and accomplish tasks and the degree that's awarded basically documents that you did something as an adult and you didn't give up. (individual interview Mike, December 29, 2017)

Similarly, one participant who left the Air Force with only his CCAF degree believed it was “...having something to show for while in the military...” (individual interview John, February 8, 2018). Another participant in the focus groups “...think[s] that...there are some advantages to...CCAF when it comes to future employments and future opportunities that I've taken, the kind of existing technical specialties such as you know, the civilian sector may look at those more like a certification that validates your qualifications for something, because you're cyber or A&P...” (focus group interview #3, June 9, 2018).

The CCAF degree as an impetus for achieving higher degrees. Several believed the CCAF degree provided the impetus to continue their education which, in turn allowed them to enter the civilian workforce with multiple degrees along with documented experience.

Others discussed the advantage of having the CCAF degree with the fact that the Army and Navy do not have the same thing. Where soldiers and sailors have to look for schools that might accept their training and credits, CCAF provides a way to maximize credit toward a degree without the worry of having to repeat credits that aren't accepted by another institution. Another participant also highlighted the difference between the Air Force and other Services, “...the Army want[s] to offer a Community College of the Army...because soldiers really don't get anything but airmen get an associate's degree so it's [CCAF] a privilege [that] airmen...can walk out of the Service with an associate's degree and be halfway for[sic] a bachelor [sic]” (individual interview Trish, December 30, 2017). One believed that the other Services' members will often have a lot of credits but no degree. This same airman believed that, while the purpose of CCAF has changed from one focused on draftees with limited education, it still provides an “...opportunity to get that [advanced] degree...” (individual interview Mike, December 29, 2017). Another emphasized that having the CCAF degree along with other degrees shows

employers that "...that's some experience right there" (individual interview Trish, December 30, 2017).

Participants in the focus groups had similar responses. As one put it, I wouldn't say that it [CCAF] made me better at the hard skills of my job, but it again if I'm looking at the world differently academically, you know in a critical thinking kind of way, [that's] what the higher learning is focused on [and that] is...directly tied to the CCAF. I don't necessarily know that accomplishing the CCAF helps you with critical thinking, but [it helps] staying in the classroom ...and there is a benefit, there is an advantage to having a CCAF versus not. (focus group interview #3, June 9, 2018)

This is in line with other comments made by participants that CCAF provides a stepping stone to higher education.

Starting early. One participant wished he had started his CCAF earlier in his career but, at the time he entered the Air Force, the expectation was that CCAF was all airmen needed and there was no rush to get it. He waited but "...once I finally got there [completed his CCAF degree], it was like a huge sense of accomplishment, there was kind of like, okay, well, I'm here, well, guess I have to continue right away [with an advanced degree] ..." (individual interview John, February 8, 2018). He felt this sense of accomplishment even more at the graduation ceremony with his family there to see him cross the stage. He believed, however, that things have changed since 1995 when he entered the Air Force. Now, he believes, airmen are working towards degrees earlier in their Air Force careers. For him, "...CCAF does make a difference and people should definitely achieve [it] and...be pushed to go higher" (individual interview John, February 8, 2018).

Research subquestion 3. How did prior enlisted (never commissioned) airmen’s perceptions change about the role their CCAF degree had in the employability for civilian jobs after they left the Air Force?

The responses to this question covered three themes:

1. The value of the CCAF degree is that it provides an impetus for achieving higher degrees.
2. Currently serving airmen valued the CCAF degree differently than those who had already separated/retired.
3. Preparing early and often, including attaining a degree and/or certification, is vital for a successful transition to the civilian workforce.

The CCAF degree as an impetus for achieving higher degrees. Two participants said their perception of CCAF did not change after leaving the Air Force. They still believed that CCAF is an important stepping stone to higher degrees. One participant stated that “[CCAF] should be the seed planted to make you want to get...higher education” (individual interview Kara, February 10, 2018). Another said that CCAF “...can’t be just a standalone...it does help with the market changing and job positions, [but a] bachelor’s degree is now turning into [the requirement]. So, it’s definitely a stepping stone...” (individual interview John, February 8, 2018). Another participant viewed CCAF as an important stepping stone to getting a bachelor’s degree adding, “...in my opinion, putting CCAF forward as part of the bigger picture in career and personal enrichment would help in motivating Airmen to finishing [sic] it” (individual interview Anna, May 12, 2017).

Changing value of the CCAF degree. The remaining participants wished they had taken the CCAF degree more seriously and understood its value while in the Air Force. One

participant originally saw the CCAF degree as just a box checker to make senior NCO ranks. He and his colleagues did not see "...how that kind of translates to a normal degree or career" (individual interview Mike, December 29, 2018). However, once out of the Air Force, some employers gave additional credit for having the CCAF degree. He noted his friends' experiences using the CCAF degree to get hired when their more advanced degree may have overqualified them. Once in the door, their advanced degrees were used to negotiate their salaries. He believes that "...it [CCAF] has a lot more benefit now... outside, then would it be something that I had to do while I was in...it became synonymous with advancement, promotion, or self-improvement" (individual interview Mike, December 29, 2018).

Starting early. Some wished they had started their education earlier in their Air Force careers. One of the participants who separated rather than retired from the Air Force, regretted not knowing more about educational opportunities while still in the Air Force. She spent very little time in the education centers until her last few months where she learned about the programs provided through the Air Force. She would have used her CCAF degree to not only leverage the AU-ABC program but to make better choices for the classes she chose to finish her CCAF degree. One thing she would have done is instead of taking a regular English class, she "...would've taken [a] more writing intensive class, because there is a lot of writing in the Air Force" (individual interview Anna, May 12, 2017).

Research subquestion 4. What did both currently serving and separated enlisted airmen hope to gain by completing their CCAF degree?

The themes that help answer this question are:

1. Having a college degree and certifications along with experience and skills are crucial to being viewed as employable.

2. The value of the CCAF degree is that it provides an impetus for achieving higher degrees.

College degrees and certifications crucial to employability. Initially, many of the participants hoped their CCAF degree would get them promoted while in the Air Force since Air Force policy required the CCAF degree for promotion to the SrNCO ranks. One airman also noted that not only was the CCAF degree good to advance her Air Force career but that, after separation, a “...degree never really hurt anyone...no employer would I think would say, he, we’re not going to take you because you have this extra degree...” (individual interview Anna, May 12, 2017). One can presume the hope in her case was to make her transition out of Air Force easier. Another participant was persuaded to complete his degree by his training manager who was getting close to retirement himself and who reminded the participant that he, the participant, had “...to think of the next step” (individual interview, Joe, December 13, 2017). For the majority of airmen who waited, it was the requirement to have a CCAF degree for promotion to senior non-commissioned officer ranks that persuaded them to finish their CCAF degree. Once they started working on their CCAF degree, all participants found that achieving the degree was easy, simple, and manageable.

Several airmen hoped that having attained a degree—not just CCAF—in the Air Force showed employers that “...you have the ability to, that focus that drive to not only have a diploma, but also to be able to say that, hey, I’m able to finish something” (individual interview Anna, May 12, 2017). This same airman said that for her attaining an education in the Air Force was more about achieving a personal goal and proving to supervisors that she was well-rounded. Coming from a very small community where most people never left, attaining a college degree was a big personal achievement for her. For others, having a degree showed civilian employers

that they have skills or are interested in personal growth or have the combination of education and experience that makes them more marketable. Several hoped it gave a way to “legitimize” the training and education they had received in the Air Force and to show they had both experience and education.

During the focus group discussions, one participant noted that hope was instrumental not only in completing the CCAF degree, but “...to be more and going up the ranks and also hope of finishing something [sic] that there is something to the other side of taking this online class...” (focus group interview #1, April 10, 2018). Others in the focus groups hoped that completing the degree would make it better for their families. As one mentioned, “I wanted to quit...and then I was just looking at my wife, looking at my kids and, like, this is the reason I am doing this...” (focus group interview #2, May 5, 2018). Another hoped that, by completing her degree, she could “...use that as an example to tell my children if mommy can do it, you can, too” (focus group #2, May 5, 2018). In the third focus group, a participant said that “...the validation of my qualification gave me hope that they’ll make me competitive with my peers on education [and] kind of to taking future employment” (focus group #3, June 9, 2018). Another in this group wasn’t sure if he was thinking about hope when he completed his degree. He was looking more to validate the things he could do. Finally, one participant said it provided “that...validation and that it backs up my stories...[gives] proof and say[sic]...I may not have much, but I have this and that’s okay, and that provides hope for the future of stability for [improved] quality of life for myself and for my family” (focus group #3, June 9, 2018).

The CCAF degree as an impetus for achieving higher degrees. Several participants continued the notion that the CCAF degree is not enough but, once achieved, provided the confidence needed to pursue higher education. In the first focus group, two participants found

that getting their CCAF degree gave them more confidence, which gave them hope to pursue more education. As one noted "...when I got my CCAF... [and then] I got my bachelor's, it boosted my confidence. It boosted my confidence. Just the knowledge -- just having that knowledge and knowing how to raise my...knowledge and my employability I should say, it was great. It was great for me mentally (focus group interview Anna, April 10, 2018).

Central Research Question. How do CCAF graduates perceive the impact of their degree in enhancing their employability for the civilian workforce?

The themes associated with this question are:

1. The value of the CCAF degree is that it provides an impetus for achieving higher degrees.
2. Having a college degree and certifications along with experience and skills are crucial to being viewed as employable.

The CCAF degree as an impetus for achieving higher degrees. A common thread between and within the two groups of participants is that the CCAF degree's greatest value or influence on employability postservice is how it creates a spring board or stepping stone to other, more advanced degrees such as bachelor's and master's degrees, as well as certifications. During the second focus group, the participants agreed about "...the CCAF degree being a stepping stone...the current job market [doesn't want] an associate's degree...but, if you do continue... [to advanced degrees] ...that's the main thing that a lot of employers are looking for" (focus group interview, May 5, 2018). In an individual interview, one participant said the CCAF degree was important because "...with the credits I had with my CCAF, they [college] were able to utilize those towards my [bachelor's] degree. So, it didn't take me as long [to complete]" (individual interview John, February 8, 2018). Another noted that with his CCAF degree he,

“...only needed 64 credits to finish my bachelor’s” (individual interview Bill, July 19, 2017).

Lastly, one participant initially stated that he wasn’t sure what CCAF would do for him postservice. Later in the interview, he stated that without completing his CCAF degree he doubted he would have followed through with his bachelor’s degree, which was made easier to attain because all his CCAF credits were accepted towards his bachelor’s (individual interview Bill, July 19, 2017). For many of the participants, completing the CCAF degree gave them the confidence to continue their educational goals.

College degrees and certifications crucial to employability. Most of the participants agreed that the CCAF degree or an associate’s degree in general is usually not enough to be competitive but is still better than having nothing and that it provides proof of experience, education, and training. Thus, the second value that CCAF has on employability postservice is to validate their training and experience in the military. It is “...another qualification that you can put on your resume as you transition out of the military...some positions look for that applied science as well” (focus group interview #1, April 10, 2018). One participant summed up his transition to civilian employment, “...all-in-all I feel I’m well prepared and the CCAF did contribute to that” (focus group interview #2, May 5, 2018). The CCAF degree, along with other degrees and certifications also lets “...employers know that you are well skilled and maintaining focus and being able to get the job done” (individual interview Trish, December 30, 2017). This same participant also added that getting the CCAF degree would “...show any future employer that I took my Air Force specialty seriously” (individual interview Trish, December 30, 2017).

Other themes. During the development of the direct themes three other themes emerged that, while not directly related to this study, bear some discussion. They each provide a perspective on the transition process and how airmen perceived the CCAF degree beyond its

influence on employability. Together, all of the themes provide a richer picture of the perceptions and experiences of airmen.

The different emotional experiences of pre and postservice airmen. During the coding process, several codes were identified from the individual interviews and focus groups that led to the development of this theme. The codes associated with the currently serving airmen and this theme were excited, looking forward, anxious, and confidence. Currently serving airmen expressed a gamut of emotions as they prepared for their transition out of the Air Force. These emotions could be divided into three categories:

1. Confidence about their employability and excitement at the new change
2. Fear and anxiety of the unknown
3. Stress

As one participant put it, “I’m terrified...[and] I’m excited. I can’t believe I made it...but, it’s scary” (individual interview Tom, September 1, 2017). Another mentioned that he has “...general anxiety because we don’t know what the future holds” (individual interview Bob, January 26, 2018). Participants used other words and phrases such as “looking forward to it” and “ready for the challenge” to describe their emotions concerning their impending transition out of the Air Force.

Already separated or retired participants provided a different view of their emotions after they left the Air Force. These were identified by the codes “loss”, “work”, and “purpose”. Regardless of whether they had separated or retired, three of the five specifically expressed a sense of loss for the Air Force. One commented about “...losing the sense of mission, of purpose as the driving factor for perform[ing] at work” (individual interview Mike, December 29, 2017). After packing away her uniform, another participant noticed that “...a month later, I

went, well I miss the Air Force, two months later, I went, well I really miss the Air Force. I miss my friends and I miss the camaraderie” (individual interview Trish, December 30, 2017). Where she thought she would be ecstatic to leave because of a bad experience, she realized that “...now I miss my people and I even miss doing my work, because now I feel like I’m just getting home and going to class and that [I] didn’t [sic]matter...” (individual interview Trish, December 30, 2017). One felt that she would feel free, while another thought she would have more free time but finds she is busier than ever and trying to find a new routine to replace the structure she had in the Air Force.

Only two of the currently serving airmen mentioned any aspect of missing the Air Force. One mentioned, “I love the Air Force...I’ll miss the impact [he has] on day-to-day airmen[‘s] lives” (individual interview Carl, January 6, 2018). Another said that, “There’s going to be withdrawal that I don’t have to put the uniform on every day and having to find a suit to put on, but, I’m ready. I’m ready for the opportunity. I’m ready for the challenge” (individual interview Bill, July 19, 2017).

The link between degrees, soft skills, and employability. While participants seemed clear on the link between having advanced education and gaining employment, they were less clear on the connection between having a degree and the development of soft skills. Codes that were identified with this theme were “stand alone”, “skills”, and “relevant”. When asked about a link between earning a degree in the Air Force and their being employable, most of the answers focused on the specific skills required for the job. One participant explained the link between education and employability as “Having the skills for a particular job” (individual interview Mike, December 29, 2017). Another noted that the connection between the two was “...skills...as it relates to the job” (individual interview Trish, December 30, 2017). Another

said the link between education attained in the Air Force and employability was "...being able to match what the requirements are for the position..." (individual interview Anna, May 12, 2017). Another explained the connection as one that "...would be able to get a job because a lot of jobs most times require some type of degree" (individual interview Bill, July 19, 2017). One participant noted that the two (degree and employability) were where "...interest and aptitude meet" (individual interview Tom, September 1, 2017). Two participants, however, did make some connection between soft skills, their degrees, and employability. One believed he did not start to think critically "...until I took more college courses" (individual interview Bob, January 26, 2018). This same participant also believed that attending college made him more articulate and able to express himself better (individual interview Bob, January 26, 2018). The other participant said that, "...every day in the Air Force we work on both hard skills and soft skills and having that degree should be able to speak to the private sector that we have those skills" (individual interview Tom, September 1, 2017).

However, just because the participants could not associate soft skills, education, and employability to each other did not mean that they did not understand the importance of those soft skills. Currently serving participants were asked what they believed they would bring to employers that set them apart from other job seekers. The participant who noted that employability was the intersection of interest and aptitude also recognized that employers look for employees who are "...in line with their values, their objectives and have...the soft skills that are truly essential when it comes to leadership, conflict resolution, ...[and] leading people" (individual interview Tom, September 1, 2017). Many of the responses included such attributes as timeliness, reliability, loyalty, ability to finish tasks, gain trust and buy-in from others, fix problems, understand and get along with others, lead and be on teams, discipline, and attention to

detail. The two most common responses were those having to do with teams and working with people as well as finishing tasks. As mentioned, one participant noted that "...the thing a lot of other prospective employee[s] miss out on is they rely so much on the ability to be technical savvy, they forget to be people savvy and without the ability...you can't really accomplish many of the goals that the company set for" (individual interview Carl, January 6, 2018). Another noted his "...ability to get along with others and to both lead teams and just being [sic] on teams and accomplish[ing] goals" (individual interview Troy, December 29, 2017) were attributes that set him apart from other job seekers. Another participant believed that he "...work[s] well with team building and in a team environment" (individual interview Bill, July 19, 2017). Two participants highlighted the ability to get things done. One participant believes he brings to potential employers "...the attitude and willingness to do whatever needs to be done to accomplish the job...we teach that to our brand-new airmen" (individual interview Craig, February 5, 2018). One highlighted how the military taught him to not only be adaptable and adjust to various work environments, but also how to work with "...different people, different cultures as we deal with multiple cultures as we move throughout the military in our careers" (individual interview Dillon, December 11, 2017). This apparent dichotomy in responses may be because the CCAF degree is first ingrained in airmen as an "Air Force" degree needed for promotion, rather than as something to enhance future employability or as a gateway to more advanced degrees as suggested by some participants.

Overemphasis on CCAF for enlisted promotion. The last theme indirectly related to this study has to do with the emphasis the Air Force places on the CCAF degree as a means to promotion. One participant considered getting the CCAF degree as a "box checker," something he had to do for promotion. As he stated,

So, I had no plan to paying [sic] a CCAF, because of – my career field was a computer programmer and I was just going to get an information systems management degree.

However, in 2006, I was informed that a CCAF degree was going to be required for me as a master sergeant, to have senior rater endorsement, so I went in [CLEP] speech in order to get the CCAF to qualify, so basically made myself eligible for promotion.

(individual interview Mike, 29 Dec 2018)

One participant noted that

If you don't have a CCAF degree, you can forget about it. You're not going to get promoted. You're going to get moved to the stack of no promotion. I had a friend of mine who never took any classes and said he didn't need the CCAF degree. He didn't get pass [sic] Master Sergeant so he had to retire. (individual interview Bill, July 19, 2017)

Finally, one participant noted that there should be an incentive other than promotion to complete the CCAF degree. He suggested that there be a "...pay increase depending on the level of degree you have, especially if it's in your career field, because you bring in an advantage, a better opportunity within the service to better serve if you have that CCAF and your bachelor's degree for instance" (Focus Group #1, April 10, 2018).

Cross-case Synthesis

The participants' changes in perception of the influence of the CCAF degree on employability by postservice airmen had to do with originally underestimating the value of the CCAF degree and waiting too long to start their degree. Like some of the currently serving participants, retired or separated participants did not always value the CCAF degree, especially as young airmen. Its emphasis on their career fields and promotion made the CCAF degree seem less pertinent for those who did not wish to continue in their Air Force career field or did not like

their Air Force career. Because of this, many did not start their degrees until much later in their careers. Many were motivated to start their CCAF degrees in order to be eligible for promotion to the SrNCO ranks. Over time, as the CCAF degree became either a negotiating tool for higher salaries or proof of experience, skills, and education earned in the Air Force, the true value of the CCAF degree became apparent. It is fair to note that the closer some currently serving airmen got to their final days in the Air Force and began engaging more with employers, they, too, began to see the CCAF in a similar light to those who were already in the civilian workforce.

Summary

This chapter described the participants of this study along with the processes used to collect and determine relevant data using a coding process to analyze the data, develop themes, and review the results of the data analysis. It intended to answer the research questions which were meant to determine CCAF graduates' perceptions of the degree's influence on employability. This study used a cross-case synthesis to compare pre and postseparated/retired airmen to determine if perceptions about the influence of the CCAF degree on employability changed once they left the Air Force. Lastly, this chapter explored that role hope may have had in the successful transition of the participants by analyzing the Adult Dispositional Hope Scale administered to the participants during this study.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore how Community College of the Air Force graduates perceived the influence of the degree on their employability. Employability according to the literature was not only defined as being able to get a job but also having soft skills such as team work, critical thinking, and life-long learning. For the purpose of this study both aspects of employability were explored. The latter emphasis on the soft skills is important, as more employers are now looking for employees who have these skills (Badal, 2016). This chapter will provide a summary of the findings and discussion of those findings within the context of this study and its theoretical framework. It will also include implications for practitioners as well as a review of the delimitations and limitations of the study. Finally, it will provide suggestions for further research.

Summary of Findings

Research Subquestion 1. How do currently serving enlisted airmen transitioning to civilian employment perceive how their CCAF degree will make them more employable?

Participants found the CCAF degree made them more employable in three ways. First, it provided them both the confidence and the springboard to pursue their bachelor's degree and, in some cases, their master's degree. It is these latter degrees that they believe make them more employable. Secondly, the CCAF degree has value as validation of the experiences and skills learned in the Air Force. Lastly, the CCAF degree is better than having no degree and is one more thing separating or retiring airmen can put on their resumes to distinguish them from other job seekers.

Research subquestion 2. How do separated/retired Regular Air Force enlisted airmen perceive their CCAF degree made them more employable for civilian employment now that they are in the civilian workforce?

Separated or retired airmen saw the CCAF degree's value in documenting their experience and their educational diversity, especially if they had multiple CCAF degrees in various career fields or other degrees not related to their CCAF degree. The CCAF degree's value was also in providing a stepping stone to other, more advanced degrees. Having the CCAF degree also showed prospective employers that they could finish something. Many participants regretted they had waited until much later in their Air Force career to start their CCAF degree.

Research subquestion 3. How did prior enlisted (never commissioned) airmen's perceptions change about the role their CCAF degree had in their employability for civilian jobs after they left the Air Force?

For those who had viewed the usefulness of the CCAF degree as a stepping stone to other degree, their opinion had not changed. In other participants' views, their perceptions changed as they saw the CCAF degree become a factor in salary negotiations or as gateways to employment when their other degrees made them overqualified. Several wished they had taken the CCAF degree more seriously while in the Air Force.

Research subquestion 4. What did both currently serving and separated enlisted airmen hope to gain by completing their CCAF degree?

Most of the participants hoped to get promoted to SrNCO ranks by completing their CCAF degree. While CCAF alone does not decide who gets promoted, the lack of a CCAF degree puts airmen at a significant disadvantage for promotion to the top three enlisted ranks. As the participants got closer to separation or retirement, many began to hope that the CCAF degree

would provide a way to show employers that they were well-rounded and driven to improve themselves. Many also hoped the CCAF degree would provide validation of their experiences and skills in the Air Force and, by extension, increase their employability so they could care for their families.

Central Research Question. How do CCAF graduates perceive the impact of their degree in enhancing their employability for the civilian workforce?

Overall, the participants perceived the CCAF degree's impact on their employability stems from it being a stepping stone or springboard to other, more advanced degrees.

Completing the CCAF degree gave them the confidence to continue their education including completing bachelor's and master's degrees and certifications, which most completed while still in the Air Force. The CCAF degree also impacted employability by providing a way to validate both the experiences and skills gained in the Air Force but also provided a tangible way for employers to see their commitment to being well-rounded and able to complete something.

Discussion

Congress and the White House have expressed concern over the unemployment rate of veterans and have conducted high profile round tables and legislation to develop solutions to help veterans gain civilian employment once their service in the armed forces is over. While many solutions have been proposed, including legislation that now mandates servicemembers attend a transition assistance program, none have considered how current education programs provided by the military to enlisted members while they are serving can also enhance their employability. This research is new to the literature as it studies the impact these programs may have on employability by using the Air Force's Community College of the Air Force associate's degree program to explore this issue. Because there are no other studies like this, this research

contributes to the literature by providing a baseline for future research in many related areas. It provides a new approach for determining the successful transition of servicemembers from the military to civilian employment.

The following section discusses the literature used to develop the basis for this study. Each will be discussed in terms of the results of this research. This includes a review of the theoretical literature as it relates to individual perceptions of reality provided; hope theory and transition theory will be discussed in terms of the results of this study; and, finally, the empirical literature will be examined.

Theoretical Literature

The theoretical framework of this study relies on an understanding of perceptions and the nature of reality. How one defines reality—fixed or mutable—influences how one also defines perceptions. Reality and perceptions in turn impact how one reacts to the world.

Perceptions and reality. In order to better understand the role hope and transition theories have in this study, one should know the ways people perceive their world. These perceptions can then be catalysts for action as explained in the sections on hope and transition theories. This study relies on the concept that there are multiple realities (Creswell, 2013) and those realities occur in a social constructivist framework where reality is based on experiences (Creswell, 2013). Indeed, as Stake (2010), pointed out each person has two realities one of which is based on individual experience and the other on shared experiences. As one participant said, watching his peers “...progressing and...seeing what they were doing to progress...those are some of the things I jumped on” (individual interview Bob, January 26, 2018). He continued, “...you just observe and follow with what works for others [pursuing education], you hope that works for you” (individual interview Bob, January 26, 2018). His relationship with his peers and

colleagues shaped his perceptions about his decision to complete his education. For another participant, it was his experience with the Air Force policy requiring a CCAF degree in order to be eligible for the SrNCO ranks that formed his perceptions about the CCAF degree (individual interview Bill, July 19, 2017). His reality required him to make a choice concerning his future in the Air Force—one that required he choose whether or not to complete his CCAF degree in order to advance his career. One participant's experience with his Air Force training manager who encouraged him to think past life in the Air Force gave him the motivation to complete his CCAF degree (individual interview Joe, December 13, 2017). For this participant, his reality was shaped by his relationship with his training manager whom he admired and trusted. Finally, another participant indicated that his personal work experience in the Air Force gave him the initiative to pursue his college education: "I believe that the application and the things [I] learned through [my] communication and intelligence background gave me [the] ability to have great foresight, intuition and also bring the initiative aspect of pursuing education" (individual interview Carl, January 6, 2018). His reality was based on the personal skills and attributes he learned doing his Air Force job. Based on their personal experiences and the reality it provides for them, each individual can determine how one views his or her reality and the choices they make. People may deal with their reality with hope, which dictates how one perceives and pursues the attainment of goals (Snyder, 1994) and the ability to break down personal barriers as described in transition theory.

Hope theory. Hope is having both the willpower to achieve a goal and the ability to make and execute a plan to achieve that goal (Snyder, 1994). The higher one's hope the greater the chance of success because one not only has the willpower to succeed but the ability to find multiple ways of achieving one's goals and creating new ones (Snyder, 1994). In other words,

hope theory posits that an individual's achievement of goals is defined as the determination (willpower) to achieve a goal with the ability to develop and execute a plan for success (Snyder, 1994). This is true whether one is working toward a college degree, preparing for a marathon, or learning a new skill at work. The higher one's hope, the greater the chance for success in achieving goals (Snyder, 1994).

The Adult Dispositional Hope Scale provides an insight into the determination and planning of individuals and was administered to the participants who completed it on their own. This Scale was chosen for several reasons. First, it has a high reliability, especially with undergraduate students. This is important since the CCAF degree is an undergraduate degree. Secondly, the Scale is "...highly correlated with responses to several scales tapping similar psychological processes" (Snyder et al as cited in Lopez et al., 2000 p. 60). The Scale is also easy to complete and not an undue burden on the participants. Finally, the results can then be used to "...predict those persons who exhibit superior achievements, better health, and successful coping" (Snyder et al. as cited in Lopez et al., 2000, p. 61). Knowing where someone falls on the hope scale can provide counselors with knowledge about his or her "...strengths. Instead of measuring that which is missing or wrong..." (Lopez, et al., 2000, p. 58). This is important because "...hope is a learned way of thinking about oneself in relation to goals" (Snyder, 1994, p. 23). As Lopez et al. stated, "...hope is the 'stuff' that facilitates change" (p. 58). Hope, therefore, may be the key in determining the motivation for the participants' pursuit of their CCAF degree; especially, as Snyder (1994) noted, "...high hope persons have done better in school" (p. 25). Hope may also have been a factor in deciding how they would approach their transition from the Air Force. In addition, those with high hope live better lives than those with

low hope (Snyder, 1994). Knowing transitioning airmen's level of hope can help to tailor programs or address issues for successful transition to civilian life and employment.

The participants' scores on the Adult Dispositional Hope Scale were quite high and consistently showed high hope. The standard total average for the Scale is 24 which indicates a "...strong base of hope" (Snyder, 1994, p. 26). The average total score for all participants of this study was 27.9, which is 3.9 points higher than the standard average of 24. The range of the participants' total scores was from 23 to 31, with 32 being the highest possible score. All the scores indicate individuals who have high hope. This was demonstrated in several ways. First, all of the participants had achieved significant academic success. All had at least one college degree and most had several. They also set very challenging goals for themselves and were not satisfied with just achieving one goal. Once a goal was attained another more difficult one had to be developed. A final way that the participants exhibited high hope was in how they approached their transition. They started early and had multiple ways of preparing for their transition, such as attending classes, participating in internships, and doing mock interviews. All of these showed that not only had they set a goal of a successful transition, but they developed and acted on multiple paths to ensure success.

This study supported the research on hope in that the participants' indications of having high hope were exemplified in their tenacity to complete often multiple degrees, but in also preparing the way for a successful transition. Those who had already transitioned were either employed or pursuing higher education. For those still in the Air Force, some already had job offers and others were actively working on their resumes, attending courses, or completing their degrees or certifications to prepare for their transition.

Transition theory. Transition theory includes the concept that an event is considered transitional only if the person experiencing it considers it to be so (Meyer, n.d.). Transition events can be managed if one has support, has effective coping strategies, understands their situation, and has the personal strength to go through the transition (Schlossberg, 1985). One of the tenets of transition theory is to control the problem (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Like those with high hope, the participants took control of their transition by planning early, attending classes (sometimes more than once), researching, and reaching out to others for advice and guidance. One participant said he prepared for transitions by "...do[ing] a lot of reading and...a lot of thinking about other research [and] the training that's appropriate and plan as much as I can" (individual interview Troy, December 29, 2017). One described his preparation for transitioning out of the Air Force as "backward planning" whereby he decided when his final date on active duty and then planned backward by putting important dates on the calendar by when he had to have certain tasks completed such as when he had to do house hunting (individual interview Craig, February 5, 2018). As a result, he started planning his retirement a year and half before the actual date. Another participant took control of his transition by phrasing it in financial terms (individual interview Mike, December 29, 2017). For him, it was important to have "...financial stability and being able to support my family" (individual interview Mike, December 29, 2017). Once those parameters were established he then added issues such as those for personal comfort, matching with long term goals, and whether he would personally enjoy the work.

Almost without exception the responses from the participants were focused on planning and researching while preparing for life transitions. While most of the answers centered on transitioning from the Air Force, most of them can be applied to any transition in their lives. The

participants had several different approaches to planning. One airman had six notebooks plus one she carried so she could take notes on "...something that might happen in the future or something I need to plan for" (individual interview Trish, December 30, 2017). Another participant emphasized the need to be organized, putting things on a calendar, and sticking to timelines (individual interview Bill, July 19, 2017). He also recognized that transition is "...a part of life. You've just got to roll with the punches" (individual interview Bill, July 19, 2017). Many of the participants took advantage of the Air Force's transition assistance program and attended not only the 5-day workshop but additional classes in resume-writing, interviewing, etc. One also ensured he had several plans in case one didn't work out (individual interview John, February 8, 2018). Four participants specifically mentioned the need to ensure they were financially able to take on the transition. Another, while he had not done a lot of planning for his transition, took lessons learned from his wife who had already transitioned from the Air Force (individual interview Bob, January 26, 2018).

Another aspect of transition theory is being able to manage the stress of the transition. For the participants, being prepared helped many manage the stress of transition out of the Air Force. Most admitted to still feeling some stress or anxiety but being prepared helped. One participant mentioned that he had not only taken the Transition Assistance workshop three or four times, but had also attended multiple workshops to prepare for his transition. Another "...started two years ahead of time by going through transition with business programs and by going through transition assistance programs [through the Air Force]" (individual interview Carl, January 6, 2018). One said he is "...terrified...I'm excited, I can't believe I made it...but it's scary..." (individual interview Tom, September 1, 2017). One believed part of his stress was emotional because he "...absolutely love[s] the Air Force" (individual interview Carl, January 6,

2018). So, leaving will be very hard. Two participants noted that their stress came from both the unknown and the actual process of preparing for transition. As one said, “There’s so many things to prepare for and so many things to do. I’m constantly receiving emails and calls about jobs and it’s sort of overwhelming. I went to a job fair and it was so stressful...but for me it’s fear of the unknown...” (individual interview Bill, July 19, 2017). Another participant said that he started out very stressed because he did not know “...how am I going to pay for my insurance, how am I going to pay for my healthcare, ...how am I going to find a job, where am I going to live, what schools are my children going to go to...” (individual interview Craig, February 5, 2018). However, as he went through the programs offered by the Air Force, he began to get answers to these and other questions so that by the time he neared his actual transition, things had smoothed out. As he said, his transition went from an “...unimproved surface of gravel road to an interstate highway” (individual interview Craig, February 5, 2018).

The experiences of the participants and the ways in which they approached their transition out of the Air Force supports the tenets of the transition theory. By controlling the situation through planning and preparation and managing the stress, the participants, while still anxious about their transition felt confident in their success.

In the next section, the empirical literature will be reviewed in terms of the findings of this study. It includes a discussion on veteran employment, the value of postsecondary education, and educational programs offered in the military.

Empirical Literature

Being employable in today’s workforce means much more than having a set of technical skills needed to perform a particular task. It requires a flexibility and ability to do just about any task at a moment’s notice (Mohuman, Mohuman, & Lawler as cited in Graen, Wakabayashi, &

Hui, 2013). It is into this environment that today's veterans are entering and competing with non-veterans for civilian jobs. The next sections will discuss the major topics from the empirical literature in light of the study's results.

Veteran employment and employability. Veteran employment, especially in conjunction with a mass drawdown associated with major conflicts, is a significant concern not only for the Federal Government but for society at large. It is important to keep faith with those who served by ensuring a successful transition to civilian employment, as well as provide employers with employees who have the skills, education, and experience they need. Despite the concerns of policy makers and even veterans themselves, today's airmen consider themselves employable. Employers today seek employees with not only technical skills but ones who are adaptable, creative, resilient, and adept at building relationships (Badal, 2016). Employers also look for those who take personal responsibility, work well with teams, and are reliable (as cited in Tymon, 2013).

The participants in this study were quick to point out that those are just the "soft" skills that they learn in the military and bring to the civilian workforce. After years of conflict, if employers want employees who must "be able to respond to constant change" (Olson & Shultz, 2013, p. 17), then today's airmen, who have worked in continuously vague and ambiguous environments that required constant innovation and adaptability, are the ideal employees. While there is a belief in some sectors that civilian employers do not value the skills learned in the military or that veterans do not have transferable skills, this study shows that the reality is very different.

Currently serving airmen were hopeful and confident that they would find meaningful work. Some already had job offers while others had positive experiences with potential

employers. For those who had already separated/retired, they had either found meaningful work or had gone back to school for a change in career. The challenge, as several participants pointed out, is being able to explain how the soft skills learned in the military translate easily to the civilian workforce in terms to which civilian employers can easily understand and relate. The issue is not whether or not they possess the soft skills. This study enhances the literature on veteran employment by highlighting two outcomes: a. The skills acquired in the Air Force can be transferred to civilian employment, and; b. Airmen feel confident that they have the technical and soft skills needed to be employable. Along with these soft skills acquired in the Air Force, separating and retiring airmen also have the education gained through formal higher education to rely on when looking for civilian employment. This will be discussed in the next section.

Value of postsecondary education. As mentioned in the previous section, many of the soft skills desired by employers are learned in the military. However, airmen are leaving the Air Force with not only these skills but often with multiple degrees including the Community College of the Air Force associate of applied science degree. The value of a postsecondary degree is that it provides not only a chance at financial security (Davidovitch et al., 2013) but that higher education "...guarantees knowledge, skills, loyalty, persistence, and other elements beyond professional knowledge" (Brown as cited in Davidovitch et al., 2013, p. 39). While the soft skills learned in the military provide a foundation for future civilian employment, they were developed within a specific set of circumstances that do not occur in the civilian workforce. As mentioned by some participants, achieving their degrees helped them with their critical thinking beyond what they had learned through Air Force training and professional military education. Higher education provides that additional context away from the military that rounds out their employability. LinkedIn CEO, Jeff Weiner, recently stated in an interview that "...a lot of

people are fixated on technology... But what we found when we did our skills gap analytical work is interpersonal skills..." (June 13, 2018, Interview with CBS This Morning). In addition, Weiner noted that "These kinds of interpersonal skills you can pick up in classes that are online, increasingly, and it's wonderful to see that there's a rise in the amount of courses being offered..." (June 13, 2018, Interview with CBS This Morning).

However, this study showed that the Air Force does not do well in making the connections between achieving a degree and the soft skills that are acquired. This may be part of a broader societal problem where a college degree is viewed as a way to get a job by acquiring hard skills, but where the soft skills are de-emphasized. This study has shed light on this disconnect. Its implications will be discussed in a later section.

Education programs in the military. The military has a myriad of educational programs available to servicemembers. Some are common among all the Services with various versions of such opportunities as military tuition assistance, credentialing, and professional military education. Some are unique to the Air Force such as the Community College of the Air Force and the Air University-Associate-to-Baccalaureate Cooperative (AU-ABC) program. While this study focuses on just one of these—CCAF—it sheds new light on how the Air Force approaches the development of its educational programs. It does this by identifying an issue that could minimize the impact the programs have in developing the full potential of airmen.

Implications

This study provides several recommendations to improve the employability of airmen and help ease their transition to civilian employment. The recommendations range from how the Air Force recruits airmen to providing training to education professionals to ensuring airmen have relevant information about their educational opportunities and transition needs beginning

early in their careers and following them through their last day. Following is a review of those recommendations.

Theoretical

This study generally supports the tenets of both hope and transition theories. An implication of this research specific to military members is addressing the high hope exhibited by the participants. It is unclear if the military screens for high hope in its recruitment process or if through the mastery of difficult physical and intellectual demands, the military develops hope in its servicemembers. Success of the mission, often accomplished in dangerous and difficult circumstances, relies on the servicemembers' ability to adapt and believe in the mission. What we do not know is whether the Air Force is deliberately developing high hope in airmen or carefully selecting those who already have it. Whatever the case, the theoretical implications of this answer are important not only for the military in how they recruit and develop airmen but to add to the literature on how hope can be developed in people regardless of their circumstances.

There are two recommendations from this study that relate to the theoretical underpinnings of this research. The first is that the Air Force should review its recruitment practices to determine how or if it is targeting potential airmen who have high hope. For the second recommendation, the Air Force should review how commanders, supervisors, and other leaders are taught to improve hope in airmen. One way to do this is to deliberately focus on those skills and attributes that increase hope and make airmen successful.

Empirical

The Air Force is doing very well at preparing airmen for the mechanics of the transition out of the Air Force and into the civilian workforce. Participants are well aware of the need to start their transition early and have taken full advantage of the multitudes of programs and

courses available to them to prepare. Many have taken the courses multiple times. What is not known is how these opportunities actually helped an airman gain employment and be employable once he or she has left the Air Force. Other than anecdotal information and results provided by studies such as this, the Air Force does not have a way to “close the loop” on whether these transition programs are effective postservice. It is recommended that the Air Force continue to develop partnerships with Sister Services and other federal partners and develop a way to follow separated or retired airmen through the first two years of civilian employment to determine the effectiveness of transition programs.

Practical

Both the directly-related and indirectly-related themes provide the Air Force with opportunities to improve the perceptions of airmen as they pertain to educational attainment and successful transition.

Soft skills, degrees, and employability. Helping airmen make this connection will also give them the knowledge to assist potential employers in identifying those non-job-related traits that employers find desirable (Davidovitch et al., 2013). If airmen clearly understand the link between what they learn in the college classroom and those soft skills desired by employees, airmen can then deliberately scope their job search in such a way that they present a well-rounded employee to potential employers. For example, it is one thing to work on a team with members who have the same goals and attitude (i.e., fellow airmen); it is another thing to work with civilians who come from very different experiences. Working on teams in the classroom with fellow civilian students provides an opportunity to expand an airman’s team work skills beyond working with other airmen. And, as mentioned in a previous section, the participants already recognize the importance of being well-rounded and diverse.

Secondly, when faced with obstacles, if airmen understand how their college courses also teach them persistence (Brown as cited in Davidovitch et al., 2013), they then can fine tune their ability to apply these skills to a multitude of problems—a significant component of critical thinking. Lastly, as Eden (2014) pointed out, college attendance also builds resilience and reflection—both important characteristics for managing the stress of both military life and civilian employment.

There are two recommendations from this section. The first is that Air Force education counselors should be trained in how to identify those skills developed by various educational courses and programs and how to relate that information to airmen in a meaningful way. Secondly, it is recommended that the Air Force revise their guidance and provide training to their education center professionals in how the CCAF degree promotes future employability by providing hard and soft skills that can be leveraged not only while in the Air Force but during and after transition. Through this training, education center counselors can help airmen understand how the CCAF degree and other degrees develop soft skills sought after by employers as well as Air Force leaders. By understanding this connection, airmen are better able to articulate those skills during interviews, on resumes, and in the work place.

Recognizing and managing emotions postservice. Already separated or retired participants provided a different view of their emotions after they left the Air Force. Currently serving airmen expressed excitement and anxiety for the future, with few considering the huge lifestyle change that would occur. Separated and retired airmen, however, did not express enthusiasm for the future but rather a sense of loss over the end of their Air Force career, including a lack of mission and missing their fellow airmen. It is possible that separated or

retired airmen could have difficulty managing this sense of loss which could hamper their emotional well-being or slow their integration into civilian life.

The first recommendation for this section is that the Air Force should explore how it can incorporate instruction and guidance to separating and retiring airmen regarding how they can manage their feelings of loss after leaving the Air Force. This should not only include counseling and guidance but connections to agencies outside of the Air Force that can help airmen better make this emotional transition. Secondly, the Air Force should consider establishing a panel of recently separated and retired airmen who can speak to those transitioning about the emotions they experienced after leaving the Air Force and how they managed them.

The value of the CCAF degree beyond promotion. Prior to the establishment of the policy requiring the CCAF degree for promotion to the SrNCO ranks, airmen were left to determine for themselves the value of the CCAF degree. With this promotion policy in place, it can be assumed that more airmen will complete their CCAF degree (and perhaps other degrees as well) earlier in their careers. However, with the recent establishment of the Blended Retirement System, it is possible airmen may leave the Air Force sooner than they have in the past.

By ignoring the influence that the CCAF degree has on other aspects of employability such as developing soft skills, it reduces the perceived usefulness of the CCAF beyond the Air Force. Airmen may not approach the learning provided by the CCAF degree as anything more than a “box checker.” If the Air Force stresses the usefulness of all its educational programs such as professional military education in terms of value only to the Air Force, then airmen will not enter the programs fully engaged. They may also not take advantage of educational programs which could lead to the Air Force deciding to no longer support the programs because

of lack of participation. The reality, however, is not that airmen may not be interested, but that they do not understand the usefulness of the programs in their professional and personal development and so may look elsewhere. It is recommended that the Air Force re-brand the CCAF degree as a means for achieving the soft and technical skills necessary for success both in and out of the Air Force.

Start early. A common concern among participants was that they started pursuing their education, including their CCAF degree, very late in their careers. Prior to the establishment of the policy requiring the CCAF degree for promotion to the SrNCO ranks, airmen were left to determine for themselves the value of the CCAF degree. With this promotion policy in place, it can be assumed that more airmen will complete their CCAF degree (and perhaps other degrees as well) earlier in their careers. However, with the recent establishment of the Blended Retirement System, it is possible airmen may leave the Air Force sooner than they have in the past. Consequently, there is a possibility that, if they are not aware of the value of the CCAF degree for employability, they may leave the Air Force lacking the education and skills needed for employment. An early, holistic intervention that provides clear guidance on all aspects of CCAF and other educational options is crucial to their success postservice. As noted by most of the participants, they were diligent about planning early for their transition (most likely due to the Transition Assistance legislation and push from Congress). However, planning for their education was significantly less deliberate, although all noted the importance of having a degree to make them more employable. It is recommended that the Air Force aggressively pursue fully instituting the Military Life Cycle and establishing procedures outlining when and how the appropriate outreach occurs for all airmen at the appropriate touch points.

This study focused on a select group of airmen. In the next section, the delimitations of that decision will be discussed. In addition, the limitations placed by the research design will also be reviewed.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study had several delimiting factors and limitations. The delimiters provided a way to scope the study so that it was manageable and helped the researcher stay focused on the purpose of the study. These delimiting factors, in turn, necessarily limited the study and its applicability beyond those participating in the study. Following is a brief discussion of the delimitations and limitations of this study

Delimitations

This study was limited to enlisted members of the regular United States Air Force. Unlike officers who are required to have at least a bachelor's degree before receiving a commission, enlisted members only need a high school diploma or GED to enlist. Therefore, enlisted airmen may be more challenged to find civilian employment that provides an acceptable salary with only a high school diploma. Studies bear out that people with college degrees have a higher salary than those who do not (Davidovitch et al., 2013). Also, only enlisted members are allowed to receive a CCAF degree, which is another reason the study was limited to enlisted airmen. This study was limited to Regular Air Force enlisted airmen and did not include airmen from the Reserve Component (Air Force Reserves and Air National Guard). In most cases, Reserve Component airmen already have jobs in the civilian sector and serve part-time in the Air Force. The other limitation had to do with when the airmen will or had separated from the Air Force. The reason for limiting it to one year before transition and no more than two years for recently separated airmen was so that the experience of transition is still relatively fresh in the

memories of the airmen. Finally, the participant group was limited to enlisted airmen who were never commissioned as officers. The reason, as mentioned earlier, is that officers are required to have a bachelor's degree in order to be commissioned and experience different training and leadership opportunities than enlisted airmen.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the sampling technique of snowballing lessens the control one has over who volunteers. Consequently, the study may be skewed by gender, rank, or career field (Patton, 2002). Secondly, it is minimally transferable to the other Services since they do not have a similar program like the Community College of the Air Force. And, finally, it is minimally transferable to the Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard although enlisted members of both components are eligible for CCAF. However, since these members serve part-time, many already have civilian jobs.

The following section will provide recommendations for further research. This will include suggestions on how to continue a cross-case synthesis for providing insight into perceptions before and after separation or retirement.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study addresses two of the most obvious groups of people who can benefit directly from completing their CCAF degree—currently serving and separated/retired airmen. However, there are other groups who also have a vested interest in how the CCAF degree influences employability. These groups would include civilian employers, Air Force Education center personnel, Air Force transition counselors, and, Air Force leaders and supervisors. All of these groups either directly benefit from the education attained by the airmen or have an overall interest in their success. For those airmen who eventually become civilian employees, the

perceptions employers have about the influence of the CCAF degree can provide additional insight for airmen when they are deciding whether or not to complete this degree. If employers believe that the CCAF degree not only makes these airmen more employable but can tie specific reasons for believing that, then this can provide an additional source of information for airmen in their decision-making process and preparation for transition. Education center personnel are often the first educational professionals airmen encounter. Knowing how they, as professionals, perceive the CCAF degree can help determine the best training for these professionals when advising airmen. Lastly, understanding how both leaders at the installations as well as those at higher headquarters view the influence of the CCAF degree on employability can help revise leader education so they can better inform airmen of their educational options while in the Air Force.

A cross-case design using these groups could be used to find areas where these groups share similar perceptions and where they digress. Depending on the results, helping agencies from within the Air Force can better educate airmen, Air Force leaders, and potential employers about the benefits of the CCAF degree. This study could also benefit from a longitudinal approach by following the same airmen during their transition and up to a year after they leave the Air Force. In this way, a more direct comparison of changes in perceptions can be conducted and outside influences more easily identified and answered.

Summary

Participants in this study understand that having a degree, particularly a bachelor's degree, along with certifications are key to being employable postservice. The Community College of the Air Force associate in applied science degree, while in and of itself, may not be a factor in employability, completing the degree is crucial in three areas:

- Giving airmen the confidence to pursue their bachelor's and master's degrees
- Through partnerships like the Air University-Associate's-to-Bachelor's Cooperative, completing the CCAF degree guaranteed the transfer of all credits to minimize the time spent completing a bachelor's degree
- Providing proof of the skills, education, and experience earned in the Air Force

As a result, the CCAF degree is perceived as being a major stepping stone toward the completion of advanced degrees and employability in the civilian workforce.

Airmen with high hope and the ability to overcome obstacles have an overall positive transition period. However, there is no mechanism in place that helps airmen make the connection between college attendance and the development of soft skills desired by civilian employers. There is also little assistance provided to airmen regarding how to handle the feeling of loss of camaraderie, mission, etc. experienced in the Air Force that the participants felt postservice.

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APPENDIX A: Consent Form**CONSENT FORM**

Perceptions of Community College of the Air Force Graduates
Regarding the Degree's Influence on Employability: A Case Study

Kimberly A. J. Castillo

Liberty University

Department of Education

You are invited to be in an official sponsored Air Force study to determine Airmen's perceptions about how their Community College of the Air Force degree enhanced their ability to gain civilian employment. You were selected as a possible participant because you have applied for retirement, are a currently serving enlisted airmen in the Regular Air Force and have a Community College of the Air Force degree. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Ms. Kimberly A. J. Castillo, a doctoral candidate with the Liberty University Department of Education.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to discover how enlisted airman perceive (or understand) their Community College of the Air Force degree influence their perceptions on their employability post-Service. The intent is to provide insight into educational programs provided by the Air Force to enlisted members enhance their economic wellbeing. If there is a significant difference between perception and reality, educators can provide better guidance to students and Air Force leaders may develop policy to benefit airmen transitioning to civilian employment.

Procedures:

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

Participate in two separate interviews each lasting approximately one hour. The first interview will one-on-one with the researcher and the second one will be part of a focus group either face-to-face, by telephone, or via Skype. Each interview will be audio for later transcription. And, lastly, complete a short survey.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The study has minimal risks and are no more than you would encounter in everyday life. The benefits to participation are helping to develop programs and policies that will assist fellow airmen and veterans to find gainful civilian employment. The results may help Air Force leaders better understand the perspectives of airmen when they are preparing for post-Service life.

Compensation:

There is no compensation associated with this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. 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. Participants will be given codes and pseudonyms to protect their identities and only the researcher will have access to this information. All recordings will be stored on a secure computer network and will only be identified by the participant's pseudonym.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or the United States Air Force. If

you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study:

If you wish to withdraw from the study at any time, please email the researcher at Kimberly@XXX.mil as soon as possible. You will receive a confirmatory email acknowledging that you have elected to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Kimberly A. J. Castillo. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at Kimberly@XXX.com. You may also contact Ms. Castillo's faculty advisor, Dr. Craig Bailey, at cbailey@liberty.edu.

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 irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

_____ (*Please initial here*). The researcher has my permission to audiotape me as part of my participation in this study

Signature:

Date:

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

IRB Code Numbers:

IRB Expiration Date:

APPENDIX B: Initial Recruitment Letter

[Insert Date]

[Recipient]

[Title]

[Company]

[Address 1]

[Address 2]

[Address 3]

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting an Air Force officially sponsored research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to discover how enlisted airmen perceive (or understand) how their Community College of their Air Force influenced their perceptions on their employability post-Service. The intent is to provide insight into educational programs offered by the Air Force enhance their economic wellbeing. If there is a significant difference between perception and reality, educators can provide better guidance to students and Air Force leaders can develop policy to better assist airmen in transition to civilian employment. This study's central question is: How do CCAF graduates perceive the impact of their degree in enhancing their employability for the civilian workforce? I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are 18 years of age or older, a currently serving enlisted airmen in the Regular Air Force or recently retired/separated, and have a Community College degree, and are willing to participate, you will be asked to participate in two interviews and complete a short survey. The first interview is a one-on-one with the researcher and the second occurs as part of a focus group. It should take approximately 2.5 hours for you to complete the procedures listed. Your participation will be completely anonymous. Your identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please download the attached consent form, initial and sign, and complete the attached survey. Return both to the researcher via email to kyates12@liberty.edu or kimberly@XXX.com.

Sincerely,

Kimberly A. J. Castillo
Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX C: Follow on Recruitment Letter

[Insert Date]

[Recipient]

[Title]

[Company]

[Address 1]

[Address 2]

[Address 3]

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting an officially Air Force sponsored research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. Two weeks ago, an email was sent to you inviting you to participate in a research study. This follow-up email is being sent to remind you to respond by completing the attached consent form and survey if you would like to participate and have not already done so. The deadline for participation is [date].

If you are 18 years of age or older, a currently serving enlisted airmen in the Regular Air Force or recently retired/separated, and have a Community College degree, and are willing to participate, you will be asked to participate in two interviews and complete a short survey. The first interview is a one-on-one with the researcher and the second occurs as part of a focus group. It should take approximately 2.5 hours for you to complete the procedures listed. Your participation will be completely anonymous. Your identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please download the attached consent form, initial and sign, and complete the attached survey. Return both to the researcher via email to Kimberly@XXX.com.

Sincerely,

Kimberly A. J. Castillo
Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX D: Interview Questions

For all participants:

1. Would you please describe your experiences in attaining a CCAF degree while in the Air Force?
2. What is your understanding of what being employable or employability mean?
3. What is your understanding of the link between having attained a college degree in the Air Force and being employable?
4. When you felt like giving up, what kept you going and why?
5. How do you decide what your goals will be? (adapted from Lopez, Ciarlelli, Coffman, Stone, & Wyatt, 2000)
6. When you reach your goal, what will be different in your life? (Lopez, Ciarlelli, Coffman, Stone, & Wyatt, 2000)
7. If I were to ask your friends/spouse/parents to list three words that would describe you, what would they say? What would you say? (Lopez, Ciarlelli, Coffman, Stone, & Wyatt, 2000)
8. How do you prepare for a transition in your life?
9. What things do you consider when preparing for a personal or professional change?

For currently serving enlisted airmen:

5. What do you see is your greatest challenge in obtaining employment post-Service?
6. How employable do you see yourself for civilian employment?
7. What do you bring to potential employers that set you apart from other job seekers?
8. What do you hope you will achieve with your CCAF degree post-Service?

9. How would you characterize your transition to civilian employment?

For separated/retired airmen:

10. Describe how did perceptions of how your CCAF degree would help in making you more employable for civilian jobs change after leaving the Air Force.

11. Compare your transition to civilian employment between what you thought would happen and how it actually went.

12. Knowing what you know now, how did having your CCAF degree help make you employable when looking for civilian employment?

APPENDIX E: Adult Dispositional Hope Scale*

Directions: Read each item carefully. Using the scale shown below, please select the number that best describes YOU and put that number in the blank provided.

1=Definitely False 2=Mostly False 3=Mostly True 4=Definitely True

- ___ 1. I can think of many ways to get out of a jam.
- ___ 2. I energetically pursue my goals.
- ___ 3. I feel tired most of the time.
- ___ 4. There are lots of ways around a problem.
- ___ 5. I am easily downed in an argument.
- ___ 6. I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are important to me.
- ___ 7. I worry about my health.
- ___ 8. Even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem.
- ___ 9. My past experiences have prepared me well for my future.
- ___ 10. I've been pretty successful in life.
- ___ 11. I usually find myself worrying about something.
- ___ 12. I meet the goals I set for myself.

Scoring: Items 3, 5, 7, and 11 are distractors and not used for scoring. The pathways subscale score is the sum of items 1, 4, 6, and 8 and the agency subscale is the sum of items 2, 9, 10, and 12. Hope is the sum of the four pathways and four agency items. Scores range from the low of 8 to the high of 32.

The scale can be used for research or clinical purposes without contacting the author (Lopez, et al., 2000, p. 77).

APPENDIX F: Focus Group Interview Questions

1. How well prepared are/were you for the civilian workforce?
2. What can/could you do differently to make yourself better prepared?
3. Describe your experience getting your CCAF degree.
4. What things did you have to consider when deciding to finish your CCAF degree?
5. Describe your transition out of the Air Force
6. What role did hope have in helping with completing your degree?
7. Why would you consider pursuing further education?