MISSION TO PERSIST: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL EXPERIENCES OF ACTIVE DUTY MILITARY STUDENTS AT A VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

La Toya Nicole Sivells

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study was to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at a Virginia community college. The theory that guided this study was Tinto's student integration theory because it examines the academic and social experiences of active duty military students and how they are key to successful integration into college community and persistence. The central research question that guided this study was: What are the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at Virginia community colleges. Additionally, to answer the central question, four sub-questions were developed using Tinto's Integration Theory: (1) What are the motivations/reasons for attending college while on active duty? (2) How do active duty military students describe their educational persistence? (3) What types of academic supports do active duty military receive from their college's administration, faculty, and staff? (4) What types of social supports does active duty military receive from their college's administration, faculty, and staff? To examine active duty military students' experiences, a transcendental approach was used to gather individual stories to understand their personal experiences. Furthermore, 10 participants were purposefully selected. The participants' experiences were uncovered through an online questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. Moustakas' steps for data analysis were used to explore the data, create initial codes, combined codes into themes, and develop textural and structural descriptions. Generally, the themes that emerged from the data sources were support systems, obligations, attributes, goals and advancements, and concerns. The participants voiced that their military lifestyle mandates often did not allow the additional time needed for degree completion.

Keywords: military, student integration, community college, persistence

Dedication

To my beautiful grandmothers, Shirley L. Moyler and Thelma D. Holley, who both transitioned to glory before completing this research. I also dedicate this dissertation to my late pastor, Rev. Dr. Clifton R. Wilson, and my beloved mentor Mrs. Linda Y. Claggion. I still feel their love and support even though they have passed on---*en mémoire d'amour.*

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First, all praise and honor and praise to God and my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for showing me grace during this process. Next, without my parents, I would not have made it through my doctoral journey. There is not enough money in the world to repay them for their never-ending love and support. They had encouraged me when I wanted to give up, prayed for me when I could not pray for myself, and instilled in me the love of Jesus Christ. I also want to thank my sister ShaRina Sivells, Alicia Street, and fellow doctoral candidate Takesha McMiller. Thank you, ladies, for being the kick in the behind when I needed it the most. Lastly, I want to express my appreciation to Dr. Eller and Dr. Fontanella. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your patience with me.

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List of Abbreviations

American Council on Education (ACE)

Career Technical Education (CTE)

Community College of the Air Force (CCAF)

Credits 2 Careers (C2C)

Credit for Prior Learning (CPL)

U.S. Department of Defense (DoD)

U.S. Department of Education (DoE)

Degree Network System (DNS)

Fiscal Year (FY)

General Education Diploma (GED)

GoArmyEd (GAE)

Government Accountability Office (GAO)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Joint Services Transcript (JST)

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

Military Occupational Specialty (MOS)

Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB)

My Career Advancement Account (MyCAA)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

National Defense Research Institute (NDRI)

Office of the Undersecretary of Defense (OSD)

Permanent Change of Station (PCS)

Post-Secondary Complaint System (PECS)

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)

Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS)

Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC)

Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC)

Temporary Duty Assignment (TDA)

Temporary Duty Station (TDY)

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

Tuition Assistance (TA)

Veteran's Administration (VA)

Virginia Community College System (VCCS)

Voluntary Education (VolEd)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Due to the constant relocation attached to military life, service members can find it challenging to complete a degree or certificate program. Despite the continuous moving associated with being an active duty military member, the government has always offered college support and tuition assistance to help them reach their academic goals. Even with substantial support and assistance, few studies have considered the experiences of military personnel who are attending college part-time while serving. The majority of military-connected student studies emphasize veterans' transition from combat to the classroom while utilizing their Post-911 G.I. Bill benefits.

Nevertheless, with the growing number of military members attending college while on active duty, particularly at two-year institutions, there is a need to articulate their experiences. To this end, the purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study was to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at a Virginia community college. Chapter one will look at the background, situation to self, and identification of the problem, followed by a statement of purpose, the study's significance, the research questions, and definitions for select terms used throughout the study. Furthermore, I used the resulting research questions and definitions of terms to create a research strategy to answer the questions and address the problem in line with transcendental phenomenology.

Background

Active duty service members' lives can be a challenge due to looming deployments, a full-time work schedule, and family life (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). Consequently, a service member’s inability to persist through college can be attributed to these considerable pressures

that frequently restrict their availability to participate wholly in academic programs (Fredman, Marshall, Aronson, Perkins, & Hayes, 2019). Ford, Northup, and Wiley (2009) added, because of the duties required of active duty military personnel, "postsecondary education typically can only be pursued part-time while off duty" (p. 62). For this reason, community colleges are a perfect fit for an active duty service member looking to obtain an educational credential while serving.

Community colleges are ideal because they have long-standing reputations for attracting non-traditional learners, such as military students (Iloh, 2018). The "non-traditional" student label is applied to students who are older than 25, did not matriculate directly after high school, attend part-time, are monetarily independent, and have additional primary responsibilities and jobs that compete with their studies (Iloh, 2016; Iloh & Tierney, 2014; Kasworm, 2005; Soares, 2013). Military student learners fit a non-traditional student's criteria since they attempt a degree or certificate and work full-time. A 2019 report by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) indicated that 928,000 active duty service members participate in off-duty educational opportunities. Of these 928,000, over half are enrolled in community college courses.

In the state of Virginia, of the 19,633 military-affiliated students attending a community college, nearly 2,500 are serving on active duty (Virginia Community College System, 2019). With such a high number of active service personnel, the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) must have programs and policies in place that support a military student's unpredictable lifestyle. Programs of importance include those that apply military training toward course credit, policies that support course completion, and tuition reimbursement if called to training or deployment. To this point, when a student's education is interrupted by training or mobilization, the institution should make every possible effort to allow the student to return to where they left

off (Thomason, 2013)—allowing students to return to their academic track as close as possible to the point before their mobilization mitigates dropout rates for this population (Thomason).

However, a 2013 report by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) reported that only 36% of higher learning institutions have plans to improve completion rates and retention for active duty military students. Unfortunately, a common myth is that service members have lower success rates than other non-traditional student populations. However, "the reality is that there is insufficient information regarding the enrollment and completion rates of the active duty population to make an assessment" (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), 2013, p. 4). While there is no current assessment of active duty military student success rates, it was reported that only 5% of academic institutions have existing policies and programs in place to improve military student retention and degree completion (American Council on Education (ACE), 2015).

However, the VCCS does have a program that offers service members credit for their military training called Credit to Careers (C2C). The system also has policies in place intended to support service members in case of sudden deployment or training. According to the VCCS policy manual, each community college must have a system that provides a refund, tuition forgiveness, and military students' re-enrollment forced to withdraw or have an extended absence because of sudden required mobilization or deployment (Virginia Community College System (VCCS), 2017). The time of prolonged absence has to be for 30 days or more. Although these policies and programs are available, not all faculty and staff employed by the 23 VCCS schools know them. Having faculty and staff uneducated about military student policies can make this student group's community college experience difficult.

Borsari et al. (2017) added, “there is a clear need to offer training to faculty and staff concerning the distinctive needs of service members” (p. 167). Academic advisors and counselors are the first to see service members entering community college; therefore, they must understand their educational entitlements and experiences (Molina & Morse, 2015). In terms of available literature on this topic, few studies exist on the active duty military student experiences with community colleges and persistence (Hammond, 2016). Yet, nearly 300,000 active duty service members attend college classes on base, on campus, or online (Ford & Vignare, 2015; Military OneSource, 2014); little is known about the experiences of this student group as they dedicate themselves to school and full-time military service (Cleveland, Branscum, Bovbjerg, & Thorburn, 2015). This is concerning since most military personnel begin their college education at a community college (De La Garza, Manuel, Wood, & Harris, 2016).

Since this study examined the military cohort's experiences attempting to persist through community college, it wa essential to look at the historical, social, and theoretical contexts. The historical context gave a backdrop on how the active duty military student educational benefits have evolved. The social perspective allowed a close comparison of active duty military students’ experiences in the military environment to the academic setting. Finally, it was essential to review the theoretical context to understand the theory guiding this research in addition to historical and social perspectives.

Historical Context

A historical context describing the evolution of active duty military educational benefits provided an understanding of the active duty learner experience today. Military personnel has existed in substantial numbers in higher education since the end of World War II (Anderson 1991). When congress launched the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, generally known

as the GI Bill, veteran enrollment in U.S. colleges increased to 49% by 1947 (De La Garza et al., 2016). According to the Directive-Type Memorandum 09-003 (2009), military-related benefits were created to attract and retain high caliber military personnel. As for active service members, the military has offered some form of tuition reimbursement for off-duty education since May 7, 1947 (Anderson). This educational benefit is commonly known as military Tuition Assistance (TA).

In an early congressional testimony, a U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) official explained that education programs were created so service members could "(1) improve their value to the service; (2) have an opportunity to continue civilian education while in the service; and (3) make profitable use of their spare time" (Anderson, 1991, p.5). However, TA often takes a backseat to the "largely publicized GI Bill; however, the benefits TA can bring should not be overlooked" (Winder, 2007, p. 39). Initially, the military would pay 100% of the course costs (U.S. Department of Defense, 2014). After DoD Directive 1322.8, July 23, 1987, congress set limitations on the percentage in which the military could pay. According to Anderson (1991), "the limit was 75% with up to 90% for enlisted service soldiers in grades E-5 and above with less than 15 years of service" (p. 1).

Yet, on October 1, 2002, the DoD agreed once again to pay 100 % of tuition with some limits. These limits are set at $250 per credit hour, with a maximum of $4,500 per year at a part-time status (U.S. Department of Defense, 2014). Not only has the amount of tuition dollars allotted changed over the years, but the purpose of the funding has also shifted. When TA programs were first enacted, congress made it clear that the purpose of TA usage was to improve the service member's value to service and make beneficial use of their spare time (Anderson, 1991). Today, TA is administered under the DoD's Voluntary Education (VolEd) program to

support professional and personal self-development goals (Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education, 2019).

The TA program is part of a series of quality-of-life efforts developed to make military service more attractive to youth and urge them to remain in the military (U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), 2017). Early research by Boesel and Johnson (1988) concluded a strong link between participation in the TA program and military enlistment retention. The researchers also discovered a correlation between TA usage and military promotion. Depending on the military personnel's branch of service and occupational specialty, those who took advantage of TA while on active duty gained extra points toward advancement and promotion (Williston & Roemer, 2017). However, researchers Ludwig and Hexter (1991) suggested that studies move away from correlating TA and promotion within the military. Instead, they stated that qualitative researchers should examine active duty education more closely by looking at collegiate academic and social experiences. Presently, researchers are following the suggestion of Ludwig and Hexter by focusing on the academic and social experiences of active military personnel attending college.

Historically known as academia's persistence, these academic and social experiences have been acknowledged at some two and four-year institutions. Still, the interest has been limited regarding the active duty student group and the effective practices needed to support them (Molina & Morse, 2015). The stronger focus has been that of the student veteran population (Wheeler, 2017). This is alarming since the DoD (2017) research stated that over 2,500 academic institutions have military personnel enrolled in academic programs. Additionally, many military personnel have enrolled in America's colleges and universities and are pursuing credentials to assist them with post-military careers (Molina & Morse, 2015).

Although there has been a historic increase in military enrollment, there has not been a corresponding increase in understanding the unique issues relevant to the actively serving (Barry, Whiteman & MacDermid-Wadsworth, 2014). The sufficient accommodation of military students at higher learning institutions has been a topic of interest in the research world for years. However, the lack of proper student services for this population can lead to student dissatisfaction, improper utilization of benefits, and low retention (Dillard & Yu, 2016).

Social Context

To understand the active duty military student learner's journey to college completion, one must also recognize the social contexts while serving. Learners with active duty military experience are a unique cohort on college campuses. De La Garza et al. (2016) added that active military students are often labeled unique because they are sensitively mature, focused, goal-oriented, and already seasoned leaders who set great examples in the classroom. In addition, active members have specific strengths and deal with cultural and logistical challenges that interfere with activities out of service (Hall-Clark, Wright, & Blount, 2019). Culturally service members are viewed as more disciplined and focused than their civilian counterparts (Wilson & Smith, 2012).

Furthermore, with their military service, they are often self-disciplined, work better collaboratively, and have leadership and time management skills (Olsen, 2014). Logistically, service members may deal with daily trauma due to having to sustain a "heightened state of alert which exacerbates the stress military personnel face from the traumatic events during deployment" (Crabtree-Nelson & DeYoung, 2017, p. 45). Morrison-Beedy and Rossiter (2018) added, "deployments for U.S. service members are six to twelve months depending on the

branch of service and military occupation code, many service members will deploy multiple times" (p. 176).

Military deployments entail three main phases: pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment. All of which pose distinctive challenges (Rossen & Carter, 2012). Rossen and Cater further reported that" post-deployment has become particularly problematic given the increase in the number of soldiers returning from military duty with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or brain injury" (p. 5). Likewise, because of these military, cultural attributes, institutions' goals should be to offer programs, support, and provisions that accommodate their lifestyle. To this end, since the military culture is one of discipline, order, and structure (Kircher, 2015; Naphan & Elliot, 2015), military personnel are used to an extremely organized environment. As a result, military students do not react positively to inconsistent procedures and policies (Hitt et al., 2015). With this in mind, institutions should foster an environment for service members that synchronize the academic and social environment with their beliefs, values, and attitudes (Jeffreys, 2015). Subsequently, as institutions experience an enrollment surge within their military population, questions have arisen regarding social adjustment (Hammond, 2016).

The social implications that military learners encounter center around the issue of campus community conflicts. Barry, Whiteman, and MacDermid-Wadsworth (2014) explained that connecting with others on campus is influenced by frequent conflicts with both students and faculty. Most of these conflicts derive from contrasting political and war views or compromising a service member's privacy; others are associated with insensitive questions such as "how many people have you killed?" (Barry, Whiteman, & MacDermid-Wadsworth, 2014, p.34).

However, a study by Zogas (2017) suggested that service members were uninterested in the social aspects of college because of their post-military focus. Borsari et al. (2017) added that military personnel pursues higher education to gain job and financial stability for their post-military career. Nonetheless, Heineman (2016) circumvented that service members face social implications when attempting to become acclimated into college. Still, the research has been devoted to understanding the social implications of the military veteran population. Unfortunately, few studies have queried into the social implications of the active duty military student (Mentzer, Black-Lowrie & Spohn, 2015). Leveling the focus to include the active duty population is beneficial not only to the students but to student services staff and faculty at colleges and universities.

For example, current research seems to only link Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) to veterans, emergency first responders, and law enforcement officers (Shaley, Liberzon, & Marmar, 2017). Today, U.S. universities are witnessing an influx of student veterans who have been under chronic stress, have suffered injuries, and currently exhibit symptoms of PTSD (Ellison et al., 2012). Additional research by Bailey, Drury, and Grandy (2019) pinpointed that much research has been completed on veteran students' previous and current generation. Hamrick and Runman (2010) added that recent research on military-affiliated student success examines military-affiliated students' unique experiences. Still, it is limited to the perspective of the veteran only.

The impact of deployment on military-connected students wa explored, but it is mostly examined from the veteran student perspective. However, it is essential to note that service members actively serving are entering college with the same struggles academically and socially (Walker, Kaimal, Gonzaga, Myers-Coffman, & DeGraba, 2017). Active service members are

also suffering from war-related injuries that may undermine social support when it is most needed (Ellison et al., 2012). These factors can cause social alienation on campus among military students. This topic's social meaning and relevance are connected to community colleges' propensities to underserve the active duty military population.

Furthermore, student services advisors, counselors, administrators, teaching faculty, and base education personnel are the stakeholders in this scenario. After all, the social concern is the time management issues active service members encounter due to balancing full-time service and part-time studies.

Theoretical Context

Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory is often used to describe military-affiliated students' transition from a military lifestyle to a student. For example, in Anderson and Goodman's (2014) study on applying Schlossberg's model for veterans in transition, they found the transition from the military to civilian life can be a multifaceted and challenging maneuver for veterans today. Moreover, offering help with this transition is progressively important, with over 200,000 military personnel switching to civilian status each year. In the past, Schlossberg's (1995) "4 S System" of the adult transition of any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles is correlated to military veterans transitioning from a military lifestyle to a student lifestyle.

In Anderson and Goodman's (2014) study on applying Schlossberg's Model for veterans in transition, they found separation from the military to civilian life can be a multifaceted and difficult transition for today's veterans, and offering help with this transition is progressively important, with over 200,000 military personnel switching to civilian status each year. However, Schlossberg's (1995) "4 S System" of adult transition is yet to be applied to the active duty

service member transitioning from a soldier, sailor, marine, or airmen by day and student by night. Additionally, Diamond's (2012) Adaptive Military Transition Theory is also being implemented to explore military-affiliated students' transition from combat to the classroom.

The Adaptive Military Transition Theory is a new theoretical framework that pinpoints crucial moments during the transition process when veterans are most likely to face challenges; particularly, the theory suggests that there are three interrelating stages explaining individual, interpersonal, community, and military organizational influences that affect the military transition process (Kintzle, Wilcox, & Hassan, 2013). Again, we have a theory focus on the veteran cohort's transition away from the military, while the active duty population is left out of the narrative. Indeed, veterans' transitioning from combat to civilian student life is important; however, through this study, service members actively serving and attempting degree completion were added to the conversation.

Situation to Self

My motivation to study issues related to active duty military and their undergraduate experience was grounded in my knowledge as a military dependent and a military education professional. After spending nearly 10 years in military education, I observed many service members enroll and dis-enroll because they felt the institution failed to understand their needs. I am also a child of a retired Navy senior chief, and I saw first-hand how difficult it was for a service member to work full-time and complete a degree. My father chose to wait until his retirement to pursue a college degree, not thinking it could be accomplished while serving on active duty.

Furthermore, my experience as a staff member at a community college showed me that institutions are not as "military friendly" as they suggest. According to Hope (2016), the

designation of being a “military friendly” institution should be granted to colleges that have incorporated specific procedures that acknowledge the unique needs and characteristics of the military student.

The ontological matter for this research deferred to the nature of reality and its characteristics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Moustakas (1994), an ontological assumption will bring awareness to the researcher that there will be multiple realities as seen through the eyes of the participants. My ontological assumption for this study was based on the belief that there was many realities present (Creswell & Poth). I also assumed that each participant had a unique experience with integrating into community college while actively serving in the military. Through the use of interviews, questionnaires, and a focus group several forms of evidence of themes using the real words of active duty learners presented their different perspectives. In line with a phenomenological inquiry this will allowed me to report how the active duty military students viewed their community college experience differently (Moustakas, 1994).

The epistemological assumption for my study was that as the researcher I was able to get as close as allowable to the participants in their natural settings for further observation (Moustakas, 1994). To this end, subjective evidence was put together based on the individual viewpoints as a mean of shortening the distance between myself and the participants being studied (Guba & Lincoln, 1988). To develop a relationship with the participants, I had to conduct studies in the “field, where the participants lived and work-these are important contexts for understanding what the participant is saying” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.21). As the researcher, as long as I stayed in the field and got to know the participants the more I gained first-hand information from them or became an insider (Wolcott, 2008).

Next, the language of the research is known as the rhetorical assumption. For this study I will used an engaging narrative style in first person and utilized the language of qualitative research. Additionally, Moustakas (1994) suggested that the researcher create a creative and brief narrative that describes the essence of the study and how the possible findings will inspire the researcher (Moustakas). By using what is known as reflexivity I was be able to write my findings in first person and position myself by restating the problem (Cresswell & Poth, 2018).

Lastly, axiological assumptions are the values and biases of the researchers that will be made known in the study (Albarqouni, López-López, & Higgins, 2017). Since I was the primary instrument for data collection (human instrument), I ensured to bracket my experiences by setting aside prejudice, prior knowledge, judgments, and preconceptions about the phenomenon to hear the input of research participants with an open mind (Husserl, 1977; Moustakas,1994). This process, also known as Epoché, was completed to alleviate the possible adverse effects of preconceptions that may have tainted the research process (Moustakas). Furthermore, because I conducted this study in a setting with which I was very familiar, it was important that I recognized and addressed the potential influences of researcher bias (Hanson, 1994).

The paradigm that guided this study was interpretivist because I sought to understand active duty military students and interpret their experiences with their persistence and integration into community college. Hanh and Thanh (2015) stated, “interpretivist researchers discover reality through participant’s views, their background, and experiences” (p. 24). The authors further explained a close relationship between the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative methodology since one is a means to collect data, and the other is a methodological approach. Since I used an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative approach, I sought individuals' experiences and perceptions as my primary form of data for this study (Thanh & Thanh).

This study was also guided by social constructivism because the participants' views were generated through open-ended questions and their interpretations of meaning. As such, the context of the participants' life settings or identities provided a background from which I could interpret their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the researcher, I used social constructivism to encourage active duty military students' understanding and interpret their experiences with their persistence and integration at a community college.

Problem Statement

According to Wilson-Cox (2019), institutions fail to understand military student learners' unique experiences on their campus while also providing policies tailored to their inimitable needs. The problem is that many active duty service members are at risk of not persisting through their undergraduate education because institutions lack the support particular to a military student's academic and social needs (Ford & Vignare, 2015). Semer and Harmening (2015) further added a lack of understanding within society about the unique needs of service members in higher education, and as group military personnel earn fewer degrees.

The lack of active duty military student studies is surprising since Stewart (2016) reported that institutions are expanding their services and programs to recruit and retain military students. However, once enrolled, researchers have found that classroom settings are not welcoming or supportive of service members (Fernandez, Merson, Ro, & Rankin, 2019). This is unfortunate because military students are utilizing tuition assistance in record numbers. Still, the enrollment increase comes with considerable responsibility for institutions that are accepting Tuition Assistance (TA) funds (Olsen, 2014). One-stop military student service centers and offices are no longer enough as institutions must ensure cross-campus programs and policy enforcement to ensure full accountability (Mentzer et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, most service members find it hard to identify academic programs that understand their deployment cycles (Borsari et al., 2017). According to Burke and Miller (2017), a service member will most likely relocate every 2-3 years. Additionally, while on active duty, a service member will regularly deploy with six, nine, or 12-month deployment cycles (Wolf, Rinfrette, Elaine, Eliseo-Arras, & Nochajski, 2018). To this end, Borsari et al. (2017) stated, "there is a clear need to offer training to faculty and staff concerning this distinctive need of service members" (p.167).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study was to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at a Virginia community college. The theory guiding this study was Tinto's (1993) student integration theory that emphasizes academic and social integration and provides a framework for examining students' experiences who seek to persist to degree completion. According to Tinto, academic and social institutional experiences are central to student integration and subsequent persistence. Academic integration was defined as when students become attached to the college's intellectual life, while social integration occurred when students create relationships and connections outside of the classroom.

Significance of the Study

This study will be significant because the results will contribute to the literature on active duty learners' academic and social experiences seeking to persist through community college. Additionally, the findings will add to the limited amount of knowledge on this topic and add to plans for the successful degree completion of active service members. Currently, the lions share of military-affiliated student studies has been conducted in the area of veteran students seeking to

persist through community college. In particular, a study by Osborne (2014) suggested that "the current intent of campus support is to serve veterans by implementing programs or an independent veteran's office associated with transitioning to a civilian higher education environment" (p.248).

Additional research by Alschuler and Yarab (2018) added that current research on military-affiliated students has focused on veterans' academic and social experiences and their transition from combat to the classroom. The missing perspective here is research that focuses solely on active duty members' academic and social experiences, along with their integration into college while serving. This study will be significant because it will contribute to the limited literature on active duty military learners' academic and social experiences, specifically with community college persistence. This study addressed the gap between what active duty learners experience when they persist through community college and how they experience integration into student life through Tinto's (1993) theory of integration.

Empirical Significance

Current studies on active duty military students show that military personnel has the skill sets to ensure seamless integration into a college environment; however, the degree completion outcomes remain vague (Cate, 2014). Wertsch (2006) added that military students have adaptabilities that assist with college integration, such as easy recognition of other military students, and they practice extroversion even if their personalities are introverted. Wertsch further reported that these adjustment characteristics were common among military students; however, these traits were not enough to overcome school integration challenges (Berg, 2008; Bradshaw, Sudhinarase, Mmari, & Blum, 2010; Weber & Weber, 2005; Wertsch).

The difficulty of military student integration included gaps in academic learning, disconnection with civilian students, and difficulty assimilating into a new school environment (Berg, 2008; Clever & Segal, 2013; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). School integration, specifically for military students, requires a supportive community and family structure to provide a sense of connectedness to others (Berg; Pollock & Van Reken; Wertsch, 2006)Nevertheless, the literature that currently exists focuses mainly on the problems associated with active duty students' integration into a civilian school after military service. This study will help college administrators, faculty, and support staff to develop system-wide military student strategies and policies for their institutions tailored to active duty students' unique circumstances. Therefore, developing ways to guarantee academic success for military students will promote the engagement of college administrators, staff, and faculty (De La Garza et al., 2016).

Theoretical Significance

This study relied on the existing research and Tinto's (1993) student integration theory that emphasizes academic and social integration, which provides a framework for investigating the experiences of students who seek to persist to degree completion (Wilson, Smith, Lee, & Stevenson, 2013). Tinto points out that student integration into an institution can occur along two dimensions, the academic and the social (Hlinka, 2017). Academic integration happens when students become involved with the college's intellectual life, while social integration occurs when students establish affiliations outside of the classroom (Wilson et al., 2013). To this end, "students who develop a commitment to the institution through academic and social integration experiences are most likely to persist" (Wilson et al., p. 629). *Integration* transpires when service members maintain their military culture and interact with college culture at the

same time. In this study, the theory will be applied qualitatively to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at Virginia community colleges.

Subsequently, describing their academic and social experiences with their institution might increase the chances of degree completion for this student population. Better known as persistence in the world of academia, these experiences have been acknowledged at some two and four-year institutions. Still, the interest has been limited regarding the active duty student group and the effective practices needed to support them (Molina & Morse, 2015). For this study, persistence is defined as the occurrences of students who continue to degree completion (Hlinka, 2017). Tinto's theory is not focused on the exchange between the two parties in hopes one will adapt to the other. Instead, "individuals must accept the norms and values of a group and affiliate with other members of the group to persist as members of the group" (Wilson et al., 2013, p. 629).

Though generally used to examine student persistence in the four-year sector, Tinto's integration framework (1993) is often presumed to be inapplicable to two-year institutions. This is because one of the common elements of the framework is social integration. Many researchers believe social integration is unlikely for students at the two-year level (Karp, Calcagno, Hughes, Jeog, & Bailey, 2008). This assumption is based on a study of their attendance patterns, which suggested that "they attend class on campus but live elsewhere, often work full-time, and have strong familial obligations off-campus— community college students are assumed to lack time to participate in activities, such as clubs, that would facilitate social integration" (Karp et al., 2008, p.1). These patterns are also firmly attributed to the military student. Military personnel's demographics show evidence of nontraditional traits similar to those of students in community colleges: "they are all nontraditional in that they all work full time" (Bibus, 2013, p.6). While

military students exhibit traits similar to the non-traditional student, this does not necessarily indicate the element of social integration is missing from this subgroup.

The definition of social integration has been limited to participation in clubs and activities when it should now include information networks that students develop in the classroom (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2018). Since integration is both academic and social, students who are not able to create a connection with the academic and social subsystems of their institutions are subject to disenrollment (Tinto, 1993). Regarding theoretical significance, this study could identify if post-secondary institutions are deficient when it comes to implementing programs and policies for active duty military student-related needs that could boost persistence. Research has been conducted in the area of veteran students seeking to persist through community college (Cate, 2014); however, few studies exist on the active duty military students attempting to persist through community college.

Practical Significance

The implications of practice will help community college faculty and staff who advise and teach active duty personnel. To this end, this study will help college administrators, faculty, and support staff to develop system-wide strategies for active duty military student success that are tailored to their unique circumstances. Developing ways to guarantee academic success for military students will promote the engagement of college administrators, staff, and faculty (De La Garza et al., 2016). Additionally, future research related to military student students' social systems at community colleges versus a residential college will offer an essential understanding of military students' enrollment experience (Hammond, 2016).

I hope that this study's results will shed light on how a community college setting influences active duty military student persistence, retention, and overall success (Hammond,

2016). If it affects student outcomes, the different perspectives will identify why there is a need to give a voice to the active duty student seeking to persist to degree completion at the community college level. To this end, this study's practical significance is that understanding the beliefs and values of a service member's lived experience can provide a more in-depth thought into those seeking to integrate into a college setting and obtain a degree.

Research Questions

Over 2700 academic institutions are guiding active duty military students toward their educational goals (U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), 2019). To this end, the purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study was to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at a Virginia community college. To examine these academic and social experiences, the following research questions guided this study:

Central Question

The central question that guided this study was: What are the academic and social experiences of active duty military students seeking to persist through a Virginia community college? This question aimed to "uncover the qualitative rather than the quantitative in behavior and experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105). I sought to uncover active duty military community college students' academic and social experiences for this study because there is limited research on this cohort (Olt, 2018). To answer the central question, four sub-questions were developed using Tinto's Integration Theory.

Sub-Question One

What are the motivations/reasons for attending college while on active duty? Previous research indicated that "military students share the risk factors related to other adult learners such as full-time employment, part-time enrollment, delayed entry, and dependents" (De La Garza et

al., 2016, p. 44). The risk factors student bring with them into college will affect their retention. Asking this question helped to offer a detailed look at the experiences of active duty military students. This, in turn, will help the institutions meet their academic and social needs.

Sub-Question Two

How do active duty military students describe their educational persistence? The decision to enroll in college is a personal choice based on differentiating factors (Wheeler, 2013). Subsequently, this question was asked to identify factors that represent trends that colleges can address to retain active duty students.

Sub-Question Three

What types of academic supports do active duty military receive from their college's administration, faculty, and staff? Colleges need to understand the stigma military students face when they enter the classroom after combat. Subsequently, the purpose of this study is to identify those factors that contribute to disengagement and disenrollment (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011).

Sub-Question Four

What types of social supports do active duty military receive from their college's administration, faculty, and staff? Colleges need to understand the stigma military students face when they enter the classroom after combat. Subsequently, the purpose of this study wa to identify those factors that could cause a service member to become or feel socially alienated (Elliott et al., 2011).

Definitions

1. *Acculturation*- occurs "as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups" (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012, p. 10).

2. *Active duty military*- “Full-time duty in the United States' active military service, including active duty or full-time training duty in the Reserve Component” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018, p.7).
3. *Department of Defense Voluntary Education*- The DoD off-duty, VolEd programs constitutes one of the world's most extensive continuing education programs. Each year, approximately 300,000 service members enroll in postsecondary courses leading to associate, bachelor, master, and doctorate degrees. Through an extensive network, Colleges and universities deliver classroom instruction to hundreds of military installations worldwide. Service members are also afforded opportunities to earn college credits for learning that has taken place outside of the traditional classroom (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.)
4. *GoArmyEd*- “GoArmyEd (GAE) is the Army’s Virtual Gateway that supports Active Duty and Army Reserve soldiers, army education officers, and institutions to facilitate all education needs. “All educational practices are available online wherever soldiers have internet connectivity” (Stanford, 2006, p.35).
5. *Installation*- “*installation* is used to refer to the posts, stations, bases, and other specific names for the installations of the various services” (Vance, Polson, & Persyn, 2014, p. 173).
6. *Military-connected student*- “The term *military-connected student* refers to a student who is either a member of the active duty, Reserve, National Guard, or retired military population, or a spouse or primary family member of one of these students” (Sherbert, Thurston, Fishback & Briggs, 2017, p. 199).

7. *Nontraditional student*- Educators and researchers commonly define nontraditional as having one or more of the following characteristics; older than 24 years; not living on campus; working full-time; married or having dependents; seeking occupational or non-degree credentials; enrolled less than full-time; and not fitting the homogeneous characteristics of the institution due to race, ethnicity, gender, or other cohort characteristics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).
8. *Post -9/11 GI Bill* -gives veterans with active duty service on, or after, Sept. 11, 2001, enhanced educational benefits that cover additional educational expenses, provide a living allowance, money for books, and the ability to transfer unused educational benefits to spouses or children. (U. S. Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d).
9. *Prior Learning Assessment (PLA*) - is another important and often overlooked strategy for helping adults progress toward a degree. PLA is the process by which many colleges evaluate for academic credit the college-level knowledge and skills an individual has gained outside of the classroom (or from non-college instructional programs), including employment, military training/service, travel, hobbies, civic activities, and volunteer service. PLA recognizes and legitimizes the often significant learning in which adults have engaged in many parts of their lives (Klein-Collins, 2010).
10. *Tuition Assistance (TA)*- education program created so service members can (1) improve their value to the service; (2) have an opportunity to continue civilian education while in the service; and (3) make profitable use of their spare time" (Anderson, 1991).
11. *Veteran*-Title 38 of the Code of Federal Regulations defines a ***veteran*** as "a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable." (U. S. Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.).

Summary

This chapter provided the backdrop of the persistence issue with active duty military students enrolled at community colleges. Although there has been an increase in military member enrollment in colleges and universities, there has not been an immediate increase in the knowledge of the unique issues relevant to this group (Molina & Morse, 2015). As a result, institutions fail to understand military student learners' experiences on their campuses and lack policies and programs tailored to their unconventional needs. The problem is that many active duty service members are at risk of not persisting through their undergraduate education because institutions lack the support particular to their academic and social needs (Ford & Vignare, 2015).

The purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study was to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at a Virginia community college. This chapter created an understanding of the military's structured learning environment as they simultaneously adapt to college culture. The development of knowledge was accomplished by presenting the background, situation to self, recognizing the problem, purpose statement, the study's significance, the research questions, and terms used throughout the research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A literature review was conducted to create a framework to examine active duty military student educational experiences at the community college level. Surprisingly, literature relevant to active duty military students is very limited. Current research is mostly devoted to easing military veterans' transition from combat to student life (De La Garza et al., 2016). Although research on active serving students is thin, the available studies identify that active duty military students face the same occurrences as other adult learners, including full-time employment, part-time enrollment, delayed entry, and dependents (De La Garza et al., 2016). A literature review will provide a theoretical framework for campus military education programs and literature (if any) relevant to past evaluations done on these programs. Several sources will be reviewed, and several issues will be discussed that concern how community college practices impact enrolled students who are currently serving.

The literature review will begin by forming a link between military-connected students and their prospective benefits. The terms “military” and “veteran” will be defined for the intent of establishing the background, purposes, and differences concerning their educational benefits. This will demonstrate how institutional academic and social hurdles can cause non-persistence for military student learners. This review will also analyze literature that shows community colleges a significant source and access point for service members and how granting course credit for military service is key to retaining service members.

Theoretical Framework

Offering help to active duty personnel attempting to integrate their military and student life is significant because over 325,000 active duty service members are enrolled in

postsecondary courses (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). Therefore, the purpose of this study is will be to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at Virginia community colleges. Tinto's (1993) integration theory will be the guiding theoretical framework for this study and will be explored in this review. Tinto's (1993) student integration theory emphasizes academic and social integration, which provides a framework for investigating the experiences of students who seek to persist to degree completion.

Furthermore, research has also shown that an essential component of Tinto's (1993) theory is student persistence that consists of institutional factors (Southwell, Whiteman, Wadsworth, & Barry, 2016). These institutional factors include faculty and staff. Together these factors play an essential part in a student's "academic success, social learning, perceptions of the supportiveness of their university environment, and ultimately their retention or departure from higher education" (p. 396). Military students encounter unique and problematic situations with their campus community in the areas of credit transfers, Tuition Assistance (TA), and the GI Bill (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2011).

Therefore, making the university enrollment integration process easier for service members is influential in creating complimentary student views of their college environment and retention (Southwell et al., 2016). Aside from using Tinto's (1993) student integration theory to guide the theoretical framework, a comprehensive review of literature pertinent to active duty military personnel and the community college system will also be conducted. In particular, literature related to the importance of social participation, retention, college support, and its influence on complete degree programs will be examined. These findings will align with Tinto's (1993) theory, which suggests that student retention is dependent on academic and social learning provided by faculty, staff, and student organizations. In other words, successful student

retention occurs when students are content with both their academic learning and their social lives in the university environment.

The academic and social constructs of Tinto's (1993) student integration theory will frame this study by providing an understanding of how military students experience these constructs as well as how academic and social experiences influence persistence. Tinto's (1993) theory is a framework that has been applied to multiple studies and settings. Still, this study will add to the literature on this theory by inserting active duty military community college students into the body of knowledge.

Related Literature

A literature review was conducted to create a framework to describe current active duty military student experiences at Virginia community colleges. The following related research will navigate the experiences active military personnel face at community colleges with tuition assistance, military transfer credit, and academic and social experiences that directly affect their persistence to degree completion.

The Benefits of a Community College System

The literature revealed that academic outcomes of military-connected students who attend community colleges are emerging (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). In 2019, the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense (OSD) reported that over 63 % of active duty graduates who earned a credential earned an associate degree (OSD, 2019). Upon reviewing these numbers, it is evident that community colleges have become a critical resource for service member education. According to Gill (2016), community colleges are an attractive educational option for military-affiliated students because of affordability, program choices, and course convenience. Snead, McMurtry, and Baridon (2010) added, "for adult learners who have no experience in a post-

secondary educational setting or been away from school for many years, community colleges offer support services and readiness programs that prepare them for the academic rigors of college-level education" (p. 79). Much literature exists, questioning the intent and quality of community college education. Francis (2018) chronicled a crisis resulting from a lack of academic rigor in the community college classroom. The researcher stated that "community colleges and technical training institutions aim to fulfill their historic mission to bring education to all, including a wave of nontraditional students who have delayed school entry, work full time, attend classes on a part-time basis, or care for dependents at the expense of academic rigor" (p. 26).

Similarly, Curruthers, and Sanford (2018) argued that community college is not a launching pad to four-year institutions but instead manages ambition and distracts students from four-year colleges. Although supporters of community colleges stress the learner's needs, they also recognize most of their student population traditionally have been disparaged from participating in higher education. They highlight offering academic opportunities to all people (Gupton, 2017). The nurturing environment gives off the illusion that two-year college learners are overprotected. However, the fostering setting guarantees student success by boosting student confidence, and community college staff seek to reach his goal by communicating care and empathy through positive support (Turner, 2015). Several studies have examined community college transfer students' attitudes and found that they consistently prefer the community college teaching approach (Walker & Okpala, 2017). The primary reasons stated for their preference include the supportive behaviors and personal attention received from community college faculty in comparison to four-year college faculty. Furthermore, in Virginia, most of their four-year institutions have an articulation agreement with Virginia community colleges that guarantees the

acceptance of students who have completed an associate's degree with a minimum GPA of 2.5 (Virginia Community College System, 2019). The opportunity of guaranteed admission to a four-year institution upon completing an associate's degree is undoubtedly attractive to students who were not competitive directly out of high school.

Historically, the nurturing behaviors, however, have subjected the community college to accusations of "coddling" and "hand-holding" (Mellander & Robertson, 1992, p. 19). Nevertheless, community colleges remain attractive to service members because the vast majority of them have special campus programming for the military student cohort. It has been reported that 66% of two-year public institutions are more likely to have programs specifically designed for the military student (Jones, 2017).

An increase in the military student populations gives colleges and universities both challenges and new opportunities (Brown & Gross, 2011). Addressing these challenges and opportunities will call for a coordinated variety of services, preferably delivered as a one-stop-shop (Heineman, 2016). Supporters propose college-level responses, with cohesive interdepartmental services, preferably located in a precise location (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Heineman, 2016; Sportsman & Thomas, 2015; Stewart, 2014). Strickley (2009) recognized a critical need for students who need support in accessing their financial benefits. In addition, McBain et al. (2012) discovered that even with the enhancement of programs and services, there continues to be a significant problem for military personnel in terms of "social acculturation to a civilian college campus" (p. 24).

Few studies have examined how student services administrators and staff who themselves are not military-connected responded to the swelling number of service members on college campuses (Arminio et al., 2018). However, our country's effort to help military-affiliated

students is overshadowed by an inadequate comprehension of this distinct student population (Cate, 2014). *Military friendly* refers to campuses' intentional efforts to identify and remove barriers to veterans' educational goals and create a smooth transition from military to college life (Strickley, 2009). Since educational benefits available to service members have varying guidelines for use and eligibility requirements, students will have a considerable requisite for support in knowing which forms to complete and how to access and use their benefits. Furthermore, military experiences distance these students from their much younger classmates; and for some, the effects of service-connected conditions such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and depression can impact concentration and memory skills in ways that even the students themselves may not understand (Student Affairs Leadership Council, 2009).

Once educators grasp military culture and lifestyle at the undergraduate level, approaches can be established to aid military-connected students' college experiences (Sherbert et al., 2017). The number of military-connected students enrolling in community colleges has increased dramatically in the past decade, and this trend is expected to continue. Past research has focused on examining factors that contribute to the academic success of community college students (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). After World War II, the President's Commission on Higher Education released *Higher Education for American Democracy*, also known as the Truman Commission Report of 1946. The report sparked the founding of a system of public community colleges that would charge little or no tuition, function as cultural hubs, be extensive in their program offerings while highlighting civic duties, and serve the community where they were located.

The community college played an integral role, perhaps more extensive than any other higher education segment, in the postwar demographic expansion of American institutions of higher education (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Many community colleges worldwide have started programs with a military-specific focus (Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011). Some states, Virginia in particular, have implemented groundbreaking programs for military personnel. However, these programs' efficacy is currently unknown since not enough data has been gathered on these programs' outcomes. Consequently, the amount of military personnel enrolling in community colleges has grown drastically in the past ten years, and the upswing is expected to continue.

Research by Williams-Klotz and Gansemer-Topf (2017) concluded that factors such as deployment, academic preparedness, and family responsibilities would impact their academic success. Additional information on reasons that affect military-connected community college students' academic achievement, including staff and faculty's duties in their student experience, is needed (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Community colleges are known for attracting non-traditional students. Having a sense of academic preparedness when entering college is a predictor of an active duty student's persistence once they start attending college (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Toph, 2017). According to Vice Virginia Community College System (VCCS) Chancellor Morrissey (2017), "the VCCS is committed to making Virginia the best state for postsecondary credential completion for our military students and veterans" (p.1).

Recently, six of Virginia's 23 community colleges garnered high marks in the annual *Military Friendly Schools* survey conducted by VIQTORY (Virginia Community College System, 2019). The Military Friendly Schools survey is the oldest and most thorough evaluation

of college and university commitment in aiding military and veteran learners (Militaryfriendly.com, 2019).

Research by Evans, Pellegrino, and Hoggan (2015) suggested that “for many community colleges, the prospect of devising broad-reaching, tailored, and effective support programs for military veterans is daunting, particularly as budgets are continually stretched thin” (p. 47). Community colleges are rapidly becoming an ideal starting point for service members starting or returning to schools because of open enrollment guidelines, affordable tuition rates, and flexible course schedules (Rumann, 2010). A further attribute of community colleges that draw military personnel is diversity, as most students are categorized as "nontraditional" (Barnett, 2011; Rumann et al., 2010).

Navigating Community College Bureaucracy

Over 43% of military-connected students will choose to start their educational journey at public 2-year institutions, also known as community colleges (Wheeler, 2013). The military-connected population is defined as persons on active duty, reservists, National Guard members, veterans, and their dependents (Molina & Morse, 2015). Like most first-time college students, many military-connected students enter higher education, not knowing what to expect and are naïve to the new rules utilized to navigate higher education (Wyner, 2014). These new rules are also known as college bureaucracy (Gunderman & Lynch, 2018). Not only are military learners naïve to the practices used to navigate higher education, but they are also naïve to the rules needed to utilize their tuition assistance (Gibbs, Lee, & Ghanbari, 2019).

Evans et al. (2015) investigated the pitfalls of college bureaucracy and concluded that “navigating the governmental and institutional bureaucracies can be daunting” (p. 49). Likewise, to foster better relationships between community colleges and military students, studies have

hinted that institutions must offer support on many levels. Institutional military student support is vital because most colleges and universities educate a military student population. Research by Burnett and Segoria (2009) suggested that military personnel's educational support shapes American universities. Cook and Kim (2009) added that departments solely dedicated to the military population, also known as student military affairs, are now more commonplace than ever. According to a 2014 report on military education by the National Center for Educational Statistics (Queen & Lewis, 2014), 96% of institutions registered military service members, veterans, or their dependents.

This kind of concentrated support is necessary because military personnel who attend college and universities differ from traditional college students in several ways (Bryan, Bryan, Hinkson, Bichrest, & Ahern 2014). They have distinctive abilities and experiences gained through their military career and set them apart from other students who enter college right after high school. To this point, institutions of higher learning differ in their preparedness for this population. Specifically, in terms of accommodating military personnel, they are called to training or deployment (Wilson & Smith, 2012). For example, in Virginia, the Virginia Community College Systems (VCCS) has a mandate that their community colleges have programs and policies in place that support a military student's unpredictable lifestyle. Programs of importance include those that apply military training toward course credit, policies that support course completion, and tuition reimbursement if called to training or deployment. To this point, when a student's education is interrupted by training or mobilization, the institution should make every possible effort to allow the student to return to where they left off (Thomason, 2013)—allowing students to return to their academic track as close as possible to the point before their mobilization mitigates dropout rates for this population (Thomason).

Most institutions are unprepared for military student mobilization, as evidenced by a report by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) that indicated only 36% of higher learning institutions have plans to improve completion rates and retention for active duty military students. As a result, most service members find it hard to find an educational program that understands and fits their lifestyle (Borsari et al., 2017). Indeed, each student is unique, and there is a wide range of characteristics to comprehend when attempting to "increase the enrollment and success of student service and the service member" (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014, p. 39).

Like many non-traditional students, current service members face challenges associated with returning to school after time away from formal education (Sherbert et al., 2017). Returning to a college campus, or facing college for the first time, can be overwhelming, especially for working adults who have grown accustomed to working within ordered structures and find themselves absorbed in the unpredictable world of post-secondary education (Cox, 2019).

A frequent barrier for military students, like many adults, is finding the balance between work, family, and academic commitments (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). The military helps individuals fine-tune the skills and confidence to help them plan for success, overcome challenges, and finish commitments—characteristics vital to college completion (Callahan & Jarrett). However, many of these students "discover that they need help in translating these abilities and applying them when adding education to an already busy life" (p. 39). Military service members' decision making includes adhering to rules authorized by superiors; in higher education, questioning rules is often urged, something those used to a military environment

involving strict obedience to, and immediate compliance with, written and verbal orders find challenging (Jones, 2017).

Additionally, service members have challenges that many first-generation students face, like not knowing where to go to for help, what questions to ask, or how to "advocate for themselves within an unfamiliar and complex system" (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014, p. 40). Apprehensions of student military members as they arrive on campus include the following: access to educational benefits; acknowledgment of extensive mastery-based training, recognition of multiple commitments and obligations, appreciation of the realities of military service, and availability of support for hidden and visible disability (Hamrick & Rumann, 2012; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2010; Steele et al., 2011). Furthermore, they often need assistance with understanding the language of higher education, similar to when they needed instruction to understand the military's acronyms and jargon (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014).

Differences in the expectations of the student and the institution are also typical (Jones, 2017). The military and most college campuses' social standards can differ, and often civilian students, faculty, and administrators have little understanding of the depth and range of military experience and training (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). The awareness of the differences in social standards between the military and college campuses has resulted in a few studies conducted on military student support services (Abdul-Alim, Pennamon, & Savage, 2017; Cox, 2019; Elfman, 2018; Hope, 2018; Pavlick, 2019). Jones argued that of military student support, pure administrative bureaucracy accounted for much of participants' frustrations; it was not malice that made navigating their entrance into higher education difficult; it was red tape and antiquated procedures. On the surface, it appears that the community college from Jones' study, like many institutions, was unprepared for the massive influx of student veterans. The unpreparedness of

two-year institutions is troubling because emerging military-connected student research shows that ineffective or inconsistent advising and faculty/staff interactions can have an adverse effect on student-military success (Cook & Kim, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Radford, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

The majority of higher education employees know little about the military or veterans (Alschuler & Yarab, 2016), which suggests a possible reason why military personnel report problems with many different interactions on campus, including those with civilian students, faculty, and staff (Griffen & Gilbert, 2015) Negative interactions with college personnel are disheartening since active duty military personnel choose to attend community colleges because these institutions have historically offered entry to higher education for people who would not otherwise be able to go to college (De La Garza et al., 2016).

It has been documented that 43% of military undergraduates have selected public, two-year institutions as their institution of choice because of its open admissions criteria (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Community college enrollment numbers significantly contrast to the 18% attending four-year institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). As academic institutions pursue avenues to appeal to military students, they struggle to support this population once they appear on campus adequately. However, research shows that colleges and universities are not essentially ready for this flood of military students (American Council on Education, 2009; Rumann & Hammrick, 2010).

The number of military students enrolling in community colleges has increased over the last decade, and this trend is expected to continue (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). Community colleges have responded to the influx of military-connected students by developing support structures and resources. Today, 94% of public two-year institutions have professionals

dedicated to serving this population of students, and 58% have student military or veteran organizations on campus (Queen & Lewis, 2014). Evans, Pellegrino, and Hoggans (2015) stated that "although there are dozens of financial, academic, and emotional support systems available through the government, academic institutions, and non-profit organizations, there is little evidence of the effectiveness of any of the supports offered" (p. 47).

The lack of evidence of these supports' effectiveness is alarming since the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has made a multi-million-dollar investment to give service members educational opportunities to have questions raised about the outcomes gained from this expenditure (Vardalis, 2013). In 2015, the DoD reported that active duty military personnel used more than 1 billion dollars in funding through the DoD Voluntary Education Program (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2015). To ensure financial accountability, President Obama signed an executive order calling for institutions receiving payments from military or veteran education benefits to provide outcomes data on service members and veterans, along with providing them added educational assistance (Heineman, 2016). Specifically, DoD and congressional committees are aggressively questioning the return on investment of the military TA program (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2015).

Given the financial importance of this student population, regarding college enrollment and taxpayer spending, there has been a lack of focus on the experiences and educational/ academic scholarship outcomes of active duty military students (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2015). Unfortunately, higher education stakeholders may not have the essential information to adequately support this growing student demographic (Jones, 2017). When examining the experiences of military-connected students and ways to create an accurate

narrative on these students, it is extremely important to guarantee that support systems aim at those who need them and policies oblige "the diverse characteristics of this growing population" (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014, p. 7).

Military Student Programs and Policies

During 2011–2012, nearly 1.1 million military students were enrolled in undergraduate education, an increase from 914,000 in 2007–2008 (U.S. Department of Education (DoE), 2016). Today, 928,000 military personnel are enrolled in post-secondary education, a slight dip from the 2012 numbers (U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), 2019). Often institutions struggle to define cohesive and dependable ways to measure their military population of students. Furthermore, some college staff and faculty cannot easily distinguish active duty from a veteran, reserve personnel, or dependents (Molina & Morse, 2015). The Department of Defense's Voluntary Education program (VolEd) allows educational opportunities for off-duty military personnel and their families (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). The VolEd department oversees programs such as Joint Services Transcripts, high school completion/diploma programs, Tuition Assistance (TA) Postsecondary/Certificate programs, and the college credit examination program.

The mission statement of VolEd is to "champion policies, programs, and partnerships that enable access to quality post-secondary educational opportunities, empower informed service member decision-making, shape meaningful personal and professional pathways, and drive military student success in higher education" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019, p. 6). However, the American Council on Education (ACE) has retired the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) Degree Network System (DNS) and Career Technical Education (CTE) as of March 29, 2019. The transfer protections will be added to the DoD MOU (Department of Defense, 2019).

Unfortunately, military-affiliated students report their most common complaint concerning communication with school staff was a deficiency of devoted military assistance from the college. Even though the institution may have a veterans' services office, help was only available once in a while (American Council on Education, 2018). Many community colleges have signed MOU's to have satellite offices and offer courses on military installations to combat this issue. Community college military sites' goal is to provide a dedicated person to assist at the service members' convenience during hours suitable to their work schedule. Even with institutional staffing on installations, reasons for military student dissatisfaction varied, but common factors included a lack of knowledge about military-related benefits. To this end, offices are only dedicated to military learners; generally, military student support offices are now standard at academic institutions (Gibbs et al., 2019).

Whether virtually or in person, these offices are crossing points for financial benefits delivered to the college and repeatedly describe their chief mission as assistance for academic and social needs (Kessler, 2018). Research into the efficacy of the financial, academic, and educational support mechanisms with this population is sketchy and, when conducted, mostly qualitative. However, many studies are planned soon (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Mentzer et al. (2015) suggested, "academic and social supports provided to the military student population received little attention in research literature" (p. 1). Several schools offer programs, classes, and even advising offices at military installations both abroad and domestically. The advantage of providing support and courses on base is that it allows students to access both in a manner that better fits their schedule (Evans et al., 2015).

College programs offered on military installations are extensive and global, with over 200 education centers that offer classes for "basic academic skills, high school completion, and

general educational development (GED) diplomas, college credits, licensing, and certification" (Vance et al., 2014, p. 173). Practically all military installations have a base education center that offers educational services to military personnel and their dependents. These centers are operated by education counselors who help refer these learners to education programs that fit their goals and needs. In addition, a selected few institutions have satellite offices housed at these education centers and abide by an installation MOU. DoD Instruction No. 1322.25, *Voluntary Education Programs*, created "the requirement for a memorandum of understanding (MOU) from all educational institutions providing educational programs through the DoD TA (Tuition Assistance) program" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019, p. 1). Currently, over 2700 academic institutions have signed the MOU. There are over 390 DoD military education specialists and professional counselors globally to help guide active duty students toward their educational goals (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). This expansion of the DoD MOU was implemented after the Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on the DoD Tuition Assistance (TA) program suggested that the department improve its management of schools receiving military TA funds.

Accordingly, a DoD MOU requirement is incorporated in this rule, "which is designated not only to improve departmental oversight but also to account for our service members' unique culture requirements" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2014, p. 2). The DoD MOU intends to form a partnership between the DoD and learning institutions to better the educational opportunities while keeping each institution's central educational standards' integrity. This partnership guarantees that a quality, effective program exists that helps service members reach their educational goals.

In addition to convenient support offices, institutions must ensure affordability. Today, nearly 85% of institutions offer in-state tuition to active duty military students. In Virginia, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) mandates that its public colleges offer in-state tuition to military personnel stationed in Virginia or a state contiguous to Virginia (Kentucky, North Carolina, West Virginia, District of Columbia, and Maryland). Students outside of these parameters are granted the military contract rate, which charges the same credit per hour as the in-state tuition rate (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2019).

Tuition Assistance (TA) vs. The Post-9/11 GI Bill

The primary connection between the United States military and higher education is a long and productive one (Jones, 2017). Nearly 74 % of active duty military and veterans replying to a 2014 survey stated that "receipt of educational benefits" was either an "important" or "very important" reason for enlisting in the armed forces (Gonzalez, Miller, Buryk, & Wenger, 2015, p. 1). Research has indicated that educational mandates, such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, TA, and educational reenlistments, motivate young men and women to join the military and participate in college work (Jacobson, 2017).

Several soldiers recount becoming interested in attending college either before entering the military, as part of the military promotion, or in anticipation of transitioning to civilian life (Wilson, Smith, Lee, & Stevenson, 2013). Every program has its eligibility requirements, guidelines on funding totals and justifiable uses, and time restrictions by which benefits must be used. Still, there is no amalgamated resource of information that service members or veterans, nor college faculty and staff, can use to help decide which program is the most fitting to meet the student's specific educational goal (Buryk, Trail, Gonzalez, Miller, & Friedman, 2015; Martorell & Bergman, 2013).

A study conducted by Bonura and Lovald (2015) asserted that institutions that offer education to military populations need first to understand the procedures and regulations delivered by the DoD, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and other military organizations like the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC).

The general influence of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and TA on military student enrollment at colleges and universities will remain a work in progress over the next couple of years. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2013), nearly five million post-9/11 service members will transition away from the military by 2020. One can research the effects of the previous adaptations of the bill on prior veteran students as a means of forecasting the type of increase the current student veterans will foster on post-secondary enrollments (Wheeler, 2013). Legislated in 2008 and executed in late 2009, Congress introduced the Post-9/11 GI Bill. This program extended the present Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) program to include complete coverage for college tuition expenses, including stipends for books and housing costs depending on the veteran's circumstances (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2018).

The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 gives eligible military service members and veterans increased funding for post-secondary education. These financial supports include a housing allowance, stipend for books and supplies, and full payment of their tuition and fees (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). When equated to prior educational programs for service members, the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill is the most financially generous educational program ever offered to veterans (Jones, 2017). Since its enactment, this program has provided educational benefits to over 773,000 veterans and their family members for a total of over $20 billion in benefits, including graduate and undergraduate degrees and vocational training (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). The authorization of the Post-9/11 GI Bill

coupled with the continued withdrawal of military service members from warzones in Afghanistan and Iraq has sparked a significant increase in the number of veterans and active military making use of their educational benefits in the U.S. postsecondary institutions (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015).

Since being enacted in 2009, the Post-9/11 GI Bill has provided over $53 billion in education support for over 1.4 million veterans and their families (Worley, 2015). On the other hand, TA is a military-sponsored program covering military members' tuition for college classes during their time on active duty (Military One Source, 2018). A report for SOC by Snead et al. (2010) documented that "enlisted personnel consistently answer that the opportunity to get a college education along with the funds to pay for it is one of their top three reasons for entering military service" (p. 79). Also, the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense Voluntary Education (OSD) reported that 376,759 service members enrolled in 736,000 undergraduate courses using TA in Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2019).

Tuition assistance (TA) is available at $4,500 at the beginning of each fiscal year (the program regenerates itself every October, when the fiscal year re-starts). The substantial dollar amount allows service members to take six courses while using federal TA per semester (Ryan, 2011). However, "there is one thing to remember: tuition assistance is a privilege, not a right" (p. 88). According to the *GoArmyEd* (GAE) (2015), TA, unlike the Post-9/11 G. I. Bill, has a minimum Grade Point Average (GPA) requirement of 2.0 (C-) to retain TA eligibility. Research completed by the National Defense Research Institute (NDRI) argues that the TA program is part of a series of quality-of-life efforts developed to make military service more attractive to youth and urge them to remain in the military (Steele et al., 2011). The current TA policy requires an enlisted service member to serve for one year after completing their training requirement before

using TA (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). The exception is the Army who lifted the one-year requirement on June 29, 2018.

If more service members tapped into TA when on active duty, they would have more funds toward furthering their education when they tap into their Post-911 GI Bill upon retirement (Jones, 2017). This is the overall premise of TA; service members can take college courses up to a per-credit amount until they have reached their fiscal year cap without it affecting their future GI Bill benefits. Through FY 2018, TA users attended 1,839 colleges and utilized 477million dollars (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019).

There was a decrease in students attending private schools, dipping from 80% to 68% percent (32% for profit, 36% non-profit). However, the private institutions' loss was the public institutions' gain, with the public sector welcoming 34% of TA users to their campuses (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). It is important to note that, although 1,169 public schools are accepting TA, more military personnel are opting to attend the 669 private institutions approved to receive TA funding. This can be attributed to private sector schools granting more credit for military experience than public institutions.

The G. I. Bill was one of the first public mandates that gave funds to individuals for college (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The model set by the GI Bill's funding of individuals would later serve as a guide for federal student grants, such as the Pell Grant program (Roach, 1997). The difference between the new public programs and the first GI Bill was that the GI Bill was not based on merit or need; anyone who served in the armed forces was eligible for the GI Bill. When one sees an advertisement to join the armed forces, the GI Bill is the highlighted incentive (Edwards, 2015). Edwards adds, "several post-secondary institutions have seen a significant enrollment surge thanks to the new 51-billion-dollar GI Bill that took effect in 2009"

(p.6). Due to this increase, Miller (2015) found that an academic advisor's role will grow drastically with military enrollment.

To this end, there is a demand for college faculty and staff also to become experts in military-affiliated education benefits (Queen & Lewis, 2014). Consequently, ill advising a student on using their military-connected benefits can lead to financial woes for the student and the institution (Heineman, 2016). On the other hand, most military-connected students know they have access to military educational benefits; however, they may lack knowledge about the complex processes required to access the funding (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014). Understanding of how to utilize TA, in general, has become extremely important as most branches of the military have moved to online portals for the processing of tuition assistance. Today, various information is presented through accessible databases such as the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), GI Bill® Comparison Tool, Tuition Assistance DECIDE, and College Navigator (Molina & Morse, 2015).

For example, the Army education TA process for active duty soldiers is gathered cohesively in a virtual gateway called Go Army Ed. This portal allows soldiers to "manage education records, college enrollment, testing, counseling/support, and educational benefits" (Wilson et al., 2013, p. 635). Thus, higher education institutions have an opportunity to provide meaningful information to service members and veterans about the cost and quality of institutions, so federal educational benefits are used efficiently (American Council on Education, 2012; Executive Order No. 13607, 2012). Subsequently, the first step in addressing the unique needs of active duty military students becoming familiar with their benefits. It is no longer acceptable for faculty and staff to simply understand the ins and outs of a degree program at colleges with a massive military population (Stone, 2017).

College Credits for Military Training

One method of assisting military-connected students is acknowledging credit for prior learning from military service (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014). When service members decide which college to attend, they often prefer to attend an institution that will give them course credit for their military experience (Mohammadimehr, 2016). An increasing number of state legislatures promote the acknowledgment of military training and experiences. Nonetheless, countless postsecondary institutions fall outside these states, are not covered by the legislation, or fail to apply the recommendations. Consequently, active duty military students have conveyed that military credit transfer is inept, nontransparent, and frequently results only in a small number of transfer credits from military experience (Cook & Kim, 2009).

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) collected data from 62,475 students at 48 post-secondary institutions and found Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) students had better academic outcomes, particularly regarding graduation rates and persistence than other non-PLA students. More than 56% of PLA students earned a post-secondary degree, whereas only 21% of non-PLA students did so (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2010). If an institution cannot successfully translate military credit to course credit that applies to their degree, students are squandering time and money (Sutton, 2018). A vast majority of military-connected students can transfer credits toward their degree programs (Queen & Lewis, 2014). Though 93% of two-year public institutions award credit for military experience, there are not any consistent policies among institutions, and the processes of applying the military credit to one's degree can be complicated.

Reviewing military training and college credit experience can be complicated for several reasons, including deviations in military occupation between service branches and inadequate

background information about military educational paradigms by college administrators (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009). Understanding recommendations are often made at the discretion of "academic units, further contributing to a patchwork of policies and procedures" (The Military Family Research Institute, 2015, p.1). Unfortunately, this kind of academic experience can lead military-connected students to believe the institution disrespects/does not value their prior experiences. Service members reported becoming interested in attending college either before entering the military as part of a military promotion or in anticipation of transitioning to civilian life (Wilson et al., 2013). Most soldiers enroll in some college while serving, suggesting that many soldiers experience college for the first time through their military lens.

Chen (2017) found that most adult learners named credit for prior learning policies as more important than small class size or financial aid availability when choosing a college. Consequently, incorporation of PLA into wide and varied college curriculum may provide the pathway and acknowledgment of college-level and creditworthy learning that will create higher graduation rates and faster paths for active military and veteran student populations (Bergman & Herd, 2016). As a guide for colleges, the American Council on Education (ACE) works together with the DoD to examine military training. Many colleges already offer credit for prior learning, most of which are examined through the ACE or the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (Boerner, 2013**)**. Additionally, ACE discovered that 62 % of colleges and universities evaluated offer some kind of program or service for military-affiliated students on their campuses (McBain et al. 2012).

For the Navy, Army, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, these ACE credit recommendations are administered officially via Joint Services Transcripts (JST). The JST

delivers documented verification to colleges and universities of professional military education, training, and occupation experiences garnered by service members and veterans (Military OneSource, 2018). Additionally, the JST translates military experience into college credit. This awarding of prior learning credits for military students goes back to World War II when ACE first translated military training to college credit (Boerner, 2013**)**. Since then, the practice has expanded with 2,000 colleges and universities that accept military training as a form of credit (American Council on Education, 2012).

The Air Force credit administration is different as they vet their military training through Air University or the Community College of the Air Force (CCAF). CCAF was founded in 1972 and is the largest multi-campus community college globally (Military OneSource, 2018). CCAF is considered an accredited institution that provides transcript services to Air Force personnel and associate degrees in applied science (Military One Source). Regardless of the method, the practice of awarding credit for military experience has been beneficial for service members who have military occupation specialty (MOS) or training courses in intricate fields. As a result, there should be substantial faculty review by the college (Sutton, 2018).

It is also essential to note that credit recommendation does not indicate that credit will transfer as procedures differ by state and institutions. Olt (2018) reported that colleges are free to "accept or reject the credit recommendations on both the JST and Community College of the Air Force transcripts" (p. 2409). Subsequently, colleges should have a qualified staff member on campus to review military credit for the service member (Sutton, 2018). Credit awarded for military experience is significant for service members seeking placement into STEM programs, particularly technology and medicine (Sikes et al., 2018). Otherwise, the military personnel who have classroom and on-the-job military training in jobs as varied as medics, IT specialists,

mechanics, and communications technicians, take college courses—at "considerable cost in time and money"— obligating them to duplicate lessons already learned through their military experiences (Sikes et al., p. 189). Sutton (2017) found that if an institution cannot successfully translate their student military credit to course credit that applies to their degree, those students are losing time and money. Service members have reported that they must be awarded credit for the military training they received in basic training beyond electives in physical education or health (Olt, 2018).

In response to this, some states, Virginia in particular, have implemented groundbreaking programs for military personnel that offer statewide credit recommendations for military-connected students. The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) has launched an online tool that will allow students to upload their Joint Services Transcript to automatically see how many academic credits their work experience could translate into more than 1,700 community college programs at Virginia's 23 community colleges. "Credits2Careers (C2C) means Virginia Community Colleges are the only college system in the nation with this comprehensive, patent-pending tool," said Carlos Hopkins, Virginia's Secretary of Veterans and Defense Affairs (Virginia Community College System, 2017, p. 1). "The Credits2Careers online tool will make it easier than ever before for our men and women in uniform to find a career path to transition from their service to civilian life" (Virginia Community College System, 2017, p. 1). The C2C portal, launched in 2017, will save individuals time, money, and hassle as they look for an accelerated way into degree programs.

Since many service members have often received academic credit for military courses during their military careers, they do not want to repeat those courses (Allen, Billings, Green, Lujan, & Armstrong, 2012). Whereas these recommendations help determine credit

transferability, they can also become tricky as the "system of review" is still not very well comprehended by academia. Consequently, the lack of understanding can cause hesitancy and struggle to honor ACE credit recommendations (Allen et al., 2014, p. 476). Furthermore, there is a difference in accreditation between the CCAF and the JST (Allen et al., 2014). The CCAF is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and grants semester hour (SH) credit for the military course completion and experience. At the same time, the JST applies credit recommendations from ACE.

A benchmark with many long-term and short-term opportunities for military personnel in education. When on active military service, "specific leadership, military strategy, and values orientation tiered courses are required for enlisted promotions, all were contributing to their military perspectives and career" (Allen et al., 2014, p. 476). For example, since 2001, over 2.7 million service members have deployed in support of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (McCarthy, 2018). According to McClain, Moore, and Hites (2019), "these personnel included numerous expertly trained medics, corpsmen, and health care specialists working in combat and humanitarian efforts" (p. 1). These service members should have no issues converting their military medical experience to course credit when seeking acceptance into a collegiate medical program.

Socialization and Active Service Member Identity on Campus

Vacchi and Berger (2014) suggested that "undergraduate socialization to college is a weak outcome of the college experience, particularly among those who are socialized to other cultures" (p. 121). Military experiences shape military students during college attendance, with socialization to the military persisting as a component of student-service member identity. According to Brim (1966), socialization is "the process by which persons acquire the knowledge,

skills, and dispositions that make them more or less effective members of their society" (p. 3). Most military students enrolling for the first time as civilian students have already experienced college as a distance education student and a part-time student. Therefore, college leaders need to be mindful of these experiences as they work to acculturate military students to a college campus. Soldiers attending college view college work through a military-values, mission-focused lens (Wilson & Smith, 2012). Gloria Edwards (2015) conducted a study that found military service members enter the military through training. In addition, military officers become commissioned officers after finishing military service academy, officer training school, or a Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program.

The key point of Edward's research is that the training is conducted through a structured learning environment. Through this structured learning environment, service members learn military-specific socially acceptable customs, values, and beliefs. So the active duty member in school is simultaneously adopting military and school culture. Bridges 'transition theory should examine the transitioning military to new duty stations while being actively enrolled in school in light of this duality. Jennifer Johnson's (2016) study on bridges transition further offers that positive academic experiences, coupled with teachers, peers, and parents' support, often cultivate a science predisposition.

Furthermore, because of the nature of active service, these students have generally attended numerous colleges as they transfer from one duty station to another (Arminio et al., 2018). When military leaders, most importantly unit commanders, expect soldiers to attend civilian schools and to excel, service members are more likely to embrace this value and complete civilian education as needed (Wilson, 2014). When military personnel attends college with civilian students, many view the civilian students as unfocused and undisciplined. At the

same time, service members see the military as the institutional affiliation where they learned to see life in mission terms (Wilson & Smith, 2012; Wilson et al., 2013). College professionals will find that answering the *why* questions are particularly important for soldiers. Why do I need to take this class? Why should I attend this event? Why is it important to become engaged on campus? As the student services professional answers the question, the military student will match their life mission's response and determine whether there is alignment. Showing military students how campus life fits their life mission is critical for the student support professional (Adams, Lee, & Holden, 2015).

Some service members exit the military with traumatic brain injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder, or other disabilities. Still, some are dealing with these injuries while actively serving (Crabtree-Nelson & DeYoung, 2017). Student support professionals and faculty members must remember that some active duty students integrate into civilian college life with such injuries. The literature on the socialization of active duty personnel is limited because, while necessary, no study has compared topics such as PTSD symptom paths of current service members with veterans (Shirvani, Reed, & Clingan, 2017). As previously mentioned, some special considerations as military students attempt to reintegrate into society after deployment are factors such as depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and even resilience (Shackelford, Smith, Farrell, & Neils-Strunjas, 2019).

Shackelford et al. further indicated that "the impact of these factors on academic success is not fully understood but is important for rehabilitation professionals, student advisors, and counselors" (p. 35). Morrison-Beedy and Rossiter (2018) added, "deployments for U.S. service members are six to twelve months depending on the branch of service and military occupation code and many service members have deployed multiple times" (p. 176). Another important

note for faculty and staff is to develop opportunities to recognize their military population as a means of establishing their institution as military-friendly (Morrison-Beedy & Rossiter).

Morrison-Beedy and Rossiter (2018) discovered that the best individual to provide educational assistance for the military population is one "who can talk both the language of academia and the military" (p. 175). Moreover, Morrison-Beedy and Rossiter suggested this liaison should desire to assist those who serve to be successful. Elliot et al. (2011) found that war trauma predicted a service member's sense of belonging on campus or that led to alienation feelings. Since higher learning institutions' culture is somewhat different from the military culture, service members encounter several college obstacles (Smith, Vilhauer, & Chafos, 2017). A common theme in mental health issues for military personnel is their struggle to integrate or reintegrate with a campus community (Bonar, 2016). Military students are inclined to underuse campus counseling services in contrast to other classifiable groups. (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2014).

In 2015, "59% of active duty, National Guard, or reserve service members concurrently enrolled as college students reported that their institutions met their current need" (Bonar, 2016, p. 42). Bonar then advised that colleges and universities understand the needs, culture, and vulnerabilities of service members. A law mandated by the Department of Education requires the service member to come back to school, "where they left off, without penalty" (Jackson, 2016, p. 18). So, service members called to training or deployment should withdraw from courses and return to school without drawbacks.

The enforcement of this law started in 2010 and gave the military personnel up to five years to return to the institution. Blaauw-Hara (2016) discovered that previous military socialization has a significant influence on the college experience. Military personnel students

may be reluctant to pursue relationships with faculty and staff. However, they are conditioned to adhere to their commanders' orders and have a strong realization of loyalty and commitment (Demers, 2013). Studies have indicated that when equated to civilian students, military students have added mental health effects which stem from the stress of military life (e.g., De Pedro, Astor, Gilreath**,** Benbenishty, & Berkowitz, 2018); however, Mentzer et al. (2015) suggested, "academic and social supports provided to the military student population received little attention in research literature" (p. 1). Of specific need are studies that examine the academic and social support offered to military learners and how the intersection of these components affect student persistence (Ford & Vignaire, 2015). Early in persistence studies, academic, social, and financial support were recognized as essential structures to keep students in college (Tinto, 1993). Additionally**,** active military students can become deployed at any time, further complicating their college studies (Hope, 2018). Military deployment entails three main phases: pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment, all of which pose distinctive challenges (Rossen &, Carter, 2012).

Rossen and Carter (2012) further reported that "post-deployment has become particularly problematic given the increase in the number of soldiers returning from military duty with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or brain injury" (p. 5). Recent studies by Astor and Benbenishty (2014) have introduced results that showed accommodating institutions could aid in protecting students' post-deployment feelings such as those of alienation, anxiety, depression, and school failure, yet for schools to become "protective" environments for their military student population they must first be aware these needs exist. (Astor, De Pedro, Gilreath, Esqueda, & Benbenishty, 2013; De Pedro et al., 2011).

Deployment is when a service member is sent overseas to carry out a job or mission for a natural disaster, war, or training (U.S. Department of Defense Educational Opportunities Directorate, n.d.). An added challenge that military personnel face is transferring from one duty station to another (Cole, 2016). According to the *Military Times* (2015), a service member will have a permanent change of stations (PCS) every 36- or 48-months. Military-friendly schools can offer further support by uniting with the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) Degree Network System. This association gives educational opportunities for degree achievement to active duty students who often experience PCS (McGovern, 2012).

Military-friendly institutions should have liaisons on staff capable of guiding military students through their integration/re-integration's everyday challenges. Moreover, having on-campus resources like military-specific student services centers are beneficial tools for military learners. Providing these services, military-friendly colleges will be better equipped to offer support that will ease the integration process into academia (McGovern).

Summary

Presently, few qualitative studies have examined the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at Virginia community colleges. Creating studies that describe active duty military students' experiences is important because there is currently insufficient accommodation for those actively serving. The military student is a distinctive and orderly member of the student population with needs contrasting with the traditional learner. Subsequently, the proper accommodation of military and veteran students at colleges and universities has been a topic of interest in the research world for years. Nevertheless, most of the research explores the veteran experience. As of result, the lack of proper student services for the active duty population has led to student dissatisfaction, improper utilization of TA benefits, and

low retention. This research review sought to analyze current literature on active duty military students' academic and social experiences seeking degree completion. Further research will deepen the knowledge pool in this vital area. This study examined the academic and social experiences of active duty military students seeking to persist through Virginia community colleges.

Recent data pinpoints the significance of having a better awareness of the experiences of military-connected college students. For example, Molina and Morse (2015) suggested that "participant comments centered on the idea that military-connected college students are often benchmarked against measures of success (e.g., three-year attainment rates for associate degree programs and six-year graduation rates for bachelor's degree programs) that may not sufficiently reflect their enrollment behaviors and diverse educational aspirations" (p. 1). However, these programs' efficacy is currently unknown since not enough data have been gathered on the outcomes.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study was to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at a Virginia community college. Chapter three of this study will provide the research design, the participant selection process, and the research site. Additionally, the research procedures, including detailed descriptions of the data collection and analysis methods, are addressed and the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness are described. This chapter closes with a discussion of this study's ethical considerations and a summary of the chapter.

Design

This research used a qualitative method because it described the academic and social experiences that influenced active duty military students seeking to persist through Virginia community colleges. A qualitative inquiry was the most suitable for this study because the researcher sought to identify a phenomenon or an "object" of human experience (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, a qualitative method was most appropriate for this study because individuals were examined in their natural setting. The researcher was the primary instrument, and several methods were used to collect data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Phenomenological research has been described as beginning "with wonder at what gives itself and how something gives itself. It can only be pursued when surrendering to a state of wonder" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). This human experience may be any phenomenon such as insomnia, being left out, anger, grief, or undergoing coronary artery bypass surgery. I then collected data from persons who had experienced the phenomenon and developed a composite description of the experience's essence for all of the research participants. This description

consisted of "what" they experienced and "how" they experienced the phenomenon that is being investigated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As this study focused on the perceptions of active duty military students and the meaning of their experiences, a phenomenological approach was selected since it helped to understand people's experiences and the contexts that shaped them (Patton, 2015).

This qualitative research study also used a transcendental phenomenological approach because its emphasis was on describing the experience rather than the interpretation (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, a transcendental approach allowed me to understand the meaning of the participants' everyday experiences (Patton, 2015). Creswell and Poth (2018) added, to achieve a transcendental perspective, personal views and experiences are bracketed to take a "fresh perspective toward the phenomenon" (p. 60).

Bracketing personal experiences, Epoché allowed me to set aside common understanding and judgments to revisit the phenomenon naively from the perspective of a pure "transcendental ego" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). To achieve a transcendental perspective for personal experiences, I used epoché to bracket my views and experiences to give a "fresh perspective toward the phenomenon" (Creswell, & Poth, 2018 p. 60). Engaging in epoché also alleviated the possible adverse effects of preconceptions that may have tainted the research process (Moustakas, 1994). Epoché was used to create an atmosphere and rapport for conducting the interview; this allowed me to unveil their own experience and feelings (Moustakas, 1994).

This bracketing was accomplished by keeping a reflexive journal (see Appendix G) throughout each stage of the study to record decisions related to methodology and logistics and my reflections on the phenomenon to "describe things in themselves, to permit what is before one to enter consciousness and be understood in its meanings and essences" (Moustakas, 1994,

p. 27), which is the descriptive nature of the transcendental phenomenological research design. Since I conducted qualitative research, reflexivity allowed me to position myself throughout the study. This means that I was able to "convey my background (e.g., work experiences, cultural experiences, and history), how it will inform my interpretation of the information in the study and what will be gained from the study" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 44). To this end, readers had the right to know about the researcher and what prompted them to investigate the topic at hand, who they were reporting, and what they sought to gain from the study (Wolcott, 2010).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this transcendental phenomenological study:

Central Question

What are the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at Virginia community colleges?

Sub-Question One

What are the motivations/reasons for attending college while on active duty?

Sub-Question Two

How do active duty military students describe their educational persistence?

Sub-Question Three

What types of academic supports do active duty military receive from their colleges'? administration, faculty, and staff?

Sub-Question Four

What types of social supports do active duty military receive from their college's administration, faculty, and staff?

Site

The site for this study was a large-sized, public community college located in an urban setting in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Student enrollment was approximately 60,000, with a military/veteran population of 6,500. I selected this institution because of its proximity to three or more military installations. Many enlisted military students majored in general studies or business administration at this institution, with a significant amount enrolled in pre-nursing, emergency medical technician programs, and teacher education programs (Virginia Community College System, 2017). Additionally, the institution had an office dedicated to military-connected students.

Offices of Military and Veteran Student Support have been created to provide guidance on certification requirements and act as a liaison between the college, the DoD, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs while assisting students with the transition from the military to civilian life. The office's mission is based on students' success in their academic studies, including making sure each recipient understands each benefit's policies and regulations. The college is overseen by a more extensive system called the Virginia Community College System (VCCS).

The VCCS oversees 23 community colleges in Virginia, which serve Virginia residents and provide two-year degrees and various specialty training and certifications. In 2017, the VCCS's annual enrollment rate topped 233,000 students (Virginia Community College, 2017). The state of Virginia was selected because Virginia's commonwealth has the third-largest active duty military population in the United States, behind California and Texas (U.S. Department of Defense, 2017).

Participants

Essential criteria for participants in a qualitative study included having experience in the phenomenon along with an intense interest in understanding its nature and meaning. The participants participated in lengthy interviews and granted me the right to record the interview and publish the data in a dissertation or publication (Moustakas, 1994). The procedure to distinguish active duty military student participants began after Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was solidified. As the individual in charge of the military enrollment program at the investigation site, I was already privy to the archival documents of students who were actively serving in the military at the college.

Upon approval, I collected a rundown of students serving in the military and attending the institution for at least one semester. At that point, I identified students who had been active duty military students for at least one semester and asked them to participate in my investigation. Recruitment explaining the research and inviting service members to volunteer for the study was emailed to each qualified participant, along with a Letter of Informed Consent. The sample size was determined when I reached saturation of themes since, as the researcher, I was justified to stop sampling once themes or categories had saturated (Moustakas, 1994).

Once the appropriate participants were selected, each volunteer participated in a preliminary questionnaire and personal interview that contained open-ended questions. The talks were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. Initially, I looked to attain data saturation with 10 participants across the five service branches, with approximately two from each branch. I achieved data saturation with the inclusion of 10 participants; however, it was not possible to obtain 10 participants across each branch of services. Participants represented all branches of service, except for the Coast Guard.

The number of participants selected supported Polkinghorne's (2005) and Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendations of 5-25 participants. Moustakas (1994) further suggested that researchers consider using varied participants: "age, race, religion, ethnic and cultural factors, gender, and political and economic factors" (p. 107). However, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) proposed that saturation occurred typically at 10 participants in homogeneous groups. Additionally, Latham (2013) noted 10 as the minimum for most qualitative interview studies. For this study, five participants were associated with the Navy, three with the Army, one with the Air Force, and one with the Marines. Six participants identified as Black, one Hispanic, one as Multiracial, one as Biracial, and one Caucasian (see table 1).

Table 1

Participant Demographic Data

Name	Branch	Age	Ethnicity	Gender
Felix	Navy	45	B	Male
Jessica	Navy	36	BR	Female
Yvonne	Navy	30	B	Female
Jerica	Navy	28	C	Female
Hector	Marines	22	H	Male
Lisa	Navy	32	B	Female
Shay	Air Force	22	B	Female
Melissa	Army	42	B	Female
Joshua	Army	22	MR	Male
Isaiah	Army	20	B	Male

Note. B=Black, MR=Multiracial, H=Hispanic, BR=Biracial, and C=Caucasian. Four participants were male, and six were female.

Procedures

Upon successfully defending the research proposal, I submitted an application to the Liberty University (LU) Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once IRB approval was received from LU, permission to solicit active duty students who are currently enrolled at the research site was gathered from the proper IRB or institutional administrator. Once I obtained IRB approval, I piloted my online questionnaire. Active duty military students who had completed at least one semester of community college courses were asked to participate in the pilot process. Furthermore, requests for participants were made through base site representatives and internal information systems such as student email announcements and snowballing techniques.

Those selected to participate were contacted and asked to sign an informed consent form informing them of the known risks and expected benefits of the study, their right to withdraw their data at any time voluntarily, the steps taken to protect their identity, the data collection and analysis activities in which they would be expected to participate, and my intent to provide them feedback upon completion of this research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As the human instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I collected the data on the active duty military student experiences by using a self-created questionnaire, semi-structured open-ended interviews, and a focus group conducted through phone calls Zoom teleconferencing. Unfortunately, I was unable to perform in-person interviews because of the COVID-10 pandemic. By using several methods of data collection, I was able to establish the validity of the data. Zohrabi (2013) added that utilizing different kinds of procedures for collecting data can enhance the validity and reliability of the data and its interpretation. Validity “refers to the

appropriateness, meaningfulness, correctness, and usefulness of any interferences a researcher draws based on data obtained through the use of an instrument" (Fraeknel & Wallen, 2006, p. 148). Polkinghorne (1989) added that validity is the notion that an idea is well-grounded and well supported. Furthermore, since this was a qualitative research inquiry, it was essential to measure content and face validity (Connell et al., 2018).

Content validity is "the extent to which the items on a measure assess the same content or how well the content material was sampled in the measure" (Rubio, Berg-Weger, Tebb, Lee, & Rauch, 2003, p. 94). Face validity is how valid the results appeared based on what they look like or if the reader can look at a data collection method and understand what was being measured (Patton, 2018). In turn, the data collected was triangulated to form themes and to add credibility and trustworthiness to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Additionally, the collected data were recorded electronically and stored on a password-protected personal computer and regularly backed up using an online backup service (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data collection occurred until thematic saturation was achieved (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 2005), and this study pinpointed that triangulation was implemented for rigor. The context provided in this section was necessary to understand some of the data provided in Chapter Four. Once I finished data collection, the analysis and conclusions were written up.

The Researcher's Role

My role was to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students seeking to persist through Virginia community colleges. I am currently a military education specialist. I do have the leadership responsibility for military programs, including converting military credit to course credit, communicating with federal tuition assistance officials, and providing military degree plans for the Service Members Opportunities College.

However, I do not have any authority over any of the participants. I earned my undergraduate degree in English before completing a master's degree and an educational specialist degree in educational leadership.

This study's motivation derived from growing up as a military dependent and the rising movement in higher education to create "military friendly" institutions based on the growing number of students utilizing military tuition assistance and the GI Bill at community colleges. (Heineman, 2016, p. 219). Furthermore, since I was the primary instrument for data collection (human instrument), I ensured to bracket my experience to set aside prejudice, prior knowledge, judgments, and preconceptions about the phenomenon to hear the input of research participants with an open mind (Husserl, 1997; Moustakas, 1994).

This process, also known as epoché was completed to alleviate the possible adverse effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, since I conducted this study at a site with which I was very familiar, it was important that I recognized and addressed the potential influences of researcher bias (Hanson, 1994). I accomplished epoché by demonstrating rigor and associated with honesty, relevance to the study, and correspondence of the methodological approach (Smith & Noble, 2017). Decreasing bias can consist of "respondent validation, constant comparisons across participant accounts, representing deviant cases and outliers, prolonged involvement or persistent observation of participants, independent analysis of the data by other researchers and triangulation" (p. 100). Therefore, I was straightforward about my relationship with the participants, my role at the research sites, and all biases and assumptions I had that may influence how I conducted data analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

Ashworth, Giorgi, and De Kooning (1986) argued that researchers who are familiar with the study site lack the distance and separation needed to see various views concerning being studied. However, they also acknowledged that a researcher familiar with the study site could do insightful qualitative work. Although the pitfalls of role confusion or lack of objectivity are legitimate concerns to the qualitative researcher, I am convinced that familiarity with one of the study sites will be equally helpful in that it will allow me to take full advantage of the knowledge of the cultural norms of the site and recognize the vested interest I have in addressing this research topic (Hanson, 1994).

I began my higher education career at Hampton University as the assistant media relations director for the department of athletics. After years of being on the road, my desire shifted to student services. After four years with Hampton University, I returned to school and received my master's in education in 2010. I was hired by the DoD as a Military Spouse Counselor and later at Virginia Community College as a Military Education Counselor. I received my Ed.S in 2013 and will prayerfully receive my doctorate in 2021. I am currently working as a college administrator for the military student population.

Data Collection

This qualitative study used a transcendental phenomenological research design to examine the active duty military student experience of undergraduate students at a public research community college in a multi-cultural setting in the Commonwealth of Virginia. In qualitative research, participants and programs are known as the unit of analysis (Patton, 2015).

Each unit of analysis suggested a unique form of data collection, a different focus of data analysis, and another point at which reports about discoveries and conclusions were made (Patton, 2015). Therefore, the data collected in this study was completed via a preliminary

online questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and focus group. Using multiple data sources offered the opportunity for triangulation and helped with categorizing the themes that emerged from the participant's lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, two active duty military students who met the participation criteria were solicited to pilot the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview questions.

Online Questionnaire

Once IRB approval was obtained (see Appendix A), a questionnaire was piloted by two active duty military students who had completed at least one semester of community college courses. To this end, a self-created online questionnaire was used (see Appendix B) to collect preliminary information about the participants, such as age, race, and gender (see Table 2).

Table 2

Online Questionnaire Questions

Questions
1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Gender:
4. Race/Ethnicity:
5. Program of Study:
6. Branch of Service:
7. Military Occupation Specialty (MOS):
8. Describe the circumstances and influences that led to your declared program of study.
9. How does your program of study line up with your currents Military Occupation Specialty (MOS)?

10. What aspects of your time at a community college have you enjoyed the most?
11. Explain the challenges that you have faced with the services and supports offered at your institution.
12. How has your community college environment encouraged you to develop your interests, talents, and abilities within the military?
13. What would you preserve and/or change about your school if you had the authority and money to do so?

The online questionnaire was also used to verify the active duty military student's demographic information and community college enrollment. Furthermore, to gather information on specific emotions, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes associated with their community college experience, a questionnaire was applicable. More importantly, the questionnaire probed deeply into the participant's emotions, feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and inner experiences (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). To this point, the questionnaire was able to gauge participants' feelings, beliefs, and attitudes on the topic.

An essential aspect of designing a questionnaire is that the researcher should ensure that it is "valid, reliable and unambiguous" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 438). The questionnaire form contained implicit open-ended questions that allowed the participant to choose generated responses or respond in their own words to ensure validity. In addition, using open-ending items ensured the questionnaire was valid enough to measure the emotions, feelings, and attitudes being examined. Face and content validity will be combined. Ensuring face and content validity addressed if the measuring instrument (questionnaire) was valid. Additionally, combining face and content validity increased the questionnaire's validity strength (Bolwarinwa, 2015).

The questionnaire showed face validity because the questions measured what they were intended to measure (academic and social experiences) in the respondents' view. Subsequently, the questionnaire had content validity if, in the opinion of the experts of this subject matter, the survey contained questions that covered all aspects of the construct being measured (academic and social experiences). The use of a questionnaire as a measurement tool also served as a convenient form for easy online access (Mathers, Fox, & Hunn, 2007).

Semi-Structured Interviews

An interview is a social interaction based on the conversation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process allowed me to analyze the participants' stories by reorganizing the stories into some general framework type. Additionally, the interview enabled me to take an active role and restory the stories into a framework that makes sense (Martin, 1990). This process further allowed for the deconstruction of the stories by such analytic strategies as exposing dichotomies (Martin, 1990).

In-depth qualitative interviews are "long, ranging from a couple of hours to full days, and in some cases, longitudinal interviews, they occur over several days, extended over a period" (McCraken, 1998, p. 27). The interview questions were motivated by the goal of gathering information that will be useful to the study (Weiss, 1994). It was understood that the premise of quality information collected during the interview process was to be anchored by the interviewer. As the interviewer, my job was to obtain high-quality information. To ensure quality information, the interviewer must, "establish rapport, be non-judgmental, authentic, and trustworthy" (Patton, 2015, p. 427). To this end, semi-structured open-ended interview questions were used to probe more deeply to obtain more information. Before the interview occurred, I

reviewed with the participants the study's purpose, the length of time needed for the interview, their right to withdraw, and plans for the interview's results (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Additionally, I offered a copy of an abstract or reported it to the interviewee. The interviews took place over the phone at my home office. All participants signed a pre-approved consent form, which allowed me to record the interview.

The semi-structured open-ended interview questions (see Appendix C) were divided into three categories (see Table 3).

Table 3

Open-Ended Interview Questions

Opening Questions

1. Let' start by getting a little background on yourself. Please introduce yourself to me- where you grew up, your family, and your goals since starting a degree program.
2. What does persistence mean to you regarding what it will take for you to complete your college degree?
3. What, if any, are the parallels between persistence in the military as well as in college?

Questions Related to Pre-Community College Experience

4. Describe any military experiences or training that have prepared you academically and socially to integrate into a community college environment.
5. What major day-to-day-changes did you contemplate before deciding to start college?
6. Describe the support of your command. Give examples.
7. During your college search, what were the critical factors for making a final selection? Name the factors that contributed to you choosing to attend this particular institution,

starting from the point of your decision to follow, the admissions process, and your decision to enroll.

8. How did your military training transferability to college credit at your institution influence your decision to attend this particular school?
9. How would you describe your academic expectations before attending this community college?
10. Describe any perceived academic or social challenges /limitations you foresaw before making your decision to start college.
11. As a service member, what were your expectations in terms of intermingling with other students on campus?
12. If you are using tuition assistance (TA), describe your experience with requesting the benefits through your branch of service.

Questions Related to Community College Experience

13. How has your integration process been an active duty service member full-time and attending college part-time?
14. How do you feel about the amount of course credit for military training you were awarded, if any?
15. To what extent, including your participation in your academic assignments, have you used campus resources and support services?
16. Explain your level of interaction in the classroom and on campus.
17. Tell me about your experience with college faculty and staff not familiar with your military lifestyle.
18. Tell me about the struggles you have experienced since starting college.

19. What kind of programs or supports would have eased your struggles?
20. Tell me about your campus social life and list clubs and organizations that you participate.
21. If you did not participate in any social activities, describe any influences that kept you from participating in college socially.
22. What questions, if any, came up when you informed college staff and classmates that you are active duty military?
23. Explain what has influenced your decision to return or not return next semester.
24. Explain how taking community college courses has helped you in your military career?
25. If needed, will it be okay if I did a follow-up or clarifying interview in person or via telephone or email?

Questions one through three focused on the participants' personal and military background. Next, since evidence suggested that experiences of military students who enroll in community colleges after deployment in a combat environment since 11 September 2001 have not been adequately researched and remain misunderstood (Jones, 2017), questions 5-18 were used to fill this gap.

Research by De La Garza et al. (2016) indicated that "military service members often begin their journey into higher education at community colleges with 84% of this student population enrolled at two-year institutions" (p. 43). Questions four through 12 allowed active duty military students to perceive community college before starting courses. These questions allowed me to gain the participants' pre-college views. Furthermore, Tinto (1993) suggested that the information faculty/staff deliver about course registration, requirements, and expectations

will help students build “realistic expectations as to the time and effort required for class success but also influences how they allocate their time to competing demands on their time” (p. 4).

Additionally, Tinto (1993) added that his student integration theory emphasizes academic and social integration that provides a framework for investigating the experiences of students who seek to persist to degree completion. Tinto points out that student integration into an institution can occur along two dimensions, the academic and the social. Academic integration occurs when students become attached to the college's intellectual life, while social integration occurs when students create relationships and connections outside of the classroom. Questions 13-25 were intended to allow the active duty students to express their experiences with college faculty and staff and how it has influenced their college experience. In addition, questions 13-25 allowed the participants to communicate their academic and social experiences with college administration and other students.

Focus Group

Focus groups can be advantageous because personal interaction with the participant yields the best information since they are similar and interact (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This format enabled participant feedback from the researcher, observation of participants in their natural setting, and the researcher's ability to gauge the participant’s personal feelings and opinions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, the questions posed via the focus group (see Table 4) were initially tentative, pending the questionnaire and interview results.

Likewise, the focus group met for one day in October to gather meaningful information, and the questions paralleled the semi-structured interview questions. The intent was for the focus group will meet in a non-threatening and permissive environment with approximately seven to10 participants who have similar characteristics related to the topic (Greenbaum, 1997). However,

I was only able to gather four participants for the focus group participation. The intent was to meet in person, but due to the COVI-19 pandemic, the focus group met via the Zoom teleconferencing system. Next, using a self-created focus group script (see Appendix F), the data collected was used to verify the researcher's findings from the questionnaire and semi-structured interview. Parker and Tritter (2006) added that focus group conversations are synonymous with semi-structured interviews since they tend to uncover the participants' perceptions and values. Lastly, a focus group script (see Appendix D) was used as a guide to obtaining detailed information virtually.

Table 4

Focus Group Questions

1. Describe any military experiences or training that have prepared you academically and socially to integrate into a community college environment.
2. Discuss the challenges you have faced with working full-time and attending school part-time.
3. What are your feelings about pursuing an education and military promotion?
4. Explain the military training evaluation process at your institution.
5. How would you describe your relationship with your college counselor or academic advisor?
6. How often do you participate in activities outside of the classroom at your institution?
7. What would you tell your best friend or family member about your academic and social experiences at your college?
8. Explain your stance on if someone on active duty can obtain a community college degree while serving.

Before moderating the focus group questions, I established rapport with the participants through self-introduction and provided the study's purpose (Krueger & Casey,

2010). I also informed the participants of how the results will be used and why they were chosen as participants (Gill & Ballie, 2018). To further assist with establishing rapport, a participatory tool, in the form of a seasonal calendar, was implemented (Peters, 2020). The purpose of a seasonal calendar was to jump-start the conversation while allowing me to predetermine "who in the group is more likely to dominate conversations, and who is likely not to participate" (p.1). Knowing this information beforehand allowed me to steer the focus group to have equal and active participation from all participants.

When creating guidelines questions, I needed to develop questions to collect rich data (Carey & Asbury, 2016). To this point, the twelve focus group interview questions were open-ended, one-dimensional, and gauged the participants' experiences in a community college as active duty military personnel (Krueger & Casey, 2010). Additionally, to ensure that rich data was gathered, I developed a questioning route known as the order of questions (Rothwell, Anderson, Botkin, 2015). To start, the opening questions, one through three, were used to make the participants comfortable. According to Krueger and Casey (2010), the opening questions should open dialogue among the participants and be simple to answer. Items four and five will be preliminary questions used to get the participants focused on the topic (Breen, 2006).

Furthermore, once the participant's' focus had been gathered through the introductory questions, transitions questions were used to link the initial questions and the subsequent vital questions. To this end, questions six through eight allowed the participants to detail further the introductory questions (Casey & Asbury, 2016). The key questions were then followed up with the fundamental questions; nine through 11 were used to address this study's significant areas of concern (Breen 2006). Once the key questions were addressed, the ending question, 12, was used to wrap up the discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2010).

Data Analysis

Once I collected all of the data and the semi-structured interviews and the focus group interviews were transcribed, I organized the online questionnaire, interview, and focus group interviews to triangulate the data. Triangulation was used as a means of making sure my report was well-developed, comprehensive, and robust (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To organize and analyze the data, I used Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) NVivo. By using NVivo, I was able to manage and analyze the data. In addition, NVivo offered a singular place for me to upload the online questionnaires, interviews, and focus group interviews. After themes were identified and organized, they were fact-checked for accuracy with the participants. Once the participants finished checking the reports' accuracy, I made necessary corrections and began Moustakas' (1994) step-by-step approach to data analysis for a transcendental phenomenological research inquiry.

To this end, I began the qualitative data analysis process as soon as the first piece of information was collected (Miles & Huberman, 1994). According to Moustakas, it was essential to begin the data analysis process by engaging in epoché. Epoché was the process by which I examined personal experiences necessary to avoid judgment and preferences throughout the research process. Therefore, I had to set aside my prejudgments and biases since I am currently a military education specialist at a Virginia community college.

I followed the epoché with the bracketing process. Patton (2015) added that bracketing requires that past personal knowledge and theoretical knowledge be set aside to focus on the phenomenon. This process of phenomenological reduction gave the reader the background story of myself. This process is known as reflexivity (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell and Poth (2018) related their beliefs about reflexivity "as having two parts [where one]… talk about his or her

experiences… [and then will] discuss how this past for experiences shape the researcher's interpretation" (p. 216). To this end, bracketing was then accomplished by using a reflexive journal (see Appendix G) at each stage of the study to record decisions related to methodology and logistics. Additionally, I kept a reflexive journal so that I could record my reflections on the phenomenon. This also allowed me to "describe things in themselves, to permit what is before one to enter consciousness and be understood in its meanings and essences" (, p. 27).

For the next step of Moustakas' data analysis process, I listed all relevant statements to the experience. This process is called horizontalization. From this process, I took significant ideas (the Horizons) that emerged through the horizontalization process and clustered them into themes (Moustakas, 1994). Once all research materials were received from the participants, questionnaires, interview transcripts, and focus group notes. After receiving all research materials from the participants, the interviews and focus group interviews were professionally transcribed. Following the transcribing of the semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews, I read through the reports thoroughly and organized the data. Furthermore, Moustakas recommended that to carry out this step, I needed to be open to every statement of the participants' experience, granting each comment equal value. For this step, I evaluated the horizons listed for each participant to confirm no overlapping or repetitive statements. Moustakas (1994) also recommended that the researcher ask the following two questions when recording these statements, 1) "Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?",2) "Is it possible to abstract and label it" (Moustakas, 1994, p.121)? I took the horizons that met these requirements and became the invariant constituents of each participant's experience. This interrelated process and epoché

made sure that the participants' accounts and not my assessments were reflected throughout the data analysis process.

Furthermore, after probing for noteworthy statements, irrelevant, overlapping, and repetitive expressions to the topic and questions were removed. From here, I used memoing to help identify any themes as they appeared to emerge (see Appendix I). I also used memoing as a means to organize the data into codes and themes. After organizing the data into codes and themes, I identified the phenomenon's structural and textural descriptions. Subsequently, knowledge was built by methodically collecting and analyzing the experiences and feelings, making meaning through textural and structural descriptions. To this end, these descriptions are the „what" of the experience in this transcendental phenomenological study and guide the researcher in this process by stating that in forming composite textural descriptions, every participant's invariant meanings and themes are studied in depicting the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994, p.137-138).

From here, I used textural-structural descriptions to give the essence of my experience. I also used the textural and structural descriptions to write an account of the settings that influenced the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This phenomenon's essence was reported from these structural and textural descriptions using a composite description (Moustakas).

After I developed the structural description, I joined the textural description with an imaginative variation. Imaginative variation is the pursuit of the possible meanings "through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). Through the imaginative variation process, the integration of textures and structures was developed into meanings, and the essence of the phenomenon was constructed. Additionally,

after finding possible interpretations by imagining different perspectives, I began to involve interpretive analysis. The interpretive analysis process encompassed how the participants experienced the phenomenon and how I understood it. Lastly, after the integration of textures and structures was developed into meanings, the essence of the phenomenon was constructed.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness or rigor of a study refers to the amount of certainty in data, interpretation, and methods used to guarantee a study's quality. In each study, researchers should establish the protocols and procedures needed for a study to be considered credible by readers (Connelly, 2016). In the past, researchers evaluated qualitative research using the same paradigms of a quantitative researcher in terms of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, researchers have now discovered that a naturalistic approach is best for qualitative inquires because the method is non-experimental (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). These new standards included credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility

The most important criterion of the data collection process was the study's credibility or confidence in the study's truth and the findings (Connelly, 2016). According to Merriam (1998), the qualitative investigator’s credibility deals with how relevant the results are with reality. Likewise, credibility involved establishing prolonged engagement and observation by spending adequate time observing the research sites and creating relationships with the research participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, to ensure the usage of multiple data sources, triangulation was used through the data collection process. For this study, triangulation was used to corroborate findings and test validity (Lincoln & Guba). Triangulation is a means of making sure the report is well-developed, comprehensive, and robust (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data

sources were triangulated by evaluating descriptive information from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and linked them to essential statements from the focus group statements. Triangulating data sources also revealed consistencies in the findings and data that might provide a different insight into the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability refers to the stability of the data over time and the study (Anney, 2014). Dependability ensured the findings were consistent and repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It was similar to quantitative research reliability, but understanding that conditions' stability depended on the study (Connelly, 2016). Bitsch (2005) stated that dependability refers to "the stability of findings over time" (p. 86). Furthermore, dependability involved participants evaluating the findings and the study's interpretation and recommendations to ensure that they are all supported by the data received from the study (Tobin & Begley, 2004). In addition, dependability was established by using an audit trail and a reflexive journal.

In this qualitative research, an audit trail was used to establish the rigor of a study by providing the details of data analysis and decisions that led to the findings (Wolf, 2003). As a bracketing means, reflexive journaling was used throughout each stage of the study to record decisions related to methodology and logistics. My reflections on the phenomenon to "describe things in themselves, to permit what is before one to enter consciousness and be understood in its meanings and essences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). Furthermore, "this record provided evidence that recorded raw data have gone through a process of analysis, reduction, and synthesis" (Wolf, 2003, p. 175).

To check the dependability of a qualitative study, one looks to see if the researcher has been careless or made mistakes in conceptualizing the study, collecting the data, interpreting the

findings, and reporting results (Anney, 2014). Additionally, the reason for selecting people and events to observe, interview, and include in the study should be presented (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Traditionally "the more consistent the researcher has been in this research process, the more dependable are the results" (Anney, 2014, p. 278). A primary technique for confirming dependability is through *stepwise replication* where an independent auditor analyzes the activities of the researcher (as recorded in an audit trail in field notes, archives, and reports) to see how well the techniques for meeting the credibility and transferability standards have been followed (Chilisa & Preece, 2005). If the researcher does not maintain an audit trail, the dependability will not be assessed, and the dependability and trustworthiness of the study cannot be achieved (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2010).

Confirmability indicated, "the neutrality or the degree findings are consistent and could be repeated" (Baxter & Eyles, 1997, p. 505). Subsequently, confirmability involves "establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer's imagination, but are derived from the data" (Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 392). Additional methods that will contribute to credibility are bracketing and Epoché (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative researchers should keep detailed notes of all their outcomes and their assessments as they progress (Koch, 2006).

Transferability

The nature of transferability, the extent to which findings were useful to persons in other settings, "is different from other aspects of research in that readers determine how applicable the findings are to their situations" (Connelly, 2016, p. 436). According to Bitsch (2005), the "researcher facilitates the transferability judgment by a potential user through 'thick description' and purposeful sampling" (p. 85). This was done to ensure I delivered a thorough description of

the query, and the participants are selected purposively. Subsequently, this enabled the transferability of the inquiry.

Ethical Considerations

With qualitative research methods more frequently used, debates on ethical practices in such projects have emerged. Frequent "ethical concerns about qualitative inquiry include the risk of subjective data interpretation, issues of social justice, and voluntary participation" (Hannes & Parylo, 2014, p. 255). Furthermore, ethical considerations in the research were addressed by ensuring the participants were always treated with respect. Before beginning the research, I obtained IRB approval from Liberty University and the research site. Additionally, I collected the consent form from all participants and informed them of this study's purpose.

Likewise, active cooperation with the participant was essential. Researchers need to discuss the participant's stories and be thoughtful about their own personal and political background, shaping how they restory the account (Hannes & Parylo, 2014). It was also appropriate that I maintained the anonymity of the participants through the use of pseudonyms. Additionally, data has been secured by ensuring all file cabinets remain under lock, and key and electronic files are password protected. Once the study is complete, all data collected for this study will be shredded and destroyed after three years and used for journal article submissions.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study was to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at a Virginia community college. A qualitative method was selected to identify a phenomenon or an "object" of human experience to accomplish this. To this end, a transcendental phenomenological approach was

used since the goal is to identify the phenomenon, bracket out one's experience, and collect data from several persons who have experienced this phenomenon.

The resulting research questions steered this study through the theoretical lens of integration: (1) What are the motivations/reasons for attending college while on active duty? (2) How do active duty military students describe their educational persistence? (3) What types of academic supports do active duty military receive from their college's administration, faculty, and staff? (4) What kinds of social supports does active duty military receive from their college's administration, faculty, and staff?

The data was collected by a preliminary online questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. This was used to describe the experiences of students who are attending college while actively serving in the military. Prior research suggested that active military personnel have the same issues as other adult learners: full-time employment, part-time enrollment, late entry, and dependents (De La Garza et al., 2016).

Starting with the setting, a Virginia community college was chosen because of its richness of active military personnel. Furthermore, a minimum of 10 participants currently serving in the military was purposefully selected from Virginia's largest community college through a solicitation process. The study followed the research university's procedures, including proposal acceptance and application to the appropriate IRB's. Recruitment explaining the research and inviting service members to volunteer for the study was emailed to each qualified participant, along with a Letter of Informed Consent. This was outlined, and the researcher's role has been described. Subsequently, the methods used in this chapter will be used to give a voice to this student population.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study was to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at a Virginia community college. In chapter three, the methods of data collection and analysis were discussed. Data collection and analysis took nearly eight months to finish. Chapter four includes descriptions of each participant. To ensure anonymity, each participant was given a pseudonym—the pseudonyms aligned with the participant's age, gender, and ethnicity. This chapter also reports the findings of the data analysis. In addition, themes are identified, and each theme answers the guiding research questions.

Participants

I recruited participants via e-mail blast after receiving permission from the research institution. A total of 10 active duty service members agreed to participate in this study. Six of the participants were female, and four were male. Ages ranged from 19 years old to 45 years old at the time of the study. Each branch of the military was represented, except for the Coast Guard. The majority of the participants were serving in the Navy. All 10 service members participated in the online Active Duty Military Student Questionnaire and a one-on-one interview.

Four participants attended the focus group. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, all interviews were conducted over the phone or via *Zoom* videoconferencing. All quotes gathered from the questionnaire and interviews were used verbatim and transcribed by a professional transcriber. Five participants were associated with the Navy, three with the Army, one with the

Marines, and one with the Air Force. Six participants identified as Black, one as Hispanic, one as Multiracial, one as Biracial, and one as Caucasian.

Felix

Felix is a 45-year-old Black male. He has been in the Navy for almost 27 years and is currently ranked as a Chief Petty Officer (E-7) with a Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) of culinary specialist. Felix is a native of Virginia who is married and has four children. Since starting his degree program, Hospitality Management, Felix has set a goal of working in the Hospitality Management field upon retirement from the military. Persistence to him is balancing active duty service, family, and the college's Hospitality Management curriculum.

Before enrolling in community college, Felix contemplated the day-to-day changes of adding school to his already full plate. These changes included less quality time with his family, potential deployments, and returning to school after 27 years. He stated that his military experience "prepared [him] for returning to college" because it taught him how to be committed to a task once it has been started (Felix, Interview, 2020).

Shay

Shay is a 22-year-old Black female from Virginia, who has served in the Air Force for nearly three years. Her current rank is Airmen First Class (E-3), and her MOS is Surgical Services. Shay has been attending community college for three semesters and is majoring in Computer Science. Persistence to Shay is "to keep striving towards your goals and to keep pushing no matter the obstacles" (Shay, Interview, 2020). Shay sees similarities between being a college student and active duty service in that both require persistence to reach goals. She explained that she has to complete courses to obtain a degree, whereas she has to have strong job performances to make the next rank in the military.

Shay's only hesitation towards college enrollment was that of time. While her command was supportive, she didn't know if she would have the time to balance active duty service and school. Despite a little hesitation, Shay was convinced to enroll after meeting with an advisor at the school's veteran services office. A stellar student, Shay is a member of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars (NSCS).

Jessica

Jessica is a 36-year-old Biracial female from Alaska. The married Navy Petty Officer Third Class (E4) is an Aviation Boatswain who just became a new mom. She is majoring in General Studies and plans to transfer to a four-year college to major in Human Resources. She chose to attend her current community college "because of their military friendliness" (Jessica, Interview, 2020). Jessica also credits her school's Military Education Specialist as to why she chose her community college. For Jessica, persistence means getting the job done by any means necessary. To this point, Jessica thanks the military for showing her the skills needed to be persistent. She stated that she would use these skills to complete her degree, work full-time, and take care of her family. Jessica's husband is also on active duty.

While Jessica loves her college and professors, she has no desire to participate in community college's social aspects. The balancing act of college, work, and family life consumes all of her time. The college delivers Jessica's courses on a nearby military installation, where the majority of her classmates are also active duty personnel. She enjoys taking classes on the installation because most of her classmates are like her, and she found her professors to be more understanding of the military lifestyle.

Yvonne

Yvonne is a 30-year-old Black female from Pennsylvania. She is a Petty Officer First Class (E-6) in the Navy, and her rating is a Logistics Specialist. The married mother of one is majoring in accounting and wants to make a career of the Navy. She was leery of continuing her education because of the long deployments that come with being in the military. Persistence to Yvonne, "is to keep going no matter what obstacles come up like detachments and deployments" (Interview, September 2020). However, she proceeded with college enrollment because her college offered many of her major courses online. Yvonne uses Tuition Assistance (TA) to pay for her classes, and she mentioned that the process was easy. While the TA process was easy, and her command signed off, it is understood that her military service comes first.

Initially, Yvonne looked forward to participating in social clubs and organizations at the college. However, once she got married and began to deploy, she stated she couldn't join in the college's social aspects outside blackboard discussion boards. Yvonne expressed that she could barely find time to do her homework. Yvonne also mentioned that her colleagues and professors were very understanding while she was out to sea for nine months. The college allowed her to pick up where she left off without any issue when she returned.

Isaiah

Isaiah is a 20-year-old Black male from New York. He is a Private First Class (E-3) in the Army. Isaiah, a Supply Specialist, plans to get out of the military soon for medical reasons. He never hesitated about continuing his education but initially thought it would be impossible because of his work schedule. He described being in the Army full-time and a student part-time as "late nights and early mornings" (Isaiah, Interview, 2020). Isaiah is not using TA but plans on using his Post-911 benefits once he discharges.

Isaiah has participated socially on campus since starting classes four semesters ago by hanging out with a few classmates outside of class. Thankfully, he has not had to PCS since starting school, but he did go on TDY twice. When field training arose, Isaiah found that his professors weren't too accommodating. He felt that his professors did not understand the demands of being on active duty and were not flexible with assignment deadlines.

Hector

Hector is a 22-year old Hispanic male who is majoring in Criminology. The Petty Officer Third Class (E-4) is a Steel Worker (Construction Battalion). While in the Navy, he has been attending community college for two semesters. The Michigan native relates his integration into the college environment to starting boot camp. Hector explained:

> many people come to boot camp with literally little to no structure because we are all coming from different backgrounds. From there, they break you down and bring you back up, and when they bring you back up, you are a better person. I was afraid to go to college, but the Navy gave me the structure I needed to start (Hector, Interview, September 2020).

Hector chose a community college because his current institution seemed to have a better Criminology program when he conducted his college search. In the beginning, he was upset that none of his military college credit recommendations were accepted. Still, his advisor informed him that none of his military credits applied to his chosen degree program. Additionally, he admitted to not taking advantage of his institution's academic resources or support services. The last time Hector touched base with his advisor was during the initial enrollment process.

Jerica

Jerica is a 33-year-old Caucasian female from Florida. The single mother of one is an Operations Specialist in the Navy with a current rank of Petty Officer Second Class (E-5). She has been attending college for nearly four semesters. It is important to note that Jerica is preparing for a medical discharge and has been on sea duty throughout her entire educational journey. Her major is Accounting because she wants to work in contract management once her active duty career is over.

To Jerica, persistence is needed on the ship as well as in the classroom. She added, "I think the parallel between the Navy and college is the structure of having a mission to complete. But to do either is very difficult. This is accurate to the military and in college. It is very, very difficult" (Jerica, Interview, September 2020).

Joshua

Joshua is a 22-year-old Multiracial male. The Marine Signal Support Specialist is majoring in Cyber Security. The Lance Corporal (E-3) stated, "my goal for majoring in cybersecurity is to get more experience working with computers and get more knowledge on military software" (Joshua, Interview, September 2020). Since starting college last semester, he has found it to be challenging but fun. As a Signal Support Specialist, he works with computers and technology daily. He has chosen to further his knowledge by completing his degree in Cyber Security.

He expressed that completing a degree in Cyber Security will not only help him gain promotional points in the military but will also give him an advantage in the IT field post-

military. Joshua intended on joining clubs and participating socially before starting. However, because of COVID-19, he has only utilized the tutoring office.

Lisa

Lisa is a 32-year-old Black female from Missouri. The Navy Culinary Specialist is majoring in Criminal Justice. Since starting college two semesters ago, the Chief Petty Officer (E-7) has found that balancing full-time work and college is challenging. To ease the balancing act, she has chosen to take all of her classes online. Since she is on shore duty for the next three years, the only issue she has encountered was a possible detachment aboard ship to support a floating hospital at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, she ended up not having to detach.

While she plans to make a career of being in the Navy, she majors in Criminal Justice to start a career in juvenile justice when she retires. Lisa considers herself a social butterfly and enjoys interacting with her classmates via discussion board assignments. Beyond the discussion boards, Lisa explained that she doesn't have extra time to participate socially with her campus community. She added:

> I will say things for me have not been so great. I don't think I have found a balance yet. I think that work takes more of my time than school, and I have to fit school and studying in where I can (Lisa, Interview, September 2020).

Melissa

Melissa is a 42-year-old Hispanic Army Financial Management Technician from Virginia. The Business Management major has completed one semester of community college and describes her experience as "so far, so good" (Melissa, Interview, September 2020).

The Petty Officer First Class (E-6) admits to having several challenges because her husband is also an active duty sailor. The mother of five is preparing for life after the Marine Corps. She wants to transition out so she can spend more time with her children. Like other participants, she was apprehensive about attempting a degree because of her many obligations: being on active duty, being an active duty spouse, and a mother of five.

Results

The following results interpret common themes and significant statements that emerged from the online questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and focus group. Before, during, and after data collection, I kept a reflexive journal as a means of bracketing out my own biases and ideas. This allowed me to record outcomes related to methodology and logistics and not my reflections about the study. Each source of data was reviewed numerous times before I began coding. After a detailed review of the data, the questionnaire, interviews, and focus group transcriptions were professionally transcribed and uploaded to NVivo.

Once the data was uploaded into NVivo, it was re-reviewed to ensure the research questions were addressed and coded correctly. The collection methods yielded several themes upon reviewing the data, including support systems, obligations, attributes, goals and advancement, and concerns. Table 5 shows the codes and themes that surfaced during the data analysis process.

Table 5

Codes and Themes of the Active Duty Military Academic and Social Experience

Themes	Codes
Support Systems	Family Command Education Office

	Faith Peers
Obligations	Spouse Children Military Coursework Deployment TDY/TDA
Attributes	Persistence Flexibility Time Management Optimism Discipline Commitment Positivity
Goals and Advancement	Degree Completion Retirement Career Advancement Personal Achievement
Concerns	Gaps in Education Deployment Family Balancing PCS TDY/TDA

Theme Development

The data collected from the 10 active duty military personnel involved using the following methods: online questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and focus group interview. After the interviews were transcribed, I reviewed each interview to note recurring themes so that I could build off them. The period between the first interview and the last interview was a little over a month. The themes that emerged from the data sources were: support systems, obligations, attributes, goals and advancements, and concerns. The resulting themes shed light on

the balancing act of family, school, and full-time service that active duty personnel faced when attempting to take courses part-time.

Support Systems. All 10 participants stated that one of the biggest reasons they could balance work and school was their support systems. When contemplating the enrollment process, the service members relied heavily upon their family, friends, commands/duty stations, school support offices, and faith to support them during their journeys. One participant voiced that family support was a significant factor because "my dad was the one who motivated me to start the enrollment process in the first place" (Jessica, Focus Group, October 2020). Jessica's father was a college graduate and had finished his four-year degree before he enlisted in the 1970s. Her father had always encouraged her to go back to school because he knew she would need to secure a good job post-military. Jessica recounted that he has supported her from the college search process to now.

Friendships were also named as buffers during the participants' educational journey in the form of mentors. Specifically, friends who were also serving could lend them support from a familiar lens. Yvonne added, "I have several friends within my command that were already taking community college courses before I started" (Yvonne, Interview, 2020). She further explained that they were the ones that recommended that she take online courses. Yvonne added that she could continue regardless of whether she was PCS'ed, detached, deployed, or had to go on TAD by taking classes online.

On the other hand, Felix was apprehensive about starting college courses because of how long he had been out of high school. He would have probably put off enrolling in courses if it had not been for his wife's support. Felix explained, "my wife gave me the push I needed to start

and the push I need now to keep going" (Felix, Focus Group, October 2020). Hector also credited his family for being a significant support, specifically his parents.

> My parents are my biggest support. I grew up in Michigan. I moved to Virginia in 2018 for the military. My major right now is Criminology with a concentration in Homeland Security. I would love to get a career within the FBI, the Secret Service, Customs, or Border Protection. Currently, my parents both work for Customs and Border Protection. My mother is very high up there; she writes the laws for her specific area. So, my parents are my motivation and support (Interview, September 2020).

Shay's support came from an unlikely source, her command. She didn't think they would be supportive but was surprised when she turned in her forms for tuition assistance (TA) approval. Shay stated, "I was surprised by how quickly my TA was approved and the words of encouragement from my commander (Shay, Interview, September 2020). She further explained that her command was happy about her decision to continue her education and still offers her that support three semesters later. Jessica was also able to find help through her command. Jessica is attached to a small command, which she names as an advantage for taking more courses.

> Being in a small command, they were all for it. They have been so encouraging. My papers went through the chain of command quickly. My chief was all for me taking classes, or I think he was just ready to get me out of his office (Interview, September 2020).

Lisa also praised the efficiency of her command, military base advisor, and the words of support from her Senior Chief. She described her TA process's efficiency and how her school and base education counselors helped her navigate the college enrollment process. Additionally, Lisa named her school's veteran advisor as a tremendous support. "My chain of command and

veteran advisor have been great! They made sure my TA requests were turned in at least 120 days and always check my student e-mail for essential notifications" (Interview, September 2020).

However, Felix had a different experience with his command. While they quickly approved his TA, his command stressed to him, "service to the Navy comes first" (Interview, September 2020). Yvonne also found her command not to be as lenient. She voiced that, while they didn't discourage her from starting courses, they did issue her a stern directive that the military takes priority over school. While they were supportive of her during the TA approval process, they were not so supportive when it came to needing additional time to complete homework assignments. The expectation was clear: work some first and school-related obligations were to be completed during off-duty hours. Furthermore, there were differences in work obligations amongst the participants that will be addressed in chapter 5.

> The chain of command does a great job of routing the TA requests quickly. However, you still have to work the allotted time they told you to, and then you go home and take care of your day to days (Yvonne, Interview, September 2020).

Aside from relationships, two participants expressed how faith got them through many of the tough times that came with balancing work, school, and family. One such participant stated, "first of all, I prayed a lot!" (Melissa, Focus Group, October 2020). In addition, Isaiah mentioned faith when he spoke on support. He conveyed that his most significant supports were prayer and his faith. Isaiah credits his faith for getting him through not only the college search process but throughout his educational journey as well. He knows that the college experience is a great opportunity and will require strength to persist through the end. However, Isaiah still expressed the feeling of being alone and discouraged. He explained:

> Only God can provide that level of strength. I knew adding school to my plate would not be easy with having a wife and a kid. There are days that I feel like I can't do it all, then I remember through faith, I can do all things. I also felt alone, so without prayer and my wife's support, the loneliness could have resulted in thoughts of fear and me failing (Interview, September 2020).

Obligations. The participants showed uniformity regarding how commitments affected their academic and social experience while attending a community college. In addition, their responsibilities also played a crucial role in deciding to start the college education process. To this point, it is important to note how the amount of responsibility for each participant impacted them academically and socially. The responsibilities named by all participants included spending enough time with their spouses and children, work, PCSing, deployments, Temporary Duty Assignment (TDA), and Temporary Duty Station Changes (TDY).

In terms of familial obligations, the majority of the participants were married with children. However, the responsibility of possible deployments and training was the most discussed. Jerica expressed how completing her degree seemed impossible because she is on sea duty. Sea duty is duty in the U.S. Navy performed with a deployable unit such as a ship or aircraft squadron (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2020).

> I am on sea duty, so I can be called out to sea for any set amount of time without too much notice. Knowing that I could be called back into work in the evening to do a critical mission and then have to miss class, I had to contemplate how many courses to take. And how long I wanted to be in class, how long I actually wanted to be in school. Knowing that I can deploy or TDA plays a part in my decision of how many courses I take at once each semester (Jerica, Focus Group, October 2020).

Having to balance school, work, and family was homogenous among all participants. To this end, Hector also discussed balancing several responsibilities, adding that balancing all three obligations is challenging, but he knew that he could do so.

> I'm still on track. I mean, I can balance. But balancing can be challenging because I got like three obligations: family, work (the Navy), and then college. But as long as you stay on track and focus on your long-term goals, you will be okay. To me, that's what I've been doing for the past, like, year-and-a-half. And it's been working well for me (Interview, September 2020).

Yvonne also described her day-to-day responsibilities, adding that she did not know if she had the time to do it all. She had so many day-to-day responsibilities that she often found it hard to concentrate on her assignments. Yvonne found herself wondering if she would have time to do things for herself, like working out. She also pondered if she would have time to do the things she typically did for her family, like making dinner or spending time with her husband and daughter. The mother of an infant child, she stated, “I want to be great at being a wife, mom, and student, so it’s hard at times; but I know that it will be worth it at the end” (Interview, September 2020).

Family obligations were a huge apprehension for many of the participants. Many felt their families were already taking a back seat to the military. Therefore, many participants considered how college would interfere with family time before enrolling. In particular, Isaiah, a new father, considered the additional time away from his daughter. He stated, “Aside from my schedule, before starting college, I contemplated the day-to-day changes that starting school would have on quality time with my daughter (Focus Group, October 2020). Additionally, family and work obligations were why nine of the 10 participants could not participate socially in their

community college environment. Many expressed that they had no time and even no desire to participate in their college community socially.

Jessica simply stated:

> I don't have time for that between my son, work, and trying to do my homework. Add to that the fact my husband is on active duty. He is on sea duty, so I am here alone with the kid" (Interview, September 2020).

Hector added that he has not been able to participate in social clubs, but he is very interactive in the classroom with his peers and professors. Hector was afraid to start college because he was not a great student in high school. Nevertheless, he credits the military for giving him the confidence that he needed to give school another try. While in boot camp, he noticed that his test scores were much better than what he received in high school. "Scoring 100 percent and 90 percent on tests in boot camp boosted my motivation." Subsequently, when he started college in the Spring of 2020, he noticed a considerable difference from his high school days.

> My people skills were there. I was volunteering in class, which I never did before. Like in high school, I was always the silent one in the corner. I did my homework, but I had a lot of missing assignments. (Hector, Focus Group, October 2020)

Today, Hector turns in his assignments on time and follows up with his professors if he has any issues. This is something he never did in high school. Socially, he enjoyed interacting with his classmates, volunteering to answer questions, and class presentations. Currently, he cannot interact with his peers in class like he is accustomed to because of COVID. Hector added, "You have to put yourself out there so you can gain more opportunities. There are many out there, but like, they're not going to be given to you, you have to get them" (Focus Group, October 2020).

On the other hand, Joshua remained optimistic about participating in social clubs, despite his military and family responsibilities. He had every intention of joining at least one club this semester, but campus activities were suspended on his campus because of COVID-19. However, Joshua remains optimistic about participating in college socially in the future. He added, "I will join a club when you know everything opens back up" (Joshua, Interview, September 2020).

Attributes. All of the participants expressed their frustration with having to juggle many responsibilities. Nevertheless, all acknowledged that the military gave them the qualities needed to persist through their educational journey. Hector explained in his interview how boot camp prepared him for his college journey. While he did not want to talk too much about boot camp, he expressed how he started boot camp with little to no life skills and was exposed to people from different backgrounds. Once he completed boot camp, he considered himself a better person because he lacked confidence before. He admitted that he was initially terrified to speak to those of a higher rank, but boot camp taught him the people skills he needed. Hector expressed, "I joined the Navy to get that structure, and that's honestly like one of the biggest things. I guess the military tells you the harder you work in the military, the higher you're going to go" (Hector, Interview, September 2020).

Subsequently, all 10 participants credited the military for showing them how to persist, multi-task, and focus on the task at hand. Joshua credits the military for showing him how to multitask and prioritize. He explained, that in terms of being persistent in the military, they need you on the clock all the time, basically 24/7. But with both, no matter what comes up, if you are in school while in the military, the military comes first, but if your long-term plan is to get out of the military, schooling is the best option. Joshua further noted that you have to stay focused on the game plan when balancing work and school.

Jerica added that her military experience prepared her for school because she provides briefings to higher-ups as part of her daily military tasks. Therefore, when it came to speaking in front of her peers in a classroom setting, she was not nervous. “Having the Navy's discipline showed me how to meet my assignment deadlines, which helps me with school, which I relate to in homework assignments” (Interview, September 2020).

Some participants even acknowledged the military for helping them to develop their study skills. Yvonne developed her study skills in the Navy through the advancement process. In the Navy, enlisted sailors in pay grades E-3 to E-6 must score well on promotion exams to advance to higher ranks. This involves promotion examinations for general Navy knowledge and MOS proficiency. You must achieve a passing score on the promotion exam to have a chance of moving up a pay grade. Yvonne explained, “Studying is vital if you want to advance to the next pay grade. It’s the same for school, to pass the classes I have to study” (Interview September 2020). Furthermore, Yvonne was sure to mention that it’s on your own time when you have to study, so you have to plan accordingly.

Isaiah also expressed how the Army helped him develop his study skills and showed him the meaning of dedication.

> In the military, you have to work overtime a lot. It’s the same with college. Your course assignments are overtime. The military has shown me how to be dedicated to school and putting in overtime always. Besides, the military is late nights and early mornings, and which the same with school is (Isaiah, Interview, September 2020).

When questioned about attributes, the participants credited many of their positive characteristics to their military experience. To this point, many of the participants expressed that the military made them more disciplined.

> The Air force has taught me a lot more about discipline. Like with the promotion that you get in the military, the goals are getting, you know, ribbons or achievements. Most of those have a deadline as well, like schoolwork. So, the military has taught me to be disciplined and meet deadlines as needed at work and in school. (Shay, Interview, September 2020)

Interestingly, all five Navy participants credited their adaptability to being on a ship. In particular, Felix spoke to the experience of how college is like being on a large aircraft carrier and how his Navy training prepared him for his degree program. When Felix has to live aboard a ship, he is in close confinement with hundreds of people. He compared his college community to the ship's atmosphere. According to Felix, the military had already mentally prepared him to adapt to a new environment and meet new people. He explained that he is around many people from different cultures when on the ship, like college. As far as his training goes, being in hospitality management in college and being a culinary specialist in the military, it was easy for him to adapt to the curriculum.

> In the Navy, we have officer quarters that have to be maintained. We often have to do laundry, clean showers, and things of that nature, like a regular hotel, which is hospitality management training. Hospitality management is a part of our practice, which we learned in our military school called sea school (Interview, September 2020).

Goals and Advancement. Goals were a common theme among all of the 10 participants. These goals were both academic and professional. Each participant, except for one, voiced that completing a degree while on active duty would positively affect their military advancement chances. The majority also conveyed that they were preparing for post-military careers. Lisa explained her desire to work in the criminal justice system when she retires from

the military. She stated, “My goal is to finish college by Spring 2022. Then once I retire, I want to get a job at a juvenile correctional facility” (Interview, September 2020).

Additionally, Jerica had a goal of securing a stable job post-military. However, she admitted her goal has shifted to that of obtaining a sense of personal accomplishment. Jerica stated:

> Honestly, initially, it was just to be able to have a decent paying job out of the military to be able to provide for my family. Now, since I’ve had to stop school twice because of deployments, it’s more of me wanting to finish what I started” (Interview, September 2020).

For Shay and Joshua, their goal is to receive a degree in a computer systems related program while in the military.

> While I am still in, finishing my degree will help me long term because I am trying to become an officer. To do that, I need to have at least an Associate's degree to get into officer warrant officers route (Joshua, Interview, September 2020).

Shay added that her goal is to achieve a degree in computer and networking systems because it will help her with her military promotion points. She also believed that it would put her in a position to obtain a good job post-military. Shay added, “In the military, you have to meet rankings, and different achievements. Having to do this in the military has helped me in college” (Interview, September 2020).

Jessica’s plan for her degree is solely for her post-military career. She does not think a college degree will help her with a promotion in the Navy. Jessica is majoring in General Studies to transfer to a four-year college to study Human Resources. She explained that she is not in college for advancement but her career after the military. Initially, she did not know exactly

what she wanted to do with her degree. However, since people have told her that she is good with other people, Jessica figured she would go into the Human Resources field post-military.

Concerns. In the same way that all participants had concerns when initially joining the military, they also had concerns about starting college. These concerns were both academic and personal. While some participants were not far removed from high school, a few had not taken a class in nearly 10 years. Felix admitted that he was nervous about enrolling in classes because he did not go to college after high school. He went straight into the military after graduating from high school. He stated, "So here I am, over 10 years and 10 cars later, trying to go back to school. I was a little nervous and a little apprehensive. But at the same time, I was still motivated" (Interview, September 2020).

Felix further added that utilizing the tutoring lab eased his apprehension with his weaker subjects. He stated:

> I would say, the math tutoring lab, as well as the English tutoring lab, has helped me out a lot. I have used their services on several occasions. So far, I have not received lower than a 'B' in any of my classes" (Interview, September 2020).

Felix was thankful that his college had this kind of assistance because he indicated a weakness in those subjects.

Joshua also expressed his nervousness about the rigor of college coursework.

> Before, I thought it would be harder because they told me before I could get into IP addresses and TCP IP to know a specific kind of math. I am not good at Math. I had not taken it in a while; but, luckily, I studied for math, and the tutoring center helped me get through that course. I passed with a B plus (Interview, September 2020).

Jerica's biggest concern was not the coursework. Being called for a mission at the last minute during class times was her biggest worry. Her command knew her schedule, so they tried to avoid calling her back into work for critical missions. But at the same time, Jerica was still concerned because, if the Navy needed her, it was out of their hands.

> When there is a critical mission that needs to be done, it has to be done. But I was also concerned when it came time for me to drop my degree program because of a deployment. However, my command was good about providing me with all of my documentation. They walked me through the process so that I would not be affected financially by dropping classes. This eased a lot of stress for me. (Interview, September 2020)

Lisa recalled that her angst was finding the time to complete assignments. While she knew it would be possible to complete a degree while in the military, she did anticipate that it would not be easy. Lisa's most significant concern before starting college was her tendency to procrastinate. However, her professor understands her military schedule and has been gracious in giving her assignment extensions. While she is thankful for having flexible instructors, she is concerned that she will never learn to manage the time. Lisa explained, "My professors have been great at giving me extended time to complete my assignments because they know that I am in the military; but, I am afraid that I will never learn how to balance my time" (Interview, September 2020).

Hector's primary concern regarding his educational journey was time management because this was his high school weakness. For Hector, starting a college program was one thing; balancing his responsibilities was another.

> It's not just your classes, but overall, your daily routine for life. You know, how do I add college to that? Did I think through how that would change my schedule by enrolling in college? That is why I held it off for a couple of years (Interview, September 2020).

In addition to the worries surrounding time, another concern for most participants was the transferability of their military training to course credits. Most participants hoped to receive college credit for their military training because they knew it would save them time and money. Two participants, Lisa and Yvonne, did not know they could receive course credit for their military training, though. Lisa stated, "I had no idea I could do that. It would have probably made things a lot easier" (Interview, September 2020). Yvonne added, "I know I have a Joint Services (JST), but I didn't think I would receive any credits, so I didn't have it looked at" (Interview, September 2020).

Jessica's concern was if the school would even review her JST because she did not want to take any unnecessary courses. However, Jessica's advisor made sure she submitted her JST. She was anticipating having her transcripts reviewed before selecting classes. However, the college had a one-course enrollment requirement before they would evaluate her transcript. Even though she disagreed with the school's policy, she submitted her JST once an advisor helped her select two courses. Jessica stated, "My advisor was key for me, he looked over my record and helped me select classes. The college was able to pull a few courses from my transcripts, and I was happy with that. I love my VA rep" (Interview, September 2020).

On the other hand, Hector was not happy with the number of course credits he received from his JST. He thought that his military experience alone would be worth a few credits.

> Quite frankly, I did not get college credit, and it kind of upset me. I'm not going to lie. They do not tell you that the only way you're going to get college credit from the military

> is to do some sort of the same degree. I know that major has nothing to do with my construction MOS, maybe a little math, but even that math was basic. Like the military uses different math than civilians (Interview, September 2020).

Research Question Responses

The central research question for this study asked about the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at Virginia community colleges. I sought to determine if integration for active duty military students only occurred when they became attached to the college's intellectual life and if social integration occurred when students created relationships and connections outside of the classroom. Furthermore, my goal was to uncover what motivated active duty personnel to continue taking community college courses and what led to their decisions when they did not return to the classroom.

After analyzing the data, six major themes emerged: (a) support systems, (b) obligations, (c) attributes, (d) goals and advancement, and (e) concerns. These themes were developed from responses to an online questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and focus group. It was clear that active duty military students are often caught at the crossroads of their many obligations and were pushed to make personal, professional, and academic choices each time one of those obligations emerged as a priority. Intriguingly, with each new interruption, most of the participants chose to remain at their current institution and continue pursuing degree completion.

The participants represented several MOS and originated from different states around the country. Interestingly, their accounts were similar yet unique at the same time. I credit their stories' uniqueness to the various branches, MOS, command types, family size, and education gaps. Most of the participants' reasons for starting their educational journey was generally for either military promotions or a post-military career. Some of the participants expressed

frustration with how the military stressed the importance of continuing their education but did not offer them the time to do it. . An additional area of frustration for some participants was with their instructors and withdrawal policies that were not deployment- or TDY/TDA-friendly. Each participant still maintained optimistic attitudes, though.

Sub-Questions: Each sub-question below was supported by the themes that emerged during the data collection process. It is important to note that not one theme addressed multiple common questions when conferring decision-making and change. Furthermore, each apparent obligation or support was changeable because each can change over time if the experiences and policies happen to change.

Sub-question one: "What are the motivations/reasons for attending college while on active duty?" This question was asked to identify what or who had the moxie to start their educational journey. Even though all participants stated that they barely had time to take their courses, they all named their post-military career or military advancement as their motivation/reason for attending college. Each participant stated they were preparing for employment after the military. Most participants agreed that a college degree would be vital for them in the civilian workforce when they plan to transition out of the military.

It is essential to note that most of the participants majored in programs that differed from their Military Occupation Specialty (MOS). Most participants also recalled that their choice program influenced their decision to enroll in a specific Virginia community college. In general, all of the research participants selected the college because they felt the institution offered the best program for their major. For example, Hector expressed how he searched numerous two-year colleges for a criminology program that he felt guaranteed transferability to a four-year

college. Once he compared all schools, he found that his college choice had the best plan. Furthermore, the college also had course selections that fit his tight schedule.

In addition to participants' post-military career preparation, military advancement played a significant part in the motivations/reasons for active duty personnel attending college. Participants described how military courses boost their military evaluations when it comes time for advancement. Several study participants explained how a college degree could help them earn promotion points. Due to military advancement's competitive nature, earning a college degree while serving could be the difference between being promoted and not. The participants who named military advancement as their reason/motivation for attempting a college degree emphasized that a civilian education was integral for success up the military ladder.

Sub-question two: *"How do active duty military students describe their educational persistence?"* This study aimed to identify those factors that represent trends that colleges could address to retain active duty students. It focused on persistence of the active duty military community college student instead of the military's transition to civilian life. To this end, participating active duty military community college students recalled the attributes that helped them complete their educational journey.

All participants named attributes that they put to use when describing their educational persistence. Most service members defined persistence as the ability to complete their educational goals, regardless of what obstacles came their way. These obstacles include missions, deployments, personal issues, and family issues. Moreover, participants named potential deployments and duty station changes as the most significant threat to their educational persistence. In addition, academic integration was found to matter in active duty community

college students' educational persistence. However, social integration was found not to matter to active duty community college students as much.

Sub-question three: *"What types of academic supports do active duty military receive from their college's administration, faculty, and staff?"* As predicted, most participants claimed to have little to no academic support from their college's administration, faculty, and staff outside of the initial enrollment process. The participants recalled faculty (their instructors) being supportive academically in terms of being flexible with their assignment due dates because they knew the nature of their military lifestyle. Outside of assignment flexibility from college faculty, tutoring was the only other academic support named.

Two participants indicated that their professors' lack of understanding and support is why they will not be returning to community college next semester. While most participants suggested that they find it hard to balance school and work, they had not all utilized the campus academic supports offered. Most participants knew of their college's military student support office but did not know of any academic support offered other than enrollment assistance.

When participants were asked if they were happy with the number of credits they were awarded from their Joint Services Transcripts (JST) by their college for military training, most recalled dissatisfaction with the number of credits they received. One participant explained that he was not happy with the amount of credits he was awarded but understood his military training did not apply to any of the courses on his chosen degree plan. One participant shared that she did not even think of having the college look at her JST for potential credits since she had not been informed of this option. Prior to this study, she did not even know that the school had an office dedicated to supporting military service members and veterans, but she expressed intent to follow-up with this service moving forward.

Sub-question four: "What types of social supports do active duty military receive from their college's administration, faculty, and staff?" In this study, two participants expressed interest in participating in the college's social environment. It was not because their college did not offer any other social outlets, but the participants simply did not have the time to utilize any of the college's social offerings. The majority of the participants received social support from their peers, which was limited to their blackboard discussion boards. The two participants who received social support from faculty and staff were taking community college courses offered at their installation. Since the college had a one-stop-shop conveniently located on base, these participants could have social interactions. These social exchanges were delivered through their base site representative and their military-affiliated peers. Participants stated that these social interactions included military student graduations and ice cream socials during their lunchtimes and class times.

Phenomenological Descriptions

The composite textural description of the active duty military community college student experience, or the "what" of the phenomenon, was flexibility. Active duty military students felt the policies created to support them in a deployment or TDY/TDA were not flexible. Furthermore, several participants were frustrated with the inflexibility and lack of understanding from their professors. In general, many of the participants were unsatisfied with the supports that were supposed to help them.

The composite textural description described by each participant, or the "what" of the phenomenon, was optimism. Although each participant had to endure obstacles and interruptions when attempting to integrate into student life, all remained optimistic and positive that they would eventually complete their degree.

The composite structural description described by each participant was "academic persistence." While each participant had to balance several obligations, each credited the military with developing the characteristics they need to persist to degree completion. Some of the service members used their military-grown traits to continue to degree completion for military advancement. Others used those skills to persist to degree completion so they can be employable post-military.

The overall essence of the lived experience of the active duty military student can be described as optimism. While many expressed concern about completing their degree programs because of the constant relocation attached to military life, every participant was optimistic that they would one day finish. Additionally, despite the continuous moving and possibilities of unplanned missions associated with being an active duty military member, each service member expressed that government does offer them tuition assistance to help them reach their academic goals. To this point, while each participant acknowledged that the military was not supportive in terms of additional time off to complete school assignments, they spoke positively about the tuition assistance process.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at a Virginia community college. Chapter Four described the results of the data collection and analysis. It also described the lived experiences of active duty personnel seeking to persist to degree completion at the community college level. The participants shared their encounters with active duty military service and being a part-time college student through the use of three data sources (online questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and focus group). The participants also expressed how one factor affected

the other. All participants shared frustration with their military and family obligations and how these obligations affected their education in one way or another.

The participants also voiced their rationale for starting college courses while serving, its influence on their ability to advance while in the military, and how a degree would boost their post-military careers. Additionally, they described a host of unique experiences to the military lifestyle: deployments, PCS's, and TDA/TDY's. Finally, six themes emerged from the data analysis process: (a) support systems, (b) obligations, (c) attributes, (d) goals and advancements, and (e) concerns.

Following data analysis, the central research question and all four sub-research questions were answered with support and evidence from all three data sources. Overall, several of the participants wanted to use their degrees to help them climb the military ranks. At the same time, other participants desired to improve their chances of being hirable upon their transition into the civilian world.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study was to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at a Virginia community college. Data were collected via a preliminary online questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and focus group. Using three data sources allowed for a holistic view of the participants' experiences as they served their country full-time and took community college courses part-time. Chapter Five summarizes the findings from all of the data sources, a discussion applying for the literature review from Chapter Two, and the implications, delimitations, and limitations of the study. The conclusion of the chapter includes recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study was to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at a Virginia community college. To answer the research questions that guided this study, data were collected using a preliminary online questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and focus group. Using the interview and questionnaire, I gathered a detailed, thick description of the participants' actual lived experiences. This allowed the voices of the participants to be heard and not that of my own.

What are the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at Virginia community colleges?

The experiences of active duty military personnel attending Virginia community colleges were disclosed through this study. Although all of the participants encountered hurdles in the form of military and personal obligations, all of the service members maintained positive and optimistic attitudes. Many of the participants' obstacles were military-related in the form of PCS

moves, TDY's, TDA's, and deployments. However, all of the participants credited the military for equipping them with the attributes they need to serve in the military full-time and be students part-time.

Most participants expressed their apprehension about enrolling in school while maintaining an already full plate. Some participants also expressed frustration with the teaching faculty's inflexibility because they did not comprehend their unpredictable schedules (e.g., professors who were unwilling to give assignment extensions when missions and training arose during the semester). This was important to understand the experience of active duty service members who are community college students.

What are the motivations/reasons for attending college while on active duty?

While there are many challenges related to being an active duty military student, the service members named significant motivations/reasons for starting their educational journeys. All 10 service members named their post-military life as a reason/motivation for starting school. The students added that they were pursuing higher education to gain job and financial stability for their post-military careers. Furthermore, a few participants designated military promotion and advancement as their motivating factor for furthering their education. These military personnel voiced that a college degree could also help them earn promotion points. These students understood that, due to military advancement's competitive nature, earning a college degree while serving can be the difference between making or not cutting promotion.

For some participants, their motivations/reasons for starting their educational journey' were more personal. These personal motivations/reasons were familial, in particular in particular related to parents and spouses. These participants agreed that it was a parent or a spouse who

motivated them to start their educational journey. Mostly by example, these students wanted to complete their degree because their parent or spouse had already done so.

How do active duty military students describe their educational persistence?

This study focused on persistence with the active duty military community college student instead of the military's transition to civilian life. To this end, participating active duty military community college students recalled attributes that contributed to their ability to be persistent. Subsequently, all students credited most of these attributes to the military. For this study, the military personnel defined persistence as their ability to fulfill their educational goals despite interferences such as unscheduled missions and deployments. Active duty community college students' also expressed that academic integration mattered to them in terms of educational persistence.

In addition to the above, service members expressed that course credit for their military experience was an essential factor in their educational persistence. An active duty service member's time is limited, and they do not want to spend unnecessary time taking a course they could receive credit for based on their previous military training. Therefore, when most of the participants decided on which college to attend, they voiced that they preferred to go where they would receive the most credit for their military experience. With this being said, most students stated that the college accepted American Council on Education's (ACE) endorsements on their military transcripts. This study showed that accepting these credits and using them where applicable was important in an active duty service member's matriculation process.

Finally, social integration was revealed to be a non-factor in active duty community college students' educational persistence. All participants expressed that they either had no time or desire to participate in their community college social aspects. While Tinto (1993) suggested

that social integration occurs when students create relationships and connections outside of the classroom, some participants considered their blackboard discussion board participation as a means of making these connections with peers.

What types of academic supports do active duty military receive from their colleges' administration, faculty, and staff?

To retain military-affiliated students, colleges have begun to create student supports centers tailored explicitly to this cohort's unique needs. Military-specific student service centers are intended to be a one-stop-shop for admissions, financial aid, registration, and academic services. The majority of the students in this study indicated that their school does have a dedicated military student support office. However, most of the participants admitted to not utilizing any of the academic support offered to them except tutoring. Two participants expressed that they took advantage of the college's free tutoring to assist them with subjects they considered weak. For both students, tutoring enabled them to receive passing grades in those courses where they received assistance. Outside of tutoring, no other supports were named. Even with institutional staffing on installations, participants only sought academic support during the initial enrollment process.

Before this study, it was pinpointed that Virginia had set guidelines intended to protect military students once they enrolled. Nevertheless, there was little information on these students' experiences when they encountered disruptions in their education. This study exposed this cohort's biggest frustration with the academic support they receive from their college. The majority of the participants name the inflexibility of their professors as their most significant frustration.

Only a few military students recalled their instructors being supportive academically regarding being flexible with their assignment due dates. The flexible professors understood the nature of the military lifestyle, especially those teaching at an installation site. Unfortunately, two service members indicated that their professors' lack of understanding and support is why they would not be returning to their college next semester. To this end, if a college has a large military population, it is simply not enough for faculty and staff to understand a degree program's ins and outs. Any faculty working with military students should be abreast of state withdrawal policies for these students. Furthermore, ill advising a student on using their TA benefits can lead to financial woes. This study also shows that an academic advisor's role grows drastically with this surge in military enrollment.

Overall, it can be concluded that this study established there is a need to educate college teaching faculty on the academic issues specific to the active duty military population. None of the participants spoke of any academic support problems with college staff (i.e., counselors and advisors).

What types of social supports do active duty military receive from their college's administration, faculty, and staff?

Prior research identified that veterans have issues related to other adult learners, including full-time employment, part-time enrollment, delayed entry, and dependents (De le Garza et al., 2016). The study sought to identify if active duty students faced these same issues. De le Garza et al. tied inner feelings such as isolation, disconnectedness, and discomfort in military veterans' academic settings. This study found that active duty military faced the same discomfort because they cannot attend school full-time and have the college experience as their civilian student counterparts. Two participants admitted to feelings of isolation and discomfort

in their academic settings. However, only three participants indicated that they received social support but not from their college's administration, faculty, or staff. However, it was not because the college did not offer any.

Each participant did recognize that their institution does provide social supports. The participants simply did not have the time to utilize any of them. Most participants received social support from peers, which is limited to their blackboard discussion boards. The only two participants who receive social support from faculty and staff were taking community college courses offered at their installation. Since the college has a one-stop-shop conveniently located near their workplace, they could interact with their base site representative and their military-affiliated peers. These social interactions included military student graduations and ice cream socials during their lunchtimes and class times.

Interestingly, social and academic experience differed between those junior enlisted (E-1 to E-4) and non-commissioned/Petty Officers with supervisory responsibilities. Some of the junior enlisted participants were able to participate in the college's social aspects or looked forward to doing so once activities opened again on campus. All non-commissioned/Petty Officers with supervisory responsibilities had no interest or no time to participate in college's social aspects. Additionally, all of the junior enlisted who participated in this study knew about or utilized tutoring services. Only one non-commissioned/Petty Officer participant used tutoring supports on campus. The others did not realize tutoring existed or did not have the time to take advantage of it.

Discussion

This section discusses this study's results concerning the existing theoretical and empirical literature discussed in Chapter Two. The study's findings aligned with Tinto's (1993) suggestion that the information faculty/staff deliver about course registration, requirements, and

expectations will help students build realistic expectations as to the time and effort required for class success but also influences how they allocate their time to competing demands on their time. However, while Tinto's theory suggested that social integration was crucial to student persistence, this study found that social integration was not essential for student success.

Theoretical Discussion

In this study, Tinto's theory was applied qualitatively to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at Virginia community colleges. Regarding this study's theoretical significance, the findings could be used to identify if post-secondary institutions are deficient in implementing programs and policies for active duty military student-related needs that could boost persistence. Previously, research was primarily conducted on veteran students seeking to persist through community college (Cate, 2014). Nevertheless, this study will add to the limited research on active duty military students attempting to persist through community college.

Prior research also suggested that differences in the student's expectations and the institution were typical (Jones, 2017). For example, the military and most college campuses' social standards differed, and civilian students, faculty, and administrators had little understanding of the depth and range of military experience and training. This research proved to be accurate, to an extent. Most of the participants praised their military and school advisors for steering them in the right direction regarding course selection and understanding the tuition assistance process.

On the other hand, the pure administrative bureaucracy from teaching faculty accounted for many participants' frustrations; it was not malice that made navigating their entrance into higher education difficult. It was red tape and their lack of understanding of the military lifestyle.

The unpreparedness of two-year institutions' teaching faculty is troubling because emerging military-connected student research showed that weak or inconsistent faculty interactions could have an adverse effect on student-military success (Cook & Kim, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Radford, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). The negative interactions recounted by participants with college instructors were daunting since active duty military personnel choose to attend community colleges because these institutions have historically offered entry to higher education for people who would not otherwise be able to go to college.

Empirical Discussion

According to Gill (2016), community colleges are an attractive educational option for military-affiliated students because of affordability, program choices, and course convenience. Seemingly, the individual participants in this study indicated that they did choose a community college because of their course convenience and the programs community colleges offer. However, none of the participants named affordability as a reason for choosing a community college, probably because they all were using tuition assistance (TA) to pay for their classes. While none of the participants mentioned affordability, the ease of their programs was mentioned. Like other adult learners who have no experience in a post-secondary educational setting or have been away from school for many years, community colleges offer support services and readiness programs that prepare service members for the academic rigors of college-level education (Snead, McMurtry, & Baridon, 2010). Most participants felt that community college courses offered the pre-requisite courses they needed to build their confidence as they continued their programs.

Before their community college enrollment, most participants admitted to being naïve to the rules used to navigate higher education. In addition, some participants were also native to the process of how to utilize their military tuition assistance benefits. Some described their experience of navigating the institutional and governmental processes as overwhelming. Previously, research indicated that the service members faced the same challenges that many first-generation students faced, like not knowing where to go for help, what questions to ask, or how to "advocate for themselves within an unfamiliar and complex system" (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014, p. 40). Nevertheless, most of this study's participants admitted to knowing that their institution had supports in place to help them ease into community college life. Still, they did not have the time to take advantage of them. Previous studies on active duty military students showed that military personnel had the skill sets to ensure seamless integration into a college environment. This study helped to solidify those previous findings. However, the results on degree completion remain vague.

Like many non-traditional students, current service members face challenges associated with returning to school after time away from formal education. Before this study, research suggested that returning to a college campus, or facing college for the first time, was overwhelming for military personnel because they were accustomed to working within ordered structures (Cox, 2019). However, the participants expressed that they were not overwhelmed because they moved away from the ordered structure of military life. Still, they found it hard to balance the many components of their lives. Like civilian adult learners, all study participants found it hard to balance work, family, and academic commitments.

The participants explained that they are at the military's mercy as far as their degree completion is concerned. Most understood that it would take them longer to complete their

college degree because of expected deployments and other military obligations. Before this study, few qualitative studies examined the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at Virginia community colleges. The results contribute to the recent research and provide further knowledge of active duty military students' academic and social experiences at Virginia community colleges.

Implications

This section aims to address the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study. This study's significance and impact go further than the participants themselves. The results of this phenomenological study provide theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for student services advisors, counselors, administrators, teaching faculty, base education personnel, and researchers. This study is significant because it contributes to the literature on active duty learners' academic and social experiences seeking to persist through community college. Additionally, this study's results add to the limited amount of knowledge on this topic and add to plans for the successful degree completion of active duty service members.

Theoretical Significance

The study results provide theoretical significance by adding to the framework of student integration theory (Tinto, 1993). The finding also offers theoretical implications for student services advisors, counselors, administrators, teaching faculty, base education personnel, and active duty military student persistence researchers. Using student integration theory to examine the experience, this study provided a detailed description of military students' academic and social experiences at Virginia Community Colleges. In general, this study showed that active duty military students are continually playing the balancing act between full-time service and student life demands. This study also demonstrated the impact of deployment on military-

connected students. Furthermore, due to the military lifestyle's uniqueness, service members had more interruptions to their college education than their civilian counterparts.

The results provided a distinctive perspective on the active duty student population, as they are much different from civilians who do not face the same life events. Unfortunately, most service members find it hard to identify academic programs that understand their deployment cycles (Borsari et al., 2017). According to Burke and Miller (2017), a service member will most likely relocate every 2-3 years. Additionally, while on active duty, a service member will regularly deploy six, nine, or 12-month deployment cycles (Wolf, Rinfrette, Elaine, Eliseo-Arras, & Nochajski, 2018).

This study also found that military students have to make the hard decision of choosing between their tasks and their missions when forced to deal with looming detachments and deployments. To this point, the interviews showed that at least three of the eight participants thought social integration was not crucial to their persistence through their educational journeys. The participants have adaptabilities that will aid in their community college persistence. Wertsch (2006) added that military students have adaptabilities that assist with college integration, such as easy recognition of other military students, and they practice extroversion even if their personalities are introverted. These participants also showed that adjustment characteristics are common among military students and these traits are enough to overcome the challenges of school integration.

Empirical Significance

There has not been significant research concerning active duty military academic and social experiences attending community colleges. The literature that currently exists focuses primarily on the problems associated with students' integration into a civilian school

environment after military service. To this point, the findings from this study will aid college administrators, faculty, support staff, and military education officers in developing system-wide military student strategies and policies that are tailored to the unique circumstances of active duty service. The majority of these study participants reported little to no interaction with college administrators, faculty, support staff, and military education officers.

Therefore, developing ways to guarantee military students' academic success will promote college administrators, staff, and faculty (De La Garza et al., 2016).

While there are several reasons for this, knowing the service member's perspective can strengthen the military and academic support staff's engagement. This is significant because several participants acknowledged disengagement between these two entities as a factor for retention. Unfortunately, current research has indicated that higher education stakeholders may not have the essential information to adequately support this growing student demographic (Jones, 2017).

The results will have empirical implications for college administrators, faculty, support staff, military education officers, and even policymakers. It provides empirical significance because the difficulty of military student integration included gaps in academic learning, disconnection with civilian students, and difficulty assimilating into a new school environment (Berg, 2008; Clever & Segal, 2013; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009).

For military student support officials and policymakers, this study's findings validate the demand for renewed support services and policies to help military service members, particularly in policy areas. Most participants expressed considerable exasperation with faculty and staff unfamiliar with service members' unpredictable work schedules. The participants indicated their professors and support staff were unbending with assignment deadlines and course withdrawals resulting

from a deployment or unscheduled detachment. This study demonstrated that the policies to assist active duty personnel in gaining a college credential while serving need to be re-evaluated. Persons in power at the state and national levels should be held responsible for knowing, implementing, and developing policies that use colleges are following the regulations regarding supporting service members and their benefits.

Practical Significance

The practical implications of this study will benefit community college faculty and staff who advise and teach active duty personnel. The findings of this study will help college administrators, faculty, and support staff to develop system-wide strategies for active duty military student success that are tailored to their unique circumstances. Developing ways to guarantee military students' academic success will promote college administrators, staff, and faculty (De La Garza et al., 2016). Additionally, this study adds to the insufficient literature related to military students' social systems at community colleges versus a residential college that will offer an essential understanding of military students' enrollment experience (Hammond, 2016).

Furthermore, this study's results shed light on how a community college setting influences active duty military student persistence, retention, and overall success (Hammond, 2016). The different participant perspectives and their student outcomes helped make known the voice of active duty students seeking to persist to degree completion at the community college level. To this end, this study's practical significance is that understanding the beliefs and values of lived experience can provide a more in-depth thought into those seeking to integrate into a college setting and obtain a degree.

Delimitations and Limitations

The researcher established this study's delimitations to provide the most factual description of the phenomenon's experience. Thus, only persons who were active duty military members were invited to participate. Another necessary delimitation of this study was that participants must have met college attendance requirements of completing at least one semester of community college courses.

There were a few limitations to this study. The participants do not represent the active duty military student population at all community colleges or even throughout the Virginia Community College System. The majority of the participants were either Navy or Army service members. I ascribe this to the location in which the study took place and the installations where the participants were recruited. There was no representation of Coast Guard service members. Preferably, qualitative research should be reproducible and given a similar cohort; similar findings are possible (Tsai et al., 2017). Because of the study's parameters, I could not equally represent participants from the military's various branches as I had initially planned. In addition, most of the participants were not in their branch's combat arms, meaning they were mainly in supportive roles. Lastly, I was only able to gather four participants for the focus group participation.

Recommendations for Future Research

This dissertation examined the experiences of active duty military personnel seeking to persist through Virginia community colleges. All participants were optimistic about completing their degrees with the influences of their family and military life on their educational journeys. The majority of the participants felt that their civilian student counterparts had advantages of greater fairness and faster completion of their degrees. They identified worry about deployments

and detachments as interruptions to their course completions that their civilian student counterparts did not have to face.

All participants revealed that the purpose of wanting to complete a degree while on active duty was to gain military promotion points or prepare for careers post-military service.
It should be noted that, upon starting the research process, I realized that there is a lack of research on this study's topic. In my opinion, many areas of research should be researched further to include online vs. in person experiences. When conducting data analysis, I observed that most participants could attempt at least two courses, and none of their commands stopped them from doing so. Essentially, except for two participants, their experiences have been positive overall but frustrating at times. The frustrations appear to be related to the unpredictability of their work schedules, deployments, PCS's, and family commitments, as well as the inflexibility of college faculty and staff. To this point, I believe that further research is necessary to comprehend why the programs and policies currently in place have not been beneficial.

While giving a voice to active duty, military students' experience will be helpful; a quantitative approach to this line of inquiry would take this study even further. Adding numerical findings would allow us to see patterns and trends so as to generalize results to broader populations. Additionally, it would be fascinating to duplicate this study using another theoretical framework or lens. The other theories that could be considered for this study are transition theory, social integration theory, or a theory I have coined as a dynamic military integration theory which suggests active duty students integration occurs when a service member balance both their military culture and academic course load.

As noted, this study's findings indicate the need for further research in active duty military students seeking to persist to degree completion at the community college level. It

would be interesting to examine if other military personnel at four-year institutions have comparable academic and social experiences. Additional studies could also investigate the perspectives of military officers rather than enlisted service members, as officers often return to community colleges to complete pre-requisites for Bachelor's and Master's programs. It would be informative to learn if these service personnel have the same academic and social experiences as their enlisted counterparts.

Finally, other lines of research could investigate the policies and programs for service members at four-year colleges. Moreover, the lens of the observation point of the phenomenon generates results worth paying attention to since most of the policies and programs for military-affiliated students were created to assist their acclimation to a college environment. This study's outcomes indicate inconsistencies in the policies and programs intended to support active duty military students specifically. Many participants conveyed that the military prepared them for the demands of being a community college student by helping them develop most of the skills needed for success. Participants of this study also expressed that they did not think their professors would be so unaccommodating to their military obligations. So, the question remains, what can be done to ensure that active duty military can balance their full schedules and succeed to degree completion in light of these discoveries?

Summary

The results of this study highlight the strong need for understanding the academic and social experiences of active duty personnel at the community college level. The themes that were found through data analysis were (a) support systems, (b) obligations, (c) mental fortitude, (d) goals, (e) and concerns. These students often take longer to complete their college education

because they can only complete courses at a part-time status and are often faced with the interruptions of deployment and constant moves. The participants of this study presented themselves to be determined, smart, and confident. The military should be proud of these overachieving men and women I interviewed for this study. They understood their need to be adaptable because of the ebbs and flows their military lifestyle presented. While discussing their obligations and frustrations, each maintained a positive and optimistic attitude.

The participants who experienced temporary deployments were the students that knew they wanted to complete their education, but not at their current institution. This shows a clear need to offer training to faculty and staff concerning service members' distinctive needs. Academic advisors and counselors are the first to see service members entering community college; therefore, they must understand their educational entitlements and experiences. Furthermore, these educational entitlements and experiences should be shared with the administration and faculty. There are minimal studies on active duty military student experiences with community colleges and persistence. This is alarming because the majority of military personnel begin their college education at a community college.

In conclusion, community colleges are a great starting point for degree-seeking service members. Whether for military advancement or a post-military career, community colleges offer flexible class schedules that will allow them to attempt a degree off duty. However, community colleges must ensure that they have policies and procedures to accommodate military personnel’s nomadic lifestyle. These policies and procedures must be known and understood at every level at the institution to include teaching faculty and staff. Once these guidelines are set and college faculty and staff are informed, an assessment of military student success rates should be developed. Currently, there is no assessment of active duty

military student success rates. Fortunately, many schools have a designated department to work with active military members to help this student population succeed. Therefore, with a designated department's help and the military student's military skills and personal motivation, the active duty military has a greater chance at Associate degree completion.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 10, 2020

Latoya Sivells
James Eller

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY19-20-199 Mission to Persist: A Phenomenological Study of the Academic and Social Experiences of Active Duty Military Students at Virginia Community Colleges

Dear Latoya Sivells, James Eller:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:
101(b):

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).
Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear [Potential Participant]:

As a student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. The purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study will be to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at Virginia community colleges, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, attending a Virginia Community College, be an active duty member of the armed forces, and have completed at least two semesters of community college courses. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in lengthy interviews and grants the investigator the right to possibly videotape the interview and publish the data in a dissertation or publication It should take approximately three months to complete the procedures listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

In order to participate, please complete the attached survey and return it via e-mail. After you have returned the signed consent form, please contact me at [redacted] to schedule an interview.

Sincerely,

La Toya Sivells
Military Education Specialist
[redacted]

APPENDIX C: PRELIMINARY ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

The purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study was to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at a Virginia community college. This questionnaire intended to capture demographic information, confirm student enrollment, assess their perceived level of ability to reflect on and discuss their active duty military student experience, and record their overall reflections and perceptions of their student experience.

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Gender:
4. Race/Ethnicity:
5. Program of Study:
6. Branch of Service:
7. Military Occupation Speciality (MOS):
8. How many semesters have you been attending your current community college?

APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

Consent

Title of the Project: Mission to Persist: A Phenomenological Study of the Academic and Social Experiences of Active Duty Military Students at Virginia Community Colleges
Principal Investigator: La Toya N. Sivells, Vice-President of the Virginia Advisory Council on Military Education, Military Education Specialist-Northern Virginia Community College

Invitation to be part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study of community college, active-duty military student persistence. In order to participate, you must be at least 18 years of age, willing to participate in lengthy interviews and grants the investigator the right to possibly videotape the interview and publish the data in a dissertation or publication, attending a Virginia community college, active duty military member, and completed at least one semester of community college courses.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please take the time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study of this transcendental, phenomenological study will be to examine the academic and social experiences of active duty military students at Virginia community colleges. The theory guiding this study is Tinto's (1993) student integration theory that emphasizes academic and social integration and provides a framework for examining the experiences of students who seek to persist to degree completion.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
I will begin by asking questions to determine the participants' eligibility for the study. If you meet the guidelines, I will ask you to participate in an interview which I will as questions about your academic and social experiences as an active duty member and while attending a community college. I will audio record the interview. The interview will take between 1 to 1 ½ hours, and there may be a need to return for an additional interview. I will ask that you also complete a self-identity questionnaire which should take less than 10 minutes that you will email to me after the interview. Last, I will ask you to attend a focus group with other participants, which will also be audio recorded and should take no longer than one hour.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study are that methods will be developed that can be used to improve the services and active duty military student experiences at community colleges. This will greatly benefit current and future students.

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include: This study will help college administrators, faculty, and support staff develops system-wide military student strategies and policies for their institutions that are tailored to the unique circumstances of active duty students. Therefore, developing ways to guarantee academic success for military students will promote the engagement of college administrators, staff, and faculty

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life

Liberty University will not provide medical treatment or financial compensation if you are injured or become ill as a result of participating in this research project. This does not waive any of your legal rights nor release any claim you might have based on negligence.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be anonymous. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of [pseudonyms/codes]. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted
- [Interviews/focus groups] will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

What are the costs for you to be part of the study?

To participate in the research, you will need to pay for nothing.

Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?

The researcher serves as a military education specialist at Northern Virginia Community College. To limit potential or perceived conflicts [the study will be anonymous, so the researcher will not know who participated] or [a research assistant will ensure that all data is stripped of identifiers before the researcher receives it.] This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision about whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Northern Virginia Community College or your class time and commitments. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researchers conducting this study La Toya Sivells. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at 757-303-1258 and/or lsivells@nvcc.edu. **You may also contact the researcher's immediate supervisor, Takesha McMiller**, at tamcmiller@nvcc.edu, 3924 Pender Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030, (o) 703-293-8130 (f) 703-293-8128.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

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., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is La Toya Sivells. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at 757.303.1258 or latoya.sivells@gmail.com. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. James Eller, at jeller2@liberty.edu.

Your Consent

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. [You will be given a copy of this document for your records/you can print a copy of the document for your records]. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher/study team using the information provided above.

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher[s] will keep a copy of the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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

☐ The researcher has my permission to [audio-record/video-record/photograph] me as part of my participation in this study.

_____	_____
Printed Subject Name	Signature & Date

APPENDIX E: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Opening Questions

1. Let' start by getting a little background on yourself. Please introduce yourself to me- where you grew up, your family, and your goals since starting a degree program.
2. What does persistence mean to you in terms of what it will take for you to complete your college degree?
3. What, if any, are the parallels between persistence in the military as well as in college?

Questions Related to Pre-Community College Experience

4. Describe any military experiences or training that have prepared you academically and socially to integrate into a community college environment.
5. What major day-to-day-changes did you contemplate before deciding to start college?
6. Describe the support of your command. Give examples.
7. During your college search, what were the key factors for making a final selection? Name the factors that contributed to you choosing to attend this particular institution starting from the point of your decision to attend, the admissions process, and your decision to enroll.
8. How did your military training transferability to college credit at your institution influence your decision to attend this particular school?
9. How would you describe your academic expectations before attending this community college?
10. Describe any perceived academic or social challenges /limitations you foresaw before making your decision to start college.

11. As a service member, what were your expectations in terms of intermingling with other students on campus?
12. If you are using tuition assistance (TA), describe your experience with requesting the benefits through your branch of service.

Questions Related to Community College Experience

13. How has your integration process been an active duty service member full-time and attending college part-time?
14. How do feel about the amount of course credit for military training you were awarded, if any?
15. To what extent, including your participation in your academic assignments, have you used campus resources and support services?
16. Explain your level of interaction in the classroom and on campus.
17. Tell me about your experience with college faculty and staff not familiar with your military lifestyle.
18. Tell me about the struggles you have experienced since starting college.
19. What kind of programs or supports would have eased your struggles?
20. Tell me about your campus social life and list clubs and organizations that you participate in.
21. If you did not participate in any social activities, describe any influences that kept you from participating in college socially.

22. What questions, if any, came up when you informed college staff and classmates that you are active duty military?
23. Explain what has influenced your decision to return or not return next semester.
24. Explain how taking community college courses has helped you in your military career?
25. If needed, will it be okay if I did a follow-up or clarifying interview in person, or via telephone or email?

APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Welcome
Introduce myself

Our topic is...
The results will be used for ...
You were selected because ...

Guidelines
No right or wrong answers, only differing points of view
We're tape recording, one person speaking at a time
We're on a first-name basis
You do not need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views
Rules for cellular phones and pagers if applicable. For example: We ask that you turn off your phones or pagers. If you cannot and if you must respond to a call please do so as quietly as possible and rejoin us as quickly as you can.
My role as moderator will be to guide the discussion
Talk to each other

The focus group questions will be as follows:

1. Describe any military experiences or training that have prepared you academically and socially to integrate into a community college environment.
2. Discuss the challenges you have faced with working full-time and attending school part-time.
3. What are your feelings about pursuing an education and military promotion?
4. Explain the military training evaluation process at your institution.
5. How would you describe your relationship with your college counselor or academic advisor?
6. How often do you participate in activities outside of the classroom at your institution?
7. What would you tell your best friend or family member about your academic and social experiences at your college?
8. Explain your stance on if someone on active duty can obtain a community college degree while serving.

APPENDIX G: REFLEXIVE JOURNAL

May 8, 2020
I received a conditional approval form Liberty University's IRB to proceed with my study. To obtain full approval, I must first receive approval from my potential research site. I have e-mailed my conditional approval from Liberty to my potential research site's IRB in hopes they will grant me an approval.

June 3, 2020
Today, I received IRB approval from my research site and I am very excited. I e-mailed the Liberty IRB my approval today and I hope they will get back to me soon with an approval.

June 10, 2020
I finally received Liberty IRB approval. Time to start collecting data.

July 13, 2020
Work has been keeping me busy more than expected. However, I finally contacted Liberty University IT to obtain permission to receive a school Qualitrics account to build and create a secure link to my online preliminary survey. I was told that I had to get my dissertation chair to submit the request. I contacted Dr. Eller and he submitted the request the same day.

July 17, 2020
Today I received approval from the division administrator to receive Qualitrics student access. I will obtain access once I complete the online training document and pass a quiz with 80 percent or better.

July 31, 2020
I passed the Qualitrics quick with 80% or better and have obtained student access. I built my online survey but it has to be approved by the division administrator before being distributed to potential participants. I have requested approval via Qualitrics.

August 27, 2020
My online questionnaire was denied because I forgot to title the survey. Dr. McDonald asked that I add the title and email him my full name, LUID number, dissertation chair, and purpose of the survey to samcdonald2@liberty.edu.

August 28, 2020
My online questionnaire has been approved for distribution. I have begun the student recruitment process.

August 29, 2020
I am surprised to have heard from five students already. They have completed the questionnaire, but only one has completed the consent form. I am sending an e-mail to remind the potential participants to complete the interviews and focus group's consent forms.

September 10, 2020

I finally have almost half of my interviews scheduled. It was hard getting the consent forms back. I have two interviews scheduled for this Wednesday, one Thursday, and another on Friday. I have sent follow-up e-mails again to potential participants that have not sent me their consent forms.

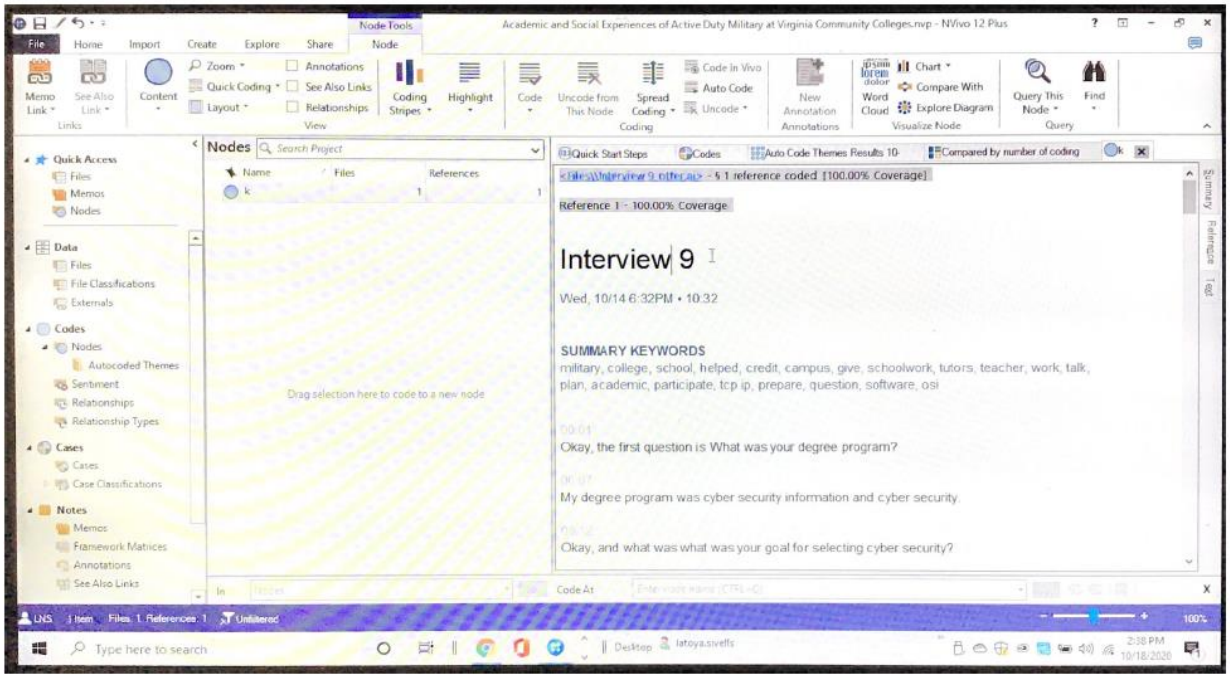
September 14, 2020

All interviews have been completed and sent to the transciber for transcription. She stated this process should take her about a week. I also scheduled a zoom for my focus group session.

October 18, 2020

I have finished editing my manuscript. Sent to my dissertation chair for an official review.

APPENDIX H: SAMPLE OF NVIVO DATA ANALYSIS



APPENDIX I: MEMOING