DISSERTATION

UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCES OF MILITARY SPOUSES

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ABSTRACT

UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCES OF

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The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis was to understand the lived educational experiences of active duty military spouses pursuing an undergraduate degree, with a focus on the perceived opportunities and challenges related to degree completion. Data were collected from nine participants who identified as an active duty military spouse enrolled in an undergraduate program. Three research questions guided this study: What are the educational experiences of active duty military spouses pursuing an undergraduate degree? How do military spouses, as nontraditional students, manage the educational opportunities, benefits, and challenges presented to them while pursuing an undergraduate degree and what success strategies do they use to persevere? How do military spouses view the value and utility of obtaining an undergraduate degree? Data were analyzed and five themes emerged: previous educational experiences before the military, challenges of military life, opportunities of military life, success strategies, and career goals. These students demonstrated a diverse array of expressed motivations and characteristics. The essence of these military spouses was characterized by a form of *altruistic resilience*. The altruistic or selfless nature of their expressed motives extended beyond their own immediate educational or professional needs and ambitions. Numerous spouses noted the impetus to pursue their education was to inspire their children. Likewise, they often placed the demands of their spouse's military career, and the associated volunteer responsibilities, ahead of their own needs and desires. Yet, they persevered.

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DEDICATION

To my patient and loving family.

“You’re braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.”

-Christopher Robin

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

Active Duty refers to men and women currently employed in full time service in the U. S. Armed Forces.

National Guard refers to the American reserve military force, primarily maintained by the states but also available for federal use.

Reserve Forces are the segment of the American military composed of citizens of the United States who combine a military occupation with a civilian career. The main role of the Reserve is to be able to fight when a nation mobilizes for total war or to defend against foreign invasion.

All-Volunteer military is one that derives its labor from volunteers rather than mandatory military service obligations.

Retired service members have served a sufficient number of years in one of the branches of the military to receive a pension as well as medical and other forms of benefits.

Honorable Discharge from active duty service means when separating from the service (without retiring) the member is given a discharge classification that essentially rates the quality of their service. An honorable discharge is the highest attainable discharge. Earning an honorable discharge is contingent upon a member's quality of work and behavior while serving and requires certain criteria be met before separation.

Military service branches include Air Force, Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard.

Military dependents include the spouse, children, and possibly other familial relationship categories of a sponsoring military member for the purposes of pay as well as special benefits, privileges, and rights.

Military spouse is anyone who is married to an active duty or retired duty service member of the U.S. Armed Forces.

Nontraditional student is anyone who satisfies at least one of the following criteria: (a) delayed enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school); (b) attends part-tine for at least part of the academic year; (c) works full-time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled; (d) financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid; (e) has dependents other then spouse; (f) single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents); or (g) does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school; (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

The GI Bill was a common name for an act of federal legislation that provided a range of education and training benefits after World War II. It was initially titled the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, and has gone through multiple amendments from its original form.

Montgomery GI Bill was an education benefit for active duty members who enrolled and paid money for 12 months, and were entitled to receive monthly education benefits once they completed a minimum service obligation. Four categories of eligibility exist for service members.

Post 9/11 GI Bill is a piece of federal legislation enacted for active duty service members that served at least 90 days of aggregate active duty service after September 10, 2001, or for a service member who was honorably discharged or discharged with a service-connected disability after 30 days. The Post 9/11 GI Bill also includes the Yellow Ribbon Program (an institutional fund-matching program) and the Transferability of the Entitlement Option, which was unavailable within other GI Bill programs.

United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is responsible for providing vital services and benefits to United States Veterans and retirees. The VA offers health services, benefits programs, and access to national cemeteries to former military personnel and their dependents.

Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) is Department of Defense identity management center, serving uniformed service members and their families across the globe.

Veteran is a person who served on active duty, other than training, for a period of more than 180 days and was discharged or released with other than a dishonorable discharge; OR was discharged or released from active duty because of a service-connected disability; OR as a member of a reserve component served, under orders, on active duty during a period of war or in a campaign or expedition for which a campaign badge is authorized and was discharged or released from such duty with other than a dishonorable discharge.

MyCAA is the My Career Advancement Account provided by the Department of Defense financial assistance program designed to help eligible military spouses pursue associate's degrees, occupational certificates, or licenses in portable career fields. The current version of the program dates from 2010.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As Rachel scanned the classroom, her uneasiness and self-doubt made her stomach queasy. She questioned her own sanity about reigniting the desire to become a registered nurse after a substantial hiatus from college. It had been more than 18 years since she had left a prestigious undergraduate program to support her new husband's military career. Rachel and Brian were high school sweethearts who married when they were just 20 years old. After high school, Brian enlisted in the Army while Rachel pursued her undergraduate degree at a state flagship university using funding from a merit-based scholarship. Brian's first duty station was only a few miles from campus, so the situation was ideal for Rachel to complete her degree while Brian began his dream of being an American soldier. However, within a year of receiving his first assignment, Brian received unexpected orders to move to Europe for at least three years.

Leaving college was extremely difficult for Rachel, but she vowed to continue her education while they lived abroad. Unfortunately, the courses Rachel needed to pursue a nursing degree were not available online, and there was no way for her to attend the classes in person. The couple decided to start a family and had their first child less than a year after arriving in Germany, just weeks prior to Brian's first of five, year-long, deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. In what seemed like a blink of an eye, the family had three children and had endured 14 moves in just over 20 years. With their youngest child headed off to high school and Brian less than a year from retirement, Rachel decided it was time to get back into school. She sat down with an enrollment counselor at a large public university with a robust adult education program, and mapped out a plan to get her bachelors of science degree within the next two years. While on paper that seemed reasonable, the reality of spending her days in a classroom with students who were half her age now seemed terrifying. Rachel strengthened her resolve and

recognized this was her first opportunity in nearly two decades to pursue her own educational and professional dreams after years of supporting the nation as the spouse of a service member.

Rachel's story embodies only one of the unique challenges of the millions of women and men who forgo, delay, or seriously alter their educational paths to support the unconventional lifestyle of an American military spouse. President Obama (2012) expressed his admiration for military spouses who take on the work of two while the service member is away. Currently, there are approximately 910,000 (700,000 female and 210,000 male) active duty military spouses ages 18 to 49, and millions of American veteran spouses (Prine, 2016). Recent federal legislation has authorized expansive education benefits to military dependents to include military spouses, but without any substantial mechanism designed to examine the success of these programs.

Prior to the implementation of these federal policies with educational benefits, the military spouse was overtly expected to actively support the military without any real compensation. In the 1970s, accounts of the military officer's way of life detailed the ancillary role of the wife and family (Harrell, 2001). In fact, an officer's duty performance evaluation included the extent to which his wife performed volunteer duties (Segal, 1993). In some cases, the military chain of command pressured spouses who were engaged in a professional career to quit their jobs or schooling in order to fulfill voluntary obligations, which can be commensurate to a fulltime job (Harrell, 2001). Some typical volunteer duties consisted of organizing unit social functions such as picnics, coffee hours, and weekend trips; one of the most important tasks was to liaise with unit commanders in order to maintain the flow of information to other military families especially during an overseas combat deployment. The ability of a military spouse to

pursue advanced education or move along a professional trajectory was frequently impractical and even discouraged.

Within the last decade, the military culture has seemingly evolved to conform to a more modern perspective on dual professional families (Ott & Morgan, 2018). Accordingly, the federal government integrated some notable programs for spouses to obtain the credentials necessary for a professional career. These benefits include the authorization for military dependents to receive the substantial education subsidies in lieu of the service member (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018). Under the provisions of the most recent iteration of the GI Bill, military dependents have presumably received billions of taxpayer dollars to pursue postsecondary education, but with a complete dearth of analysis on their degree persistence or academic outcomes (Keierleber & Narayanswamy, 2014). In 2004, the NDRI reported that slightly less than one-tenth of military spouses believed that they had educationally benefited from being a military spouse. The remaining majority of spouses were divided, with approximately half of them believing that their educational opportunities had suffered negatively and the other half perceiving no effect on their education. The following study is a qualitative examination of the higher education experiences of contemporary military spouses attending undergraduate institutions. The study was intended to glean greater insight into the postsecondary experiences, opportunities, and challenges of a military spouse, who are a unique, nontraditional, and scarcely examined student population. All the participants this study were female active duty military spouses.

While there has been some recent, mostly qualitative, analysis on veterans' experiences in higher education, there has been little investigation into how military spouses are performing and persisting in the higher education setting (Gonzalez, Miller, & Trail, 2016). Veterans

support services have increased dramatically on campuses across the country, but awareness and attention to the experiences of military spouses, who might be using these federal education benefits, are also important to academe and the nation at large. Institutions might be interested in better understanding the experiences of military spouses in order to create support programs and analyses measures to appropriately help them persist toward graduation. Because so little is known about this population, and the American taxpayer is subsidizing the education of military spouses using the Post 9/11 GI Bill, it is important to further examine the educational experiences and subsequent outcomes of this specific population.

History of Post-Service Educational Benefits

Since the middle of the 20th century, the federal government has provided an array of post-service education benefits to ease the transition of military members back into society, but without any real focus on the spouse or family of military members. The impetus of some of the initial education benefits was to prevent a flood of working-aged men back into a fragile post-World War II labor market (Bound & Turner, 2002). Consequently, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the first GI Bill, officially entitled the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, to guide some returning veterans into universities or technical schools to prevent a massive influx into the strained job market. The investment in this population was indeed substantial, but not as different in scale or the size of the current military population as one might imagine (Bound & Turner, 2002).

The military has long-provided a host of both overt and intangible benefits to service members and their families such as generous access to medical care, free legal assistance, discounted shopping on military bases, housing allowances, job security for the service member, as well as a sense of belonging and a supportive community setting (Segal & Segal, 2005).

Additionally, in the event of a service member's death, spouses were offered several forms of reparation such as dependency and indemnity compensation, settlements from the Service Members' Group Life Insurance (SGLI), as well as burial assistance (U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2010). These benefits were designed to support the traditional spousal roles of the 1940s and 1950s, but they became inadequate as a greater of number of spouses envisioned a professional career of their own during the impending era of social transformation (Leyva, 2009).

The 1960s ushered in a number of dynamic changes in the American military that triggered the need for greater recognition of the hardships incurred by military families. For example, shortly before the start of the Vietnam War the number of family members actually exceeded the total number of service members for the first time in history (Albano, 1994). While the challenges of frequent relocation, separation, deployments, and the inherent stress of the military lifestyle persisted, military leaders also had to consider the impact on the family system rather than only the individual service member.

By the 1970s, more than half of male service members were married, and many of the female spouses had professional aspirations of their own (Castenda & Harrell, 2008). Unfortunately, the military lifestyle was far from conducive to a dual-professional family, and the constant instability of frequent moves often stifled the professional mobility of the nonmilitary spouse (Castenda & Harrell, 2008). Despite the growing need to acknowledge the professional aspirations of the military spouse, official policies encouraging the pursuit of advanced education and professional training for military spouses did not appear until after the year 2000.

The events of September 11, 2001 ("9/11"), and the subsequent conflicts in the Middle East have produced a new generation of battle-weary veterans. Today's service members and families experience significant separation and strain related to combat deployments (Gonzalez et al., 2016). In 2008, President George Bush signed the Post 9/11 GI Bill, officially known as the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistant Act of 2008, to provide generous education benefits to all veterans who served in the military after September 11, 2001 (Tucker, 2012). In 2009, the federal government broadened the law to allow all direct military dependents, to include military spouses, the ability to use the higher education subsidies allocated within Post 9/11 GI Bill in lieu of the service member (Hassan, Jackson, Lindsay, McCabe, & Sanders, 2010).

Currently, the federal government is helping to support hundreds of thousands of veterans and family members with expansive and expensive postsecondary education benefits (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2017). The Post 9/11 GI Bill has paid $40 billion since 2009, but the Veterans Affairs Office has yet to analyze how many of those students actually received any type of degree, or delineate whether the benefit went to the service member or to military dependents (Wagner, Cave, & Winston, 2013). In fiscal year 2015 alone, the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provided more than $11 billion to colleges, universities, and other educational and training programs for enrolling 652,998 service members or veterans (U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). According to former Senator Jim Webb (D-Va.), American society will see the rewards of this program 20 years from now when the successes that have been accomplished by this legislation are apparent (Doenges, 2011). This assertion is consistent with the narrative describing "positive externalities" or the social benefits of higher education (McMahon, 2009). Moreover, the United States has historically experienced a significant return in the form of social and economic benefits from education investments

oriented on the military population (Webb, 2012). However, neither the Department of Veterans Affairs, nor any other government agency, maintains data that tracks retention and graduation rates among students using the Post 9/11 GI Bill (Wagner et al., 2013). Without the ability to evaluate the persistence and outcomes stemming from this investment, it is quite difficult to conclude if these programs are indeed valuable to service members, their families, and America as a whole.

Military Population

While the federal government attempts to downsize the active-duty military population, the veteran population continues to grow as service members' transition out of service. The population of military spouses is actually growing as new active duty service members enter the services married, and others transition into the veteran population. According to the Veteran Population Projection Model 2014 (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2014), there were 21,368,156 living veterans in 2014. The National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2014) provides the latest official Veteran population projection from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The model is an actuarial projection algorithm developed by the Office of the Actuary (OACT) for Veteran population projections from Fiscal Year FY2014 to FY2043. Using the best available Veteran data by the end of FY2013, the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2014) provided living Veteran counts by key demographic characteristics such as age, gender, period of service, and race/ethnicity at various geographic levels. In 10 years, it is possible there will be 18,457,094 living veterans accessing their benefits, to include educational benefits. Now that military service members and veterans are able to transfer their education benefits to their spouses and children, the number of military

spouses pursuing higher education is considerable and may be significant to higher education institutions.

Purpose of Study

Many military spouses are pursuing higher education degrees, but there is a lack of analysis on their higher education experiences, opportunities, and challenges. The purpose of this study was to conduct a qualitative examination of the lived educational experiences of active duty military spouses pursuing an undergraduate degree, with a focus on the perceived opportunities, benefits, and challenges related to degree completion. A qualitative study was conducted to be able to interview the participants for their rich description and to understand their lived educational experiences as military spouses in undergraduate school.

Research Questions

The over-arching research question for this study is: What are the perceived academic experiences of active duty military spouses in their pursuit of an undergraduate degree? The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the educational experiences of active duty military spouses pursuing an undergraduate degree?
2. How do military spouses as nontraditional students manage the educational opportunities, benefits, and challenges presented to them while pursuing an undergraduate degree and what success strategies do they use?
3. How do military spouses view the value and utility of obtaining an undergraduate degree?

Delimitations

The participants in this study were female active duty military spouses. This study was performed by interviewing nine military spouses in the southeast United States during the summer and fall of 2017. Active duty, service members, veterans, and dependent children were excluded as participants. Veterans, retired veterans' military spouses, or divorced military spouses also have experiences that are not addressed in this study because they might attend college after their spouse has left active duty service.

Limitations

The researcher's status as a military spouse provided greater access and nuanced insight into this population. However, there was careful consideration and due diligence to address the injection of potential biases and conclusions not supported by the collected data. This study included interviews of only female active duty military spouses, which may be viewed as a limitation of this study.

Significance of the Study

This study provided information and insight, framed by the experiences of military spouses, that illuminates the educational experiences of the military spouses' that might inform educators and institutional administrators regarding these experiences. The study was designed to help fill a gap in the literature regarding an understanding of the educational experience of military spouses. This study might inform administrators and military education service centers on military installations regarding support services for military spouses on college campuses.

Researcher's Perspective

My personal perspective in this dissertation involves my worldview as a mother, a higher education faculty member, a military spouse of 20 years, and as a researcher. As the researcher, I served as the instrument of interpretive analysis; I was therefore unable to remove myself from the study and perform my research from a value-neutral standpoint (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). While facts about others utilize third person omniscient and academic language, the narrative herein includes use of the first person "I" to illuminate the researcher-as-instrument aspects of this qualitative study.

As a military spouse and mother with professional ambitions, I have been required to reinvent myself with each of the nine military moves to other states and countries. I feel the challenges of my military life and the accompanying experiences leave me well suited to research military spouses' experiences at higher education institutions.

My exposure to the military lifestyle started with one of the world's most demanding collegiate environments: the United States Military Academy. Without much understanding of the military lifestyle, I was compelled to test my mettle. As an active duty cadet, I learned a lot about myself and about service to our nation. I eventually concluded that I did not want a professional military career, but my experiences there inspired me to a lifetime of military service in other ways. I continued my academic and athletic career at Eastern Kentucky University where I thrived in the traditional academic setting. Immediately after graduating from college, I again found myself immersed in the military lifestyle. My new husband was a commissioned officer assigned to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Soon after arriving in Oklahoma, I was fortunate enough to find a job working for the Department of Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS). Working for the Department of Defense allowed me the opportunity to serve

our nation and the military community as a civilian employee. It also enabled me to continue my education through the generous employee education benefits. My experiences in Oklahoma were highlighted by my participation in the graduate program in Applied Managerial Economics at the University of Oklahoma. By continuing my education while working, I was able to see the immediate relevancy of my studies. After completion of my master's degree, I continued to yearn for the stimulating environment of the classroom. It was at this point that I started to teach as an adjunct at Cameron University, while still maintaining my position as a government employee. I eventually concluded that I wanted to focus my attention on my own pedagogical development, and thus started teaching full-time.

As my husband's five-year commitment to the Army was ending, we had planned to transition out of the military. I intended to go back to school to pursue my doctoral degree with the goal of becoming a university professor. Just prior to my husband's final days in the Army, the tragedies of 9/11 indelibly changed our professional paths. As a couple, we decided that the country needed our service more than ever. At that point, we committed to another military assignment, which would send us to Europe. Just weeks prior to our departure, I gave birth to our first daughter. Living overseas provided me a much broader perspective on life in general and it solidified my resolve to continue my own educational endeavors. I was afforded the opportunity to teach through the University of Maryland - Europe. Through this institution, I taught business, economics, and management courses at U.S. military installations throughout Germany. These less than traditional classroom environments consisted of American service members and military spouses, U.S. federal employees, as well as some German citizens. I found this diverse environment incredibly stimulating, and it allowed me to grow as an instructor. During my husband's first deployment to Iraq, I remained in Germany with my

daughter and I was able to experience, first-hand, the challenges of military spouses attempting to complete their undergraduate education. I was fascinated with the challenges and obstacles they faced while trying to complete coursework, and inspired by their individual motivations and resolve.

My husband's next assignment allowed us to return to the United States, where he was able to obtain a graduate degree in Southern California. The short duration of my husband's graduate school duty made finding work within the educational field challenging. I started teaching for the Boeing Company as an Instructor for Estimating and Pricing Specialists, which provided me significant insight into the private business sector. In the relatively brief time that I was there, I was also able to continue some of my work-related education through UCLA's Extended Campus programs.

In 2007, we moved to the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. As my husband commenced his assignment within West Point's student services center, I was hired as the institution's director of the Semester Abroad Program. I coordinated with non-English speaking institutions around the world to host West Point cadets for a semester of interdisciplinary studies and cultural immersion. While working full-time, I enjoyed the stable and caring military community that West Point provided, which encouraged us to expand our family. Early in 2010, I gave birth to our second daughter just months before my husband left for another year and a half deployment to Iraq.

In 2011, I became a graduate student in the Colorado State University's Doctor of Philosophy degree program in Education and Human Resources Studies. I started the program in West Point, New York, moved to Kansas for less than a year (2011-2012), then to Georgia (2012-2016), and now currently reside in South Carolina (2016-present). Throughout these

transitions, I always maintained sight of my personal educational goals, endeavoring to use my education as a vehicle to help share the educational experiences of military spouses trying to earn an undergraduate degree. As a woman, I feel that I can be an example for my daughters in pursuing their educational dreams, as well as to military spouses during their educational journey. The following study is an attempt to establish a basis for better understanding the opportunities and challenges of the female military spouse within the higher education setting. I can make meaning from my research because of my experiences as a military spouse for more than 20 years.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

While there are some historical analyses of military and veteran students in higher education, the current body of literature concerning education and military spouses is very limited. Any discussion of military spouses concerning postsecondary education is focused heavily on policy. Thus, it is imperative to begin this review by examining the literature specific to the historical development of all military education programs. Even within these sources, there is very little mention of military spouse population, despite recent recognition of their sacrifices and increases in financial support for education. Existing quantitative and structured qualitative research studies pertaining to military educational benefits only focus on the active duty member or veteran service member. Additionally, some research helps explain why and how active duty service members and veterans return from college, but neglects these topics related to the military spouse. Thus, I make the connections to other research tangentially related to this unique student population in this analysis of existing literature.

This literature review is segmented into sections that apply to military spouses. I examine Military Education Opportunities, Factors Affecting Undergraduate Degree Completion for Nontraditional Students, Degree Completion Strategies, Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition, Military Students, and Military Spouses. I begin by examining the history and evolution of military service members' education opportunities and programs including a chronology of different federal educational funding. Within the literature focused on nontraditional students, I identified and investigated different perspectives on attrition, motivation, and persistence in higher education. Then, I perused sources focused specifically on opportunities and challenges of military personnel and spouses pursuing postsecondary education or professional careers.

Military Education Opportunities

This section will discuss the history of military education opportunities and benefits. A timeline of the history of US Military Education Programs is presented.

The World Wars and Veteran Educational Support

After World War I, Congress and President Woodrow Wilson chose not to financially assist veterans returning from war to re-enter the workforce nor provide the means for greater access to advanced education. While economic hardship throughout the nation may have contributed to the lack of financial support to veterans, the glut of unemployed working-age male veterans only exacerbated the financial situation. This political oversight not only further degraded the economy during the Depression, but also led to an infamous standoff between veterans and the American military that would influence the provision of federal education benefits for years to come (Carleton, 2002). The political missteps after the First World War provided a cautionary tale for the future need to support military veterans attempting to reintegrate into American society (Carleton, 2002).

During the years following WWI, a substantial proportion of U. S. veterans found it difficult to make a living, even if they returned home in good health (U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). World War I provisions consisting of legislative and military benefits, financed a subsistence allowance of $90 to $145 a month for the vocational and professional training of disabled veterans. While the World War I provisions gave limited aid to a minority of veterans, it did establish a precedent for providing rehabilitative aid for returning veterans to obtain gainful employment (Olson, 1994). Five years after most WWI veterans returned home, the federal government had not done anything to assist in reintegrating healthy veterans back into American society. Congress eventually passed the World War Adjusted Compensation Act of

1924, known as the Bonus Act, to provide financial support to struggling veterans. The Bonus Act included a benefit plan for World War I veterans as additional compensation for their military service (Olson, 1994). Service members were credited with "adjusted service certificates" (Olson, 1994) equal to $1.00 per day served in the United States and $1.25 per day served overseas, up to specific limits. The law granted a bonus based on the number of days served, but veterans grew impatient and even violent after they had to wait 20 years to receive benefits. A sizeable group of veterans marched on Washington D.C. in the summer of 1932 to demand full payment of their bonuses, which led to an alarming and violent standoff between active American soldiers and discouraged veterans.

The economy was still recovering from the Great Depression when the United States entered World War II in 1941and many American had a strong recollection of the tens of thousands of unemployed citizens, including veterans, begging for work in the streets (Carleton, 2002). Furthermore, political leaders did not want a repeat of the Bonus Army experience. To avoid another socioeconomic and political disaster, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a piece of legislation that would have a resonating impact on the education levels and upward social mobility of generations of Americans. President Roosevelt stated that he believed the nation was morally obligated to provide training, education, and the necessary financial assistance (Bound & Turner, 2002). On November 13, 1942, the President appointed a committee of educators to study the problem of educating returning service members and women after the war. The stated objective was to enable the young Americans whose education was interrupted by the war effort to resume their schooling, and to provide additional opportunities and access to higher education and technical training after their discharge from the armed services (Mettler, 2005). Roosevelt's committee recommended the federal government make it

financially feasible for every man and woman, who served honorably in the armed forces for a minimum period after September 14, 1940, to receive an educational benefit.

Initially, it was suggested that a service member spend a period of up to one calendar year in college, a technical institution, or training within a specific industry (Carleton, 2002). Harry W. Comery, former national commander of the American Legion and former Republican National Chairman, is credited with creating the outline for the Bill (Carleton, 2002). It almost did not pass because it was thought that paying Veterans $20 per week might diminish a veteran's incentive to work (Carleton, 2002). Other members of Congress questioned the concept of sending battle-hardened veterans to colleges and universities that were often reserved for the wealthy or those entering the traditional professions (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). This notion gave way to what would be widely considered one the most important legislative acts of the 20th century (Carleton, 2002).

The original GI Bill, officially known as The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, is credited with helping to build the world's largest middle class and changing the accessibility of higher education for Americans (Ford & Miller, 1995). While the GI Bill is often considered an education-focused measure, at least one researcher argued that President Roosevelt was more concerned with what returning veterans would do to the fragile economy (Ford & Miller, 1995). Therefore, legislators devised the Bill as means to echelon returning veterans back into the workforce after World War II. Consequently, the federal government provided more than 16 million veterans with access to the financial means necessary to pursue an advanced education (Bound & Turner, 2002).

The original GI Bill provided low-cost mortgages, low-interest business loans, as well as cash payments for tuition and living expenses at a university, high school, or vocational school

(Carleton, 2002). These benefits were available to every veteran who had been on active duty during the war years for at least 120 days and had not been dishonorably discharged; combat was not required. Former service members almost immediately began to change the population at American colleges, and by 1947, they made up nearly 50% of the student body (Bound & Turner, 2002). Under the provisions of the GI Bill, veterans had the autonomy to decide their own courses of study and what institution to attend. With many more Americans receiving a college education with minimal debt, the American economy thrived after World War II, and the framework for future veteran compensation was firmly established.

Historical Evolution of Military Education Benefits

After WWII, a series of shifting programs provided different levels of support to American veterans, service members, and even military dependents. In 1966, the Veterans' Educational Assistance Program (VEAP) provided education and training funding to eligible persons who contributed to the program while on active duty, and eventually gave way to the Montgomery GI Bill in the early 1980s. Within the Montgomery GI Bill, service members had the opportunity to contribute to a fund while on active duty that would result in a greater amount of financial assistance for education (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2012). However, this benefit was not used to its full potential. Therefore, after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the ensuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Congress introduced the most robust education-funding program in the history of the GI Bill (Connelly, 2012). Within this legislative act, service members, veterans, and military dependents have access to an extensive array of education and training benefits.

Veterans' Educational Assistance Program (VEAP)

Under the VEAP, participants were selected from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps to participate in Section 903 paid for by the Department of Defense. Section 903 stipulated that participants could transfer their benefits to a spouse or child (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2001). Eligibility requirements stipulated that the service member entered service for first time between January 1, 1977, and June 30, 1985. Additionally, the service member had to open a contribution account before April 1, 1987, and voluntarily contribute from $25 to $2,700 (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2001).

Montgomery GI Bill

In 1984, Mississippi Democrat, G. V. "Sonny" Montgomery, who was a WWII veteran, a Major General in the Mississippi National Guard, and a 30-year member of the U. S. House of Representatives, introduced the next iteration of the GI Bill. Previous iterations of the GI Bill were oriented primarily towards active duty military members. Prior to the introduction of the Montgomery GI Bill, service members within the National Guard and Reserves were rarely mobilized, and therefore the federal government did not recognize the need to compensate this population for the missed opportunity to participate in higher education (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). The new law made National Guard and Reserve personnel eligible for educational benefits for the first time in history.

The Montgomery GI Bill helped to change the perception of military service after the very unpopular Vietnam War. The Bill provided veterans with a transition benefit for reentry into the civilian economy, and served as a recruiting tool to attract talented youth into the armed forces (Asch, Fair, & Kilburn, 2000). The United States abolished the military draft in 1973 and by the late 1970s the success of the all-volunteer force was in peril because the service branches

had difficulty recruiting high quality citizens (Asch et al., 2000). As chair of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, Mr. Montgomery recognized these needs and proposed a cost-effective education incentive that would be popular with college-age youth. Many top military officials praised his vision because it "reversed expectations of failure, and planted the promise of success" in a post-Vietnam era military (Asch et al., 2000). More than 2.6 million veterans used the Montgomery GI Bill (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016), only a fraction of those who were eligible for this benefit.

Montgomery GI Bill Active Duty (MGIB-AD)

The Montgomery GI Bill Active Duty (MGIB-AD), sometimes known as Chapter 30, provides education benefits only to Veterans and service members who had at least two years of active duty and contributed $100 per month for 12 months. This was a recruiting incentive that offered active duty service members and reservists up to $28,800 in tuition in return for a three-year commitment on active duty (Leyva, 2009). The assistance could be used for college degree and certificate programs, technical or vocational courses, flight training, apprenticeships or on-the-job training, high-tech training, licensing and certification tests, entrepreneurship training, certain entrance examinations, and correspondence courses (Leyva, 2009). The benefits were generally payable for 10 years following active release from honorable active service (U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011).

GI Bill

The GI Bill (Public Law 346, passed in June 1944) became the chief instrument for access to higher education for Americans who might not have considered further study. The military members enrolled in unexpectedly large numbers (Henry, 1975). These benefits were available to every Veteran who had been on active duty during the war years for at least 120 and

had not been dishonorably discharged, but combat was not required (U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2010). Veterans had the autonomy to decide their own courses of study and what institution to attend without any federal guidance (Albano, 1994).

The first GI Bill expired on July 25, 1956 (U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2010). An estimated 7.8 million World War II veterans had participated in higher education or training programs using the GI Bill (Carleton, 2002). This act of legislation has been credited with helping to create the American middle-class (Tucker, 2012). While the original version of the GI Bill was highly successful in enabling returning veterans to progress into a higher level of professional employment and social stratum, there was no such benefit for the military family members who remained at home to support the American war-effort and the economy.

Post 9/11 GI Bill

Under the Post 9/11 GI Bill, increased educational benefits are available to all members of the military who have served on active duty since September 11, 2001, to include activated reservists and National Guard as well as to their direct dependent family members (U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2012). To qualify, veterans must have served at least 3 to 36 months of qualified active duty, beginning on or after September 11, 2001 (U. S. Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2012). Educational benefits provided under the Bill allow veterans or their dependents pursuing an approved program of education to receive payments covering the established charges of their programs, up to the cost of the most expensive in-state public school, plus, if retired, a monthly stipend equivalent to housing costs in their area (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012). Active duty personnel and their dependents do not receive this benefit because it would be considered "double dipping" as they are already receiving housing allowance. President Barrack Obama established Executive Order 13607 on April 27, 2012, to

ensure that federal military and veterans' educational benefits programs were providing service members, veterans, spouses, and other family members with information, support, and protection (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012).

After the passing of the Budget Control Act of 2011, also known as *Sequestration*, the U. S. Department of Defense has been challenged to control spending while involved in numerous military operations throughout the world. To address the considerable reduction in funding, the military began to reduce the size of the active and reserve forces. As evidence of this downsizing, the U. S. Army, America's largest branch of service, has already reduced the active force from 566,000 in 2011 to 490,000 soldiers in 2014 to 472,000 soldiers in 2017 (Governing Data, 2017). Current projections suggest that the size of the Army could go as low as 420,000 within the next few years, which would be an aggregate reduction of more than 25% (nearly 150,000 soldiers) from its size in 2011. These forecasts do not provide any estimates on the combined number of service members and their families. Due to the robust federal investment in education benefits for the military service members and their dependents, it seems incumbent to further examine this population and their educational experiences, outcomes, and persistence toward graduation.

In previous iterations of the GI Bill, less than half of those who were entitled to the educational funding actually applied for it (Wagner et al., 2013). If a service member had no desire to attend college or pursue technical training, the benefit would simply go unused. Presently, dependents can use this generous funding, and it is being used by nearly 100% of those entitled to receive it (Wagner et al., 2013). Moreover, the annual expense of the GI Bill has more than doubled since the initiation of this iteration, and an excess of $75 billion has been allocated since 2009 (Wagner et al., 2013). Regrettably, the Department of Veterans Affairs has

not included any internal analysis mechanisms to determine the return on this substantial investment. Furthermore, there are no means within the Veterans Administration's system to determine whether it is a veteran or dependent using the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefit. This lack of accountability should be concerning to the American population, and could be used as evidence to reduce such a sizeable pecuniary investment. Under the current system, it is estimated that thousands of military spouses are receiving education-funding benefits, but there are no government systems in place to monitor their educational experiences (Ott & Morgan, 2018).

The following section is a timeline summarizing military education programs in the United States. It is followed by an examination of the literature focused on the factors affecting undergraduate degree completion in higher education. The intent of this study is to investigate the undergraduate education experiences of military spouses who are inherently nontraditional based on their status as married, older, have dependents, and change schools frequently due to military moves. It is relevant and necessary to explore the broader research on nontraditional undergraduate persistence to better understand what is known about nontraditional students, and what challenges are in the postsecondary education setting.

Timeline of the History of United States Military Education Programs

1916 National Defense Act of 1916 – Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) in civilian college and universities, beginning with the land-grant colleges and several military institutions like the Citadel. American entry into the World War stifled the program.

1920 National Defense Act of 1920-established ROTC units in any college or high school

1924 WWI Adjusted Act

1930 U. S. Department Veterans Affairs founded July 21, 1930

1934 U. S. Supreme Court, *Hamilton v. California,* upheld the constitutionality of compulsory ROTC, setting the state for numerous anti-ROTC campus protests (Abrams, 1989)

1940 Congress authorized the draft and establishment of Officers' Candidacy Schools for regular Army enlisted men.

1941 President Roosevelt's executive order creating the Office of Scientific Research and Development endorsed

1944 Serviceman's Readjustment Act (GI Bill)

1952 Korean GI Bill – served Veterans of Korean War, all monies were given directly to veterans, out of which they would pay the school tuition and fees, rather than the government paying the school.

1966 Veterans Readjustment Act – served Vietnam veterans, and retroactively, those who served between the Korean and Vietnam wars.

1984 Montgomery GI Bill – contributory program, with servicemen and women paying into educational fund, which is matched at least two to one by the federal government.

2008 Post 9-11 GI Bill

Factors Affecting Undergraduate Degree Completion for Nontraditional Students in Education

Given the distinctions that make the military spouse student population different from other students enrolled in undergraduate programs, it is necessary to explore the literature focusing on nontraditional students. For many years, researchers focused primarily on traditional student outcomes in higher education because they made up the vast majority of the student population. The definition of nontraditional students has evolved as the demographics have changed within the academic setting. A nontraditional student is anyone who satisfies at least one of the following criteria: (a) delayed enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in

the same calendar year that he or she finished high school); (b) attends part-tine for at least part of the academic year; (c) works full-time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled; (d) financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid; (e) has dependents other then spouse; (f) single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents); or (g) does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school; (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

A majority of military spouses classify as nontraditional (Harrell, Lim, Castaneda, & Golinelli, 2004). Furthermore, the nature of this study orients not only on nontraditional students, but also on their ability to persist toward graduation. Nontraditional students face a number of unique additional challenges that affect their ability to persist toward the intended degree goal such as extensive work hours, family obligations, and the confidence to return and stay in school (Friedman, Miller, & Evans, (2015). While there is a vast body of information focusing on nontraditional students, it appears that the nontraditional student literature is virtually void of any mention of the military spouse population.

According to the National Audit Office (2007), many surveys showed that nontraditional students presented a higher risk of dropping out of school. According to Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011), empirical evidence supported the hypothesis that the degree of students' social integration in the campus community influenced the level of commitment during academic schooling. Gilardi and Guglielmetti conducted a quantitative study using interviews of nontraditional students. The regression predicted that employed students with permanent and temporary jobs were likely to drop out of school, while traditional students were not a significant factor. Most interesting in the findings was that higher levels of perceived intensity of

difficulties were associated with a lower probability of dropping out (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). The results from the ANOVA showed that nontraditional students in this study in general valued more meaningfulness to the "learning experience," encountered more difficulties, and used university services significantly less than traditional students (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). These findings suggest nontraditional students in this study valued the "learning experience" (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

Clayton and Smith (1987) conducted a study to determine whether motives for returning to college among undergraduate reentry women could be grouped into patterns and whether these reentry women could be grouped by motive types. A 70-item Continuing Education Women Motives Questionnaire were administered to 100 undergraduate reentry women aged 25 and older enrolled in a degree or certificate program in higher education (Clayton & Smith, 1987). Clayton and Smith (1987) identified eight primary motivations for nontraditional women students' decisions to pursue an undergraduate degree: self-improvement, self-actualization, vocational, role, family, social, humanitarian, and knowledge.

Houle (1999) examined nontraditional students and stated that online education was necessary because the current US information explosion. The technology expansion fueled the need for professionals to stay current in their respective fields, and go back to school. At the same time, the aging of the Baby Boom generation forced higher education institutions to search for new ways to fill its classrooms (Houle, 1999). Technological innovation made an enormous leap over the past 30 years (Houle, 1999). Houle (1999) explained that old educational models of brick and mortar institutions no longer work. Community colleges have aligned themselves closely with the business community and endeared themselves to adult learners by providing online education (Houle, 1999).

Boshier (1991) conducted a qualitative study and used the Education Participation Scale (EPS) (A-form) to measure motivational orientations of nontraditional students. The study consisted of seven 6-item factors comprised of items inductively derived from adult education participants. Responses from 845 subjects living in North America and Asia were entered into discriminant function equations where the combined EPS (A-form) scores successfully classified 60% of respondents into their gender, 25% into their age, and 65% into their ethnic groups (Boshier, 1991). Boshier (1991) found that motivation in adult learning consisted of different orientations. First, Boshier identified goal-oriented learners whose education serves as a means to achieve some other goal (Boshier, 1991). Additionally, activity-oriented learners who participated in higher education for the sake of an activity itself enrolled in higher education institutions. Third, Boshier discovered social-orientation for participants in higher education who appeared to appreciate the social aspects of the educational environment.

Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) published a comprehensive guide for learning in adulthood. The researchers examined the sociocultural contexts of the United States, the range of learning opportunities available to adults, and who took advantage of these opportunities and why. The search for the underlying motivational structure of adult learners was examined. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) examined several previous studies and determined the two most cited reasons for nonparticipation in higher education were the lack of time and the lack of money (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The most salient barrier to participation in higher education that the researcher found was "family responsibilities" (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, 2007). Finally, there were those students who were identified as the learning-oriented participants who sought knowledge for its own sake (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

The Benshoff and Lewis (1992) informational analysis (prepared with funding by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement and US Department of Education), reported nontraditional college students influenced institutions of higher education to rethink the focus of academic and student affairs programs. Nontraditional students have needs that differ from traditional-age students (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992). Benshoff and Lewis (1992) reported that adult learners tend to be achievement oriented, highly motivated, and relatively independent with special needs for flexible schedules and instruction appropriate for their developmental level. The willingness of institutions to modify existing programs and develop new services geared to adult populations have had a positive impact on their ability to attract, serve, and satisfy the educational needs of adult students (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992).

Peterson (2014) conducted a phenomenological study and researched fifteen nontraditional community-college student-parents from three Mountain West colleges. Peterson studied the participants' experiences after they had delayed college attendance and then became full-time students while parenting, working part-time, and managing academic responsibilities. The purposeful sample of student parents represented mixed demographics, to include men and women, ages 21 to 43, and military veterans. All of the participants had at least a child under the age of five. The methodology included a 90-minute interview with open-ended questions, interpretive phenomenological analysis. Five themes emerged from the findings of the student-parents' shared experiences (Peterson, 2014). The themes revealed that student-parents attended college to increase their skills and knowledge with the goal of improving their lives and the lives of their families through a meaningful career (Peterson, 2014). Student parents appeared to focus on completion of their degree by prioritizing responsibilities and making decisions that would allow them to be financially, academically, and parentally

successful despite challenges (Peterson, 2014). The student parents of this study agreed that a positive mindset was a motivation for their persistence (Peterson, 2014).

Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) studied the support systems, psychological functioning, and academic performance of nontraditional female students. Traditional (18-22 years of age) and nontraditional (35-44 years of age) female students were compared on various aspects of their social support systems, childcare, psychological functioning (depression and anxiety), and academic performance (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). The study findings of traditional students exhibited poorer psychological functioning when they were less satisfied with their emotional support network (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). In contrast, psychological functioning within the nontraditional students was independent of the amount and satisfaction with their emotional and instrumental social support resources (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). Despite having fewer sources of support, nontraditional students in this study reported better academic performance than did the traditional students (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002).

Hook (2016) examined how sole parents are constituted within university contexts, through social discourse and social policies. The gendered assumptions of female parental care-work are analyzed as both constraining and enabling sole parent participation in higher education (Hook, 2016). Social welfare policies and the policies of university institutions are considered as central to the experiences of sole parents who study at universities (Hook, 2016). Hook (2016) explored the sense of belonging and engagement for sole parents in higher education with a view to challenging how universities engage with under-represented and diverse students.

Degree Completion Strategies For Nontraditional Students

Park and Choi (2009) examined 147 learners who dropped out or finished online courses offered from a Midwestern university. Family support and organizational support were measured by a 6-item, 5-point Likert scale. The study sought to determine whether persistent learners and dropout participants in this study were different in individual characteristics (i.e., age, gender, and education level), external factors (i.e., family and organizational support), and internal factors (i.e., satisfaction and relevance as a dimension of motivation). Items used to measure satisfaction and relevance where based on Keller's (1987) Instructional Materials Motivation Survey (Park & Choi, 2009). In this study, female learners consisted of 74.5% (n = 147) of persistent learners and 65.3% of the dropouts (Park & Choi, 2008). Interestingly, the majority of military spouses were female. Statistical significances in differences of individual characteristics where not found. Organizational support and relevance where the highest predictive variables for persisting in online learning. The results showed that online instructors need to enhance the relevance of courses to keep students coming back. The findings in this study communicated how instructors need to develop and work at building community in courses. The results showed adult learners were more likely to drop out of online courses when they did not receive support from their family and/or the higher education institution while taking online course (Park & Choi, 2009). It appeared the academic preparedness of the learner and aspiration had no affect on degree completion in this study. Online adult learners needed support from family and from the higher education institution to finish online courses (Park & Choi, 2009).

Kjelland (2008) conducted an analysis of competing theories on economic returns to higher education: signaling v. human capital theory. This study looked at previous studies, and attempted to separate out the independent effects of the signaling and human capital mechanisms

for higher educational attainment. Kjelland (2008) argued that individuals in the study utilized higher education to signal a broad set of inherent productivity enhancing characteristics (Kjelland, 2008). Kjelland concluded that several past studies focused too narrowly on measures of inherent intelligence as representative of an individual's signaled productivity. The economist, Chevalier contended that, at least in the labor market, the inherent commitment to actually achieve a diploma is as valuable as the educational benefits gained in the process of attaining it (Kjelland, 2008).

In the publication, *The talent equation: Big data lessons for navigating the skills gap and building a competitive workforce*, Ferguson, Hitt, Tambe, Hunt, and Grasz (2014) navigated the skills gap and the shifting labor market for Human Resources in the United States. The educational value of a degree to workers and employers was explored and discussed from the general labor pool. Some of the findings concluded that undergraduates often matriculate into professional fields that were outside their areas of study (Ferguson, Hitt, Tambe, Hunt, & Grasz, 2014).

Kim, Shin, Smith, and Hwang (2018) examined online higher education for nontraditional adult students. The study examined two U.S. four-year public universities, the Pennsylvania State University World Campus and the University of Oklahoma Outreach, that have successfully developed online adult education system programs for adults. Using the principles of effectiveness for serving adult learners, the integrated review revealed how adult learners in the study advanced online in a higher education environment for adults (Kim et al., 2018). Key findings highlighted that, under a strong tradition of distance education, "self-assessment system," "financial independence," and "diverse active supports for life and career planning" played a critical role in increasing the academic engagement and retention of adult

students (Kim et al., 2018). The challenges for adult learners in the study consisted of "high tuition rates and limited scholarship options," "monitoring students' experience," "learning outcome assessment," and "commitment of faculty members" (Kim et al., 2018). The researchers explained that online education opens the door for adult learners to consider education, even as a first-time pursuit of higher education, because of the ease of accessibility (Kim et al., 2018).

Nuesall (2016) quantitative study examined the relationship between online programming and persistence for the nontraditional student population in higher education. In Nuesall's study, the nontraditional student population was examined using a traditionality model developed by Horn and Carroll (1996; Nuesall, 2016). Data from a national dataset obtained through the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the Beginning Postsecondary Students of 2004‐2009 Longitudinal Study (BPS:04/09), were analyzed using logistic regression analysis (Nuesall, 2016). The study found that the composite nontraditional student group who attempted to complete all courses in academic year 2003-04 through online education was less likely to persist or attain a degree (Nuesall, 2016). In contrast, when examining the stratified nontraditional population, those students categorized as moderately nontraditional taking a blended online format had a higher probability of persisting or attaining a degree (Nuesall, 2016).

Bandura (1997) explained self-efficacy is concerned with people's beliefs in their capabilities to exercise control over their own functioning and over events that affect their lives. Beliefs in personal efficacy affect life choices, level of motivation, quality of functioning, resilience to adversity and vulnerability to stress and depression (Bandura, 1997). People's beliefs in their efficacy were developed by four main sources of influence. The major influences

included: mastery experiences, seeing people similar to oneself manage task demands successfully, social persuasion that one has the capabilities to succeed in given activities, and inferences from somatic and emotional states indicative of personal strengths and vulnerabilities (Bandura, 1997).

Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons (1992) researched self-motivation for academic attainment, and the role of self-efficacy beliefs and personal goal setting. The participants from their study included, 116 ninth and tenth graders from two high schools in a large Eastern city, Two subscales from Bandura (1989) of the Children's Multidimensional Self-Efficacy Scales were selected for use in this study: self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and self-efficacy for academic achievement (Zimmerman et al., 1992). The self-efficacy for self-regulated learning scale included 11 items that measured students' perceived capability to use a variety of self-regulated learning strategies (Zimmerman et al., 1992). The participants in the study expressed a desire to achieve something special with their potential (Zimmerman et al., 1992).

Ortagus (2017) used nationally representative data and logistic regression to examine the changing profile of online students in American higher education. Weighted descriptive statistics revealed that the proportion of postsecondary students who enrolled in online courses increased from 5.9% in 2000 to 32.1% in 2012, with 23.6% of students enrolled in some online courses and 8.5% of students enrolled in fully online programs (Ortagus, 2017). Empirical evidence suggested that student characteristics associated with the highest opportunity costs of engaging with residential education—such as being a full-time employee, parent, or married—were more likely to enroll in some online courses and online-only programs (Ortagus, 2017).

Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition

Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition was the most common theoretical approach to analysis in studies on military spouses' attrition. The purpose of Bean and Metzner's (1985) study was to estimate a conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition. Data were gathered from 624 nontraditional (commuter, part-time) freshmen at a university enrolling 22,000 students. For these nontraditional students, dropout was a function of GPA and credit hours enrolled, as well as the utility of education for future employment, satisfaction with the student role, opportunity to transfer, and age affecting dropout through intent to leave (Bean & Metzner, 1985). In addition, absence from class, age, high school performance, and ethnicity had indirect effects on dropout through GPA (Bean & Metzner, 1985). These results from the Bean and Metzner study suggested that nontraditional students dropped out of college for academic reasons or because they were not committed to attending the institution, but their reasons for leaving were unrelated to social factors at school (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The findings helped validate the conceptual model.

The model explained how nontraditional students were more affected by the external environment than the social integration variables affecting traditional student attrition. Bean and Metzner (1985) defined three factors that must be considered in a definition of nontraditional students: where they live relative to campus, age, and part-time versus full-time attendance.

Nontraditional students usually do not live in a college residence, and therefore must commute to classes. Chickering and Reisser (1993) believed this is the most important distinction between the "new" and traditional students, because living arrangements have profound influence on the socialization of the traditional student. The second characteristic that differentiates traditional from nontraditional students is age. Older students have already

developed self-control and values typically identified with maturity and were less susceptible to socialization than their traditional counterparts (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The third characteristic associated with nontraditional students is part-time attendance (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Commuter, older, and part-time students experience an environmental pressure while attending college that differs from that of a traditional age, full-time, residential students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). For nontraditional student, the environmental pressure included less interaction in the college environment with peers or faculty members, and less engagement in extracurricular activities, and less use of campus services. Engagement in class-related activities for nontraditional students was very similar to that of traditional students. Finally, there was a greater interaction with noncollegiate, external environment with nontraditional students.

Bean and Metzner's model, Figure 1, indicated that four sets of variables influence a student's decision to drop out. Students with a poor academic performance were expected to drop out at higher rates than students who perform well. The second major variable is the intent to leave, which is expected to be influenced primarily by the psychological outcomes, but also by the academic variables (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The third group of variables expected to affect attrition were background and defining variables—primarily high school performance and educational goals (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Finally, the environmental variables were expected to have substantial direct effects on the dropout rate (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

In the model, environmental variables affected student academic performance. For example, if students could not make adequate child care arrangements, or adjust their work schedules, or pay for college, they would not continue in school regardless of good academic support (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Thus, for nontraditional students, environmental support

compensated for weak academic support, but academic support would not compensate for weak environmental support (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

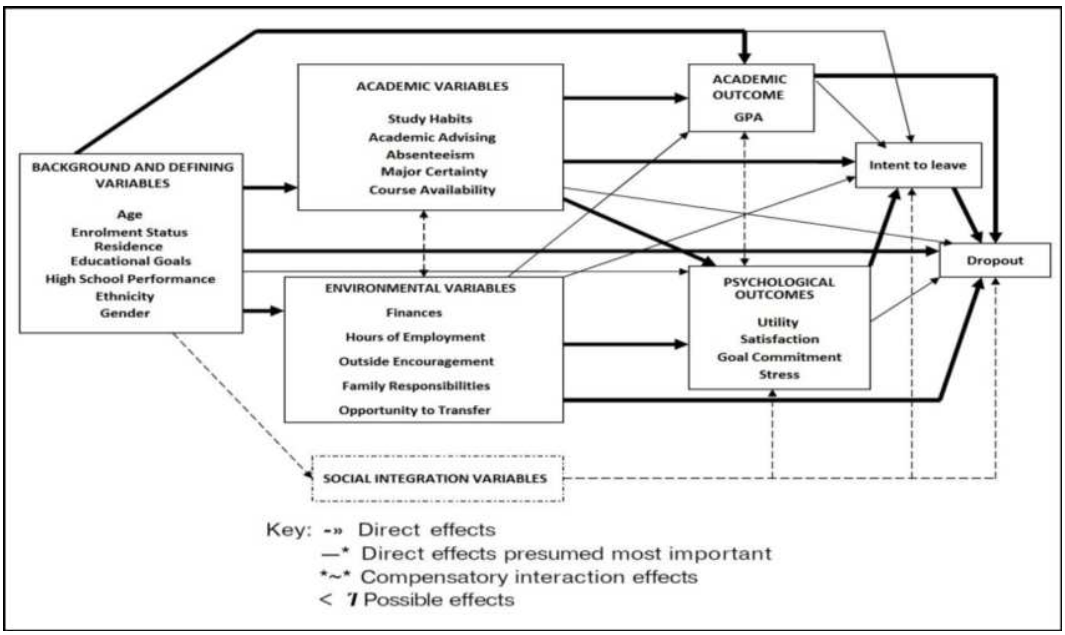

Figure 1. Bean and Metzner's Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition. Key: **-»** Direct effects

Military Students

The military student faces some unique challenges including war, separation, mental illness, relocation, and lack of family support, but the military student may also possess specific traits that help in the higher education setting (Harrell, et. al., 2004). The military culture emphasizes values like honor, strength, self-reliance, discipline, and respect for authority (Sternberg & Sternberg, 2016). Military culture also emphasizes unit cohesion and sacrifice for others, but self-reliance in challenging circumstances.

In a recent analysis on student veterans, DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) found that military students were accustomed to working in a bureaucratic setting and they were often willing and able to find the student service providers who could assist them. The study noted that participants found a diverse and confusing array of requirements, facilities, and services that

might have been discouraging to their educational goals. Somewhat paradoxically, their self-discipline, personal strength, and self-reliance may have made it difficult for them to ask for help (DiRamio et al., 2008).

In many ways, military service members and veterans constitute a minority culture on campus. Some student veterans felt alone, isolated when beginning college, and in need of assistance or comfortable place to go to fulfill their social integration needs (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Student veterans also feel a need to connect with student veteran peers who have similar world experience and maturity levels (Zinger & Cohen, 2010).

Zinger and Cohen (2010) conducted a study on the lives of ten war veterans returning to college life. A qualitative research design used structured interviews to obtain information about returning veterans from Afghanistan and/or Iraq (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). This study discussed the many challenges that soldiers faced when they return into the classroom. Several participants experienced symptoms of PTSD, making it difficult for the transition into student life. One participant expressed frustration seeing all the "happy" people on campus that had no idea of the destruction and death going on in Iraq.

Military Spouses

The military spouse population represents a niche in American society that has been long overlooked, despite significant personal sacrifices made on behalf of national defense. In Friedman, Miller, and Evans' (2015) assessment of education and employment goals and barriers facing military spouses, data was analyzed from Department of Defense 2012 Active Duty Spouse Survey. The research was conducted within the Forces and Resources Policy Center of RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant

Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community (Friedman et al., 2015). The assessment found 57% (n = 4,454) of military spouses reported they had "some college" but no associate's degree or bachelor's degree (Friedman et al., 2015). Many military spouses did not intend to forgo their own educational and professional interests in the name of military service, but were required to do so by the extensive demands of the military lifestyle (Friedman et al., 2015). The National Defense Research Institute (NDRI) reported that service member absence and military work schedules were the most commonly cited negative factors affecting military spouses' educational opportunities; with frequent moves also mentioned as detrimental (Friedman et al., 2015). The emotional duress of surviving through combat deployments and long-term separation adds to the complexity of this experience.

This report provides an analytical understanding of military spouses' employment and educational status, drawn from robust quantitative data, while also incorporating the input from more than 1,100 military spouses who participated in interviews in the context of this research. Military spouses are typically nontraditional students, racial or ethnic minorities, have graduated from high school or have some college experience, have young children at home, and experience frequent long-distance relocations (Harrell, Lim, Castaneda, & Golinelli, 2004).

President Bush acknowledged that the economic well-being of military members, the degree to which they believe that their families are cared for, and their general quality of life are key to maintaining the force (Harrell et al., 2004). Researchers have demonstrated that military spouses' high school graduation rates far exceed the national average (Harrell et al., 2004). This report responds to the recognition that the majority of military spouses have paid employment, but that neither the Department of Defense nor other organizations, such as military family advocacy groups, understand which occupations military spouses pursue, their motivations for

work, or their perceptions of how the military lifestyle has affected their employment or education. My study examined military spouses' lived experiences while attending undergraduate institutions, and communicated how the military lifestyle has affected their higher education.

In the Keenan (2012) study, factors were examined that motivated military spouses completing a college degree. Keenan (2012) collected data using a 23-question survey that included closed-form Likert-scale questions, open-form questions, and demographic questions. The survey was sent to more than 3,000 military spouses at four higher education institutions; 734 military spouses completed the survey. According to Keenan, 75% of military spouse participants "strongly agree" that personal fulfillment and satisfaction motivated them to earn a college degree. Keenan discovered several other motivational factors that military spouses considered when earning a college degree. The second most significant factor was being a role model for children (Keenan, 2012).

Keenan (2012) used two independent variables in the study: motivation and persistence. The dependent variable was the desire to earn a college degree. Of the 734 military spouses to complete the survey, 705 (96%) were female and 29 (4%) were male. The regression model helped predict motivation, R=.44, R^2 =.19, p <.001. Using a minimum significance level, the predictors for motivation were for career, enjoy learning, and university accommodates development needs (Keenan, 2012). The regression model was not a significant predictor of persistence (Keenan, 2012). Using a minimum significance level of $p < .05$, the only predictor for persistence was "support and encouragement from other people (family, friends, co-workers)" (Keenan, 2012). The results revealed no significant effect on confidence by gender. In addition, Keenan analyzed the additional factor comments and did not determine any

significant points made by the males that were different from female military spouses' additional factor comments (Keenan, 2012). In summary, military spouses as students in these studies have significant motivation and persistence factors in degree completion.

Keenan (2012) and Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) had similar studies related to military spouses and nontraditional students and need for family and university support. Each researcher found similar results for nontraditional students needing family support, organizational support, value in learning experience, place to congregate, and simplified information on the FAFSA.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of military spouses pursuing an undergraduate degree, with a focus on perceived opportunities and challenges related to degree completion. This study was conducted using a constructivist paradigm and a qualitative design. Social constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work in. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences. The goal of constructivist research is to rely as much as possible on participants' views to make meaning of the situation (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research requires a willingness to engage with complexity (Creswell, 2012). Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences. These meanings were varied and multiple, leading to a complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas (Creswell, 2014; Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 2013). A constructivist paradigm was appropriate for a study of participants to make meaning of their lived experiences.

Qualitative methods were well suited for a study using a constructivist paradigm (Creswell, 2012). A qualitative inquiry is appropriate when "the researcher's intent is to make sense of the meanings others have about the world" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8).

Methodology

Phenomenological research is a qualitative design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes individuals' lived experiences of a particular phenomenon as described by the participants (Creswell, 2013). A phenomenological study is the "essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon" (Creswell, 2014, p. 14). The approach helps researchers to understand the meaning participants place on events, phenomenon, and activities (Gliner, Morgan, & Leech, 2009). The design has

strong philosophical underpinnings and typically involves conducting interviews (Giorgi, 2009: Moustakas, 1994). This approach answers questions that begin with "how" and "why" (Gliner et al., 2009). A qualitative research interview is often described as a "conversation with a purpose" (Creswell, 2014, p. 57). The "conversation" is the aim of the interview to facilitate interaction allowing the participants to tell their own story (Creswell, 2013). The research design for this qualitative study was a phenomenological approach.

This study utilized a phenomenological approach called interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Usually these phenomena relate to experiences of some personal significance, such as a major life event, or the development of an important relationship. It has its theoretical origins in phenomenology and hermeneutics from Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Smith et al., 2009). Edmund Husserl famously urged phenomenologist to go "back to the things themselves" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 2). Using the framework of Bean and Metzner's (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition as a guide for this study, I analyzed how participants attributed meaning to their lived educational experiences as military spouses pursuing an undergraduate degree.

Research Questions

The over-arching research question for this study was: What are the perceived academic experiences of active duty military spouses in their pursuit of an undergraduate degree? The research questions were as follows:

1. What are the educational experiences of active duty military spouses pursuing an undergraduate degree?

2. How do military spouses as nontraditional students manage the educational opportunities, benefits, and challenges presented to them while pursuing an undergraduate degree and what strategies do they use?
3. How do military spouses view the value and utility of obtaining an undergraduate degree?

Research Design and Rationale

I conducted a qualitative examination to address the research questions using a purposive sample of military spouses in the United States. I conducted face-to-face or web-based video interviews with female military spouses pursuing an undergraduate degree. I began this interpretive phenomenological analysis by transcribing and thoroughly coding each of the interviews to identify common thematic messages and nuances within the data. Upon multiple iterations of analyzing the data, I used an audit process that involved using outside researchers to test for coding coherence.

Research Participants

Participants were selected on the basis that they could offer insight regarding the particular perspective of the military spouses as nontraditional students. They represented a perspective, rather than a population (Creswell, 2014). Using a purposive sampling process, I identified nine female participants who fit within the defined criteria as active duty military spouses and nontraditional student enrolled in undergraduate institution for this examination. The initial three participants were obtained by contacting the education center at an Air Force base in the United States. I found another three participants using a snowball sampling process. Then, I identified three more participants by contacting the Focus Forward Military Connection

group. The ethnicity composition of my participants included five White, two Hispanic, and one African American female military spouses.

Data Collection

By means of a semistructured interview approach, I collected data from each participant via a recorded interview. An Education Specialist at Joint Air Force Base Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina, assisted in identifying participants. In order to recruit more participants, I sent a referral letter via e-mail (Appendix A) to Education Specialists in the Education Center at Joint Base Charleston who support active duty military spouse students as part of their professional responsibilities. The recruitment letter to each Education Specialist included information about the possible participants, the study, and the time commitment involved. The Education Specialist was asked to forward the referral letter to potential military spouse participants, instructing participants to contact me for more information about the study.

Once the participants were selected, I sent each a recruitment letter via e-mail (Appendix B). The recruitment letter gave each participant information on the study. I described the purpose of the study, provided an overview of what types of questions would be asked in the interview, requested that participants forward my recruitment letter to other potential military spouses they may know, and provided an informed consent form (Appendix C) with all of the information regarding the study and the participant's rights and confidentiality information. I asked the participants to return their completed consent forms via e-mail. I notified the participants that they may remove themselves from the study at any time. I compensated the participants with a $10 Wal-Mart gift card for their participation after the completed interview.

After receiving the participants' informed consent forms, I collected the initial data by an intake survey (Appendix D). This survey included questions about the participants'

demographics (e.g., gender, military affiliation, dependent status, active duty status, ethnicity, number of credit hours completed). I contacted participants to schedule a single 60-minute, semi-structured interview using a 12-question interview protocol (Appendix E). Depending on participant's preference, I conducted the interviews in person at their preferred location, or by web-based video. The interview questions were broad and general allowing the participant to construct the meaning of the situation (Creswell, 2013). I conducted an interview with each participant, which was audio recorded using a digital recording device. In addition to the audio recording, I took field notes during each interview to record my observations and to note any follow up questions for the participants.

I used semistructured interview questions that allowed me to ask follow-up questions, and gave the participants the opportunity to speak freely. The interview covered their lived educational experiences as active duty military spouses pursuing an undergraduate degree; experiences outside of higher education that may have influenced their lived experiences in school were discussed as well.

Data Analysis

The essence of IPA lies in its analytic focus. In IPA's case, the analytical focus directed attention towards the participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences (Smith et. al., 2009). After completing the interviews, I transcribed the audio recordings and checked for errors. I e-mailed the interview transcripts to participants with an invitation for them to add, clarify, or delete any statements and gave the participants 10 days to respond to the invitation. I received a response back from six of the participants. I used the IPA data analysis framework for my collected research data. The process included six specific steps (Smith et al., 2005) in order to analyze the data:

Step one: Reading and re-reading. I read each transcript twice. I listened to the audio recordings. I reviewed my field notes from each interview.

Step two: Initial noting. This initial level of analysis is the most detailed and time consuming (Smith et al., 2009). I maintained an open mind and noted anything of interest within the transcript. I wrote exploratory notes, questions, and reflections on hard copies to start the data reduction process. I imported each transcript into NVivo to further identify word and phrase repetitions. I carefully narrowed down and identified emergent themes.

Step three: Developing emergent themes. In the new data set, I identified a list of preliminary emergent themes within each case. I analyzed the passages and notes on each transcript. I looked for emergent themes. Identifying the emergent themes involved breaking up the narrative flow of the interview. This process represented the manifestation of the hermeneutic circle by providing a detailed analysis of personal accounts followed by my interpretation of the generic experiential themes (Smith et al., 2009).

Step four: Searching for connections across emergent themes. The next step involved charting, or mapping, how I thought the themes fit together (Smith et al., 2009). I observed the list of emergent themes for each case and compared to the transcript extractions. I looked for any connections. I used abstraction, subsumption, contextualization, and numeration strategies (Smith et al., 2009, p. 98). For the important and interesting aspects of the participants' accounts, I looked for a means of combining the emergent themes and produced a structure (Smith et al., 2009).

Step five: Moving to the next case. I treated each case on its own terms and did justice to its own individuality. I grouped the ideas that emerged from the analysis of the first case while I started on the second case (Smith et al., 2009, p. 100). I established a list of emergent

themes for each case. I repeated steps one through four looking for emergent themes within each case before I progressed to step six.

Step six: Looking for patterns across cases. In the final step, I determined the emergent theme patterns and recurrences across all the cases that resulted in a final list of themes. Sometimes this leads to reconfiguring and relabeling themes (Smith et al., 2009). I repeated the process of reviewing the transcripts, initial notations, emergent themes, and identified the connections. I listed my cross-case subordinate themes. These findings were discussed in chapters four and five.

Trustworthiness

Validity in qualitative research is based on determining whether the findings were accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Trustworthiness is a term that addresses validity in qualitative literature (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Trustworthiness is the guideline by which the quality, replicability, and rigor of qualitative research is determined. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were the four criteria through which researchers can assess trustworthiness in a qualitative study (p. 301).

Credibility

I established credibility through peer debriefing. With selected colleagues I discussed my initial reactions to the data following each interview and solicited their feedback. Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined the role of the peer debriefer as a "devil's advocate," and the individual that keeps the researcher honest. I shared no personal information about the participants during the peer debriefing process.

In member checking, the researcher solicits participants' views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988). I conducted member checks with each military spouse by checking in with them throughout the interview about their interpretation of the questions. I reflected back what I heard them say. Lincoln and Guba (1985) considered member checking to be "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). I asked follow up questions during the interviews. I asked participants to review their interview transcripts for any errors, additions, or omissions within a 10-day period for any updates or corrections. I asked participants to review their findings to review the themes I discovered during the interview.

Transferability

Rich, thick description allows the readers to make decisions regarding transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988). I provided an appropriate and accurate description by using a rich, thick description of the participants and research site, and numerous quotes to support the conclusions described in the results section. The description may transport readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences (Creswell, 2014).

Dependability and Confirmability

I established dependability by a detailed description of the methods. I established confirmability by completing an audit trail of my research process. Auditors can authenticate the findings of a study by following the trail of the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). The audit file included raw data, field notes, forms, Microsoft, Excel, and NVivo. The chair of my doctoral dissertation committee executed an audit of my research findings. She reviewed my work and asked questions to ensure that my process of data collection and analysis were suitable.

Authenticity

According to Lincoln and Guba (2013), the five qualitative study criteria to examine authenticity consist of fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity. I explored fairness, ontological authenticity, and educative authenticity. I achieved fairness with my military spouse participants by following an informed consent procedure, engaging in member checking, and asking for feedback about my findings. I obtained ontological authenticity by being transparent about the purpose of the study with each active duty military spouse. After the interview, I shared my interview transcripts with each participant to ensure accuracy. At that time, I engaged in conversations with the military spouse participant about emergent themes to ensure that the findings most accurately reflect the participants' experiences with the phenomenon. I focused on educative authenticity by being engaged in the dialogue with military spouses to help them make sense of their lived experiences as an active duty military spouse in pursuit of an undergraduate degree.

Role of the Researcher

According to Creswell (2012), the researcher is the key instrument of a qualitative study. It was important for me to disclose any preconceived personal military spouse experiences and biases I brought to the study. As an active duty military spouse for 20 years and pursuing higher education degrees, I built a rapport with participants in the study. I have not had a personal experience of being an active duty military spouse in pursuit of an undergraduate degree, but I have had the opportunity as an active duty military spouse to obtain a graduate degree, and pursued a doctorate. I had lived experiences as a military spouse with the opportunities and challenges related to degree completion. Through this methodology, I endeavored to make each of my participants comfortable in sharing their lived experiences as a military spouse.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis was to understand the lived educational experiences of military spouses pursuing an undergraduate degree, with a focus on the perceived opportunities and challenges related to degree completion. Using semistructured interviews, data was collected from nine participants who identified as a female active duty military spouse enrolled in an undergraduate program. This chapter begins with a biographical sketch of each participant to provide further insight into some of the nuanced differences between the participants; each participant chose a pseudonym for this study. The findings of this study, which comprise an analysis of the emergent themes extracted from their interviews, were presented following the biographical information.

Biographical Sketches

The participants were nine adult women who would all be classified as nontraditional undergraduate students based on factors such as their age and a delay in their undergraduate educational pursuits. All of the women were married to an active duty service member serving in different branches of the United States military. All but one of the participants had children. Only one of the participants was enrolled in a primarily resident-based institution, while the rest either participated in blended or online programs. Additionally, all the participants had been engaged in their current program for at least eight years. That said, each participant had a unique story and experience that helped to shed light on this student populations' experiences.

Participant 1: Jennifer

Jennifer, a 43-year old, Hispanic, Air Force officer's spouse, was completing her nursing undergraduate degree in an online program. Prior to getting married, Jennifer received a bachelor's degree in sociology. However, she found it difficult to find work when she

encountered the frequent moves in the military lifestyle. Jennifer became interested in nursing because she needed a career that was portable, and allowed her to find employment wherever her husband was stationed. She started working towards her nursing degree in 2002 at a traditional "brick and mortar" school, but due to frequent moves, she has attended numerous institutions and accumulated 261 undergraduate credit hours. She currently has two school-aged boys.

Participant 2: Destiny

Destiny, a 28-year old, White, Marine Corps enlisted spouse, was majoring in international studies at a traditional resident institution. She was also enlisted in the Marine Corps and was using her own Post 9/11 GI Bill educational benefits to fund her undergraduate education. She started her undergraduate degree and accumulated 80 credit hours, but took a five-year break from school and joined the military. She was enrolled in school for the second time and has changed her major since she originally began her studies. According to Destiny, she was "studying something completely different than before, and is more certain and confident in what she wants to study." She was the only participant in the study who had no children.

Participant 3: Lane

Lane, a 26-year old, White, old Army enlisted spouse, was working on a degree in general education within an online program. She attempted to start school five years previously, but took custody of her three nephews because their parents were in the military and received deployment orders to Iraq. She was also pregnant at the time, and in the middle of a cross-country military move for her husband's new job in the Army. She was very pleased with her current online program because it allowed her the flexibility she needed due to her husband's intense training schedule. Lane had one daughter along with providing care for her three nephews.

Participant 4: Karley

Karley, a 34-year old, African American, Air Force enlisted spouse, was in the process of completing an environmental science degree online. She opted to start her program online because she moved so often. She stated, "I would be going to three different colleges in different states by now because of the military moves." In addition to the frequent moves, Karley noted that one of the significant challenges associated with the military lifestyle included the expectation of spouses to volunteer. She has frequently been left raising her young son while her husband conducted military training. She found that the military's volunteering obligations can be intrusive.

Participant 5: Beverly

Beverly, a 37-year old, Hispanic, Marine Corps enlisted spouse, studied in an online business administration program. She originally started attending college in 1999, after high school graduation. After the first year, she married her spouse and moved to his duty station. Beverly transferred colleges four times because her spouse received military orders to move. This was her fifth attempt to finish her undergraduate degree. As a mother of two and a military spouse, she asserted transfer of credits was the biggest challenge to degree completion.

Participant 6: Holly

Holly, a 38-year old, White, Army enlisted spouse, was studying early childhood education. She started college right after high school in 1997, and then married her spouse. She moved to Germany and took a four-year break from school. She started back in school in Maryland and obtained an associate's degree, and then enrolled in an online undergraduate degree program. Her biggest challenge was learning to embrace the military lifestyle while going to school. She explained that she often planned to take a course and suddenly her husband

would receive orders to train for three months. However, her husband's absence due to training paled in comparison to a combat deployment. Holly stated, "When he is in Iraq, I am not really focused on getting through school. I am focused on getting him home safely." As a mother of two children, she identified that the stress of losing her husband was a real challenge. Although she kept things in perspective, Holly noted that the most important thing was to not lose sight of her goal to graduate.

Participant 7: CK

CK, a 41-year old, African American, Army officer's spouse, was enrolled in an online sociology program. She stated that she had been out of school for 20 years before restarting her education. As CK approached 40 years of age, she decided it was time to finish her first bachelor's degree. CK used a lot of intrapersonal dialogue to try to keep herself motivated. She stated that she had a daily conversation with herself "to do it, make the kids proud, and make my husband proud. Do not give up. Do not quit!" CK had three children.

Participant 8: Abby

Abby, a 30-year old, White, Air Force officer spouse, was working on an accounting degree online. She changed career path, and needed to go back for a second undergraduate degree. She decided to complete her second degree online because "it is not always easy to find a home base of education." Abby was a successful student in her previous undergraduate program where she graduated with a 3.96 GPA. However, she found that there were additional challenges in her current program related to her obligations as a spouse and mother. Her time at school required a lot of multitasking to manage her home, children, and volunteering responsibilities. Abby's biggest inspiration was her children because she wanted to provide a good life for her family.

Participant 9: Heather

Heather, a 28-year old, White, Navy officer spouse, studied construction management online. She received her first undergraduate degree in Architecture, and was working on her second bachelor's degree. She stated that she considered attending a resident-based program, but opted to enroll online within the same program because the format was more flexible. Her spouse had received a new assignment, and they were on orders to move again. She has one child.

Table 1 describes each of the participants, using their selected pseudonym, with data relevant to their participation in this study.

Themes from Military Spouses

The following is a presentation of the findings from my analysis of the data collected during the interview process. I begin with a discussion of the emergent themes and subthemes using quotes and evidence from the interviews. After presenting the thematic analysis, I then returned to the research questions presented at the onset of this examination to provide answers based in the data presented by the study participants.

I clustered the themes into the following five main categories: Previous Educational Experiences Before the Military, Challenges of Military Life, Opportunities of Military Life, Success Strategies, and Career Goals. The first primary theme had two emergent sub-themes: Motivation and Self-Efficacy. The second primary theme entitled Challenges of Military Life was comprised of six sub-themes: Moving, Absences of Spouse, Volunteerism, Lack of Government Support, Intersecting Roles, and Opportunity Cost. The third theme, designated as Opportunities of Military Life, described benefits associated with the military lifestyle to include the sub-themes of Social and Institution Support, Benefits, and Perspective. The theme of

Success Strategies had two sub-themes: Distance Learning and Scheduling. Lastly, Career Goals revealed the future professional goals for the military spouses.

Table 1
Participant Information

Name	Credit Hours*	Major	Spouse's Branch	Program Format	Year Initiated Program+	Children	# of under-graduate degrees
Jennifer, Age 43, Hispanic	261	Nursing	Air Force Officer	Resident and Online	2002	Yes	Second
Destiny, Age 28, White	50	International Studies	Marine Corps Enlisted	Resident	2008	No	First
Lane, Age 26, White	24	General Education	Army Enlisted	Online	2003	Yes	First
Karley, Age 34, African American	120	Environmental Science	Air Force Enlisted	Online	2009	Yes	First
Beverly, Age 37, Hispanic	126	Business Administration	Marine Corps Enlisted	Online	1999	Yes	First
Holly, Age 38, White	120	Early Childhood Education	Army Enlisted	Online	1997	Yes	Second
CK, Age 41, African American	21	Sociology	Army Officer	Online	1995	Yes	First
Abby, Age 30, White	136	Accounting	Air Force Officer	Online	2000	Yes	Second
Heather, Age 28, White	140	Construction Management	Navy Enlisted	Online	2008	Yes	Second

*Credit hour totals were for the current degree program only
+Indicates the year the participant started current undergraduate degree program

Previous Educational Experiences Before the Military

A significant majority of U. S. high school students matriculate into some form of postsecondary education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Yet, the military spouses within this examination seemed to follow an indirect path to achieve their undergraduate educational goals. For example, Holly stated, "I graduated from high school as an honor student, and had every intention of attending college, but my high school sweetheart enlisted." Her future husband told her, "Here is the deal, if we get married, you can go with me to Germany. Otherwise, I am going overseas for two years by myself."

In general, the participants were successful in high school, enjoyed attending school, and appeared to be on a path toward college. All participants except one reported that they received a traditional high school diploma. The one exception, Karley, dropped out of high school as a junior. Yet from her perspective, Karley felt she was fully capable of finishing high school. She stated, "I completed my GED for my high school diploma. I am not a traditional high school graduate, but I enjoyed school. I did well. I really liked it. I had to leave school for various reasons."

On the other hand, Heather's comments seemed to be more representative of most of the military spouses in the study. She stated, "I went to a really large high school. I would consider it more of an upper class school where we had numerous college preparatory programs, and everyone goes to college."

Indeed, several participants even stated they went to college right after high school. Holly stated, "I had completed 32 hours of freshmen level coursework over two semesters. Then I decided to marry my husband and I dropped out." Like Holly, a few participants started college after high school, but ended up leaving for reasons such as obligations related to a

military marriage, inability to focus on education, or they decided to enter the military or civilian labor market without a degree. Destiny's statement illustrated this scenario.

> I had already started going to school for my undergraduate right after high school, which is actually a totally different degree that I'm very glad I didn't pursue. I really was having a lot of fun and partying with my friends. I ended up joining the military.

It seemed that some of the participants had to make a hard choice between their preferred area of study and a professional career due to the specific demands of the military life. For example, Abby felt that she may have had the potential to be highly successful in another field, and she would have preferred a more traditional learning environment, but due to her lifestyle as a military spouse, she chose a different educational pathway. Abby added:

> I ended up changing career paths and needed to go back for my second undergraduate degree. I had to go online since I am a military spouse, and it is not always easy to find a consistent home base for my education. My first undergraduate experience, I had a 3.96 GPA. I graduated summa cum laude.

Motivation. As identified within the previous section, four of the spouses in this study were working toward a second undergraduate degree. Interestingly, all four said the reason for getting a second degree was for a career that would work with a military lifestyle. While the military lifestyle seemed to drive Abby to find a different field of study in order to be able to establish a portable career, Jennifer identified a field of study that was both appealing to her and had a resulting career field that would be agreeable within the military lifestyle. After receiving her first bachelor's degree in sociology, Jennifer decided she wanted to engage in a nursing career that required her to basically start over in her undergraduate education. She stated:

> I needed a job that could fit the military lifestyle, such as nursing or teaching. You know, if you look at military spouses those are the typical careers if they have any, besides like MLMs, those multi-levels marketing jobs. You feel like with military spouses, they are not somebody that is with corporations typically. I've never known anybody that's like, Oh, I've been working with this company and I've been able to move all around and stay with that company. In the medical field that is something that can translate.

In Jennifer's case, she had already earned a bachelor's degree in sociology and an associate's degree in nursing years prior, but was now attempting to finally obtain her bachelor's degree in nursing in order to solidify her position in the nursing field. Her experiences seem to be more consistent with a number of nontraditional students' motivations in general to return to school, but that certainly was not the case for the all the military spouses.

Six of the participants stated they were motivated because they wanted to have a professional career of their own, which seemed consistent with a goal-orientation (Boshier, 1991; Houle, 1999). Three of the participants stated that their motivation was for their children. Lane's motivation helped to emphasize this rationale.

> I started it because of my daughter actually. My daughter is two years old; she has a lot of health issues. She was diagnosed with asthma at nine months old, so she has asthma. She has eczema. She sees a neurologist. She also has sensory issues, a sensory processing disorder, and anxiety. So, she sees a bunch of therapists and a bunch of specialists. I decided that, with everything she has going on, I wanted to make sure I was the best role model that I could be for her and to show her that no matter the challenges, she can do whatever she wants and sets her mind to.

Consistent with Lane, Karley also endeavored to set an example for her child, although it did not appear to have anything to do with any of her child's health issues. Karley felt a sense of personal obligation to actualize her potential largely to be an example for her son.

> Our son actually [motivated me]. He's four now. Statistically, kids whose parents didn't both go to college are less likely to go to college. We wanted to really drive home the point that it isn't an option. You will go to college, and you will do well in life. I want him to look at what mommy and daddy did. He is really the catalyst for the whole thing.

Motives and reasoning tend to affect persistence and the attainment of a goal (Zimmerman et al., 1992). While it has long been believed that intrinsic motivation is critical for goal achievement (Ryan & Deci, 2012), there is current evidence that other sources of motivation can be beneficial in educational settings as well (Jang, 2008). Jennifer's following comment represented a pragmatic perspective, but also demonstrated an acute awareness of the dangerous nature of her

spouse's work. She stated, "I never wanted to be somebody that couldn't support myself in case something happened to him." Holly identified her internal motivation when she stated,

> Neither one of my parents went to college. That was not something on my husband's radar either, and so it is just an internal motivational feeling for me that I want the degree plan. I want that piece of paper to fall back on should I need to support myself or our children in the future.

Self-Efficacy. Student's self-efficacy and personal goals at the beginning of a semester served as predictors of student success (Zimmerman, et. al., 1992). Beverly explained her sense of self-efficacy:

> I was always passionate about wanting to maintain my own career and educational goals around his. I always knew it was probably not going to be a straightforward path, because we were married just two months shy of the tragic 9/11 happening, and the demands on his schedule and what military life looked like changed so rapidly. I always felt I could preserve my educational goals as my individual goal. No matter how crazy life is getting, it was the one thing I will always keep working at, even though it is messy at times.

Challenges of Military Life

Many nontraditional students return to school to complete educational pursuits they began years before as traditional undergraduate students (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992). According to the literature, they often abandoned their initial educational ambitions for a number of reasons including financial considerations, competing responsibilities, lack of focus, loss of motivation, or just general immaturity (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992). In addition to many of these typical nontraditional student challenges, these military spouses also faced several challenges specific to life within the military.

Relocation. CK noted that her mere access to education and educational resources varied depending on her husband's location of assignment when she stated, "When we were stationed overseas where you didn't have as much access, or the base library was limited, or things like that, that definitely impacted in a more negative way." Certainly, a lack of access to educational

resources could discourage someone from pursuing postsecondary education, but the growth of online education has helped to reduce some of that unavailability. Unfortunately, the problems extended beyond a mere inaccessibility to resources.

For many military spouses, one of their greatest challenges arose from the inability to transfer earned credits from one institution to another in order to achieve an actual degree. Numerous participants in this study noted the specific challenges of frequent moves. Holly explained, "I opted to do online school because we move so much. The problem is that you cannot really transfer those credits from every traditional college to your next college. You end up retaking things and paying for classes again." Holly's choice for an online option was consistent with many of the others who came to the same conclusion that it would have been a waste of time and money to attempt to use a local institution in residence. Beverly stated:

> Transferability of credits is a very big challenge that I faced. I transferred college four times before I finally said on the fifth shot, 'Okay, this time!' I am enrolled online. Every time I moved, I lost so many credits. The only way I can finish is an online program. Even though I was at an accredited college, when I transferred from one state school to another state school, I always ended up having to retake the lower level classes. No institution would even transfer any classes as electives. It was really just a whole big waste of time and money.

In Jennifer's robust statement below, it is possible to get a sense of the complex and fragmentary nature in which this military spouse pursued her second undergraduate degree education.

> In 2002 and already married, I decided, okay, I'm going to go to nursing school when we lived in Alaska. I'm going to do the bachelor's program in Alaska. I had to take a bunch of prerequirements because I didn't have them from my previous undergraduate degree. I had to take like anatomy and physiology, chemistry, organic chemistry, philosophy. I took like, it was probably a year and a half of prerequirements before I could get into the bachelor's program. I got into the bachelor's program for nursing and then did a semester of that. Then Jeremy got selected for pilot training. After only one semester of the bachelor's nursing program that I still probably had two years left, he went to Texas. I asked myself, do I stay in Alaska? We had no kids at the time. It just seemed ridiculous to stay in Alaska because I thought, "Well I'll just pick up a program."

> We moved to Texas and we were in a small little town so there were no programs there. Then he does his year and a half of pilot training. I cannot do any nursing school because there is no options for me. Then that is when I had our son. Then, we moved to Washington State. The problem there was that they actually did not have a lot of the nursing school options at the time…and we lived out like in Tacoma area. With the child, and Jeremy being constantly on trips, it was not going to work. I was not going to be able to do a bachelor's degree. Or the other option was a private school which was crazy expensive. I decided to go the associate [degree] route. I had done all those pre-reqs for a bachelor's degree, which really I did not need…I needed a couple of them but I did not need everything to do the associate's program.
>
> Then, I even had to retake a class or something that I didn't do very well in when I was like 19. I had to take like Psych 101. I went down to Boise, did it at Boise State, it was like a three week class. It was so easy…So I had to waste time doing psych 101 because the associate's program had certain requirements for you to get into their program. It was minimal but Psych 101 was one of them, but anyway, I get in and then I do my nursing degree that route. I ended up doing associate's route. Then I sit for the exam, take my test, get an RN. Finally, eight years later, I'm working, but nursing is really pushing that everybody needs to have a bachelor's degree. Therefore, I decide I have to finish and get my bachelor's degree. If I stayed in Alaska I would have had it done forever ago. I am getting my undergraduate bachelor's in nursing from Boise State online.

Clearly Jennifer's lifestyle has not been conducive to finishing a bachelor's degree in a typical timeline, as it has taken her nearly 18 years to complete her nursing degree.

Absences of spouse. The National Defense Research Institute (NDRI) reported that service member absence and military work schedules were the most commonly cited negative factors affecting military spouses' educational opportunities; with frequent moves also mentioned as detrimental (Friedman et. al., 2015). The following quote demonstrated how Lane experienced the challenges of her husband's training schedule.

> My husband was doing 21 days of training and also deployments. He was also trying to build hours for flying because he is a pilot. I am trying to do my thing, my school thing. It is nearly impossible…He does a lot of training, or he trains others, and he is trained. It's usually in two-week frequencies. He'll be gone two weeks, he'll be back two weeks, he'll be gone another two weeks. His schedule is so unpredictable.

While Lane noted challenges that were concerned specifically with how her education was affected by her husband's training schedule, other participants in this study noted that

children added an even more complicated layer to their lives. The extensive amount of spousal absenteeism required these military spouses to function for long periods of time as a single parent, despite being married. Beverly provided some insight into how difficult that process was for her.

> I'm doing my school from home on the Internet. My son is always here. He is running around in the background. He is four. He is a distraction, and that is okay. He is a delightful distraction, but he is a distraction. Therefore, when my husband has to go away for a week, I do not have any reprieve at all from that. It is 24 hours a day, seven days a week, taking care of my kid, and then on top of that, it is four hours a day of whatever my homework assignments are. It is difficult. It can be hard to stay focused when you have your kid running around…I just finished finals last week. My husband had to leave during finals week. I said, "Of all the weeks, really? This is the week you're going to pick?" Therefore, I was writing my two essays with my four-year-old bouncing around behind me. It is hard to stay focused. Finding time to just find a quiet place to...Most of the time, it is okay. I can do my reading when he's watching TV or whatever, but some things, you really just need a quiet, dedicated place to be. That's not an option when your husband's gone and you have a kid.

It seemed that the "come and go" nature of the service member's professional demands made some spouses question their own rationale for attending college. The challenge of trying to negotiate the multiple roles became too much. This statement from Holly was indicative of how the volatility of the military lifestyle created a highly unpredictable lifestyle that was just not conducive to pursuing an education.

> Sometimes I did not even bother attending, like enrolling for a semester, or withdrew from classes because things came up during our military life that I could not have anticipated when I registered. Things like deployments and training, especially in the first few years after 9/11 occurred, it was not very much notice often that he would be going somewhere. It was sometimes just weeks before. We have children, and I work. Now I have to solo parent. It just seemed impossible to keep up with the tempo of a college schedule on top of that. So, there were times I either withdrew from classes or didn't take them all together. Then add the emotional piece to it, when your husband is in Afghanistan, or is in the Horn of Africa near Somalia, when they are in places like that, it is very hard to keep your head in the game. It sounds nice to say that we would be able to balance all of this, and we can call military friends to lean on. However, in the hours of your day when you are thinking about how they are gone and the dangers that exist in their jobs, that is just not the typical situation most college students have to balance or even think about. I mean we (military spouses) are not robots.

While Holly's challenges proved to be prohibitive at times, she was not the only military spouse whose education was impacted by her husband's professional demands.

Several of the military spouses stated they lost focus the first time they were enrolled in undergraduate school. Even when the spouse was home, there was an unpredictable nature of the service member's work that often seemed unforgiving to someone trying to pursue their own educational and professional objectives. Karley's comments provided some insight into this erratic process.

> I think the big challenge is that your husband does not work a nine-to-five job. So, when you're saying, 'Well, I'll finish this essay,' you know, because my son's only four so he goes to school for two hours a day, and that's it for pre-K, and then he's home the rest of the day. So, I'll be like, 'Oh, I'll just finish that essay when my husband gets home at five,' and then he calls me. 'I'm not going to be home until eight.' Oh. Well, that changes a lot of things.

Volunteerism. As noted earlier in this study, volunteerism has long been an explicit expectation of military spouses. The behind-the-scenes or overt unpaid work of military spouses was an aspect of military life about which most civilians are unaware. Lindsey stated, "I am always very involved in his career, meaning volunteering for the Family Readiness or the military service work."

The perceived demands on a military spouse can oscillate depending upon the service member's assignment. In the following statement, CK expressed uncertainty about her ability to find the time to manage her own professional life when she stated, "So, I really don't know how I'm going to handle my volunteer commitments when I get done with my degree because we still have his job requirements with me volunteering. I may have to stick to more volunteering until he's retired."

Karley explained that although she was aware of the expectations, she held a different view of her obligations.

> We're generally encouraged to be very involved in volunteer work in the community. For example, I run a photography club for military spouses, and then I also help in our unit with a volunteer program that helps incoming spouses learn the area and kind of have an instant friend. So, I have those obligations as well as going to school, and a lot of the spouses do additional volunteer work above that and still go to school. I don't know how they manage to do that. I think that's the big thing.

Lack of financial support. When asked about challenges and how the government might help military spouses pursue their educational goals, the interviewees offered numerous suggestions to include providing financial assistance for military spouse education. All but one of the military spouses in this study were paying out-of-pocket for their undergraduate education. A number of them had taken out student loans in order to continue their educational pursuits. Abby explained:

> I was motivated to start my second undergraduate degree program because of my changing career path. However, for a long time it was cost prohibitive to start. I eventually found a program that offered military spouses discount on tuition. I actually found a complete online accounting degree program at an affordable cost. I went to the education center on base for financial help, and they said I could not use MyCAA because it is my second undergraduate degree. They gave me some scholarships and grants to apply for as a military spouse. I applied, but have not heard back. I have student loans available to me, but I am trying to be financially responsible. It is really hard and expensive for me to get this degree.

Lane explained, "I receive some federal financial assistance because I am a stay at home mom with one kid, but we are paying mostly out of pocket for school. We have a lot of loans to cover the cost of my school." Beverly stated, "The MyCAA program is only for super junior enlisted military families. Your service member has to be under the E5 rank, so unless you learned about the program early in your service member's career, you cannot take advantage of the financial benefit from that program." Beverly also stated the fact that "transferring schools is very expensive" because you have to pay to retake courses over at different institutions and lose several classes due to not receiving transfer credits. Karley presented her perspective on the availability of funding when she stated:

> We are not using the GI Bill on me because my husband is actually finishing his masters. Right now, I am using the Pell Grant, but I will not be eligible for it next year. I also have student loans to pay for it right now. I was told at my education center that most of the benefits for military spouses are for those whose husbands were injured in war or who were killed or otherwise retired early for reasons that were not their own fault. There is not a whole lot for you if your husband is still active duty and is healthy and still doing his job. I spoke to my counselor, and she said, "Yeah. There isn't a whole lot for your situation because your husband is still active duty, still working. It's mostly for people who were, their husbands were injured, and they don't have that income coming in anymore."

Intersecting Roles. The experiences of nontraditional undergraduate students were inherently different from most other college students (Merriam et al., 2007). Given that contention, numerous military spouses stated they felt like they lived "double lives" by being a military spouse and an undergraduate student. Certainly, the many spheres of life for nontraditional students distinguishes this student population from traditional undergraduate students. In support of this notion, Abby stated, "It is taking a lot of balancing between my different schedules. Sometimes I feel like I have two different lives when it comes to my personal career, and my schooling, being a homemaker at the same time as a military spouse. It just takes a lot of different roles and organization and time." Indeed, her statement could be true for many nontraditional adult learners. In Destiny's statement, the reader can sense the difficulty of negotiating the diverging environment at home and at school:

> It was kind of intimidating to have to go back in your late 20s to start up a degree, especially because I changed what I was studying previously. So I am not finishing the last year of my degree. I am starting over and having to commit to another four years. Therefore, I don't really want to be trapped with a bunch of 19 year olds…Nobody understands how hard I have it right now. When you go back to college in your late 20s thinking that you know everything, and it is just, it is so much harder to be out of place adult living in a teenager's world.

Abby noted, "Sometimes I feel like I have two different lives when it comes to my personal career, my schooling, and trying to be a homemaker at the same time. This is my life as a military spouse. I have a lot of different roles."

Opportunity cost. Not only did these military spouses become aware of the differences between them and their current classmates, they also realized how much ground they had lost toward the pursuit of a career. Jennifer's comments shed light on her perception of how she had fallen behind her peers when she stated:

> If I look at the people that I went to nursing school that have the associate's degree, a lot of them have surpassed me in the career field because they have stayed in Washington State…The ones that I'm talking about, obviously they did the associate's then they pursued the bachelor's faster. Then, they've gone on and done their master's. Some of my former classmates are like light years ahead as far as their education because they didn't have to move and bounce around.

Undoubtedly, Jennifer also lost time away from her family in the pursuit of multiple degrees and a professional career. Very little of those costs can be captured on account ledger or in a resume, but those expenses were very real.

Other participants communicated how their meandering experiences also impacted their areas of study. For instance, Beverly submitted:

> When I started college in 1999, business administration and marketing were my focus. I kept Business Administration as a major throughout the whole time, because I did not want to have to start from scratch again with making Communications my major. My interests changed drastically over the years since I first started, so that's why I want to add a minor. Journalism is really my passion, my preferred career. I think business is always a good foundational structure to have…It will be good to have that business education. But, my major is no longer my primary focus for my career goals. I just did not want to have to start all over again.

Opportunities of Military Life

Along with the challenges associated with being a military spouse, the participants also expressed some perceived benefits of this lifestyle that deserved some focused examination. In the following section, I elaborate on some of the examples provided by the participants in support of their perceived educational opportunities.

Social and institutional support. All of the military spouses interviewed stated their family and friends gave them a tremendous amount of support. Specifically, they believed that spousal support was the most critical component to their ability to persist. In the following statement, Destiny was adamant about the support her husband gave her when she stated:

> I think just having the support of my husband, and having the previous experience of not doing so well in college. It's really, if you just go to class, it's not hard. Then you get back your grades and you're like, "Wow. I can do this and I can do it well." So I think just really not having the distractions of being really young and having a support system from my husband has really helped me focus on school and then getting back the grades and just the feedback from my professors and stuff has been that thing that keeps me coming back. I'm like, "Okay, I can do this, because I'm good at it."

Destiny explained how Colorado State University's (CSU) support to military affiliated students was one of the reasons she chose to attend undergraduate school there. Colorado State has an Adult Learner and Veteran Services program (ALVS) that aims to support nontraditional students in their transition to Colorado State University. ALVS employees provide a broad range of resources to aid in the advancement of adult and veteran students both academically and professionally (Colorado State University Adult Learner and Veteran Services, 2018). Because Destiny was the only participant studying in residence at a brick and mortar institution, I inquired into her perception of institutional support. She stated:

> It's not quite as weird now, because CSU is just so strangely catering to nontraditional students. There are so many veterans there that you wouldn't even know, because not a lot of people go to the little veteran center. But there are a ton there, because I know the administrator had said that they were having huge problem with female veterans not wanting to identify at school. I kind of don't want to, because I don't really, I don't like being in new classes with new people and I have to stand up and give my life story. It's nice having that community with support, but it is hard because a lot of people don't really want to be put in that box.

Benefits. One of the benefits of being a military spouse was access to childcare on a military installation. Military families may request childcare via a Department of Defense sponsored website, but it may be limited to those service members who were living on

the installation (Military OneSource, 2018). While this resource does provide an additional layer of support, many of the participants found that they were able to use online programs in lieu of these services. For example, Jennifer stated, "I did use the child development center while I was attending classes. I did not need to use the military child care center when I switched to online courses."

Along with the GI Bill, institutions often provide supplementary funding for undergraduate and graduate programs that have a gap between the GI Bill financial allocation and the institutional cost. As an example, the Yellow Ribbon Program is an institutionally sponsored subsidy that covers the gap between the GI Bill allowance and the actual cost of the program. However, the Yellow Ribbon funding is not only specific to certain institutions, it is often restricted to certain programs within institutions. Destiny was the only military spouse in this study receiving the Post 9/11 GI Bill, and she was using it as the actual beneficiary (not the dependent), because she earned her own GI Bill benefit as an active duty Marine for five years. It was easy to sense her appreciation and enthusiasm for the generous program when she stated, "With the GI Bill you can literally study anything. It was so unbelievable and exciting, but it is almost too much because you can study anything with no constraints on what you study!"

Service members and dependents who use the GI Bill after the service member leaves active duty were also eligible for additional benefits including a housing stipend, book allowances, and even medical insurance. As an example, CSU offers health coverage to students through the university medical system, but the associated costs of that coverage is covered by GI Bill funding. Destiny, whose husband recently transitioned into a Reservist, added:

> Having the health insurance has been the most lifesaving thing on earth, because the VA is such a nightmare to deal with them. They just randomly send us bills for no reason whatsoever. We have not even checked into a VA clinic. I do not have time to drive up to Cheyenne Veteran's Service Center and sort out what's going on with the VA and their

> crazy billing system. In using the GI Bill, my health insurance is paid with the GI Bill. It just gets added to our monthly stuff, so the GI Bill just covers it. Thankfully, the GI Bill gives us enough to pay for housing while we are in school, surprisingly.

Destiny's situation was unique as she started her education while her husband was on active duty but has now seen how robust the benefits can be once they both finished active service.

The remainder of the participants opted not to use the GI Bill, and have pursued other mechanisms to receive financial support. The reasons for this decision varied amongst the participants. Karley explained that "We're not using the GI bill on me because my husband is actually finishing up his masters, so he's using as much of it for his masters as he can. His classes are a lot more expensive." Meanwhile, Lane stated, "I use the tuition assistance my online school provides. They offer $20 off a credit hour because I am a military spouse. It definitely adds up. I have applied to a few scholarships, and I have not received any." Beverly explained:

> We were going to use the Post 9/11 GI Bill, but we did not know the rule that he still had to have four years in service left [to transfer it to dependents]. It was too late in the game for me to use his benefit. He is at almost 19 years now. He is about to retire at 20 years, and he is unwilling to give four more years of service. He could not transfer the benefit to me. I think that is one thing about the Post 9/11 GI Bill that should be shared more because in my eyes, I thought it was crazy that he had already completed 18 years, and going to do 20 years of service, but we still were not able to take advantage of that education benefit he earned.

A new perspective. Some participants found it to be an advantage going back to school older and with greater perspective. While many adult learning structures focus on the challenges for the nontraditional student, there appeared to be some perceived academic advantages for this population. Destiny's statement indicated a renewed sense of purpose and vigor once she returned to school when she stated:

> I don't want to say it's been easy, because it's not been easy. But it's so much easier to focus now…I am very pinpoint focused, very determined just because it has been this five-year break from doing undergraduate study, which I'm very grateful for. I feel like I

> really discovered who I was and like I said, I'm studying something completely different than the original. My original studies were criminal justice because I was very interested in law enforcement, and now I'm doing more of international studies regarding China. I'm taking Chinese and I'm also doing global politics... It's much more of a global view…I'm more certain and confident in what I want to study.

CK further explained:

> I did two years of college at Troy State, and it was difficult for me right out of high school because it was 18 years old. I just did not get it. It did not make sense to me then the way it does now.

Success Strategies

Military spouses as nontraditional students had two main success strategies for attending undergraduate school. All of the participants mentioned distance learning and meticulous scheduling as methods for success.

Distance learning. The most common success strategy for these military spouses was the opportunity to take classes online. The participants felt that without the learning opportunities afforded through online courses, they would not have been able to deal with the numerous specific challenges of their demanding lifestyle. Moreover, the flexibility of distance-based learning programs helped them address the problems caused by spousal absenteeism, frequent military moves, and child care concerns. In Karley's opinion, an online program made the most sense as she looked at her options. She provided some greater insight into that decision in the following statement:

> I opted to do the online [courses] because we move so much. The problem is that you can't really transfer those credits from every college to your next college, and so you end up retaking things and paying for classes again. I would be going to three different colleges if I had started at a traditional school. It's nice with this one that I can ... It's all online so I don't have to worry about transferring credits or doing any of that…It's like well, are people going to actually even honor that degree or are they're going to look at it less than a traditional school degree? I go online to Southern New Hampshire University. It's a nonprofit accredited college. I really enjoy it. It's not really easy. Like, the material seems on par with what my husband learned in a traditional college, so I

> appreciate that. It's been going well. I've got a 4.0 GPA right now, which is amazing for me. It's not easy. I had to work for it.

Karley's contribution embodied the struggle these spouses go through when determining how to pursue their educational goals. Many of them concluded that online programs provided them with the flexibility they needed, even if it would not have been their first choice. Lane added that the flexibility of online courses allowed her to work around her child's schedule when she said, "I will work on my assignments at my daughter's nap time or after she goes to bed at night. I have been up until about one o'clock in the morning working on homework just to get it done." It certainly seemed that military spouses needed and greatly benefitted from the positives of online programs, and were able to use them to along with other strategies.

Scheduling. While the benefits of flexible learning modalities helped these military spouses, they also integrated other important study strategies to ensure their academic success. Primarily, all the participants noted they used a planner and made daily lists to stay organized and engaged in their schoolwork. Karley stated:

> The big thing is just having everything written down. I have to have it written so I can physically see how much I am doing every day, and then just being really good with my time management. Instead of doing everything on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, I have to push some things over to Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.

Lane was able to establish a rhythm in her work due to the consistent assignment schedule in her program. She added:

> Everything is due at the end of the week. We get our assignments and they have to be turned in by Sunday at midnight. I am able to get my assignments done on my own time because of the Sunday night deadline…I will make a list at the beginning of the week on what days I want to accomplish what, and what to do. I just write it all down. I make lists. I am very big on lists. I live for my lists. I use my list, and my planner every day. They are my biggest help.

Career Goals

The dedication necessary to complete an undergraduate degree is a valuable aspect of the higher education experience. Economists even contend that, at least in the labor market, the inherent commitment to actually achieve a diploma is as valuable as the educational benefits gained in the process of attaining it (Kjelland, 2008). Correspondingly, some of the participants seemed to be of the mindset that just getting a degree would help their chances of getting a job in the future. Heather's comments reflected this notion when she stated:

> I think just kind of having that piece of paper solidifies your understanding of your career and gives you that edge on top of, you know, your experiences that employers look for, and just having that actual certification and my degree in my hand and being able to put that on my resume just makes me that much better of a candidate for jobs.

Destiny stated about her future professional objectives:

> That's actually a really difficult question, just because every day I'm like, "I could do this instead." But I think, it's just so exciting how many opportunities there are, and then you hear about something from somebody else and you're just like, "Oh, that's a job? How do I get to be part of that?"

Karley pursued a difficult undergraduate degree and she felt the specialized nature of her work could be limiting. She seemed to surrender to the idea that her husband's career would remain primary in the following statement:

> I know that this is an undergraduate degree. I'm not going to get a whole lot. We will continue to live on base because my husband has the primary career. So probably initially, it'll be working for the base just as an environmental technician. I'll be sampling soil, sampling water, things like that. But, after I'm finished with my undergrad, I do plan on going for my master's and maybe my doctorate as well, because I do eventually want a research position. Yeah, being a technician is not going to be enough for me, so that's honestly my real-world view of what's going to happen after I get my undergrad. I'll probably just become a technician and do soil sample taking. That's pretty much it.

It seemed that CK was prone to wait until her spouse was done serving to find her calling when she stated:

> I have not really explored the job hunting opportunities in probably three years. Up until then, I worked full time in guest services. Yeah, relatively easy, but with this degree my end goal is to work in advocacy work. I'd like to work around women and children in some capacity whether it's fundamental organizations. So, I really don't know how I'm going to handle that when I get done and handle it with his moves or if I may have to stick to more volunteering until he's retired.

In fact, multiple participants indicated they were willing to wait until their spouses finished their military career to pursue a legitimate career within their professional field of study.

Table 2 provides the names and a brief description of each theme and sub-theme. The remainder of this chapter includes an analysis of the answers to the research questions, and the essence statement.

Findings and Research Questions

This section summarizes the findings from the research, and then describes how the findings address each research question. The purpose of this study was to understand the perceived academic experiences of active duty military spouses in their pursuit of an undergraduate degree. These research questions explored the phenomena related to their pursuit of an undergraduate degree through the unique perspective of a military spouse. I used the responses from the nine female military spouse participants to generate responses to the research questions.

Research Question 1: What are the educational experiences of active duty military spouses pursuing an undergraduate degree?

I began the interviews by inquiring into the previous educational experiences of the participants because I believed they were important in shaping the current educational experiences of the military spouses. All of the military spouse participants where high performing high school graduates except one who completed her GED. Although Karley stated

Table 2

Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes

Primary Theme	Sub-Theme	Description
Previous Educational Experiences Before the Military	Motivation	Purpose and objectives of starting an undergraduate program
	Self-Efficacy	Personal belief in ability to reach educational goals
Challenges Of Military Life	Relocation	Distinct features of nontraditional and military spouse student experiences
	Absences of Spouse	Spouse deployment and training schedules
	Volunteerism	The demands of volunteering in the military
	Lack of Financial Support	Government Funding
	Intersecting Roles	Living "Double Lives"
	Opportunity Cost	Time and resources necessary to complete the degree
Opportunities of Military Life	Social and Institution Support	Family, Friends, and School Support
	Benefits	Distinctive benefits of the military lifestyle and perceived advantages
	Perspective	To be an older adult attending school
Success Strategies	Distance Learning	Approaches used by military spouses to navigate their degree pursuits
	Scheduling	The importance of scheduling school work
Career Goals	Future	Perceived benefits of a degree in the labor market and return on investment in the future

she did well in high school, she had to leave due to a number of complex issues in her life in high school. All of the other students were on a college preparatory path and planned to matriculate into college after high school. Indeed, several of them not only began their college education after high school, but a number of them actually completed an undergraduate degree prior to starting their current undergraduate program.

I found that being a military spouse had a demonstrated impact on the educational experiences for the participants in this study. Regardless of the amount of effort and the quality of their previous educational experiences, all of the participants concluded that they needed to find an education program that was compatible with their unique lifestyle. The evidence from this study revealed that these spouses wanted to pursue an undergraduate degree that was not only interesting and potentially valuable in the labor market, but also something that was feasible given the numerous constraints such as frequent relocations and the other demands of their spouse's career.

In an effort to understand more fully the military lifestyle, I inquired into the challenges they experienced based on their spouse's professional demands. All of the participants remarked that their spouse's professional demands and roles affected their degree progression, but did not give the indication that they were bitter about that issue. They commented that they had to adjust their educational course schedule and study time for their active duty service member's work, training, and deployment schedule to continue their undergraduate degree. While acknowledging the difficulty in their experiences, they took a more practical approach to resolve issues and complete responsibilities instead of lamenting about the difficulty of the process. For example, Abby stated, "I have had to step up quite a lot just to make sure everything else is taken care of to include being a mom, caring for our dog, being a homemaker, volunteering, etc. I have to balance it all on my plate to include going to school."

As I examined their motivations, I found a selfless quality to their explanations of their educational objectives. The majority of the participants stated they wanted to help their family by receiving an undergraduate degree, and three of them remarked they wanted to have a career that fit the military lifestyle. Heather stated, "The reward is so great for me to have that career,

and it is a benefit to the whole family. So that is what drives me, my future. I know I will be happier and more fulfilled with my career once I am done with school. I know it will benefit my family." One-third of the participants specifically stated their children motivated them to pursue an undergraduate degree. In other words, they expressed that they wanted to set a good example for them. The participants overtly stated they were modeling behaviors for their children with the hope that their kids would pursue a college education when they were older. For example, Karley stated, "We wanted to really drive home a point to our son that if you go to college, you will do well in life."

In a more forthright effort to explore the first research question, I directly asked the participants to discuss their educational experiences. Consequently, I identified within the group a common thread of resilience to finish the degree. All the military spouses in this study experienced a sense of gratification due to their enrollment in an undergraduate program, and they expressed a strong commitment to complete their respective programs. This was demonstrated empirically by the number of years many of these spouses had dedicated toward their degree. Additionally, there were numerous comments that alluded to the persistent efforts of the participants. In support of this concept, Beverly stated, "The best piece of advice I got from an Army wife was to make school a top priority, because nobody else was going to make it a priority."

Research Questions 2: How do military spouses as nontraditional students manage the educational opportunities, benefits, and challenges presented to them while pursuing an undergraduate degree and what strategies do they use?

Inherent to the nontraditional student is a host of challenges that often impede the pursuit of their educational objectives (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Along with the obstacles shared by other adult learners, the military spouses in this study had additional unique issues to attend to.

These military spouses had to be very deliberate about choosing an undergraduate program and means of study that were going to be compatible with the challenges of the military lifestyle.

Participants noted problems associated with frequent moves largely due to mandatory military reassignments. These moves created considerable complications for a number of the participants and caused them to accumulate extensive nontransferable credit hours and to repeat classes unnecessarily; prolonging their time until degree completion. Beverly stated, "The leading challenge is moving. So, if you try to attend a brick and mortar school, and you are moving, typically, every two years, it is near impossible to finish at one institution." The majority of participants commented that finances and the cost of receiving their undergraduate degree was a major challenge of their undergraduate degree completion. All of the participants searched for scholarship opportunities, but did not receive any offers. All of the military spouses were paying out of pocket or using student loans, except Destiny who was using her own earned Post 9/11 GI Bill.

Eight of the nine participants were currently enrolled in an online program. The only participant enrolled in a traditional in-residence program was Destiny, who was also the only participant without any children. Three of the participants chose to pursue a degree that was perhaps not their first choice, but could lead to a more mobile career that was agreeable with the transient military lifestyle. The study participants who chose to initiate a completely new undergraduate degree program, despite already having completed an undergraduate degree, resolved this issue by starting a new degree program. The new program pursued a career field that could be used every time they needed to move.

In addition to the service member's professional obligations, it seemed that the military lifestyle also included compulsory volunteer service for the spouse. The notion of expected

volunteerism emerged as a subtheme that was quite influential in the lives of the participants. A majority of the military spouses mentioned volunteerism as a challenge to pursuing their undergraduate degree. Karley explained that "we are 'highly encouraged' to be very involved in volunteer work in the military community."

One of the expected opportunities available to military spouses pursuing their degree was financial support. However, only one of the study participants was using the Post 9/11 GI Bill, and she was using it as the beneficiary. The lack of financial support being used by the study participants was unanticipated given the generous package of benefits within the GI Bill.

Family assistance and support were seen by the participants as some of the most important aspects of their educational experiences. The military community can be quite accommodating when it comes to childcare. Two of the participants were able to use free childcare services to help them focus on their studies. Additionally, the majority of participants specified that spousal support was critical in encouraging them to complete their degree. CK expressed that her husband tells her, "Don't give up. Don't quit. He gives me encouragement and helps me focus."

Research Question 3: How do military spouses view the value and utility of obtaining an undergraduate degree?

When I inquired about how the military spouses viewed the value of their educational pursuits, it changed the tone of many of the interviews. When given the opportunity to envision their professional futures, the participants seemed to develop a sense of personal actualization that they have not had the ability to express previously. CK stated that she was excited, but was hoping to find professional positions for people who move every two to three years. In addition, she talked about the utility of the degree beyond a professional context when she stated, "I want to be able to have my degree in my sociology major so I can look at people and social groups and

understand them a little better." Beverly explained, "When I started college in 1999, business administration and marketing were my focus. I kept business administration as a major throughout my journey because I did not want to have to start from scratch. My personal interests have changed drastically over time since I started, so I added journalism as a minor. My major is no longer my primary focus for my career goals. I realized I did not want to have to start all over again."

The Essence

These students demonstrated a diverse array of expressed motivations and characteristics. The essence of these military spouses was characterized by a form of *altruistic resilience*. The altruistic or selfless nature of their expressed motives extended beyond their own immediate educational or professional needs and ambitions. Numerous spouses noted the impetus to pursue their education was to inspire their children. Likewise, they often placed the demands of their spouse's military career, and the associated volunteer responsibilities, ahead of their own needs and desires. Yet, they persevered.

The extensive impediments to achieving their academic goals did not deter this population from enduring through years of challenging conditions. The term resilience is defined as the ability to recover or adjust easily to misfortune and change (Dictionary, 2018). The military spouses in this study embodied the notion of resilience as they have persisted through years of unpredictable change and instability within their lives. However, the demands of this lifestyle extended well beyond mere logistics. These particular military spouses have all done this during the longest continuous period of war in United States history. Not only do their spouses have erratic schedules when they were home, they were constantly pulled away for long training or combat deployments. The inherent stress of caring for a family while your spouse is

at war may be difficult for most civilians to comprehend. Nonetheless, the women in this study showed that not only could they persist, but many of them thrived within their respective programs. They did not dwell on their struggle, but rather they found a truly exceptional level of resolve within their struggle.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Discussion of Research Findings

This study examined the lived educational experiences of active duty military spouses in their pursuit of an undergraduate degree. Three research questions guided this study: What are the educational experiences of active duty military spouses pursuing an undergraduate degree? How do military spouses as nontraditional students manage the educational opportunities, benefits, and challenges presented to them while pursuing an undergraduate degree and what strategies do they use? and How do military spouses view the value and utility of obtaining an undergraduate degree? This chapter describes the meaning of the findings, relates the findings to the literature, offers how findings inform practice, and discusses implications for practice and future research.

Previous Educational Experiences before the Military

I found that most of the military spouses in this study progressed along a typical college preparatory trajectory while in high school, but they had a far more protracted trajectory through their undergraduate degrees. This finding was consistent with previous analyses on traditional students versus nontraditional students that found that students who enrolled at a traditional age completed a bachelor's degree in just over five years, while older enrollees took more than eight years to complete their degrees (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2013). All the study participants had been in their current program for more than eight years at the time of this study. Interestingly, the participants found it normal that they had followed such a long and indirect path toward achieving their undergraduate degree. I interpreted this to mean that these military spouses had accepted the reality of the challenges within their lifestyle and did not have a sense of urgency to complete their undergraduate degree. The participants often cited

conflicting priorities in completing their degree to include family obligations, frequent relocation, volunteerism, and supporting their service member spouse's career. Intriguingly, previous literature identified that factors such as part-time enrollment, taking online courses, and having young children were all found to be significant detriments to persistence and degree completion for other nontraditional students (Nuesell, 2016; Taniguichi & Kaufman, 2005). Yet the military spouses in this study persisted despite some of these unfavorable elements.

One of the most unexpected findings of this study was that four of the nine participants had already attained an undergraduate degree and were now working on an additional bachelor's degree or studying in a completely different field. While educational attainment in the U. S. is at the highest level in history, only one third of Americans have attained at least a bachelor's degree (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2013) determined that approximately 3% of all undergraduate students earn multiple bachelor's degrees. Yet, more than one half of the participants in this study were working toward a second bachelor's degree. The military spouses in this study often noted that their previous area of study was not conducive to finding a job due to the specific challenges of the military lifestyle.

Motivation. Given the educational patterns of the study participants, it was important to explore why they prolonged their pursuit of a bachelor's degree or decided to pursue a completely different field of study. While there were likely numerous background factors that influenced the educational paths of these military spouses, there was also variation in their stated motivations to obtain an undergraduate degree. Many of these spouses identified a source of motivation that was more selfless in nature.

One of the findings that were consistent with previous literature on military spouses, but departed somewhat from other nontraditional students, was modeling educational attainment for

their children. A number of the participants identified a primary motivation to complete an undergraduate degree was to set an example for their children. From my perspective, these military spouses wanted to be a successful role model to establish an example for their children and their children's' future. This finding was consistent with previous studies on military spouses where modeling or serving as a role model for children was identified as the primary motivation for attaining a college degree (Keenan, 2012). Studies on nontraditional student-parents have mentioned this factor, but it was not seen as a primary source of motivation (Peterson, 2014). In other examinations, it was more common for student-parents to perceive the challenges of parenthood as a barrier to educational persistence and attainment (Markle, 2015; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). In this analysis, I found that not only were the military spouses willing to delay and extend their educational pursuits, but they also appeared to do so with the intentional desire to inspire their children.

The divergence from other nontraditional students may lie in the secure nature of their spouses' professional lives. Moreover, although they have tremendous volatility in their jobs, military service members provide a consistent income and benefits that allow the military spouses to be more deliberate in managing the multiple challenges in their lives that were not financial in nature. Thus, it seems the sources of motivation for the participants in this study were more externally oriented on their children rather than the need for more money or career advancement.

Self-efficacy. After a break in their education, the military spouses in this study appeared focused on academic achievement and ready to work. A number of them noted that they either seemed better prepared or more resolute within their current program, which allowed them to perform better than they did when they were in school at a younger age. While some of the

participants' motivations to obtain an undergraduate degree stemmed from a desire to encourage their children to appreciate and eventually pursue a bachelor's degree, others' objectives were more consistent with the concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Bandura identified several participants who stated they never wanted to be somebody that could not support themselves. With a more self-oriented impetus for academic attainment, the participants in the Bandura study expressed a desire to achieve something special with their potential (Zimmerman et al., 1992). According to Keenan (2012), 75% of military spouse participants "Strongly Agree" that personal fulfillment and satisfaction motivated them to earn a college degree (Keenan, 2012). I found that all nine of the military spouses in this study expressed they had developed an enduring sense of belief in themselves that helped to buoy their motivation to attain a bachelor's degree.

While the military lifestyle seemed to initially complicate their ability to pursue an undergraduate degree, the participants eventually made the decision to return to school as nontraditional students. Other researchers (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002) found that adult learners even outperformed their younger contemporaries in academic achievements. My research indicated that as many of the military spouses in the study expressed a strong and consistent focus on good grades, and even noted that they performed better as they became more adept at managing their time and external commitments. Perhaps this was because these military spouses possessed a broader perspective on the value of their educational pursuits and maybe were more mature about their educational and career ambitions than earlier in their lives.

Transfer Credit Policy. The sentiments of the majority of military spouses in this study indicated a perception of a widespread problem with transferring credits from one institution to another, which prolonged their undergraduate experience and compelled many of the spouses to choose an online program after unsuccessfully attempting to transfer credits into other traditional

programs. The need to transfer into a different institution can be complicated by credit-transfer policies that were not only institutionally-based, but may also be specific to each academic program. Several participants in this study mentioned that mandatory military relocations hindered their undergraduate degree completion because they had to leave their college and repeat courses they had already taken due to inconsistent transfer credit policies. Several of the participants had been enrolled at more than three undergraduate institutions. Three of the nine military spouses in this study had already accumulated more than 136 credit hours. According to Complete College America (2011), the average credits accumulated by bachelor's degree completers in more than 30 states was 135 credits. It is likely that military spouses in this study had several enrollments because they moved and lost transfer credit hours. The participants specifically stated that they had to reenroll at their new location and retake some classes. This prolonged their educational process, and often ended up costing them more money. Consequently, they enrolled in online education programs that were portable and compatible with their mandatory moves.

Role as a Military Spouse

Many of the respondents in this study had lifestyle-specific experiences that made the pursuit of their undergraduate degree very challenging. A number of the participants noted a need to find a career that was portable and compatible with the frequent moves within the military lifestyle. In the Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition, Bean and Metzner (1985) indicated that decisions to leave school were based primarily on academic, social, and environmental variables. For the military spouses in this study, their decisions to enroll and stay in school appeared to be affected more by the external environment than social integration and academic variables. Specifically, Bean and Metzner (1985) noted that

environmental variables, such as family responsibilities, influenced dropout decisions for nontraditional students. In addition to numerous relocations, all but one of the military spouses in this study conceded that they had substantial challenges related to raising children by themselves due to their spouses' demanding military obligations. Therefore, these spouses had to find flexible academic programs and generate specific study strategies in order to persist and succeed in their programs.

Online Education. The participants revealed that their most important consideration associated with pursuing higher education related to online educational programs and academic programs that were available on or near their military installation. Online programs in American higher education have grown considerably in recent years. The percentage of postsecondary students who enrolled in at least one online course increased from 5.9% in 2000 to 32.1% in 2012 (Ortagus, 2017). Due largely to the convenience and flexibility of the courses, online education can provide access to higher education for many students who would not be able to attend college otherwise (Ortagus, 2017). As mentioned previously, many of the participants in this study transferred institutions multiple times, and were unable to transfer many of their credit hours in the process. Therefore, these military spouses consistently acknowledged that online programs were the most valued format for their courses, and all but one of the participants were enrolled in such programs.

Volunteerism. Based on the accounts and insights of these military spouse participants, the service component of the military lifestyle appeared to extend beyond the actual service member. The requirement of the spouse to provide uncompensated time volunteering was a challenge for the military spouses' time commitments. In this study, several spouses stated that they were always very involved in their husband's career. Volunteer activities often included

efforts related to support services for other military families while their service member was deployed abroad or away on training. These typically fall within structured organizations such as Army Community Service (Army), Fleet & Family Service (Navy), Marine Corps Community Service (Marine Corps), and Airmen & Family Readiness (Air Force). While the military service branches have started to hire some fulltime employees to lead these programs, many of the personnel required to run them do so as fulltime volunteers working 20-40 hours a week with no compensation (Army OneSource, 2018). Volunteers within these groups were formally trained to assist others either at the individual unit level or at the military installation level in jobs such as childcare, coordinating educational and recreational events, and family team building.

For some participants in this study, their volunteer obligations were overwhelming to the extent that they interfered with their ability to adequately pursue their academic and professional pursuits. Several of the participants indicated that the military service member's career, along with the volunteer obligations associated with it, had primacy over their own educational and professional ambitions. According to the findings from Harrell et al. (2004), military spouses were unable to work or go to school because of their military volunteer commitments. My findings suggested that these spouses persisted despite continuing to volunteer, but their academic pursuits and careers were often seen as secondary to their volunteer obligations.

Using Military Benefits. Although the participants noted that financial support of the Post 9/11 GI Bill was an important benefit, a particularly surprising finding was the lack of participants using the Post 9/11 GI Bill for their education. Only one participant was using her own Post 9/11 GI Bill. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the educational transferability option under the Post 9/11 GI Bill allows service members to transfer all or some of the unused education benefits to their spouse or dependent children (U.S. Department of VA,

2018). Eligible family members including the spouse, one or more children, or any combination of spouse and children, may receive all 36 months or a portion of unused Post 9/11 GI Bill education benefits. In 2013, more than $30 billion had been spent on the Post-9/11 GI Bill since payments began in 2009 (Wagner et al., 2013). That total was expected to reach $42 billion by 2014, according to White House budget projections (Wagner et al., 2013), which demonstrated an average of more than $10 billion a year federal cost since the new GI Bill was implemented. The annual monetary allocation of the GI Bill has more than doubled since the transferability clause was implemented in 2009 (Wagner et al., 2013). Since the Post-9/11 GI Bill was implemented on Aug. 1, 2009, the VA has provided educational benefits to 773,000 Veterans and their family members (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018).

Yet, only one of the military spouses in this study was using the GI Bill benefits to fund their education, and few were receiving any form of financial aid whatsoever. Presently, the Post 9/11 GI Bill is being utilized at a rate of nearly 100% of those entitled to receive it (Wagner et al., 2013). According to this statistic, nearly every service member eligible for the benefit had either used it themselves or they have transferred it to a dependent family member. Yet, in this study, I found that the spouses were not using the transferability of the Post 9/11 GI benefit. Unfortunately, there is no means within the VA's system to determine whether a veteran or dependent (spouse or child) is using the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefit. Under the current system, it is estimated that thousands of military spouses are receiving education-funding benefits, but there are no government systems or tracking in place to monitor who is actually using this educational benefit for dependents.

Given that most of these military spouses were paying out of pocket or using student loans to save their GI Bill benefits, it was curious that there were so many who were not taking

advantage of this substantial opportunity. After inquiring more into this issue, I identified that the majority of the military spouses in this analysis provided a reason for preserving their education benefits. A majority of the spouses who were eligible to receive transferred Post 9/11 GI Bill funding stated that they were saving all or at least a portion of the benefit for their children. This finding was important because it could be assumed that many military spouses would see the transferability of the GI Bill as an incentive to start and complete a degree program, but this did not appear to be the case in regard to these participants. There was a general sense amongst these spouses that there was supplemental funding available outside of the GI Bill to pursue their own educational interests, or they were willing to pay for it on their own.

Only two of the study participants noted that they received financial support due to their status as a military spouse. Specifically, Karley and Beverly stated they received tuition assistance from their undergraduate institution in the form of a $20 per credit hour reduction due to their military-affiliated status. This finding was unexpected as there has been a concerted effort, both institutionally and through governmental support, to encourage military spouses to pursue their educational objectives via multiple funding streams (Gonzalez et al., 2016).

Bean and Metzner, (1985) stated that if nontraditional students cannot make adequate child care arrangements, adjust their work schedules, or pay for college on their own, they often will not continue in school regardless of good academic support. According to the literature, nontraditional students often abandoned their initial educational ambitions for a number of reasons including financial considerations, competing responsibilities, lack of focus, loss of motivation, or just general immaturity (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Although it was deemed to be important, the participants in this study appeared to be pursuing their education without financial

support based on the opportunity to defer the benefits to their children or allow their spouse to advance their education.

Single Parenting Issues

This section discusses the challenges of single parenting. The absences of spouse, and the social and institutional support are examined.

Absences of spouse. Many of the participants agreed that one of the most prominent challenges to completing their education was the long periods of time that their service member spouse spent away from home. Most Americans may be aware that military personnel spend months or even years away from home when they "deploy" out of the country into combat or other foreign assignments. What may be less well known is that service members also spend weeks and months away from home when training domestically, even when they are not deployed abroad. All of the military spouses with children noted that they felt like a single parent at times. Additionally, there are no limits on the work-hours for military personnel, and a normal workday may be 12-15 hours long.

Hook (2016) found undergraduates carry a significant workload; these work demands clash with family workloads. For single parents, family workloads are often magnified, which is argued to be uniquely significant to their experiences of undergraduate education (Hook, 2016). As noted by the participants in this study, the unpredictable and demanding schedule of a spouse in any household may be quite stressful in general, but the addition of educational demands further complicates the ability to create the conditions necessary for academic success. Most of participants in this study had difficulty dealing with some of their spouse's career demands and their absence from home. In this study, the absence of their service member interfered with the military spouses' abilities to pursue their degree.

According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, 1.1 million student parents attend four-year institutions (public and private non-profit), representing 15% of the total four-year undergraduate student body (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014). Additionally, around 1.2 million student parents attend for-profit institutions, making up 51% of the student body at for-profit collegiate institutions (Gault et al., 2014). The remaining 371,207 student parents attended other institutions or more than one institution (Gault et al., 2014). The literature reinforced the high number of student parents attending undergraduate schools. In my study, all but one military spouse had a children, and were attending an undergraduate institution.

It appears that being a single parent may negatively affect the persistence of receiving an undergraduate degree. One additional infant or toddler child reduces the chance of degree completion by about 50% for females or males (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). The majority of the military spouses in my study felt like single parents because of the absence of their active duty spouse while attending an undergraduate institution.

Social and institutional support. For the military spouses in this study, the support from family and friends was an essential aspect that enhanced their educational experiences. Several participants stated they could not go to school without the support of their spouse. According to several spouses in this study, the service members often provided encouragement to their spouses to complete their degree so they would have the opportunity to pursue their own professional interests in the future. The literature noted that students with high family interaction not only report higher GPAs, they also had higher academic self-efficacy (Turner, Chandler, & Heffer, 2009). My research indicated that high family interaction and support enhanced educational experiences. Each of the military spouses in my study stated they received encouragement from their service member spouse in the forms of actions and words. When they

were home, the service member provided help with the kids, household duties, and allowing for the military spouse to have time.

Success Strategies

Two main success strategies emerged from the participants' responses. First, the availability of different learning modalities was of particular importance. Online education, the most popular modality utilized by the participants, allowed for two crucial factors that contributed to their perceived persistence. Online education helped to partially eliminate the need to transfer into another institution every time they moved. Also, it allowed these military spouses more flexibility in the way they received the required course content as well as in the way they completed their assignments. Kim et al. (2018) stated that online education opens the door for adult learners to consider education, even as a first-time pursuit of higher education, because of the ease of accessibility As many adult-learners faced challenges balancing between their personal, work, and academic lives, they preferred to pursue certificates/degrees through online programs, which added flexibility for their studies (Kim et al., 2018). This is demonstrated in the current study where eight out of the nine participants were obtaining their undergraduate degrees through nontraditional programs.

Secondly, in terms of actually completing their educational requirements, all of the participants in this study noted the need for substantial organization and planning. Macan, Shahani, Dipboye, and Phillips (1990) concluded that in general, undergraduate students who perceived control of their time reported significantly greater evaluations of their performance, greater work and life satisfaction, less role ambiguity, less role overload, and fewer job-induced and somatic tensions. Similarly, the layers of complexity in the lives of these military spouses

required all of them to take control of their academic processes, and they reported purposefully carving out time to accomplish their academic requirements by scheduling class and study time.

Career Goals

In general, the military spouses gained a sense of professional value from their educational pursuits. The interviews provided a plethora of data that supported the notion that many of these military spouses had changed their professional areas of interest over time. Furthermore, some had even altered their fields of study to the extent that they decided to pursue multiple undergraduate degrees. That said, not everyone had a crystallized sense of their future career goals.

While some of the participants had a clear idea of what kind of work they wanted to pursue after they received their degree, others were less certain of the professional opportunities in front of them. I could sense the professional curiosity and enthusiasm that some of the military spouses garnered from the idea of obtaining their undergraduate degree by sharing their excitement of the possible future employment opportunities. However, that was not always consistent amongst the participants. Some participants in this study shared their anxiety of finding a job after getting an undergraduate degree. As stated in the literature review, Clayton and Smith (1987) identified eight primary motivations for nontraditional women students' decisions to pursue an undergraduate degree: self-improvement, self-actualization, vocational, role, family, social, humanitarian, and knowledge. The participants in my study were motivated by self-improvement, self actualization, family, and knowledge.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study may be helpful to higher education researchers, student affairs administrators, U. S. policy makers, education centers on military installations, and military spouses in pursuit of an undergraduate degree. Based on the findings of this study, it seems important that educational counselors, both on military installations and at institutions, become acutely aware of the educational motives and needs of this population. These military spouse participants appeared to be willing to protract their education and find a career that may fit into the lifestyle of their service member spouse. Student affairs professionals advising this population might look at the aspects of this lifestyle, and make the military spouse aware of possible programs that are more flexible and fit the lifestyle and needs of military spouse students.

Educational counselors on military installations could serve as a conduit for undergraduate information, and provide military leaders with more education on the benefits available to military spouses. Whether this is currently a practice of the military is inconclusive, but none of the military spouses in this study acknowledged that the military had encouraged them to pursue a professional career. Not only do military spouses need up-to-date information on their educational programs, they should also be provided specific assistance oriented to their career aspirations. Military spouses have access to military education centers. Currently all military education centers do not provide consistent advisement in person, although they have recently implemented new online support via Military OneSource and the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities portals online to help military spouses.

Military spouses might benefit from an adult learning student-success course offered either in residence or online. It seemed that many of the military spouses in this study figured

out how to navigate their higher educational journey on their own. Not one of the students mentioned using an adult learner success course, or some other learning enhancement mechanism, to maximize their educational experience. Many institutions may offer this course option to incoming traditional freshman students. Unfortunately, it does not seem the same resources are offered to adult learners. This seems particularly appropriate for a population that has such specific needs.

For many years, there has been an expectation that military spouses serve as volunteers on military installations. The hours invested by military spouses indicated that much of this work would justify a full-time working professional. However shifting the culture of military, where the service member's career is paramount, seems like a challenging endeavor to say the least. However, military leaders are required to undergo significant training in order to fully understand the personnel under their supervision. They may benefit greatly from understanding the contemporary environment in which many spouses are as professionally-oriented as the service members. This study may be helpful and important to military spouses in pursuit of an undergraduate education because it highlighted the opportunities, challenges, and success strategies for nine military spouses.

Suggestions for Future Research

All of the participants in this study were women whose husbands were active duty service members. There are a number of nuanced forms of military spouses that could be incorporated into future research. Clearly, integrating male military spouses would be one mechanism to expand this inquiry. Additionally, it is not safe to assume that the results would be consistent across all branches of service. For example, one branch of the military might be more progressive in its encouragement for spouses to pursue professional careers, or may even provide

greater educational and professional advisement resources. Furthermore, there may be very different educational experiences for spouses of National Guard, Reserve Component, or veteran populations. I would encourage an analysis that distinguished between enlisted military spouses and officer military spouses' experiences, if there are differences between experiences, and to what extent this would be related to income and financial resources. My study had three officer wives and six enlisted wives, but I did not study the impact of these differences directly.

Another perspective in expanding this analysis would be to look at the experiences of military spouses at different levels of education. I limited this study to military spouses obtaining a bachelor's degree. It could be of great importance to understand the different educational experiences of military spouses at levels both below and above the bachelor's degree. Understanding the different needs of military spouses pursuing their education at different levels of undergraduate and graduate levels could help higher education administrators shape the curriculum, format, and delivery of courses and educational services for military spouses.

Another suggestion for future research might be to examine military spouses with children versus military spouses without children and their degree completion rates and educational experiences. All but one of my participants had children at home with them, and most were keenly aware of the challenges related to child rearing and continuing their education.

Finally, I would like to see a study examining the funding sources for military spouses, and the systems related to gathering information about federal resource usage could be useful. Prior to the implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, institutions and federal agencies had been able to determine the success rates of veterans by using the GI Bill as an indication of military service. However, since the implementation of the current GI Bill, recipients of the GI Bill can

either be a service member, a veteran, a military spouse, or the dependent child of a service member. Given that some military spouses are able to use the GI Bill provides a potential source of information on the use of federal resources and success rates of military spouses in higher education. This would be helpful and educational for higher education institution administrators, policy makers, as well as military spouses.

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APPENDIX A: REFERRAL LETTER

Letter to the Education Counselor at Joint Base Charleston

[CSU LOGO/LETTERHEAD]

June 2017

Jennifer Beck, Education Counselor

628 FSS/FSDE

101 West Hill Boulevard

Joint Base Charleston, SC 29404

Dear Ms. Beck,

Thank you for your willingness to provide me with access to active duty military spouses in the southeast United States for my upcoming dissertation research project. I am a doctoral candidate, pursuing a Ph.D. in Education and Human Resource Studies, with a specialization in Higher Education Leadership at the Colorado State University School of Education, Fort Collins, Colorado. For my study, I am interested in exploring the lived educational experiences facing military spouses pursuing an undergraduate degree, with a focus on the perceived opportunities and challenges related to degree completion.

I am writing to request your assistance with helping recruit military spouses for my dissertation research project. The working title of my dissertation is *A Qualitative Study on the Undergraduate Experiences of Military Spouses.* I would sincerely appreciate your efforts if you could forward the attached letter to all of your military spouses from Joint Base Charleston by June 30, 2017. Any of the military spouse undergraduate students who agree to participate may

withdraw from my study at any time. I will ask that students sign the attached Informed Consent form on or before the first interview to solidify their interest in participating.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to clarify any questions and the details of my study. I am happy to provide any additional information that you require. I may be contacted via e-mail at heatherleechadwick@gmail.com or my cell phone (714) 423-8595. Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Heather L. Chadwick

Advisor: Dr. Linda Kuk

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Participant,

My name is Heather Chadwick and I am a doctoral candidate at Colorado State University in the School of Education. We are conducting a research study on lived educational experiences facing military spouses pursuing an undergraduate degree. The title of our project is *A Qualitative Study on the Nontraditional Undergraduate Experiences of Military Spouses.* The Principal Investigator is Dr. Linda Kuk, in the School of Education, and I am the Co-Principal Investigator. You have been identified as a potential research participant because you were referred to me by an Education Counselor from Joint Base Charleston as someone who fits the criteria for the study.

We invite you to join the study by completing a brief demographic survey and participating in a 1 hour audio-recorded interview to discuss your experiences as a military spouse pursuing an undergraduate degree. Participation will take approximately 1 hour and will take place at a time and location that is convenient and comfortable to you. In addition to your participation in a 1 hour recorded interview, the investigators would like you to participate in an activity called member checking after the initial data analysis is complete. Member checking involves reviewing the transcript to ensure its accuracy and will involve no more than 1 additional hour.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty. You will be compensated with a $10.00 Wal-mart gift card for participation. We will not collect your name or personal identifiers. When we report and share the data to others, we will combine the data from all participants. While there are no direct benefits to you, we hope to gain more knowledge

on the lived experiences of various active duty military spouses pursuing an undergraduate degree. You are invited to call co-principal investigator with any questions or concerns.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact Heather Chadwick at 714-423-8595, heatherleechadwick@gmail.com, or Dr. Linda Kuk Linda.Kuk@colostate.edu. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Dr. Linda Kuk

Advisor

Colorado State University

Linda.Kuk@colostate.edu

Heather L. Chadwick

Doctoral Candidate

Colorado State University

heatherleechadwick@gmail.com

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Colorado State University

TITLE OF STUDY: *A Qualitative Study on the Undergraduate Experiences of Military Spouses.*

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Linda Kuk, Ph.D., Associate Professor, School of Education, email: linda.kuk@colostate.edu; phone, 970-491-5160.

CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

Heather Chadwick, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, email: heatherleechadwick@gmail.com, phone, 714-423-8595.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?

You have been identified as a potential research participant because you identify as an active duty military spouse undergraduate college student who is currently attending a school in the United States.

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?

The principal investigator, Dr. Linda Kuk, is the Director of the College and University Leadership program and an Associate Professor in the School of Education at Colorado State University. Dr. Kuk is the primary advisor to the co-principal investigator Mrs. Heather L. Chadwick. This study is being conducted for Mrs. Heather L. Chadwick's doctoral dissertation.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to better understand the lived experiences of active duty military spouses pursuing an undergraduate degree, with a focus on perceived opportunities and challenges related to degree completion.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

The study will consist of a brief (about 10 minutes) online demographic survey and a 1 hour audio-recorded interview that will take place at a time and location that is convenient and comfortable for you. You will also be asked to review your interview transcript for accuracy about one week after your interview, which should take no more than 30 minutes. Your total time commitment will be no more than 3 hours.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO? Each research participant will be asked to complete a brief online demographic survey and participate in a 1 hour audio-recorded interview. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences at your university, what it is like to be active duty military spouse at your university, your opportunities and challenges related to degree completion. Participants will also be asked to review their transcripts for accuracy about one week after the interview.

ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

You should not participate in this research if you are not an active duty military spouse, or do not consent to have your comments recorded for research purposes.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

You may experience discomfort when discussing certain experiences related to active duty military spouse experiences. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. While each research participant will have a concealed identity, it may be possible for others to identify each participant through their responses. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Participation in this study will not directly benefit participants; however, the study itself may be useful to individuals and educators with an interest in military spouse research.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?

We will keep all research records that identify you private, to the extent allowed by law. Each research participant will choose a pseudonym that will be used to discuss and analyze information that is provided during the formal interview. We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. For example, your name will be kept separate from your research records and these two things will be stored in different places. The coded list that links you to your data will be destroyed when the final manuscript is completed.

You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, we may be asked to share the research files with the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee for auditing purposes. In addition, the law may require us to show your information to a court OR to tell authorities if we believe you have abused a child, or you pose a danger to yourself or someone else.

It is the intent of the investigators to publish the study in the Co-Investigator's dissertation and in a professional journal. When we write about the study to share with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be identified in these

written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Research participants will receive a $10.00 Wal-mart gift card for participating in this study. Your identity/record of receiving compensation (NOT your data) may be made available to CSU officials for financial audits.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I AM INJURED BECAUSE OF THE RESEARCH?

The Colorado Governmental Immunity Act determines and may limit Colorado State University's legal responsibility if an injury happens because of this study. Claims against the University must be filed within 180 days of the injury.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the co-principal investigator, Mrs. Heather Chadwick at 714-423-8595 or heatherleechadwick@gmail.com. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu; 970-491-1553. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

Each interview will be audio-recorded. Participants will be asked to engage in member checking after the conclusion of each interview, which will involve reviewing interview transcripts for accuracy. Only the researchers will have access to the audiotape files. The audiotapes will not include your name, and will be destroyed once the transcript of the interview has been finalized.

Please acknowledge that you are willing to participate in member checking after the initial interview by checking the following ____ and initialing here _____.

To indicate your consent to participate and acknowledge that you have read the information stated, please type your name and date below, and return this consent to the researcher via email. Receipt of this consent from you acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 3 pages.

_____ _____

Name of person agreeing to take part in the study Date

Heather Chadwick _____ _____

Name of person providing information to participant Date

APPENDIX D: INTAKE SURVEY

Please answer the following intake survey questions:

What Pseudo Name would you like me to use of you in this study?

1. What is your date of birth?
2. What is your gender?
3. Military Affiliation
    a. Are you currently serving in the military?
    b. Are you married?
    c. What is the status of your spouse? Please choose one:
        i. Active Duty
        ii. Retired
        iii. Veteran (Served over 120 days)
4. What is the Rank of your spouse?
5. How many years has your spouse served in the military?
6. Do you have children? If yes, how many and what ages(s) are they?
7. Has your spouse ever had a deployment to another country, or participated in a training exercise away from you?
8. What is the longest period of time your spouse has been away from home?
9. Are you currently enrolled in a higher education institute as an undergraduate student?
10. How many credit hours have you completed?
11. What is your preference for participating in an interview?
    a. Face to Face or electronic (Skype or facetime)?
        i. If you prefer face to face, where would you like to meet?
12. What is the best time for us to have the interview? Can you please provide a time of day and day of the week that would work best for you?

APPENDIX E: QUESTION INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. How would you describe educational experiences leading up to your undergraduate studies?

2. What motivated you to begin an undergraduate degree program?

3. Describe your undergraduate educational experiences?

4. What are some of the opportunities of being a military spouse pursuing an undergraduate degree?

5. What are some of the challenges of being a military spouse pursuing an undergraduate degree?

6. How did the mentioned opportunities affect you? What kind of strategies did you use to address them?

7. How did the mentioned challenges affect you? What kinds of strategies did you use to address them?

8. How did your spouse's professional demands and roles (such as deployment, out of town training, or relocation) affect your educational experience?

9. How do you stay motivated and focused on completing your degree?

10. What strategies have you used to manage the other demands of your life?

11. Describe your vision of your career once you complete your undergraduate degree?

12. How do you envision an undergraduate degree in the major you have chosen helping you realize your career goals?