PERMISSION TO ENGAGE: EXAMINING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF ACTIVE DUTY ARMY ENLISTED SOLDIERS ENROLLED AT HOPKINSVILLE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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PERMISSION TO ENGAGE: EXAMINING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES
OF ACTIVE DUTY ARMY ENLISTED SOLDIERS ENROLLED AT
HOPKINSVILLE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the College of Education at the University of Kentucky

By
Tracey Y. Folden
Henderson, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Jane Jenson, Professor of Educational Policy Studies and Evaluation
Lexington, Kentucky
2018

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The military has long-standing partnerships with institutions of higher education (Leporte, 2013; Parks, 2015 & Massie, 2016). These partnerships have been significant over time because the United States Army has incentivized civilian education via the Army enlisted ranks and promotional structure (Wilson, Smith, Lee & Stevenson, 2013). Researchers are beginning to recognize service members as adult students who need specific supports in an educational setting (Wilson et al., 2013; Leporte, 2013; Parks, 2015; Massie, 2016). Enlisted soldiers arrive on college campuses with identities ascribed and molded by the military. Thus, their primary identity is soldier not student (Nagel & Kleykamp, 2007; Wilson et al., 2013 & Massie, 2016).

Community colleges specialize in providing educational opportunities to all facets of the community (Kane & Rouse, 1999). The current cultural diversity discourse does not include military personnel and the degree in which institutions of higher education seek to integrate via policy and practice with the military. This qualitative study explores the perceptions of the ten enlisted soldiers who participated in a semi-structured interview and completed a demographic questionnaire. I used the Collective Affiliation model (Davidson, 2011) to analyze the data generated from the soldier-students interviews regarding their educational experiences at Hopkinsville Community College Fort Campbell Campus.

The research participants discussed family support and expectations, preparation for life after the Army, reenlistment incentive programs, and civilian education embedded into promotional points as aspirations for college attendance. Lastly, the soldiers described their educational experiences as navigating military, family and academic bureaucracies to encompass; balancing multiple roles as adult students, discovering the opportunities and challenges of military educational benefits, enrollment experiences as community college students, and faculty interactions and support in the classroom. From this research study, I created the Dual System for Enlisted Soldier-Student Academic Persistence (DSAP) conceptual model to illustrate the lived experiences of enlisted
soldiers as students specifically. The findings of this research add to the body of knowledge of the educational experiences of enlisted soldier-students attending community college.

KEYWORDS: Active Duty Enlisted Soldier, Community College, Education Policy, Cultural Discourse, Diversity, Nontraditional Students

Tracey Y. Folden

March 27, 2018
PERMISSION TO ENGAGE: EXAMINING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF ACTIVE DUTY ARMY ENLISTED SOLDIERS ENROLLED AT HOPKINSVILLE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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March 28, 2018
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the active duty enlisted soldiers I have had the honor of teaching, advising and supporting over my ten years as an administrator and adjunct instructor at Hopkinsville Community College and Hopkinsville Fort Campbell Campus.
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"Giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," Eph. 5:20

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education are part of the landscape on many United States Military installations. These partnerships play a significant role in meeting the educational needs of active duty military, veterans, and dependents (Leporte, 2013 & Rumann, 2010). Parks (2015) cites Scott (2011) stating, “The Department of Defense (DoD) estimated that the Tuition Assistance (TA) program, including the Montgomery G.I. Bill, aided 302,000 service members who utilized 531 million dollars in pursuing postsecondary education in 2010 alone” (p.1). However, occupational demands, military education policy modifications, and family obligations pose challenges for enlisted soldier-students (Massie, 2016; Bolling-Harris, 2015; Neelands, 2014; Ferby, 2013; Ady, 2009; Hummel, 2000). Although enlisted soldiers frequently experience barriers accessing college on a consistent basis, researchers (Vacchi, 2012; Brown & Gross, 2011; Manos, 2010) expect more servicemembers to attend college. In support, Wilson, Smith, Lee & Stevenson (2013) advise that “Tuition assistance, the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill and the placement of education centers on military installations suggest that politicians and military leaders are interested in seeing service members participate in college coursework and attain college degrees” (p.628). Some enlisted soldiers report navigating barriers which impede their academic and occupational aspirations. Furthermore, they also confirm that the opportunity to attend college is contingent on the advocacy and support of the unit commander (Wilson et al., 2013).

Active duty enlisted soldiers as students arrive on campuses with life experiences that are beyond the scope of the average adult student (Wilson, 2014; Wilson et al. (2013); Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Given the diverse
backgrounds and occupational experiences that enlisted soldiers bring with them, higher education stakeholders must develop comprehensive policies and institutional practices that support their success beyond processing the educational benefits extended to them through the Department of Defense (Leporte, 2013; Brown & Gross, 2011). According to Ford, Northrup & Wiley, 2009; Lokken, Pfeiffer, McAuley, McAuley, & Strong 2009; Moon & Schema, 2011; Ferby, 2013), there is an abundance of research examining successful programmatic supports to engage the veteran population. However, very few seek feedback from the active duty enlisted soldier, the faculty who teach them, or the administrators who support them specifically (Wilson et al., 2013). When active duty enlisted soldiers and veterans arrive on a college campus, their motives for attending college and support needed are vastly different (Wilson, 2014; Wilson et al., 2013). An enlisted soldier’s focus is on balancing family demands, acquiring education for promotion purposes and unit deployments, (Cook & Kim, 2009; Stringer, 2007; Hummel, 2000) field related duties and Permanent Change of Station (PCS) relocating to a new duty station (Wilson et al., 2013).

In contrast, veterans attending college are reintegrating into society as civilians, balancing personal obligations, and transitioning to the workforce after service (Jones, 2013; DiRamio et al. 2008). In support of disaggregating military affiliated populations, Wilson et al. (2013) argue, “We found no research making distinctions between veterans, reservist, and active duty personnel attending college, although their college experiences are likely quite different” (p.632). By researching the educational experiences of enlisted soldiers, the findings will provide constructive feedback regarding how soldier-students navigate the demands of the military, higher education, and family obligations
simultaneously. Bolling-Harris (2015) confirms, “military members…face challenges because school officials cannot offer many of the services they need. Some military members do not receive help when transitioning into college because many education officials are unsure how to assist them with the process” (p.2). Institutions of higher education must develop policies and practices that align with the soldier’s primary affiliation with the military (Wilson et al., 2013), thus embracing the student without unmaking the soldier. Phelan and Kinsella (2009) cite Christian (1999, 2000, & 2004) who confirms “… participation in an occupation contributes to one’s construction of identity and is the primary means to communicate one’s identity…” (p.85). Regardless of the enlisted soldier’s affiliations outside of their professional capacity, they will always consider themselves a “soldier first.” Wilson et al. (2013) and Parks (2015) reference soldier-students as undergraduate students with military experiences in their research. Wilson et al. (2013) emphasize that the soldiers’ primary identity as an active duty soldier impacts their designated role as a college student by stating, “…the exchange between the military institution and the college institution is centered on how the military prepares soldiers to be students” (p.639). Furthermore, the expectation and support to attend college must be consistent from the military.

**Active Duty Profile as Undergraduates Nationally**

According to Molina & Morse (2015), 170,790 (.07%) of active duty soldiers enrolled as undergraduate students in comparison to approximately 23 million undergraduate students for the 2011-2012 academic year. The average age upon initial enrollment was 22, and 1-in-5 (22%) were women with half (48%) of the total population representing racially ethnic minorities or multiracial. On average, active-duty
soldiers earned $35,413 gross incomes per year, and 1-in-10 (9%) of soldier-students accessed student loans to supplement their financial aid package. In line with the transient nature of soldiers, 60% of active duty undergraduates identified as having 4 or more risk factors associated with attrition; that include, attending multiple colleges and not completing degree requirement (Massie, 2016; Bibus, 2013; Wilson et al., & Anderson, 2012). Of the data set, 31% of students enrolled at public two-year institutions, 18% at public 4-year institutions, 7% at 4-year private nonprofit and 34% attended a private for-profit institution. Finally, the findings suggest that active-duty soldiers prefer flexibility course offerings with 59% registered for online classes and 61% enrolled primarily as part-time students (Molina & Morse, 2015).

**Challenging the Diversity Discourse: Expanding for Occupational Differences**

Institutions of higher education are charged with meeting the needs of a growing adult student populations. The growth in this group’s demographics urges administrators and faculty to create culturally responsive policies and practice that support matriculation to degree completion (Mallet, Mello, Wagner, Worrell, Burrow, Andretta, 2011; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). According to Sims & Barnett (2015), “The plight of nontraditional student populations is similar to that of other underserved and marginalized groups, particularly racial minorities as well as (LGBTQ) students, low-income student and first-generation students” (p.2). Similarly, “The U.S. military may present a particularly challenging environment for women due to its traditionally masculine culture and women’s numerical minority status in this setting” (Weatherill, Vogt, Taft, King, King & Shipherd, 2011, p.348).
College students with a military affiliation largely are missing in the diversity and inclusion literature (Wilson et al, 2013). Oliha (2010) asserts “Despite this fragmentation in the treatment of diversity issues, education scholars predict that students in the academy will become more diverse and colleges and universities will have to respond (p.3). Active duty soldier-students are a subpopulation of diverse students attending various institutions in higher education (Rumann, Hamrick & DiRamio, 2009; Vacchi, 2012; Wilson et al., 2013). Unlike other adult student populations, active duty soldiers arrive on a college campus with an extensive indoctrination into the military culture. As they enter into the academic environment, they bring with them occupational experiences and health ailments unlike any other student groups (Wilson, 2014; Wilson, et al., 2013; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Burnett & Segoria, 2009). In support, Massie (2016) states, “[A]ctive duty military students cannot be simply categorized as at-risk or non-traditional students” (p.22). Given the impact diverse populations have made in higher education, it is imperative that researchers examine the effects of policy integration or lack thereof for adult student populations with occupational affiliation, unlike other nontraditional student groups. Because of the lack of empirical data, there is a lack of understanding about the educational needs of the enlisted soldier population across college campuses in the United States (Ferby, 2013; Wilson, et al., 2013 & Wilson & Smith, 2012; DiRamio & Ackerman, 2008).

Enlisted soldiers bring considerable amounts of occupational and intellectual to academia (Morrish & O’Mara, 2011). Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, and Jalomo (1994) contend that students from diverse racial and occupational backgrounds may thrive in an educational environment when “…receiving confirming
signals that they can be successful in college and are worthy of a place there, have their previous work and life experiences recognized as legitimate forms of knowledge and learning, have contributions in class recognized as valuable…” (p.66). Particularly, many soldier-students bring perspectives as members of multiple underrepresented and marginalized groups (Layne, 2008; Bibus, 2013; Parks, 2015). Hannon, Woodside, Pollard & Roman (2016), who cite Stewart (2008) found, “the importance of understanding the multiple identities of college students, including race and gender” (p.653). Ford (2006) suggests, “Precisely because identities are constructed within not outside discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies” (p.79). This further notes the importance investigating the institutional factors and personal challenges affecting adult students with demanding occupations. Thus, ascribing how the military culture influences college participation and communication regarding their expectations for enlisted soldiers to complete an undergraduate degree while balancing multiple roles. Moreover, this research study seeks to provide justification for including military affiliated student populations into the sphere of diversity discourse in scholarly research, institutional and governmental policies and culturally responsive practices.

**Background of the Problem**

The Montgomery G.I. Bill and Tuition Assistance accounts for the enlisted soldiers attending college. Furthermore, the expansion of military-affiliated populations challenges faculty, staff, and administrators to both support and meet the needs of this rapidly growing adult student population. The military does not lend to a seamless

Meanwhile, examining the opportunities and challenges, soldiers face related to policy alignment between civilian institutions of higher education and the military (Kelty et al., 2010; Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley & Strong, 2009; Rumann, Hamick & DiRamio, 2009; Ackerman, DiRamio & Mitchell, 2009).

By researching the educational experiences of enlisted soldier-students attending community colleges, practitioners and policy makers can understand the impact civilian institutions have in supporting military personnel to degree completion. Bibus (2013) proposes, “active duty service members have extrinsic reasons to be working on a degree, either to be able to remain in the Army or to begin a career when they leave the service” (p.5). Enlisted soldier-students want an educational environment that is accessible, supportive, and offers affordable tuition cost. Community colleges often serve as the educational nucleus for adult students with transient careers and demanding family lives. Wilson et al. (2013) explain that a soldier’s allegiance is to the military. Thus, their educational endeavors are secondary to the military’s mission. To date, most institutions of higher education consolidate active duty enlisted soldiers and veteran students in policy and practice. Subsequently, the research is sparse highlighting the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldier-students attending community college as a diverse undergraduate adult student population.
Research Statement

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to investigate the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldiers attending community college. Soldier-students will provide perspectives to describe their educational process while enlisted in the U.S. Army and enrolled at community college. According to Dial-Corujo (2015), “Varying perspectives may lead to varying definitions of what constitutes an educational experience…participant’s personal feelings, thoughts, and responses concerning the academic environment” (p.9). From a student success and policy inclusion standpoint, this research seeks to investigate and define the educational experiences of active duty soldiers attending Hopkinsville Community College Fort Campbell Campus and serving as an enlisted soldier in the United States Army.

Conceptual Framework

Davidson (2011) based the Collective Affiliation model on Tinto’s traditional model (1975) in conjunction with Durkheim’s theory (1961) of social constructs. “The Collective Affiliation model proposes that Durkheim’s theory of suicide is inapplicable to college student attrition because it focuses on reason, such as insufficient moral integration and collective affiliation but rather expect the student to find new self-identity” (p.78). In a different approach, Davidson’s Collective Affiliation model describes the process of campus integration as a “sense of belonging” for the nontraditional student attending community college. His development of this model exerts that academic and non-academic sense of belonging interconnects and overlaps, illustrating that the process does not transpire separately nor in silos. The foundation of this model defines the lack of student retention as the result of the institution not
collectively affiliating with the student, not the student ineffectively integrating with the institution.

**Figure 1. Collective Affiliation Model**

Davidson (2011) clarifies, “The Collective Affiliation model does not attempt to understand the individual’s decision to persist outside the social structures, namely family, and work. The students cannot be forced to disregard their previous communities in order to achieve an educational objective” (p.77). This conceptual framework expands on the perspectives needed to respond to diverse adult student populations that places emphasis on institutions of higher education to promoting academic persistence by creating education policies and practices that integrate into the student’s primary culture. The Collective Affiliation model illustrates the demanding life cycle of an adult commuter students who engage and make meaning of their educational experiences while balancing the demands of life. The obligations in an adult student’s life are overlapping and cyclical in nature (Davidson, 2011, p.14). Moreover, this framework asserts that an adult student persists because they chose to incorporate life in academia
into their existing social structure (e.g., work and family) (Davidson, 2011, p.13). The Collective Affiliation model advocates that it is not necessary for an adult student to reject their current affiliations outside the academic environment. Wilson et al. (2013) cite Lundberg (2003) who also suggest that, “Institutions other than colleges (e.g., economy, military or kinship) may be able to influence college commitments in such a way as to encourage persistence - even if the student does not affiliate with the campus community” (p.630). When an individual is a member of two different bicultural exchanges (community college and the military), they are more likely to persist to degree completion when both institutions encourage college participation. The authors argue that conducting research at the institutional level is imperative to understanding how the norms and values of one institution affect another institution. Wilson et al. (2013), emphasize to institutional leaders, “If a person is affiliated with a societal institution that values postsecondary degree attainment, the process of affiliation or the rites of passage will occur relative to that institution, including valuing a postsecondary degree…” (p.630).

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to define the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldier-students as a disaggregated population from other military-affiliated student groups. This research extends Wilson et al.’s (2013) study by addressing the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldiers attending Hopkinsville Community College Fort Campbell Campus?
RQ2. What are the enlisted soldier-student’s perceptions regarding the military’s expectation regarding their college participation and college graduation?

RQ 3. What are some actions the U.S. Army and Hopkinsville Community College have taken that the soldier-students perceive as supporting (or not supporting) of college enrollment and persistence of enlisted soldier-students?

**Significance of the Study**

To date, institutions of higher education combine active duty enlisted soldiers and veteran students in policy and practice. From a student success and cultural inclusion standpoint, higher education officials and scholars should not assume that an active duty soldier-student’s educational experiences and needs are the same as those of veteran students. By researching the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldiers, practitioners and policymakers can understand the role civilian institutions have in supporting military personnel to degree completion. The data generated may provide ways in which community college can integrate the soldier’s identity, experiences, and military culture into their educational experience.

**Military Acronyms**

- **AD**- Active Duty
- **CES**- Civilian Education System
- **DMDC**- Defense Manpower Data Center
- **DoD**- U.S. Department of Defense
- **MAP**- Military Affairs Program
- **MAP**- My Academic Plan
- **MOS**- Military Occupational Specialty
NCO- Non-Commissioned Officer
PCS-Permanent Change of Station
TA- Tuition Assistance
TDY- Temporary Duty Yonder
TIS- Time In Service
TIG-Time In Grade
TA- Tuition Assistance
VA- U.S. Veterans Administration

Definition of Terms

**Adult Learners.** Balancing multiple roles and responsibilities while tackling education; some may have past experiences with school, lack confidence, face financial difficulties, child care conflicts and may face multiple barriers regarding accessing education on a continuous basis (Kerka, 1995).

**Army.** The largest branch of the United States Armed Forces and performs land-based military operations.

**Academic Advising.** The process in which students receive guidance from a faculty and or staff advisor regarding requirements for the degree. Typically, the discussion surrounds the student’s life goals (Wilson & Smith, 2012).

**Active duty (soldier).** In this study, the term identifies a full-time service member in the United States Army (Molina & Morse, 2015).

**Andragogy.** Knowles (1972) created an andragogical theory based on four assumptions that include, changes in self-concept, the role of experiences, readiness to learn and orientation to learning (p.33-36).
Basic Skills Education Program (BSEP). The army offers a two ½-week course to help soldiers prepare and retake the Armed Forces Classification Test. At the time of reenlistment, active duty soldiers may request to change their MOS or apply for Officer Candidate School or Warrant Officer School.

www.army.mil/article/3068/bsep_helps_soldiers.advance.careers

Campus Integration. Formal and informal interactions with diverse demographics of faculty, staff, and students. The campus also effectively integrates the cultures of the students and community with the appropriate artifacts, symbols, cultural programs, and services.

Cohesion. The emotional bond of shared identity and camaraderie among soldiers within their local military unit; in sociological terms, horizontal or primary group integration (Burk, 1999).

Community College. An institution that offers Associate in Arts (AA) Associate in Science (AS) or Associate in Applied Science (AAS) as well as technical programs, and certificates. The credentials offered often reflect the needs of community and service areas.

Community College Student. The goals of this student population may include, earning a diploma, certificate, or degree; upward transfer; or acquiring skills for gainful employment (Davidson & Wilson, 2017).

Cultural Discourse. Has been used systematically to organize ways of understanding how culture is an integral part, and a product of discourse systems (Carbaugh, 2007, p.169).
Culturally Relevant Adult Education (CRAE). Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasized that adult educators must understand their students and cultural backgrounds; and use this information effectively and creatively during instruction (Kaya, 2014 p.166).

Deployment. Military personnel is moving materials and manpower for home installation to a designated location (https://www.military.com/deployment/deployment-overview.html).

Diversity. Differences that are encompassed within cultural groups to includes race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, religion, and sexual orientation (Anderson & Taylor, 2008).

Education Centers. Housed on military installations, serves the hub for education and counseling needs for active duty, veterans, dependents, and civilians (Wilson et al., 2013).

Enlistment. The term illustrates a military commitment and rank (E1-E4). It is also inclusive of Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) (E5-E6) and Senior Enlisted (E7-E9). For this study, the sample population consisted of soldier-students with an E4-E5 military ranking.

Esprit de Corps. Describes the commitment and pride soldiers take in their military establishment and its effectiveness; in sociological terms, vertical and secondary group integration (Burk, 1999).

Etiquette. Normative prescriptions that guide or control interpersonal behavior especially between those of different rank or military status (Burk, 1999).
**Go Army Ed Portal.** An online database that allows active duty soldiers, veterans and administrative staff to enroll students in courses, administer educational benefits and tuition assistance.

**Kentucky Community & Technical College System (KCTCS).** Community College System located in Versailles Kentucky. KCTCS supports 16 colleges with multiple campuses throughout Kentucky that specializes in continuing education, technical training, degree and certificates for The Commonwealth of Kentucky’s diverse constituency; in addition to individuals residing in neighboring states.

**Military Discipline.** The behavior of military personnel as individuals or in group formations, in battle or garrison in conformity with a previously prescribed rule, usually in response to command and the result of instruction and drill (Burk, 1999).

**Montgomery GI Bill.** Education and training benefit available to active duty soldiers, veterans and can be transfer to military dependents. MBGI Bill rates may vary.

**Nontraditional Student.** A student older than 24 or not living in a campus residence (e.g., is a commuter), or is a part-time student or some combination of these three factors; is not greatly influenced by the social environment of the institution; and is chiefly concerned with the institution’s academic offerings (especially courses, certification and degrees) (Bean and Metzner 1985, p.489).

**Non-Commissioned Officer.** Leader E4 and higher of the enlisted rank.

**Post 911.** This pivotal piece of legislation provides recruitment and retention incentives for military personnel. The educational benefit is available to active duty soldier who served a minimum of 90 days of aggregate service since September 10,

**Servicemembers Opportunity College Associate Degree (SOCAD)** Student agreement for enlisted soldiers and warrant officers who take advantage of a consortium of institutions of higher education that belong to a system that provide flexible course offers and degree programs for Servicemembers seeking associate and bachelor’s degrees. [https://www.goarmyed.com/public/public_earn_degree-soc_army_degrees.aspx](https://www.goarmyed.com/public/public_earn_degree-soc_army_degrees.aspx)

**Student Veteran.** A student veteran is an individual taking classes on a college campus with prior service in the military.

**Tuition Assistance.** Education benefit provided to active duty soldiers via the Department of Defense (DoD).

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CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Enlisted Soldier-Students in Higher Education

The United States Armed Forces supply viable cohorts of potential college students to various institutions of higher education (Ford, Northrup & Wiley, 2009). The structure of the military does not readily lend itself to a seamless civilian-military working relationship (Snead & Baridon, 2010; Teachman, 2005, 2007). According to Ady (2009), “The unique roles and responsibilities of active duty soldiers often create various challenges and perhaps barriers impeding the academic success of this population of students” (p.4). In support, DiRamio et al. (2008) conduct a study to include 25 students from various locations who served in the current Iraq and Afghan wars. This study focused on the experiences of war veterans as active duty soldiers transitioning and entering college. According to the authors, the participants mentioned that their transitions to college were among the most difficult after returning home from war. Rumann (2010) cites Rumann & Hamick (2010) who affirm that the differences in college and military cultures as a result of multiple deployments and Permanent Change Station (PCS) transitions. Anderson (2012) also endorses that “The military transforms them in some ways that are particularly misaligned with the university, contributing to what many of them experience as culture shock” (p.11). Further, as enlisted soldiers enter the campus environment, they find themselves in the classroom setting with their civilian counterparts, struggling to adjust to the civilian environment (Wheeler, 2011; Wilson et al., 2013; Brown, 2014; Bolling-Harris; 2015).

Institutions of higher education on military installations can enhance existing partnerships with the military (Wilson, 2014). Although these institutions are housed in
Education Centers on military installations, the structure of the military does not readily lend itself to a seamless civilian-military working relationship (Snead & Baridon, 2010; Teachman, 2005, 2007). Ferby (2013), champions the idea of collaboration by stating, “Military awareness means to make specific goals developed by schools to recognize and minimize stumbling blocks…” (p.3). The research suggests that military serving institutions should examine how to create education policies and institutional practices that blur when the military ends and higher education begins (Wilson et al., 2013; Wilson & Smith, 2012 and DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Kelty et al., 2010; Ackerman et al., 2009; Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley & Strong, 2009; Rumann & Hamick, 2009 also suggest that civilian institutions should create admission and orientation processes that provide seamless access to competitive academic programs that align with their MOS and future career goals.

An enlisted soldier’s ability to attend college can be complex. Ferby (2013) recognizes the barriers experienced by enlisted soldiers as college students. He conducted a mixed methods study that examined whether soldiers were more likely to utilize civilian education if brought to the unit. Twenty soldiers currently enrolled and other soldiers who never attended college participated in the study. The findings address the barriers soldiers face while completing their degree, e.g. the lack of access to advising, information regarding university policies and procedures, and college courses offered to soldiers. The researcher stated, “These barriers make it difficult for soldiers to succeed in completing their educational goals” (p.48). Ferby (2013) cites Cook and Kim (2009) who state, “Soldiers are a growing demographic that requires the support of
instructors and administrators alike. Once soldiers understand the institution is committed…they will become more motivated and vested in the process as well” (p.49).

Wilson and Smith (2012) explain although the military culture values civilian education and encourages service members to use the benefits allotted to them, a soldier's ability to use those benefits lies in the opportunity. Therefore, the opportunity to attend college is not consistent throughout one's military career but varies based on duty station location, job, and Military Occupational Specialization (MOS). Wilson et al. (2013) examine the soldiers’ ability to attend college further. The research participants stated that the ability to go to college falls under the jurisdiction of the unit command. For example, Carlos clarifies, “They talk about it, but it’s more talk than action. They talk about you going to school and bettering yourself, but I’ve requested lunch and been denied (p.636).” Another participant, Esmeralda, argues that the military “does not really support me going to school. My place of duty is where I’m going to school for the first six months…There’s absolutely no unit support” (p.636). In alignment with the studies above, Hummel, (2000) conducts a qualitative research study examining the factors that impede academic persistence for active duty soldiers attending college. The sample size consisted of 1,050 Army Light Infantry TO&E Division soldiers located at Fort Drum, New York and Fort Campbell, Kentucky on Army Installations. The research participants answered survey questions to assess their perceptions regarding the attitudes and behaviors of the unit leadership and the structural characteristics associated with the Army. The finding concludes that the soldiers discontinued their college attendance because of unit training, deployments, and a lack of flexibility among unit leadership regarding missing field training and/or adjusting work schedules.
A quantitative study by Williams (2015) examines the transition factors of military and veteran students’ academic success from a combination of thirteen two- and four-year institutions in one Midwestern state. The sample encompasses military and veteran undergraduate students who served in various branches of the U.S. Armed Forces. The researcher collected data by administering the Iowa Survey of Veteran and Military Students (ISVMS) survey instrument. She used quantitative analysis to determine a relationship between descriptive and inferential statistic-independent variables (demographic characters, financial, personal and relationship experiences and dependent variables (GPA and intent to return). The results describe low levels of direct correlation between study factors and GPA; however, a high correlation between a professor’s academic expectation and GPA outcomes for all institutional types (community college and four-year). The findings suggest, “No financial, personal or relationship variables were significantly correlated with GPA” (p.78). Although the intent to return to college was 90.24%, the analysis suggested “no financial, relationship, personal or demographic factors were significant predictors of intent to return to community college participants” (p.79).

Bibus (2013) explores the educational experiences of twenty participants who were active-duty soldiers (12), civilians who work for the military (4) and military spouses (4). This study examines the internal and external factors that lead to participants “stepping in and stepping out” of their community college attendance. The findings indicated a variety of personal and environmental factors affecting persistence to degree completion. For example, some of the participants noted lack of desire or perceived financial ability to enroll in college right after high school. Others would fit college in as
they could while balancing family and career obligations. Finally, the participants reported that they began their educational endeavors with an associate degree in mind. Their outlook had changed regarding their desires for themselves and the educational attainment of their children.

According to (Ferby, 2013; Wilson et al., 2013; Wilson and Smith, 2012; Hummel, 2000) in promoting degree completion for soldier-students, colleges must make a concerted effort to integrate as much as possible into the military culture while maintaining academic rigor. For higher education, the research shows that institutions should offer seamless enrollment and orientation processes, flexible course offerings, trained faculty and resources specific to this diverse student population. Because the DoD allocates a substantial amount of monetary resources for education and training, the Army must rethink how civilian education aligns with the overall goals of the Army. The access to monetary support changes the trajectory for enlisted soldiers who desire to become college students. The research findings suggest that the amount of encouragement and flexibility a soldier receives to attend college from their superiors validates the importance of civilian education within the military culture; therefore, creating a culture of collaboration between institutions that aid in the education matriculation process. When the dominant (military) and subordinate (education) systems align, it underscores the importance of achieving educational goals along with military service (Layne, 2008; Wilson et al. 2013).

**Enlisted Promotional Structure**

The military has a legacy of building and transforming individuals (Barber, 1972). Through the transformation process, many enlisted soldiers develop keen
occupational proficiencies, unwavering dedication, leadership experiences, and team
work abilities (DiRamio et al., 2008). Equally, the military structure develops inno
tiative and dedicated leaders by supporting a well-defined promotional system and
pathways at all levels of leadership (Fallesen, Keller-Glaze & Curnow, 2011).
According to Dougherty (2010), leadership and educational development are two of the
most important responsibilities of the United States Army.

The Army defines its promotional system from E2 through E4 by time in military
service (TIS/years of service) and time in grade (TIG/time in current pay grade). A
soldier at the pay grade of E2 is considered for promotion within six months of active
federal service and can only be contested by the unit commander. The Private First-Class
paygrade (E3) receives an automatic promotion with TIS of twelve months TIG of and
four months. There are provisional considerations regarding promotions. Enlisted
soldiers can receive a waiver for exemplary performance (e.g., overall attitude,
leadership ability, and development potential). Furthermore, the unit commander must
endorse an enlisted soldier’s promotion to E4. A soldier can be promoted without a
waiver to Specialist or Corporal within 24 months of TIS and six months TIG or
performance with waiver TIS of 12 months and TIG of 3 months. The promotional
process to E5 Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) and higher is no longer automatic. An
enlisted soldier’s promotion to E5 encompasses TIS of 36 months and TIG 8 months and
secondary TIS 18 months and TIG 4 months and a minimum 450 promotional points,
and an E6 receives a promotion at ten months TIG as an E5 and seven years TIS. There
are limited spots for and E5 and E6; a soldier must wait on an opened slot (Army
regulations 600-8-19).
The Army develops and sustains a competency assessment program for evaluating a soldier’s technical and tactical proficiency as it relates to their Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) and leadership skills for their rank. Particularly, Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) attend colleges and universities to earn an undergraduate degree, participate in various career schools and leadership training to increase their chances for promotion through the Army’s enlisted ranks. The following table illustrates the promotional structure for the enlisted soldier.

**Figure 2. Ranks and Insignias for Enlisted Soldiers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E1</th>
<th>E2</th>
<th>E3</th>
<th>E4</th>
<th>E5</th>
<th>E6</th>
<th>E7</th>
<th>E8</th>
<th>E9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Private First Class</td>
<td>Specialist Corporal</td>
<td>Sergeant</td>
<td>Staff Sergeant</td>
<td>Sergeant First Class</td>
<td>Master Sergeant First Sergeant</td>
<td>Sergeant Major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Insignia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

https://www.army.mil/symbols/armyranks.html

The Army’s enlisted promotional process has evolved to include civilian higher education. Enlisted soldiers are taking full advantage of the opportunity to attend college. In support, Cohen, Segal, and Jemme (1986) found that the higher the rank one achieved in the military, the higher the level of education one progressively attains. Active duty enlisted soldiers, as students, are older and in most cases, determined to achieve their educational aspiration. Leporte (2013) cites Mehay and Pema (2008) attest, “First-time enlistees who take advantage of Tuition Assistance (TA) and complete some
undergraduate coursework have a significantly higher probability of reenlistment and promotion” (p.41).

There is a need for relevant quantitative and qualitative retention data on the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldiers in the higher education (Neelands, 2014; Bibus, 2013; Wilson et al., 2013; Ackerman et al., 2009). Wilson et al. (2013) conduct a study that focused on how soldiers constructed their reality, as well as their perceptions of the military’s commitment to their participation in higher education. They wanted to know if the credential helped them attain their personal goals. The study participants attended two-and four-year branches of the institutions that are housed in the education center on a military installation. The results concluded that soldiers embraced the norms and values of the military, including attending college. Furthermore, soldiers did not only pursue education for personal gains, but they also mentioned military incentives and promotional points. Brown (2014) reiterates the need for further inquiry on the educational needs of soldier-students stating, “While certain areas of academia have evolved with great success, other areas need further attention and research to advance to a more optimal level” (p.3). If supporting active duty enlisted soldiers to degree attainment is the goal, higher education and military officials must discover the proper educational policies and practices needed for enlisted soldier-students, while supporting their military career advancement at the same time.

**Educational Benefits as a Retention Tool**

One of the goals of the military is to produce a sound group of well-educated leaders (Barber, 1972). According to Ady (2009), “The military also uses education as a retention tool” (p.1). In support of service members using their educational benefits,
Hummel (2000) notes, “The Army is one of the major organizations that realize the importance of educating its adults, because of the positive impact a formal education can have on the military and society” (p.1). Enlisted soldiers are taking full advantage of the opportunity to attend college. According to Mentzer et al. (2014), “U.S. military students possesses over a century-long legacy of professional service enhanced by their educational opportunities” (p.24). Neelands (2014) cites Persyn and Polson (2012) confirm that the “Department of Defense is the largest provider of adult education and 1.4 million active duty members take advantage of the benefit yearly” (p.4). In support, Ady (2009), states, “Education is becoming increasingly important in today’s workforce, to include the military. Active duty soldiers have the opportunity to pursue a college education at no cost to them” (p.1).

The education incentive programs offered by the Department of Defense are major bargaining tools for individuals entering the Army as enlisted soldiers (Mentzer et al., 2014 & Wilson, 2014). In a study conducted by DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008), the participants listed motivation to enlist, including economics, a family tradition of military service, and the multitude of educational benefits as reasons for enlistment. Kelty, Kleykamp, and Segal, (2010) suggest, “Most people who join the military do not make it a career. For them, military service is a transition between high school and higher education or the civilian workforce” (p.195).

The Department of Defense (DoD) provides financial assistance under the umbrella of the Montgomery GI Bill (Ch.30), Post 9/11 GI Bill (Ch.33) and Military Tuition Assistance for soldiers who qualify for the benefit and desire an education. It is important to note that the amount awarded from the Montgomery GI Bill varies and
contingent on a soldier’s TIS of 3 years or more. Tuition Assistance (TA) plays a pivotal role in supplying access to higher education and training for active duty soldiers. Soldier-students use TA to attainment degrees at an accredited college or university that with diverse options for academic plans to earn an associate, bachelor or master’s degrees. Additionally, TA is substantial support for lower enlisted soldiers completing a high school diploma and certificate programs.

Massie (2016) cites (Marine Corps Community Services, 2012; Navy College, 2012) affirming, “Unlike the Post-9/11 GI Bill, Military Tuition Assistance requires that courses be taken at a college, university or vocational/technical institution with national or regionally accreditation recognized by the Department of Education” (p.16). Wilson (2014) explains, “These programs offer benefits including tuition and fees, a monthly housing allowance, books and supplies, stipend, and moving expenses” (p.56). The proper use of the benefit can serve as a retention tool for the military and higher education.

The Post 9/11 GI Bill (Ch. 33) benefits provide education and training for active duty (after 90 days of active service) veterans and dependents since September 10, 2001 (Leporte, 2013; Neelands, 2014; Arman, 2016; Massie, 2016). Steele, Salcedo & Coley, (2010) confirm, “The Post-9/11 GI Bill was the most comprehensive expansion of the benefit since 1944” (p.3). Since the introduction of the post 9/11 GI Bill on August 1, 2009, military serving institutions have seen a visible increase in active duty service members, veterans, and dependents attending community colleges and universities (Leporte, 2013; Green & Hayden, 2013; Ady, 2009; Kleykamp, 2006). Despite the increased presence of active duty enlisted soldier-students on campuses, little data is
available regarding the total number of soldier-students on campuses and the institutional policies supporting their success (Wilson et al., 2013; Wilson & Smith, 2012). Moreover, because the military is transient, an enlisted soldier may attend multiple colleges before completing a degree (Massie, 2016; Bibus, 2013; Wilson et al., 2013; Anderson, 2012).

Educational Policy Modifications

On April 27, 2012, President Barrack Obama signed Executive Order 13607, “Establishing Principle of Excellence for Education” institutions servicing active duty, veterans and depends. This Executive Order required the DoD to coordinate with the Department of Justice and Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to create a framework for institutional compliance. The new framework includes:

- Implementation of rules to strengthen existing procedures for access to DoD installations by education institutions.
- The requirement that the DoD conduct an annual review and unification process if there are changes made to the uniform semester –hour or equivalent TA cap and annual TA ceiling.
- The requirement that the Military Departments provide their service members with a joint service transcript (JST).
- Implementation of the DoD Postsecondary Education Complaint System for Service members, spouses, and adult family members to register student complaints.
- Authorization for Military Departments to establish specific TA eligibility criteria and management controls
President Obama mandated new regulations by the 2013-2014 academic year. In 2014, the new regulations included the DoD making significant changes and increasing oversight of the TA policy via the purview of the Department of Education under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965. As of February 3, 2014, 4,229 Institutions of Higher Learning (IHR) signed the new DoD Voluntary Education Partnership Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The new policy requires participating institutions to provide information to soldiers regarding degree requirements, tuition cost, attendance policies so that “military students can make informed decisions on where to attend school. Furthermore, colleges cannot use unfair deceptive, and abusive recruiting practices; and provide academic and student support services to service members and their families” (Parks, 2015 p.3). The Federal Government believes stricter parameters increased accountability for the college and universities receiving military specific funding (Parks, 2015 & Leporte, 2013).

Although DoD provides financial support to eligible soldiers for educational purposes, the modifications to the Tuition Assistance Policy in 2014 may be creating more barriers than opportunities. The Federal Government modified the Tuition Assistance (TA) Policy to include a $4500 yearly/ $250 per credit hour cap or 16 credit hours per year limit that is available for 36 months. Berlerique (2015) cites (VA, 2008), “surrounding the changes in the reduced time frame of educational benefits from 48 months to 36 and the total educational stipend no longer covered 100% cost of the total cost of higher education” (p.3). The misalignment of the Federal Government’s fiscal
year and reduction of education requires some enlisted soldiers to find additional financial aid for a traditional August start. Subsequently, the financial barriers are driving soldiers to be more selective regarding their college choice (Massie, 2016; Leporte, 2013).

In research conducted by Steele, Salcedo, and Coley (2010), the soldier-students provided mixed reviews regarding the new Tuition Assistance policy. Some of the research participants spoke favorably of the new policy. They appreciated the seamless payment process to the institution for of the tuition and fees, a monthly living allowance and a book stipend. Also, service members do not have to pay into the program before accessing the funding Steele et al. 2010; Leporte, 2013). In contrast, Massie (2016) and Leporte (2013) discuss the deficiencies of the new policy to include a $250 per credit hour cap equivalent to a $4500 (ceiling)/16 credit hour maximum from October 1-September 30 of the fiscal year for 36 months. Massie (2016) and Vacchi, (2012) suggests despite the misalignment of the August start for the academic year and the October 1 start of the fiscal year for the Federal Government, colleges should remain flexible because the soldier’s funding is guaranteed.

Another policy modification includes the Montgomery G.I. Bill (MGIB) for active duty soldiers. Effective October 1, 2016, the monthly rate increased for active duty soldiers attending college or receiving training. This policy modification is instrumental in creating additional funding sources for soldier-students who prefer to start with an associate’s degree and transfer to a 4-year institution to earn a bachelor’s degree. Unlike the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, MGIB allows benefits for non-degree learning opportunities and provides a housing allowance regardless of enrollment status and the medium of
instruction (Berlerique, 2015). The following chart illustrates the allocations received from the MGIB for active duty soldiers receiving institutional training:

**Table 1. Montgomery GI Bill Disbursement Effective October 1, 2016**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>$1857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¾ Time</td>
<td>$1392.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>½ Time</td>
<td>$928.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than ½ time but more than ¼</td>
<td>$928.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¼ Time</td>
<td>$464.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Education Centers on Military Installations**

Under the Memorandum of understanding (MOU), the Federal Government certifies the colleges and universities located in the educational centers to provide education and training opportunities to active duty soldiers, veterans, military dependents, and civilians who are a part of the fabric on military installations and residents of the service area. “The Educational Center’s Education Officer (civilian) has worked with the colleges to develop articulation agreements between the colleges”. The authors also mention that the soldiers can earn associate’s and bachelor’s degrees face-to-face and or online (p.632). To illustrate the vital role civilian institutions of higher education, play on a military installation, (Bolling-Harris, 2015, p.7) cites Army Regulation 621-5 that states:

> Each installation is responsible for providing educational services to active duty soldiers either assigned to or supported by that installation under provisions of intra-service or inter-service support agreements. Each installation is also responsible for providing educational services to members of other services
assigned for duty at the installation. The Department of the Army will provide tuition assistance for its own members. (September 6, 2009, p.12)

The impact of higher education on adult learners can spark a renewed sense of dedication and purpose, thus, blazing new paths of opportunity toward degree completion. In support, Kasworm (2003, 2012) affirms that adult learners are constantly navigating, adapting, and readapting to the college environment. Campus acclimation and acceptance are important components to college student success; ultimately, cultivating a campus environment that is considerate of each student’s individuality and distinct experiences builds a valuable pedagogy for higher education.

Wilson (2014) references Wilson & Smith (2012) stating, “Soldiers attending college view college work through the military values, mission focus lens” (p.56). The goal of the colleges and universities in the Education Center includes providing affordable tuition within the boundaries of the MOU and a holistic system of support. Within that holistic system of supports, students with military background need comprehensive services, to include mandatory orientation, mentor/transition coach, counseling services, disabilities services office, academic advising and supportive faculty and staff (Ferby, 2013; Wilson & Smith, 2012; DiRamio et al. 2008).

**Joint Service Transcript (JST)**

Very little literature exists discussing how institutions of higher education align academic policies that support the matriculation for military service, leadership and training into college credit for soldier-students (Wilson et al., 2013; Ferby, 2013; Ackerman et al., 2009). Dial-Corujo (2015) states, “Many institutions understand the significance of military experience in the academic environment. Over the years, more
and more institutions have sought ways to transfer military experience into college credit” (p.106). Williams (2015) describes the chain of misinformation regarding military credit:

The bureaucratic processes of acquiring credit for military service or credits earned while in the military and the process of accessing military educational benefits are often early tasks for students as they enroll. Efficiencies in these procedures would allow students to focus on their academic success…failure to determine and address any of these concerns may lead to students being continually frustrated with a system and feeling less prepared to be academically successful. (p.88)

The Joint Service Transcript (JST) articulates data from the United States Army, Marine Corps, Navy and Coast Guard. The information provided by the American Council on Education (ACE) brings context for colleges and universities regarding a soldier completed military service, education, and training. For soldiers, each JST includes the following: personal service member data, military course completions, military occupations, college-level test scores and other learning experiences (ACE brochure, http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/Joint-Services-Transcript-Brochure.pdf).

The number of credit hours awarded will vary depending on the soldier’s military training, background, and experiences.

**Adults Learners Attending Community College**

Adult learners arrive on college campuses with a broad range of identities and affiliations. Bibus (2013) suggest that “community college student populations are highly diverse, tend to work while they go to college, and are older than traditional age
students” (p.2). Further, they are mature and approach the opportunity to attend college with a purpose. Corder (2011) also contends, “A variety of definitions exists which suggest that it is very difficult to develop a typical profile or definition of a nontraditional student” (p.13). Historically, researchers reference adult learners and non-traditional students in academia as mature learners, late starters, transitioning students, lifelong learners and displaced workers (Rowan-Kenyon, Swan, Deutsch, & Gansneder, 2010; Wyatt, 2011). Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) also designate adult learners thusly: “This label may be applied to mature students, those who have entered through alternative routes, those with qualifications other than the standard…” (p.599). Kasworm (2003) suggests, “… the adult student as one who represents the status of age, maturity and a developmental complexity acquired through life responsibilities, perspectives and financial independence; and the status of responsible and other-competing sets of adult roles reflecting work, family, community, and college student commitments” (p.3).

Balancing occupational, academic and life demands are the central character of adult students. Some adult students to decide to enter or reenter post-secondary education after a life event or at a time they desire a career change (Tilley, 2014). As an adult student reenters, the higher education arena, Donaldson and Graham (2014) express, “They are enrolling part-time, taking courses through the internet and other distance technologies and demanding creative ways to complete their education where they spend little or no time on campus” (p.24). Despite the demands, Donaldson, Martindill, Bradley and Graham (2000), stating the challenges adult students face may also build their capacity to solve problems, think critically, manage time well and engage with faculty and other students in meaningful ways.
Over the past three decades, community colleges have positioned themselves as a one-stop shop for adult learners (Kane & Rouse, 1999; Bragg, 2002; Dougherty, 2001; Beach, 2011). “Many students enter the community college with negative perceptions of education, and in many instances failed attempts at higher education” (Fletcher, 2015, p.31). According to Hatfield (2003), “some nontraditional students come to prepare for the GED; develop skills for cake decorating; become a nurse; learn English as a second language; discover new mysteries on the computer, and pursue an associate’s degree” (p.18). Furthermore, Goldrick-Rab (2010) suggest, “Community colleges are highly regarded for their open admissions policy, which expands opportunities to everyone, regardless of prior advantages or disadvantages. Working learners are welcomed, more than half of 2-year college students are employed, compared with only 37% of 4-year college students” (p.45).

Adult learners may stop-out and return to college multiple times before completing a degree. In the interim, community colleges are often unaware of the circumstances surrounding why the student stopped attending. Understanding the reasons why adult students persist is complex. In support, McCallum (2016) describes barriers affecting adult student degree completion: “Another factor that can act as a barrier to educational participation for adult learners is that many returning adult learners enter school with multiple non-school related commitments and responsibilities” (p.6). Hatfield (2003) offers a conflicting viewpoint regarding adult student attrition suggesting, “Nontraditional students interrupt their completion of a course of study for many reasons. They stop out to have a baby, change jobs, care for a dying parent, get
married, get a divorce, or simply catch their breath; however, their absence does not mean they are not retained” (p.19).

**Classroom Experiences**

The classroom plays a unique role in helping students understand the experiences of those from various occupational backgrounds, different races, religions, genders, nationalities, levels of physical ability, occupations, and sexual orientations. For example, students who study and work within a diverse environment are better able to understand and consider multiple perspectives and appreciate the benefits cultural and gender diversity (Etowa, Foster, Vukic, Wittstock & Youden, 2005). The cultural disparities among community college students often go unrecognized. Heflin (2015) discusses the struggles community college students face while adjusting to the academic culture and classroom environment:

For community college students, the capital they bring with them to the institution of higher education, whether it is cultural, social, and academic, has the potential to be misaligned with the culture of the institution creating student capital disparity. This disparity of capital creates problems for the student in understanding the expectations and rules of the community college, as well as issues for faculty who interact with the student in the context. (p.3)

As soldiers enter the campus environment, they find themselves in a classroom setting with their civilian counterparts, struggling to adjust to the civilian environment. Breihan (2007) suggests that “Successful strategies for increasing the retention rates of adult part-time students of color should include attention to three areas: teaching techniques, a relationship fostered beyond the classroom, and recognition strategies (p.95). Further,
Bolling-Harris (2015) acknowledges the diversity soldiers bring to the educational environment and cites Brown and Gross (2011) who state: “Students who serve in the military belong to a subpopulation of adult learners. They are different, have money for college and experience, and have credits that are often transferable into degree programs because they have served on active duty” (p.80). Further, Wyatt (2011) attests “prior knowledge and life experience is not only a crucial part of the contributions that nontraditional students bring to the classroom but paramount to the nontraditional student engagement in the classroom (p.14). A growing number of soldiers are arriving in a classroom setting with combat-related injuries. “The number and duration of military deployments by U.S. service members have increased significantly over the past decade” (Newby et al, 2005, p.815).

Faculty members who teach soldiers in the classroom are often curious about their combat experiences. In the dissertation research conducted by Bolling-Harris (2015), the research participant 05352 discusses an encounter that transpired in the classroom. The research participant’s reaction validates the need for culturally responsive training for faculty. Participant 05352 states:

I was in a class once, and the teacher asked me questions about my military service. I thought some of the questions he asked were not appropriate, but in a way, I understood why he was asking so many questions. He was curious about the military. His questions took time away from the class. The school should offer military seminars to these people. We have sensitivity training in the military; it would be a good idea to offer sensitivity training to these nonmilitary people.
Some of the questions they ask are crazy. Some things you just do not ask people whom you do not know well. (p.81)

In the context of a college setting, student-faculty relationships, student-peer relationships, and classroom interactions reflect a sense of belonging for students (Hoffmann et al., 2003). It makes sense for college faculty and administrators to capitalize on the work and leadership experiences of soldiers and veterans in the classroom setting. Byman (2007) affirms:

Beyond the intellectual perspectives they bring, many of these students are simply more mature. They have seen the world, faced incredible dangers, and had to make decisions that few civilians had had to. While their presence enriches the classroom, the exchange goes both ways. The military needs to learn about the civilian world.

(p. B5)

Faculty members can cultivate a bond with students as mentors. As mentors, the faculty member may act as a sounding board and support system as the student he or she is mentoring makes major life decisions. According to Moore & Toliver (2010), “most students want professor mentors who cared about their futures and who were interested in their education” (p.940). In support, Davidson & Wilson (2013) state, “faculty/instructors are the primary sources of social capital both in and out of the classroom, transmitting valuable information to students” (p.82). In the context of a college setting, student-faculty relationships, student-peer relationships, and classroom interactions reflect a sense of belonging to students (Hoffmann et al., 2003).
Faculty who develop culturally responsive instruction enables the enlisted soldier-student to thrive in the classroom. According to Breihan (2007) “Many adults do want to know that their tuition dollars will buy access to a knowledgeable instructor, but they also want to know that they will be active learners, not simply unengaged viewers of lectures” (p.90). Engaging adults in the classroom cultivates a positive educational experience for soldier-students and sustains a pipeline of valuable military personnel. The dissertation study conducted by Ferby (2013) includes an example of culturally responsive practices. Ferby investigates the concept of building unit support while implementing successful interventions for soldiers wanting to attend college. The foundation of the study encompassed eliminating barriers for soldiers by taking the classroom to their military unit. “The primary challenge was to keep soldiers motivated and to be successful in the classroom while they faced many distractions that came with serving in the military” (p.5). The intervention included minimizing barriers to consistent course enrollment; as a result, academic advisors and instructors taught and supported the soldiers at the unit. Ultimately, this approach may lead to increased enrollment and assisting soldiers to a better probability of degree completion.

Many soldier-students arrive on college campus coping with the residual effects of war (Brown, 2014; Parks, 2015; Dials-Corujo, 2015). There is a substantial amount of research discussing the health ailments and disabilities sustained by service members engaged in combat with the Afghanistan-Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Iraq-Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) conflicts (Hoge, Auchterlonie & Milliken, 2006; Rumann, 2009). The effects of war manifest themselves as physical, cognitive and psychological disorders (DiRamio et al., 2008). When active duty soldiers enter the
college environment, they bring with them physical, mental and emotional disabilities that may be beyond the sphere of expertise for the average college or university official. Moreover, Ackerman, DiRamio & Mitchell (2009) posit, “The experience of war makes those who fight a special group with the general population” (p.5). This notion of occupational differences in comparison to other adult student populations further justifies that active-duty soldiers are a diverse student population on college campuses. Vacchi (2012) states, “A side effect of this environment is that no military member wants to be a weak link…failure is not an option and being a burden to anyone such as a professor or campus administrator…that is why so many cases of post-traumatic stress, anxiety disorders, alcohol and drug addiction go undiagnosed and or untreated” (p.16). Likewise, Burnett and Segoria (2009) suggest that the students with military backgrounds feel most comfortable with each other. Their findings suggest that soldiers having the support of their peers is especially valued because military training and culture has them relying on each other for safety and support.

**Online Educational Experience for Active Duty Soldiers While Deployed**

Online learning opportunities are attractive to active duty soldiers and other adult student populations with occupations that do not provide the flexibility for a brick and mortar college experience. Brown (2014) conducts qualitative case study research that seeks to understand the educational considerations that are indigenous to active-duty soldiers and deployed military personnel that are different from non-military students. This study consisted of ten male soldiers who were members of the U.S. Army or Air Forces and enrolled in college before deployment. The researcher analyzed the data by using the Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and Tinto’s theoretical retention model.
findings consisted of three themes that illustrated the challenges related to their educational endeavors while deployed: 1) challenges to pursuing higher education, 2) internet related challenges to completing coursework, and 3) challenges to focus and concentration. The researcher states, “Despite the service members’ strong sense of self and dedication to the mission, pursuing higher education while deployed in certain locations was quite difficult. Factors outside their control often influenced their quality of work, leaving them frustrated and at times, discouraged” (p.107).

Moreover, Parks (2015) examines the online educational experiences of nineteen soldiers, representing all military branches, who enrolled in online courses while deployed. Several of the research participants were veterans at the time the study. The responses reflected their lived experiences before retirement or separating from the military. The participants represented enlisted and officer ranks. In addition, they were on paths to earn associate, bachelors and master’s degrees. This phenomenological study suggests that there are many barriers to soldiers taking online courses while deployed. Their barriers include stress, time management, everyday threat of violence, communication with faculty, time difference as it relates to completing and submitting assignments, and internet access and connectivity concerns. Parks notes, “We found out how important family support was for the success of the participants…participants yearned for flexibility from colleges and support and resources from the military” (p.116).

**Active Duty Enlisted Soldiers’ Sense of Belonging**

Cultural competence at the institutional level plays a prominent role in building a positive college experience for soldier-students. Student engagement and integration as a
construct comprises an effect or feeling factor relating to their sense of belonging in a college setting, and their participation in academic and non-academic activities (Willms, 2003). Wilson and Davidson (2013) advocate by addressing systemic changes as a vital approach to addressing their needs through empirical data:

Adding programs, clubs, or classroom requirements will not be effective without developing a culture of relationships...leaders will need to assess the needs of students at their institutions, using the literature to guide inquiry, with the goal of understanding their unique needs. (p.341)

A sense of belonging represents an intermediate outcome of the college experience that mediates between a student’s status in college or retention and degree completion. Even for soldier-students, a sense of belonging is an interim outcome of the college experience that mediates between a student’s status in college or retention and degree completion (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Further, Anderson (2013) explores the uniqueness of the soldier-student population:

While enlisted, they accumulated social, cultural and economic capital, and symbolic capital-authority, deference respect and status. However, their capital did not translate into the academic setting, leaving them feeling disrespected, angered by the perceived entitlement of their younger classmates, and grappling with a fear of incompetence after having been highly competent in their roles. (p.69)

Military serving colleges and universities receive recognition for providing accessible academic programs and support service for military-affiliated populations. These institutions earn honors for being selected as one of the nation’s military-friendly
campuses. According to Lokken, et al. (2009), “Military friendly refers to marked efforts made by individual campuses to identify and remove barriers to the educational goals of veterans, to assist with the transitions from military life to college life and to provide information about available benefits and services” (p.45). Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell (2009) suggest:

The students we spoke with mentioned veteran and military friendly campuses, and while that term was difficult to define, we came to understand that veterans and service members use it to refer to the campus where programs and people were in place to assist with the transition between the college and the military. (p.10)

Relevant questions remain unanswered relating to the active duty students’ educational experiences in higher education. Given what we know about individuals with military experience, it is important to discover practices that will support their academic persistence. Bolling-Harris (2015), found creating culturally responsive “policies created to prove that military members will have every opportunity to complete their degrees, such as refunds for courses dropped due to military assignments, must be created by all universities and colleges offering classes to (war) veterans” (p.4.). Enlisted soldier-students are more likely to persist to degree completion in an environment that demonstrates an appreciation for the human capital soldiers bring to the educational environment and creating an environment that encourages academic persistence (Wilson & Smith, 2014; Wilson et al. 2013; Burnett & Segoria, 2009).
Conclusion

The community college has a legacy of providing culturally responsive educational opportunities for diverse groups. It is imperative that community colleges develop a system of support for students with a military background that extends beyond processing their Montgomery G.I./Bill and Tuition Assistance (TA) benefits. Furthermore, the review of the literature reveals opportunities for colleges and universities to build bridges with the military, enhance existing partnerships, and develop policies that foster success for enlisted soldier-students. As soldiers make their transition to community college, the path to educational attainment is often unclear (Brown, 2014). Higher education administrators and policymakers must work in conjunction with the military to promote a culture of college attendance, flexible academic programs that are cognizant of the diverse work experience, and an appreciation of the abilities of the soldier-student (Morreale, 2011).

Researchers overwhelmingly combine active duty, veterans, and dependents in the literature (Wilson et al., 2013). Active duty, veterans, and dependents are distinct groups. It is necessary to disaggregate the data, which in turns may inform policies and practices that are culturally responsive to each student group. Therefore, broadening the capacity to answer this study’s research question: What are the educational experiences of active duty soldiers attending Hopkinsville Community College Fort Campbell Campus?

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CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate and define the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldiers attending community college. This study extends Wilson et al.’s research obtaining a deeper understanding of the active duty enlisted soldiers as a student population. To gain a holistic understanding, I examined the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldiers attending a community college center on the Fort Campbell Army installation at Hopkinsville Community College Fort Campbell Campus. Merriam (2009) revealed, “A central characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds” (p.22). Enlisted soldiers arrive on college campuses with life and work experiences vastly different from any other adult student population. Wilson et al., (2013) confirmed, “Nontraditional military specific pathways are not well studied by higher education scholars” (p.628). Finally, this chapter encompasses a description of the qualitative research design, the background of military education in Kentucky, research location and selection of participants. I also provide an in-depth synopsis of the recruitment process, background on the interview participants, data collection, data analysis procedure, the role of the researcher, ethical issues, assumptions and the limitations of the study.

Qualitative Research Design

According to Creswell (2014), “Qualitative methods demonstrate a different approach to scholarly inquiry than methods of quantitative research” (p.183). “The primary purpose of qualitative research is to describe and clarify experiences as it is lived and constituted in awareness” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 138). Given that this research seeks feedback from the enlisted soldier-student, a qualitative approach was appropriate
for this research type. In support, Yin (2011) specified qualitative research seeks to yield an in-depth synopsis of the data that applies to that small group from a particular culture that does not apply to others. This study’s findings contribute significantly to the body of knowledge. The results are representative of active duty enlisted soldier-students attending one Army Post-located campus, Hopkinsville Community College Fort Campbell Campus. The focus of this study examined the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldiers as a diverse student population. The sources of data collection were observation, in-depth face-to-face and telephone interviews, and a demographic questionnaire.

**Background: Military Education in Kentucky**

The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) serves as a coordinating body for a multitude of statewide legislative and policy initiatives for public institutions in higher education. In 2010, CPE unveiled the 2011-2015 Strategic Agenda for Kentucky Postsecondary and Adult Education. The Strategic Agenda set the stage to “fulfill the vision first articulated by Governor Paul Patton and Kentucky General Assembly in the Postsecondary Education Improvement Act of 1997” - House Bill (HB) 1 (*Stronger by Degrees*, p.3). The then-President of CPE, Dr. Robert L. King, stated, “This new Strategic Agenda builds on the decade of success encouraged by HB 1 and brings focus and renewed energy” (*Stronger by Degrees*, p.3). At that time, the passing of HB1 (1997) and The Adult Education Act (2000), underscored the Commonwealth of Kentucky’s commitment to building a competent workforce that is competitive on a global scale.
Policymakers recognized that all legislative mandates must encompass culturally responsive strategies and initiatives. As illustrated by the 2010 census, Kentucky’s citizenry reflects growing segments of society vying for support and affirmation. This sentiment reigned true for active duty soldiers and Gulf II War Veterans. After decades of marginalized support, soldiers and veterans are at the forefront of growing equitable policy practices - acknowledging they arrive on college campuses with work and life experience, unlike any nontraditional student population.

The Kentucky Collaborative on Military Credit (KCMC) is a consortium of professionals, charged by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) to evaluate Kentucky’s current policies and practice supporting past and present service members. These professionals represent various colleges and universities across the State of Kentucky. KCMC’s charge is to evaluate policies barriers affecting current and former service members. The consortium’s primary focus is to ensure current and former servicemembers receive the appropriate academic credit for prior work experiences related to military leadership and training. One of the goals of the consortium is to create a centralized an online repository for soldiers and veterans to assess academic programs, course evaluation, support services via institution and track credentials earned (KCMC, p.1-4).

The work produced by KCMC is a vital first step to creating culturally responsive policies and practices for soldiers and veterans. The goal of the consortium is to provide a consistent system of articulation of academic credit based on American Council on Education (ACE) recommendations, deliver licensure and certification pathways, offer
consistent communication and outreach, and develop a website available to colleges, agencies, and stakeholders. (Allisha Lee personal communication, June 26, 2015).

State policymakers and education officials recognized the advocacy lead by KCMS for active duty soldiers and veterans. In 2016, Kentucky House Legislators sponsored HB 127-Amend KRS 164.2951, titled “An ACT related to creating a framework for the Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) to develop a statewide policy for public institutions of higher education.” This framework will guide institutions in articulating military service and training into academic credit for active duty soldiers and veterans representing all branches of the United States Armed Forces (http://www.lrc.ky.gov/record/16RS/HB127.htm).

This new legislative mandate works in tandem with a policy outlined by the American Council on Education (ACE). According to the website, “ACE works under a contract from the Department of Defense that is administered by the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) to conduct and facilitate academic reviews of military courses and occupations.” (http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Transfer-Guide-Understanding-Your-Military-Transcript-and-ACE-Credit-Recommendations.aspx) Although DANTES administers the military credit via a Joint Service Transcript (JST), it is left to the college or university to articulate military credit as appropriate for the academic program/major of choice. The establishment of the legislative mandates is a step-in building capacity to service and support active duty, veteran populations to degree completion. The new framework guides institutions that do not have large populations of military-affiliated and veteran students specifically.
The work of KCMS as a coalition of direct service providers to military-affiliated populations in higher education provided justification that informed state policymakers of the need for new legislation at the state level. Sabatier (1988) explained the process of establishing a new policy with the following framework: The Advocacy Coalition Framework has at least three basic premises: 1) Understanding the process of policy change” (p.131). This process requires the perspective of a decade or more. For example, at the institutional level, campus leaders (actors) build capacity over time and examine barriers for various student groups. If the barriers are beyond the institutional level, it requires the exchange of best practice with other benchmark institutions to support students in the interim. 2) “The most useful way to think about policy change over such a timespan is through a focus on policy subsystem” (p.131). For example, the purpose of KCMS Consortium is to serve as a reservoir for educational needs of soldiers and veterans as a diverse student population. Collectively, the consortium became a professional support network of service provider who focused on legislative advocacy and streamlining institutional practices statewide (e.g. admission requirements, course articulation, JST acceptance, 3) “That public policy (or programs) can be conceptualized in the same manner as belief systems” (p.132). The implementation of the recommendations brought forth consortium shows the level of commitment that policymakers and educational leaders have related to creating and implementing culturally responsive policies and institutional practices in support of active duty soldier, veterans and military dependents in an educational goal.

Postsecondary education leaders and state policymakers made a critical step in creating a culturally responsive educational policy for active duty soldiers and veterans
attending an institution of higher education. The United States Army has a profound impact on Kentucky. There are two Army installations located in Fort Knox and Fort Campbell. As illustrated in (Table-2), the Fort Campbell military installation has multiple two and four-year public and private institutions. Additionally, each have a long-standing history of serving active duty military, veterans, and military dependents in various capacities. The military communities in the region are attractive prospects to the colleges and universities because of the education benefits afforded to them through the DoD and the human capital that soldiers as nontraditional students bring to educational spaces. The KCMS consortium is a prime example of how the advocacy coalition framework worked as a catalyst for education policy creation and implementation.

**Site Selection**

The site for this study is the Fort Campbell Army post, situated in both Kentucky and Tennessee, is home to the historically famous 101st Airborne Division. “Campbell,” which is recognized nationally, is home to two prestigious Special Forces groups: the 160th special aviation regiment and the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne). Hopkinsville Community College houses its second campus on the Fort Campbell Military Installation. Since 2010, GI Jobs publication recognized Hopkinsville Community College as a military friendly campus. Strickley (2009) advised that “military-friendly” refers to the effort made by a campus to remove obstacles from military personnel achieving their educational goals. These campuses provide critical information to service members about benefits and services and assist with balancing military obligations and college life. Hopkinsville Community College (HCC) strongly
believes in providing supporting and maintaining academic programs that reflect the needs of the residents in the service areas. Hopkinsville Community College reaches a wider community through the Fort Campbell campus, including the military, their families, and the community members in proximity to the Army Post. This community is diverse, not only regarding its inclusion of military and nonmilitary members but also because of the racial and ethnic diversity of the military-affiliated populations on the installation. Thus, the diversity of the Fort Campbell community has brought a positive impact to the faculty, staff, and students in the areas of education, cultural awareness, and economic prosperity (personal communication, Allisha Lee July 2016).

Hopkinsville-Fort Campbell Campus enrolls the largest number of active duty, veterans, and dependents in the Kentucky Community Technical College System (KCTCS). This population encompasses one-third (1,200) of the total student body population at HCC. Primarily, the active duty soldier enrollment at HCC averages 280 students on the Hopkinsville-Fort Campbell campus (HFCC) (personal communication, Allisha Lee June 26, 2015). Both full-time and adjunct faculty facilitate the courses, online and in person. Per its mission, Hopkinsville Community College (HCC) offers associate’s degrees, diplomas, and certificates in customized training that is responsive to the local community’s needs. Hopkinsville Community College is 1 of 16 colleges in the Kentucky Community & Technical College System (KCTCS) HCC faculty, staff, and administrators take pride in providing educational opportunities to active duty soldiers, veterans and military dependents, and residents in the Western Kentucky and Northern Tennessee regions.
The Glenn H. English Jr. Army Education Center houses other institutions of higher education on the installation. The Federal Government certified the institutions to provide education and training opportunities to active duty soldiers, veterans, military dependents, and civilians who are a part of the fabric on military installations and residents of the service area. Wilson et al. (2013) describe the make-up of the institutions in the Education Center to include “a community college, two state colleges, and a proprietary college. The Educational Center’s Education Officer (civilian) has worked with the colleges to develop articulation agreements between the colleges”. Hopkinsville Community College and Hopkinsville Fort Campbell Campus provide flexible course offerings that meet the needs of many diverse student populations on the installation and various community constituencies. For their convenience, all HFCC students can register for online courses from any KCTCS college. Finally, HFCC is known for maintaining the highest enrollment of active duty enlisted soldiers in KCTCS and providing affordable tuition rates to community constituencies in the service areas.
Table 2. 2016 Undergraduate tuition rates face-to-face for the institutions located in Education Center on Fort Campbell

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTITUTION</th>
<th>HOPKINSVILLE Fort Campbell Campus</th>
<th>MURRAY STATE Fort Campbell Campus</th>
<th>AUSTIN PEAY Fort Campbell Campus</th>
<th>EMBRY RIDDLE Fort Campbell Campus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In-state</td>
<td>$162*</td>
<td>$331* 1-11hrs. $3,972.00 12-15 hrs. $331* Above 15 hrs.</td>
<td>**1000-2999 $167.25 **3000-4999 $270.25</td>
<td>$250*/Military $365.00*/Civilian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out- of- State</td>
<td>$324*</td>
<td>$902* 1-11hrs Varies by state 12-15hrs. Varies by state above 15hrs.</td>
<td>**1000-2999 $802.25 **3000-4999 $ 905.25</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Resident</td>
<td>$567</td>
<td>$902* 1-11hrs. $10,824.00 12-15hrs. Above 15hrs. *$902.00</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes:</td>
<td>Active Duty Military &amp; Dependent receive in-state rate.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Active Duty Military personnel may qualify for out-of-state waiver</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Selection of Participants

In selecting methods, there are multiple ways to identify participants from a population. The sample for this qualitative study was a purposeful sample. Creswell (2014) noted, “The idea behind the qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or a site that will help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (p.189). Hence, the selection process ensures that the questions asked are relevant to the population (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). According to Maxwell (2013), “Qualitative researchers typically rely on a small number of informants for a major part of their data, even when the informants are purposefully selected…there is no guarantee that these informants’ views are typical” (p.100). As it relates to sample size, the military community is transient; thus, it was imperative to put a contingency plan for participant recruitment. At the start of the participant interviews in Summer 2016, the entire installation was participating in mandatory field training. A snowball sampling method was necessary. I deployed a snowball method by asking participants for referrals of interested enlisted soldiers who met the research criteria. Therefore, data saturation was not reached for this study.

The participants were Army enlisted soldiers enrolled at HFCC, and eligible for military educational benefits. The Federal Government provides Tuition Assistance (TA) for active duty specifically. Leporte (2013) stated, “In order for an active duty soldier to take advantage of TA, the military member must be serving, be eligible for advancement and commit to one year in past last class was taken” (p.41). The selection criteria included: of (a) nine credit hours at HFCC by Spring 2016, (b) held an E4-E6 rank/pay grade, (c) enrolled in at least one 3-hour face to face course at HFCC during the Summer
term (May-August 2016) and Fall 1 (August - October 2016) and (e) seeking an Associate of Arts, Associate of Science or Associate of Applied Science from Hopkinsville Community College. I found it important to identify potential research participants who could attest to their educational experiences at (HFCC) comprehensively. Polkinghorne (2005) recommends, “Participants and documents for a qualitative study are not selected because they fulfill the representative requirements of statistical inference but because they can provide substantial contributions to filling out the structure and character of the experience under investigation” (p.139).

Recruitment

The Director of the Hopkinsville-Fort Campbell Campus served as the gatekeeper (Yin, 2011), sending invitation letters via email (Appendix-A) to eligible soldiers by querying the number of hours earned and Federal Aid type. The gatekeeper identified eligible students through the Go Army Ed Portal based on the above criteria. The gatekeeper could not predict the availability of soldiers because of annual training, unit responsibilities, deployments, and Transfer Duty Yonder (TDYs). The enrollment of enlisted soldiers at (HFCC) was significantly low during recruitment. Consequently, recruitment did not reflect saturation of the enlisted soldier population enrolled at Hopkinsville Fort Campbell Campus (HFCC). When a participant confirmed interest, I sent an email confirmation solidifying the day and time of the interview based on their availability. Before each interview, the research participant completed the letter of informed consent (Appendix- B). The gatekeeper located space in the Education Center to conduct the interviews to ensure that the students were comfortable, safe and in a
familiar setting. Creswell (2014) discussed that the appropriate qualitative study sample size ranges from three to ten participants (p.189).

Lastly, before I conducted interviews, I discussed my research topic and protocol with an Army Veteran who I worked on campus and enrolled at the Hopkinsville campus. She provided information on ways to connect with the research participants. She suggested that I maintain a flexible schedule. Any potential participant’s schedule may change without notice. Lastly, make sure the questions are direct and easy to understand. The use of higher education terminology may confuse the soldiers, and to explain the questions thoroughly. This bit of detail was invaluable to me as the researcher.

**Interview Participants**

Ten United States Army enlisted soldiers participated in semi-structured interviews. The participants provided rich demographic data by completing a questionnaire (Appendix-D) before the interview. The research sample represents a variety of academic programs, Military Occupational Specialties (M.O.S.), age, racial/ethnic background, gender, years in the Army and military rank. The purposefully sampled participants included five males and five females who attend (HFCC) and were at various stages of taking coursework at the institution. The questionnaire did not ask extensive background information on their parental educational attainment, children, marital status, and college transfer goals. However, the participants referenced aspects of their personal, academic, and work lives during the interviews (e.g., family history, children, roles, responsibilities, prior educational experiences, and relationship/marital status. Several of the participants discussed the opportunities and challenges of
navigating multiple roles as parent, female considerations in a dominated male occupation, and dynamics at the unit level.

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Table 3. Interview Participant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Program of Study</th>
<th>Number of Terms</th>
<th>Mode for Taking Classes</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>MOS Military Occupational Specialty</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Years in the Army</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student A</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Hybrid/In Person</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>92 A Special Forces/Supply Specialist</td>
<td>E4</td>
<td>0-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student B</td>
<td>AS</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Hybrid/In Person</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27D/Paralegal</td>
<td>E5</td>
<td>0-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Student C</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hybrid/In Person</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11B/ Infantry</td>
<td>E5</td>
<td>5-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student D</td>
<td>AAS</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Hybrid/In Person</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>88M/ Motor Transport Operator</td>
<td>E4</td>
<td>0-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student E</td>
<td>AS</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Hybrid/In Person</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>68W/Combat Medic</td>
<td>E4</td>
<td>0-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student F</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hybrid/In Person</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>91B/Mechanic</td>
<td>E4</td>
<td>0-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student G</td>
<td>AAS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Hybrid/In Person</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>91E/Machinist/Welder Working in the Barracks</td>
<td>E5</td>
<td>11-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student H</td>
<td>AS</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hybrid/In Person</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>68K/Medical Lab Specialist</td>
<td>E4</td>
<td>0-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Student I</td>
<td>AS</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Hybrid/In Person</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>68W/Combat Medic/Healthcare Specialist</td>
<td>E4</td>
<td>0-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Student J</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Hybrid/In Person</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>92G Culinary/Cook/Supplies</td>
<td>E5</td>
<td>0-4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* School option (eligible to soldiers during reenlistment) allows soldiers to attend classes for six months with little or no work duty or obligation.
**Student A:** Student A is an 18-24 African American male. He is an active duty enlisted soldier who has served 2-4 years in the Army. Student A’s MOS is a 92A (Supply) in a special operations unit, and an E4, Specialist pay grade/rank. He has been enrolled at HCFC for seven terms, seeking an Associate of Arts degree (AA). Student A has taken courses in person primarily; however, most face-to-face courses that have an online component at HFCC.

**Student B:** Student B is a 25-34 Caucasian female. She is an active duty enlisted soldier who has served 5-10 years in the Army. Student B’s MOS is a 27D (Paralegal) working in Human Resources, and an E5, Sergeant pay grade/rank. She has been enrolled at HCFC for five terms, seeking Associate in Sciences (AS). Student B has taken courses face-to-face and online at HFCC.

**Student C:** Student C is a 35-44 Caucasian male. He is an active duty enlisted soldier who has served 5-10 in the Army. Student C’s MOS is a 11B (Infantry), and an E5 Sergeant pay grade/rank. He has been enrolled at HCFC for three terms, seeking an Associate of Arts (AA). Student C has taken courses face-to-face and online at HFCC. He also utilized a reenlistment benefit/school option at the time of the interview.

**Student D:** Student D is an 18-24 Caucasian female. She is an active duty enlisted soldier who has served 2-4 years in the Army. Student D’s MOS is an 88M (Motor Transport Operator), and an E4, Specialist pay grade/rank. She has been enrolled at HCFC for ten terms, seeking an Associate of Arts in Applied Science (AAS)-Criminal Justice. Student D has taken courses face-to-face primarily; however, most in-person courses had an online component at HFCC. She also attended college in Florida one year before joining the Army.
**Student E:** Student E is an 18-24 Asian female. She is an enlisted active duty soldier who has served 2-4 years in the Army. Student E’s MOS is a 68W (Combat Medic), and an E4, Specialist pay grade/rank. She has been enrolled at HCFC for seven terms, seeking an Associate of Science (AS)-Nursing. Student E has taken courses face-to-face and online in the evenings at HFCC.

**Student F:** Student F is an 18-24 Hispanic female. She is an active duty enlisted soldier who has served 2-4 years in the Army. Student F’s MOS is a 91B (Mechanic), and an E4, Specialist pay grade/rank. She has been enrolled at HFCC for three terms, seeking an Associate of Arts (AA). Student F has taken courses face-to-face and online at HFCC. She also attended college in Texas before joining the Army.

**Student G:** Student G is a 25-34 Hispanic male. He is an active duty enlisted soldier who has served 11-15 years in the Army. Student G’s MOS is a 91E (Welder), and an E5, Sergeant pay grade/rank. At the time that this study was conducted, this soldier was working in the Barracks. He has been enrolled at HCFA for two terms, seeking an Associate of Arts in Applied Science (AAS)-Information Technology. Student G has taken face-to-face courses primarily; however, most courses have an online component at HFCC.

**Student H:** Student H is an 18-24 African American male. He is an active duty enlisted soldier who has served 2-4 years in the Army. Student H is a 68K (lab tech), and an E4 Specialist pay grade/rank. He has been enrolled at HCFA for three terms, seeking an Associate of Science degree (AS). Student H has taken face-to-face courses primarily; however, most courses have an online component at HFCC.
**Student I:** Student I is a 25-34 Caucasian female. She is an active duty enlisted soldier who has served 2-4 years in the Army. Student I is a 68W (Combat Medic), and an E4 Specialist pay grade/rank. She has been enrolled at HFCC for four terms, seeking an Associate of Science degree (AS)-Nursing. Student I has taken face-to-face courses and online at HFCC. She attended community college for two semesters before joining the Army. She also utilized a reenlistment benefit/school option school option at the time of the interview.

**Student J:** Student J is a 25-34 Caucasian male. He is an active duty enlisted soldier who has served 2-4 years in the Army. Student J’s MOS is a 92G (cook), and an E5 Sergeant pay grade/rank. He enrolled at HFCC one term, seeking an Associate of Arts (AA). Student J has taken face-to-face and online courses at HFCC. He also utilized a reenlistment benefit/school option at the time of the interview.

**Data Collection**

To explore the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldier-students, I prepared with preliminary fieldwork, interviewing direct service providers, and observing academic advising sessions. The preliminary fieldwork aided in the development of questions for semi-structured interviews with the participants (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2011; Merriam, 2009). The direct service providers reviewed the interview questions to ensure that the participants would understand the questions and that the questions aligned with answering the research questions. Furthermore, the fieldwork allowed me to build a rapport with staff and administrators while gaining access to the field (Yin, 2011).
As the observer for this study, I recorded field notes that illustrated what occurred during each academic advising sessions. The field notes were inclusive of verbal description of setting, activities, direct quotes, behaviors of the participants, and my reflective comments as the researcher (Merriam, 2009). A comparative analysis of the advising sessions was conducted on the field notes, adding to my general knowledge regarding enlisted soldiers as a student population. Ferby (2013), confirmed, “Observation was important in accessing the actual behavior of the soldier; behaviors were not reported by how or what soldiers said they did or felt” (p.25). To assess how enlisted soldiers make meaning of their educational experiences, I observed soldier-students from May-September 2016 to develop a holistic understanding of their advising and registration processes. I used observation techniques to explore how academic advising supported academic persistence for soldier-students attending Hopkinsville-Fort Campbell Campus. Yin (2011) suggest that “Observing can be an invaluable way of collecting data because you see with your own eyes and perceive with your own senses is not filtered by what others might have (self) reported to you or what the author of some document might have seen” (p. 143). The perspectives offered in the Wilson and Smith (2012) study provided a non-intrusive lens for observing academic advising sessions. I implemented a non-intrusive approach for this study. At Hopkinsville-Fort Campbell Campus, new soldier briefings are an essential part of the orientation process for new and existing soldier-students. Enlisted soldiers value structure and very specific instructions regarding the education requirements for degree attainment. For annual advising session, currently enrolled soldier-students make a one-on one-appointment with the academic advisors at the (HFCC). Those who desire a face-to-face advising appointment are
encouraged to make an appointment one week before priority registration or drop in at the designated times. The campus director and another primary advisor conduct the advising sessions. The advisors take a systematic approach to guiding enlisted soldier-students through the advising and registration processes. They are well versed in Army education regulations, processing benefits through the Go Army Ed. Portal and registering for classes in PeopleSoft. Rosenberg (2015) recommends:

From an institutional level, a student’s term-to-term planning often revolves around the academic advising process. This process assures that a student is taking the correct courses in the proper sequence to achieve their desired educational outcome. The base assumption is that the institution possesses the correct information to pass along to students to assist them in the process. (p.122)

Upon arrival, soldiers meet with an advisor in an office space that is private and easily assessable. The advisor asked a litany of questions about their degree program of choice, the student’s MAP (My Academic Plan), developmental education sequences, intentions to transfer after associate degree completion and an overarching explanation of the differences between face-to-face classes and online offering from HFCC and KCTCS. Existing students use the MAP as a guide and a contract that outlines degree requirements that encompasses their transfer credits and Joint Service Transcript (JST). On average, soldiers are award 15 credit hours that articulate as elective credits (personal communication, Allisha Lee, July 14, 2016).

Typically, soldiers attend academic advising sessions between classes and during their lunch break. The advising staff tries to conduct the session in an efficient manner. The HFCC advising staff discusses the bureaucracy an enlisted soldier-student must
navigate to receive approval to take classes from their unit command, accessing multiple systems to register and queue financial aid and military educational benefits to complete the enrollment process. In a study conducted by Wilson and Smith (2012), the research focused on the importance of culturally responsive academic advising that supports not just the immediate needs of the soldier-student, but their life’s mission and goals. The findings suggested that advisors use transient and permanent perspectives regarding advising soldier-students. “The transient lens describes advisors who viewed the soldier’s relationship with the college a part of the soldier’s temporary working mission, while the permanent lens describes advisors who view the soldier’s relationships with the college as part of the soldier’s core mission” (p.70). The findings reiterated that advisors, who engaged soldiers with a permanent view, merged the soldier’s long-term educational goals and career aspirations into the advising process.

Student E reflected on his experiences working with an advisor by stating, “I met with a counselor, and they started talking to me about my goals and stuff and what I wanted to become. As far as registering for classes, the counselors have been really helpful. The (MAP) is very helpful because we are able to check off what you have left every semester.” Student C affirmed by elaborating on his initial academic advising experience at HFCC:

I said listen; you will need to treat me like you are talking to a stupid person. Because I don’t know how to do any of this stuff. And she said, no problem. She was very patient. And she just walked me through every single thing. Okay, this is what you are going to need for this…what do you want to do? She explained how the classes worked, and how they are eight weeks opposed to 16 weeks. And
because of that, you do not want to take too many classes. You could overwhelm yourself.

For this study, the observation of the advising sessions brought additional context to the educational experiences of soldiers enrolled at Hopkinsville Fort Campbell community college. The narrative provided by Students C and E supports the research conducted by Wilson and Smith (2012). The researchers described the transformation that soldiers experienced stating, “The journey moves from joining the military for the college benefits…to finding a core mission through military experiences and redirecting college efforts toward the accomplishment of a core mission” (p.71). The journey described by the researchers provides insight into the transformation experienced by enlisted soldiers. Although soldiers may join the military with preconceived ideas and aspirations regarding their lives, there is empirical evidence (Layne, 2008) that suggests the occupational experiences provided by military reshapes the soldier-student that ignites the self-efficacy skills to thrive not only in the military but an education setting as well.

I used the feedback from the administrators and staff to revise the semi-structured interview questions (Appendix-C), subsequently, generating responses that reflect the participants’ opinions regarding their educational experiences as community college students. The semi-structured interview protocol allowed soldiers to answer questions independently and freely. Although I had previous contact with the enlisted soldiers enrolled at HFC as an administrator and adjunct faculty member, the purpose of this research was to explore their educational experiences, not to confirm my ideas about the population. The interview protocol encompassed data generated from the preliminary fieldwork and observations. I learned during the fieldwork that the Fort Campbell Army
Post is a training and deployment preparation installation primarily, and junior enlisted soldiers (E2-E3) focus on matters that are “mission” essential and fulfilling their Active Duty Service Obligation (ADSO). It is not until the time of enlistment that most junior enlisted soldiers receive permission from unit command to attend college. After learning this information, I narrowed the scope of my proposed sample population. Subsequently, enlisted soldier-students who were eligible to participate in the study were enlisted soldiers with an E4-to-E6 pay grade.

At the beginning of every interview, each participant received an informed consent document (Appendix- B) outlining the nature of the study and their rights as a participant. At the beginning of each interview, I provided a demographic questionnaire to gather academic, military and personal demographics. This information included: classification degree type, occupational information such as age, race, gender, rank, number of hours earned, number of hours enrolled, (MOS), a program of study, rank, and the number of years in the U.S. Army. The education center on the Army Installation was the primary location for active duty soldiers taking classes in person at Hopkinsville Community College at the time. I conducted interviews in a familiar setting.

I reminded the participants of their choice to discontinue their participation at any time. To allow enough time for each participant to answer the questions thoroughly, I allotted up to 60 minutes per interview. The interview questions were purposefully designed to answer this study’s three research questions:

1) What are the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldiers attending Hopkinsville Community College Fort Campbell Campus?
2) What are the enlisted soldier-student’s perceptions regarding the military’s expectation regarding their college participation and college graduation?

3) What are some actions the U.S. Army and Hopkinsville Community College has taken that the soldier-students perceive as supporting (or not supporting) of college enrollment and persistence of enlisted soldier-students?

The interview questions (Appendix-C) helped me as the Researcher formulate how soldiers construct their reality as students and their perceptions about the Army’s commitment to their educational goals. Finally, the foundation of qualitative research considers how individuals make meaning of their experiences while interacting with their environment. According to Duncombe and Jessop (2002), “This process of qualitative interviewing is seen as benign, leading the interviewee to valuable personal insights and enabling the researcher to contribute to a wider understanding of individual’s lives and problems” (p.8). In support, Merriam (2009) suggested, “To get at the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of the experience the qualitative interview is the primary method of data collection” (p.25).

Data Analysis Procedure

To understand how soldiers make meaning of their educational experience, I conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data collection. I recorded all interviews digitally. Immediately following each interview, I listened to the interview several times before transcribing the audio recording. Before coding and analysis, each participant had an opportunity to review their transcript on a day that was convenient (Creswell, 2014). During the summer of 2016, soldiers on the Fort Campbell installation had mandatory training. Consequently, I received minimal feedback from the
participants regarding their transcript. I created a data analysis matrix, listing each interview question along with the participant’s responses. After creating an interview matrix for every participant, I began to subdivide the data and noticed similarities and differences across the ten transcripts. In support Maxwell (2009) stated, “In qualitative data analysis, similarities and differences are used to define categories and to group and compare data by category” (p.106). I developed an open color coding process that allowed me as the researcher to “deem what is important based on prior ideas or new insights, that produces rich data” (Maxwell, 2009, p.107). I merged the data based on the coding system from each matrix and created a master document of the data presented by the participants. I spent several weeks reviewing field notes and observation transcripts from the academic advising sessions that employed an inductive examination of the data. As I analyzed the master document, I connected relative codes to create general categories that synthesized the themes that defined their lived experiences. Based on the interview questions presented to the participants, two descriptive themes and multiple subthemes emerged from the analysis that illustrated the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldiers attending HFCC. To ensure triangulation of the data, I readily referenced the data generated from the preliminary field notes and observation during the analysis of the interviews. This produced data which are a direct reflection of the research questions. The final themes include soldier-students aspirations for college attendance and the opportunities and challenges of navigating the academic and military bureaucracy.

Finally, although the Collective Affiliation model encompasses the lives of adult commuter students, the framework did not illustrate the enlisted soldier-student’s data
generated from this research study, I created the Dual System for Enlisted Soldier-Student Academic Persistence (DSAP) conceptual model which illustrates the lived experiences of this adult student population attending community college.

**The Role of the Researcher**

According to Merriam (2009), “In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (p.15). Creswell (2014) reiterated that it is imperative that the researcher is aware of their biases and acknowledging how those beliefs might affect the collection and analysis of the data. I had eighteen years of professional experience in higher education and employed for ten years with the Kentucky Community & Technical College System/ Hopkinsville Community College, serving in the capacity of Director of Cultural Diversity and Adjunct Instructor of Mathematics at the Fort Campbell Campus. The exposure to the enlisted soldier-student in the classroom and supporting soldiers as a diverse population reinforces my position of advocacy for this student population. Creswell (2014) explains, when an individual conducts backyard research, although the data is accessible, the information may not be accurate. It was imperative that I show the integrity of the data will not be compromised (p.188).

I kept a reflective journal of highly descriptive field notes that chronicled my reactions, expectation, and biases regarding the research to include a debriefing to ensure accuracy. According to Creswell, peer debriefing enhances the accuracy of the account (p.202). A reviewer examined the first interview transcripts, adding an interpretation beyond the analysis of the researcher. The goal of conducting this research study is to
gather and interpret richly descriptive data reflecting the soldier’s opinion regarding their educational experiences attending HFCC.

**Ethical Issues**

When conducting research, the researcher must consider all potential threats and concerns. According to Yin (2011), the first step to building trustworthiness and creditability is to report research procedures and data as transparently as possible (p.39). The researcher received IRB approval (16-0267-P4S) from the University of Kentucky and Kentucky Community and Technical System. The researcher obtained letters of support from the President of Hopkinsville Community College and an Education Officer at the Education Center at Fort Campbell.

While working with human subjects, it is imperative to keep in mind the emotional and physical trauma they may have experienced. The participants in this study may have experienced multiple deployments and exposure to environments with lasting psychological effects. Building trust and rapport was instrumental in guiding the participants through the recruitment and interview process. I provided each participant with the Form of Consent (Appendix B) reiterating that participant can refuse to answer any question and/or discontinue the process at any time. The researcher conducted the interviews and observation sessions in a familiar setting in the education building on the installation. The data gathered from this process is confidential and stored in a locked location in my home office.

**Assumptions**

I assumed that the Kentucky Community & Technical System (KCTCS) and Hopkinsville Community College (HCC) are committed to sustaining the culturally
responsive policies and practices outlined by Federal Government. To date, the Post 9-11 GI Bill is the most pivotal piece of legislation supporting the educational endeavors of military personnel (Leporte, 2013; Teachman, 2007). Since Hopkinsville Community College has the reputation of fostering a military-friendly environment, the researcher assumed that the active duty student population would be responsive to the recruitment efforts. Since the military community is transient, it was imperative to remain flexible based on the general availability of participants for interviews. Lastly, I assumed that the participants gave their honest assessment regarding their experiences as a student at HFCC.

Limitations

This study focused on Army active duty enlisted soldiers attending Hopkinsville Community College. The (HFCC) has the highest enrollment of active duty enlisted soldiers in the Kentucky Community and Technical College System. College officials cannot predict the availability of soldiers because of unit training responsibilities, deployments and Transfer Duty Yonder (TDYs). I collected data during the 2016 summer terms and the first 8-week term of Fall 2016. Furthermore, the findings were contingent on each student feeling comfortable speaking openly and honestly about their educational experiences. This qualitative study focused on the educational experiences of active duty soldiers attending HFCC. The population recruited was very specific. Therefore, not all enlisted active duty Army soldiers attending HFCC were eligible to take part in the study. The soldier-student must have earned a minimum of nine hours from HFCC by Spring 2016 and be enrolled in at least three credit hours in a face-to-face course during the time of data collection to participate in the study. The population
narrowed further. Soldier-students attending college are more likely to have the rank of E4-E6. Lower enlisted soldiers (E1-E3) were not eligible to use education benefits until they have completed their Active Duty Service Obligation (ADSO) at their current duty station (goarmyed.com). Senior enlisted soldiers (E7-E9) were not eligible to participate in the study. They are more likely to have earned a degree because the Army ties civilian education to promotional points.

Conclusion

Active duty enlisted soldiers arrive on a college campus with education benefits and incentives, unlike any other adult student population. Naturally, the benefit positions military personnel as a highly sought commodity on many civilian college campuses. Furthermore, the army embeds civilian education into the enlisted promotional structure. This partnership positions civilian institutions in a position of advocacy for military personnel in academia. This chapter provides an overview of this study’s qualitative design and qualitative research methods that investigated the educational experiences of the ten active-duty enlisted soldiers. To bring context to the educational experiences of enlisted soldiers attending HFCC and gain access to the student population, I observed four academic advising sessions as a nonparticipant. The observation allowed me to understand how enlisted soldiers receive information and support with navigating college. I was also able to investigate how the HFCC does or does not align institutional policies and practices with the military. My analysis may present ways in which community colleges can integrate into the soldiers’ identity and military experiences into their educational experiences. Finally, although I used the Collective Affiliation Model to analyze the data for this study, I realized that conceptually the model did not
encompass the bicultural existence of soldier-students specifically. I introduce the Dual System for Enlisted Soldier-Student Academic Persistence (DSAP) conceptual model in chapter five.

CHAPTER IV: The Research Findings

This qualitative study examined the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldiers attending community college. The research questions guiding this study are: What are the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldiers attending Hopkinsville Community College Fort Campbell Campus? What the enlisted soldier-student’s perceptions regarding the military’s expectation regarding their college participation and college graduation? What are some actions the U.S. Army and Hopkinsville Community College has taken that the soldier-students perceive as supporting (or not supporting) of college enrollment and persistence of enlisted soldier-students?

This chapter highlights the research findings that encompass two descriptive themes, along with multiple subthemes that emerged from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews. The themes and subthemes include the following: (1) aspirations for college attendance; a) family support and expectation; lack of clear aspirations and college experiences; c) reenlistment incentives and civilian education supporting military career aspirations and d) aspirations for a better life. The second theme and subthemes include: (2) enlisted soldiers navigating dual system bureaucracy; a) navigating their role as enlisted soldiers; b) faculty relationships and support in the classroom; c) navigating multiple roles and d) navigating enrollment experiences.
Theme 1: Aspirations for College Attendance

Individuals join the military for a variety of reasons. The educational benefits provided by the DoD are an incentive that supports military retention and produces well-rounded leaders. The research participants for this study reflected on their aspirations for attending college. The narrative provided a real testament to the educational journey that drastically altered the trajectory for themselves and their family members collectively. Although many enlisted soldiers begin their college experience with the end in mind, many attested to their educational experiences as the catalyst to profound personal and professional growth; therefore, aspiring for college attendance beyond earning promotional points for career progression.

Family Support & Expectations

The educational benefits afforded to enlisted soldiers support their aspirations to build a better life for themselves and their families, thus fueling their intentions to take full advantage of the education benefit (Kleykamp, 2006; Rumann, Rivera & Hernández, 2011; Jones, 2013; Wilson et al., 2013). Cruz (2012) suggested that aspirational capital transpires when “parents transmit their desires for academic advancement to their children by stressing the importance of an education” (p.84). Student G determined because of the shared commonality of school obligations and homework he connected with his daughter and son on a different level. He expressed, “It gives me and my kids more to talk about… my daughter is talking about essays. It just feels really good. I’ve been preaching this for so long. And for them to finally see me doing it.” In support, McCarron & Inkelas (2006) confirmed that “parental involvement is a viable predictor of post-secondary educational aspirations” (p.544).
As a slightly different example, Student A’s parents are career military. He described his aspirations to carry on the family’s college-going legacy. He credited, “My motivation for attending college is to be successful in life like my father, he has two master’s degrees, and my mother has her bachelors. So, I just want to follow in their footsteps and be successful.” Student E suggested that her aspiration to attend college stemmed from her parents’ work ethic and their desire to provide a better life for her by coming to America from the Philippines in 2008. as a first-generation student, she was concerned about finding the money to attend college. As an immigrant, she was ineligible for Federal Financial Assistance out of high school.

Her aspiration to join the Army was two-fold; she needed monetary support for college and an avenue to develop and explore career options. When asked why she attended college, she began by discussing how enlisting in the Army helped support her educational and occupational goals. She asserted, “They (Army) can support me for my education. I attended college because… I want to become a doctor. I’m taking small steps while I’m on active duty and hoping the Army will commission me.” Finally, like many young adults beginning careers in the military, Student I also struggled to align her immediate family’s aspirations for a college education with her own educational goals. Student I reflected on her initial community college attempt. She attended because her parents expected her to enroll. To that end, Student I stated, “I decided to go to college. Both of my parents are college graduates. So, I sort of felt like it was necessary for me to go.” Davidson (2011) created the Collective Affiliation model to define the lives of adult transit college students. Further, he reiterates the significant role family members play in the college-going behaviors for adult students by stating, “… the Collective Affiliation
model does not attempt to understand the individual’s decision to persist outside the social structures, namely family, and work. The students cannot be forced to disregard their previous communities in order to achieve an educational objective” (p.77). The foundation of the Collective Affiliation model suggests that for an adult student to persist, the student’s family members must display the same level of buy-in, engagement, and support in support of the soldier’s academic obligations. The sentiments provided by the research participants validates that parental support and the family’s expectations for college attendance can change the trajectory of a soldier’s life.

**Lack of Clear Aspirations and Community College Experiences**

Adults who enlist in the military have many prevailing reasons for deviating from what many consider the “traditional” route to educational attainment. Some perceive the military as a viable option to examine career interest and work on earning a college degree over time. Hummel (2000) emphasized that many enlisted soldiers do not consider college right after high school. Some of the research participants in Hummel’s study indicated that they used their occupational experience in the military helped to discover career interest. Student J discussed his aspirations to attend college right out of high school. Nonetheless, he found himself running from the structure and discipline provided in the home. Student J remembered not attending college because he lacked direction and career goals. He described the crossroads that he encountered following high school, “Shortly after high school, I was going to college…I didn’t have any discipline or structure, well I did at home… I failed to accomplish college on my own devices. So that is why I originally joined the Army.” In the research study conducted by Bibus (2013), several of the research participants recalled not being committed to the school and lacking goals as young adults.
Student I enrolled at a community college before joining the Army. She discussed struggling to find her “calling” during her first attempt at college. During her interview, she reflected on her transformation since she has been enlisted in the Army, “I really didn’t know what I wanted to do…I joined the Army after that…I got the job as a 68 Whiskey (Medic). After practicing it for a little bit, I decided I was really interested in becoming a nurse.” Similarly, Student A also used a few years to mature and developed career interest as he navigated his career in the Army. During his interview, he described why he chose to attend a community college several years after high school by stating, “I was a young knucklehead, so I did not get my mind right (after high school), so my parents sent me to the Army.” Although the participants attended college after enlisting in the Army, they were afforded to explore career options and align occupational and educational goals.

Fortunately, attending community college while serving in the Army affords the enlisted soldiers the opportunity to broaden their academic and occupational skills-set simultaneously. The research participants in this study discussed why community college is the right fit for them as working adult students. This research study addressed this question specifically. In support, Kasworm (2003) advised, “Adult undergraduate students typically enroll in a college that is readily accessible, relevant to current life needs cost-effective, flexible in course scheduling, and supportive of adult lifestyle commitments” (p.6). The research participants reflected on their reasons for choosing (HFCC). Student G stated that he desired to attend a 4-year institution initially. This institution accepted most of his JSTs, and he was familiar with the institution because he is from Texas. Ultimately, the soldier valued a smaller campus that offered an
environment with supportive faculty, staff, and administrators. He believed that introducing himself slowly to the academic rigor of college would benefit him long-term. He solidified his decision by stating, “…I wanted to start small. My associate’s then my bachelors, because I didn’t want to fail, and I wanted to gain something from it, I chose Hopkinsville.” Student F had a similar experience. She attended a college in Texas before his transition to Fort Campbell. She was looking for an opportunity to enroll at a community college that would accept her transfer credits. After shopping, around with various 4-year and 2-year institutions in the Education Center, Student F stated, “I wanted a 2-year… (HFCC) was the one giving me the best opportunity to transfer credits.”

Initially, Student E wanted to attend a 4-year institution at the Education Center. However, she received advice that changed her plans. She reflected on the accessibility and affordability of Hopkinsville Community College: “They are right here…in the Office (Ed Center). The (Army Counselor in the Ed Center) told me (the tuition at HCC) was cheaper here.” Similarly, Student D replied, “I wanted to go to a community college and not another college like Austin Peay. Why go to Austin Peay when I can get the same education at a community college?” In support, Student C expanded on his reasons for choosing (HFCC) over a 4-year institution. He stated, “Mostly because of convenience. They have an outlet on Fort Campbell. I tried Austin Peay. It’s just easier to use a community college a lot of times. They tend to be a lot more helpful.”

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Reenlistment Incentives and Civilian Education Supporting Military Career Aspirations

The Army provides enlisted personnel opportunities to receive educational incentives in return for service. At the time of reenlistment, the Army offers eligible enlisted soldiers the option of reenlisting with multiple education incentives. The soldier must hold the rank of Specialist, Corporal (E4) or above, minimum of twelve months at their current duty station and meet their current unit assignment requirements. As a retention tool, the Army provides five reenlistment options created to satisfy the needs of the Army and the soldier. It is at the time of reenlistment that many soldiers negotiate contract changes and solidify their opportunity to take college courses (www.armyreenlistment.com).

The Army Training Reenlistment Option (school option) allows soldiers to take classes as a full-time student without duty obligations for six months (Ady, 2009). Furthermore, the Retention NCO has the discretion of disseminating the information to the soldier during the negotiation of the contract (personal communication, Student C). Student J, a 92G (Cook) who works logistics in receivables, discussed the challenges he experienced not knowing about the educational options available to enlisted soldiers at the time of reenlistment: “The (school option) is not very well advertised. I had to do research and find out all of my options when I reenlisted. The school option is something I just stumbled upon through someone who mentored me outside the Army…” The sentiments expressed by Student J emphasizes the importance of soldier-peer support.

Although the information regarding educational reenlistment incentives is not advertised extensively. When asked about their educational experiences, the enlisted soldier-
students described the “education option” as a major catalyst that brought them closer to degree completion. The opportunity to take advantage of the education incentives is contingent on the approval of the retention NCO.

The amount of encouragement an enlisted soldier receives to attend college reinforces the Army’s commitment to enlisted soldiers to earn a civilian education. It is up to the soldier to inform and advocate for themselves during the negotiation period. The research participants described their experiences and lack of familiarity with the education process and incentives offered by the Army. According to Student B, “My current commander allowed me to reenlist with the Fort Campbell school incentive program. Where I got to take six months of full-time classes. And the Army could not do anything about it. She encouraged me to do it.” Student C joined the Army at thirty years of age. He often referenced feeling behind because of this age in comparison to the other enlisted soldiers at the same rank/paygrade (E4-E6). The information provided by his retention NCO provided him the opportunity to “make-up” time with his schooling. Not all retention NCOs present soldier with the provided by the Army. Student C mentioned, “…my retention NCO, Sgt. Santana said… are you aware if you re-enlist for (school option) that you are authorized to take some time off for schooling? “Did anyone ever tell you that?” I said, “No.” And she said, “Oh!” Enlisted soldiers who take advantage of the “school option during reenlistment have the opportunity to take college courses for six months without the day to day occupational obligations. Students B, C, and J referenced checking in regularly for paperwork and emergencies that would come up with the unit. The time off allows soldiers to register full-time for two or three terms; thus, supporting military progression and potentially accelerating degree attainment.
Civilian education is a significant component of the promotional structure for the enlisted soldiers. Several studies have shown that military service itself has had a positive effect on their educational attainment (Binkin, Eitelberg, Schexnider, & Smith, 1982; Kolstad, 1986; Mason, 1970). Cohen, Segal, and Jemme (1986) found that the higher the rank one achieved in the military, the higher the level of education one progressively attained. This notion is in part due to the fact promotions are partially determined by educational level achieved. Student G is an E5 paygrade/rank who has spent over a decade as an enlisted soldier. Primarily, he described his aspiration to attend college for military progression. He also discussed making a pact with his daughter. If she got accepted into Austin Peay State University; he would enroll in college as well. In addition, he discussed navigating the bureaucracy of the enlisted promotional process. Student G goes into greater detail regarding how promotional points are accumulated: You want to progress to the next rank; civilian education is sort of a must. And there are 90 points that you can get toward promotion for college...their cut off for promotional points is 798. So, if you’re lacking in civilian education, you’re most likely not going to reach that cutoff.

Some service members view their military service as parallel with their educational aspirations (Kolstad, 1986). The military values civilian education by requiring an enlisted soldier to receive ongoing education and training. Soldiers receive promotional points for credit hours earned. Student G describes his experience by stating, “I started to attend, for one, military progression. You want to progress to the next rank; civilian education is sort of a must. Student E emphasized her desire for upward mobility as a soldier, “I attended college because I want to be able to
accomplish…I want to become a doctor. I’m taking the small steps while I’m on active
duty and hoping they (Army) will commission me.” Student J expressed, “I’m getting to
the point in my career where I definitely need to have college credit to get further in my
career…So, I had the opportunity, and it presented itself that is why I am here.”
Although the Army has embedded promotional points, the opportunity to attend college
is left to unit leadership. In a study conducted by Wilson et al., (2013), participants
named educational benefits, promotional points and education option “as actions that the
military takes that support college” (p.637). I’m taking the small steps while I’m on
active duty and hoping they (Army) will commission me. That’s my next step after the
associate’s.” In support of the Army’s stance for valuing education, (Hummel, 2000)
stated, “The Army is one of the major organizations that realize the importance of
educating its adults, because of the positive impact a formal education can have on the
military and society” (p.1).

In conflict, Teachman (2007) explored college attendance of soldiers, “Yet, there
remains substantial evidence that military service affects schooling and does so
negatively” (p.371). In comparison, several participants in a study conducted by
DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) mentioned, “delayed benefits payments,
mostly due to an imposing federal system and bureaucratic “red-tape,” caused
unnecessary stress” (p.91).

Several studies have shown that military service itself has had a positive effect on
educational attainment for soldiers (Binkin, Eitelberg, Schexnider, & Smith, 1982;
Kolstad, 1986). Cohen, Segal, and Jemme (1986) found that the higher the rank one
achieved in the military, the higher the level of education one progressively attained.
This notion is in part due to the fact promotions partially determined by educational level achieved. Some service members view their military service as parallel with their educational aspirations (Kolstad, 1986). Student J is an E5 92G/ Cook in the Army who has served in the military less than five years. He spoke extensively about the benefits provided by the Army as his aspiration for joining. In addition, he was taking advantage of the reenlistment incentive/school option at the time of the study. Student J expressed, “I’m getting to the point in my career where I definitely need to have college credit to get further in my career…So, I had the opportunity, and it presented itself. That is why I am here.” Further, Student J also mentioned that he was taking classes in the Basic Skills Education Program (BSEP) Program to assist him with raising his GT score for better military career placement/Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) for a career change and advancement.

**Aspirations for Life After the Army**

Enlisted soldiers join the military with a variety of intentions. For many, they use the skills acquired as support for their lives during and after service. Fairchild (2003) contends, “As adults build families, careers, and positions within their communities, their perception of higher education changes” (p.11). The research participants described their drive to take advantage of the opportunity to earn an education with the end in mind. As an example, “Because of their family and educational background, going to college often constituted a significant and intimidating cultural transition…Attending and completing college carried the potential for radical changes…college was a conscious decision to escape the occupational dead-ends…” (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, & Jalomo, 1994, p.63). Their reflections did not focus on the benefit of civilian
education for promotion. The soldiers placed special emphasis on preparing for life after a military career. Student C explained why it is important to take advantage of the opportunity to attend college and formulate a plan for the future, “I joined the Army late, and I was 30 when I joined. I was in the construction field for years before that. You know I was recently injured…so I needed to kind of plan.” Although there is a significant age difference between Students C and D; Student D also described her intentions to take advantage of the opportunity to attend college. She described her plan for life after the Army by stating, “I’m going to get out of active duty, but I might go reserves, I haven’t decided yet…To better myself to get out of the Army.” Student H also reflected on the necessity of a college education while in the Army and for progression afterward. He summarized his sentiments, “In the outside world it is really hard to get a job and progress without an education. I’ve learned that from multiple ways; from family and seeing how the world works.” When asked if he desired to attend college before the military, he stated, “Yes, that was the main reason why I joined the military; for free college and to serve my country. But mostly so that I can benefit outside once I got done with the military.”

Finally, the research participants described their aspiration to attend college to include their family’s support and expectations, lack of clear educational and career goals, failing at prior college attendance, reenlistment incentives and creating a better life after military services. The narrative suggests that military affiliated populations enter college with unique needs and aspirations for attending.
Theme 2: Enlisted Soldier-Students Navigating Dual System Bureaucracies

Enlisted soldiers as community college students navigate multiple bureaucracies to achieve their aspirations. As such, their success in academia and the military commands clear institutional policies and pathways. Davidson (2011) argued that the process for adults seeking degree attainment is not linear. The research participants for this study worked on a training installation. Hence, it was impossible to receive flex-time during the day to take classes and difficult at times to leave work on time for evening and night classes. Their ability to attend college is contingent on the duty station and support from the unit commander. The unpredictable nature of the military profession requires military serving institutions to address their needs in and outside the classroom in a culturally responsive manner.

Navigating Their Role as Enlisted Soldiers

The amount of information and encouragement a soldier receives from the Army to attend college is a pivotal element to the military’s system of support. In the study conducted by Wilson et al. (2014), the research participants “made a distinction between national military policies, and Army practices” (p.636). Suggesting that in an occupational environment that is “mission first” driven, a soldier’s ability to take classes may depend on the duty station and support of the unit command (Wilson & Smith, 2014; Ferby, 2013). Student A described his experience with getting the “green light” to enroll in college by providing the following statement related to the culture of support in his unit: “The NCOs have more of influence if you can go or not. The commander just signs off. From there it is up to your NCO to support you.” Student H reiterated, Student A’s sentiments stating, “NCOs like seeing your progress on paper, so it makes them look
good. But on the outside, it’s difficult for them to do their jobs if you are not there.”

Student E discussed her frustration with the lack of support from her unit command regarding her educational goals. She gives her poignant testament: “They are not very supportive of me taking classes. I wanted to talk to her about my goals, but there is no time; she just brushes me off sometimes. It really makes me emotional, to be honest with you.”

Student B had a slightly different experience at the unit level. When she sought support, she found that the Officers (Lieutenants) in the unit could relate to her needs more than the NCO or unit command. She discussed her experiences further by stating: “But sometimes there are just circumstances (taking classes) beyond anyone’s control. To be honest, they are probably more officers who are more understanding. And maybe it is because they already have a degree. I don’t know why. It’s not fair to say.” The research conducted by Ferby (2013) recognized the barriers experienced by enlisted soldiers as college students. The findings address the barriers soldiers face while completing their degree, e.g., the lack of access to advising, information regarding university policies and procedures, and college courses offered to soldiers. Furthermore, enlisted soldiers must find alternative routes to completing their coursework, and they are unable to leave the unit. Similarly, Student C ‘s Commanding Officer (CO) encouraged the enlisted soldier not only to attended college but via tutoring and mentoring support as well, “All officers have their college and stuff. He (CO) was actually an English major. He was telling me I could bring him my essays to have him look over.”
Moon & Schema (2011) suggested mentoring and peer-to-peer engagement provides invaluable support to the adult student matriculation process. Student G revealed that he received support from his unit command and superiors. He created a network of support with his peers who had like experiences, “I will get encouraged by my peers, go to school…Those peers, Sergeants, Staff Sergeants…My battalion commander, (Lt. Col) sign off on this and approve it when you enroll.” When an individual is a member of multiple institutions that support a college-going culture, it can create a positive environment, thereby cultivating camaraderie between the individuals engaged in the process. Student I described her new NCO’s attitudes as it relates to education, “My supervisor now is support of me taking classes. He is actually finishing up his MBA right now. So that’s a good thing. However, my NCO before that was not very supportive.” Student J believed that his desire to attend college was granted because his NCO attended college as well. Additionally, the NCO found the soldier’s student status as a benefit: “… [O]nce I said I was going to school, he (supervisor) was really supportive. I could tell in his demeanor how beneficial it was for him. And he had that same feeling for me. I am such a good asset to him.”

According to Wilson et al. (2013), a soldier’s ability to attend classes is at the mercy of the unit command. The following research participants discussed their ability to take classes depends on the duty station, chain of command and if their unit is mission essential. Student B explained, “We need professors to be understanding. I don’t have a choice in whether I make it to class… I feel like we need time to go to school...when you have to go take the class, well you have work.” Parks (2015) elaborated on the soldier’s desire to be supported by military and higher education. Student D also reiterated the
need for support from Senior NCOs and Unit Command, “I need support from leaders in the Army, like higher-ups. They always talk to us about going to college, but when you actually try to go, they kind of frown upon you being in school…And they remind you mission first.” Student H discussed a similar experience, “…you also realize that the people in charge of you don’t really care about you and they don’t put your needs first sometimes. It’s just whatever the mission dictates.”

Ford, Northrup, and Wiley (2009) suggested, “Because of the duties required of active duty military personnel, post-secondary institutions typically can only be pursued part-time while off duty” (p.62). In support, Ady (2009) stated, “Most adult students are part-time which presents a problem for degree progression and completion” (p.17). The previous participants reflected on the importance of the college’s proximity to their work and the flexibility of class schedules for evening classes as their motive for attending community college.

An enlisted soldier’s ability to take classes is at the will of the unit commander. Enlisted soldiers are expected to pursue their educational endeavors on their own while balancing field training, TDYs, and deployments. At the time of reenlistment; the soldier reaches an E4 rank where civilian education becomes pivotal for career growth and promotion. Until the time of reenlistment, civilian education is not imperative to the individual’s development as an enlisted soldier. In fact, they are becoming indoctrinated into the military culture and putting the military’s mission first.

**Faculty Relationships and Support in the Classroom**

Active duty soldiers arrive in college classrooms with no or limited academic experience. Unlike other adult learners, soldier-students are required to respond to
occupational demands that often interrupt educational progression. Brown (2014) focused on the transitional experiences of soldier-students attending community college. The research participants in this study voiced concerns related to the challenges of completing coursework while deployed. Similarly, the research participants in this study discussed their interaction with faculty in the classroom and presented definitive examples illustrating how faculty offered support. They are called upon at a moment’s notice for field training and TDY. The unpredictability in their schedules required a proactive approach to maintaining their course load. Soldier-students discussed their rapport with faculty: Student A contemplated, “Sometimes I go to the field, I try to do my part, and get assignments done ahead. Since I have been here, my teachers have been responsive to what I have needed… It is important to communicate with your teachers.” Student D expressed, “I had a History class I was taking last year. I had to go to the field for a week and miss two classes, and it would put me behind. That instructor worked with me.”

Other research participants discussed how much they appreciated the flexibility offered by the faculty. They appeared to be empathetic regarding lateness because of work obligation. Student E stated, “Some of us don’t get out until 17:00 and classes start at 16:45. He was very lenient. I emailed him before classes started…okay, I’m going to be a bit late.” Student H also mentioned, “I’m not sure if all teachers are lenient, but they have been good about it…Sometimes you have to do 2-3 weeks’ worth of stuff in 2 days. I got most of it in.” A soldier-student also commented on receiving time after class for additional instruction and tutoring from faculty members as needed. Student G indicated, “It has been made clear to me as well if I need that extra time to talk to them
and let them know what is happening and they will work with me.” Faculty play an instrumental role in the matriculation and retention processes for students. Their ability to engage student populations from occupational backgrounds enriches not only the classroom experience for soldier-students but also their civilian counterparts. Wilson and Smith (2012) stated, “For adults, engagement in college through peer and faculty interactions and learning activities increases the value they place on their knowledge identity” (p.67).

The Hopkinsville Community College Fort Campbell staff are well-versed in the nuances that encompass the life of an enlisted soldier-student. In addition, HFCC has several faculty and staff who are military veterans. The research participants did not discuss experiencing faculty members who did not support them academically. Faculty maintain a classroom structure and academic expectations that one might expect, offering flexibility and assignment extensions as needed for the enlisted soldier-student. Although most are met with compassion, faculty members maintain the expectation that the soldier and other students abide by the guidelines outlined in the syllabus and provide documentation for duties that change regarding their military training commitments, unit obligations, and deployments.

**Navigating Military Education Benefits**

The educational benefits provided by the DoD serve as a recruitment and a retention tool for all military branches. Leporte (2013) analyzed the usage of Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for active duty, veterans and reservist attending a community college. Some of the research participants mentioned that while they did not enlist in the military for the educational benefits; they did feel that it was a recruitment and retention tool for
other soldiers (p.100). Students G and J are an E5 rank/pay grade. They discuss how difficult it is to raise a family on an enlisted soldier’s salary and afford college. Student G stated, “Yes, TA [Tuition Assistance] definitely played a huge role. It would have been a lot more difficult decision to go to school and support them (family).” Student J, “Well I don’t know how to say it. I have a wife and three kids on top of our military pay is great, but it’s not a lot…So it [TA] definitely influenced it hugely.”

According to Parks (2015), “In 2011, the United States Government Accountability Office examined the DoD education benefit and determined that the DoD accountability of educational benefit lacked oversight” (p. 2). Hence, a policy overhaul was on the horizon. In January 2014, a cap was placed on Tuition Assistance for active duty enlisted soldiers. The new policy encompasses a $4500 or 16 credit hour cap on soldiers. HFCC is set up on two eight-week terms versus a straight 16-week semester system. Typically, soldiers take two courses per term and accumulate 12-15 credit hours over a semester. There are also concerns about the misalignment of the fiscal years between both institutions; Higher Education and the Army. The Army operates on an October 1-September 30 fiscal year begins October 1st and education institution fiscal year begins July 1 with a semester start for August. College officials have noticed that soldiers are taking more credit hours than aid available. Therefore, depleting their tuition assistance allotment within a semester. This new policy forces soldiers to take courses on a part-time basis only or looking for additional financial assistance to cover the cost. Depending on the income level of the soldier, some are taking advantage of TA, Pell Grant, and student loans. Student B reflected on her experience with depleting aid but also used Pell Grant to supplement cost. “I’m a single Mom of 2 kids. And the enlisted
pay is not extravagant. I would not be able to afford it without tuition assistance. I paid a lot out of pocket this year because I took so much school.” Student A is appreciative of the benefit. He also felt that the aid provided was no longer equitable because the new policy may require soldiers to stay in the military longer than expected. He voiced his dissatisfaction by stating, “I think you can only take 5 or 6 classes a year, and then you got to stop. Essentially, you’ve got to stay in the Army longer to get this degree for free.” Student E had a similar experience, “As far as me taking two classes per semester, for some reason around the end of August they are unable to finance it. I’m not sure why?” Student F also confirmed, “It has been difficult because we only get 16 credit hours a year. That is why I was unable to register for the first term.” Student H who has been in the Army for three years talked about the delay of the utilization of the benefit put him behind. “It used to be once you get your first duty station… Now, it’s a year after you get to your duty station, you are allowed to use your TA. Which is kind of putting people behind… a lot of people want to get their degree…and get out.” Student I mentioned that the tuition incentive supported her motivation to restart after attending community college in the past. “It (TA) was a help. But I’ve also paid out of pocket. I feel like I would have done it either way…but TA gave me that little push to start it up again.”

Military educational benefits provide enlisted soldiers the opportunity to access civilian education. It is imperative that higher education officials fill in the information gaps regarding how to circumvent the pitfall of the new TA policy. Typically, lower enlisted soldiers qualify for Federal Financial aid (Pell Grant and scholarships) as well. The soldier-student’s access multiple types of aid may support the soldier through earning a bachelor’s degree before departure from the Army (Bolling-Harris, 2015).
Navigating Multiple Roles

Rumann and Hamrick (2010), described the phenomenon of role incongruities for soldier-students that included “the military, academic life, and incompatibilities of lingering stress and anxiety when returning to college…and enacting aspects of the military role during college” (p.440). Students A and D experienced balancing work and school demands daily. Student A expressed, “I force it. Honestly, I wake up at 6:00 in the morning, I get off work at 4:30/5, and I force myself to go. This is my drive to be successful.” Student D suggested that her educational experiences might be different if she worked in her actual MOS. “My MOS is a truck driver, but I’ve been working as a 42 Alpha which is a Human Resources Specialist…But if I was working as a truck driver it could have been a lot easier for me.”

The military presents unique challenges to adult students balancing occupational, school, and family demands. Kasworm (2003) recommended, “the responsibility of children has been both a major inspiration and a major deterrent to (college) participation” (p.9). Soldiers are trained to be resourceful and self-sufficient. Student B is a working mother and single parent who considers her children an inspiration. “I have two kids…I do PT, and then I go to work…I go to night school until 10:00 at night. I had to have my Mom come up here three nights a week…it’s been really hard to balance it all.” Student C discussed how he managed family demands, work and school when his wife had to leave the county suddenly, “I’ve been pushing to kind of balance everything. So, most of my homework and stuff I have to do kind of in the middle of the night. I just tend to sort of stay up late anyway.”
Student E is a first-generation college student who is blazing the trail as the first individual in her family to attend college. She discusses the stress of balancing work and school demands and she describes her experiences navigating work and school demands by stating, “...study for your test like at lunch break...go to PT formation early and read off my study guides. And then when I get home from work...I just want to sleep.”

Student I reflected on her experiences balancing unit demands and coursework while taking advantage of the reenlistment incentive (school option) for six months. This incentive allows soldiers to have limited duties or no duties for a contractual time period. Her sentiments suggested that she is not receiving the time off as promised. Student I described her experience as: “Stressful, extremely stressful. I got to the point where my hair was falling out. That’s how stressful they make it for me on the Army side...HCC is very flexible.” Student J concurred, “It gets kind of frustrating...In the contract (school option) ... there was that kind of pushback and fear; it became hard for them to find replacements and to fill the void as I was leaving. Sejuit (2016) also revealed the downside of managing occupational demands for soldier-students by stating, “After joining the military, the way in which educational attainment is viewed by those around them, can dictate whether or not they will use their military educational benefits and apply to college” (p.11). Dial-Corujo (2015), also confirmed, “As students get older and take on the multiple demands of life, they are often left feeling overwhelmed and somewhat bewildered. It is during those times; that family involvement and support is most important” (p.114). Lastly, the adult student’s life is complicated and ever-changing.
Navigating Enrollment Experiences

The roadmap to a civilian education is uncharted territory for many adult learners. According to Fairchild (2003), “Once adults have made the decision to enter higher education, threats to success caused by multiple role demands and institutional barriers form a web of perception, constraint, and role demands” (p. 12). In response to these challenges, the Fort Campbell Campus Director and or Staff Advisor conducts a “new soldier briefing” that serves as the orientation for active duty enlisted soldiers at HFCC. This briefing gives soldiers an overview of the college, academic programs offered, classroom expectations, academic advising process, registration, financial aid process, accessing the Go Army Ed Portal, and the withdrawal process. The high touch onboarding process for soldiers cultivates a strong rapport with the staff. The research participants discussed their relationships with and accessibility to the staff at HFCC. Student A explained, “I started building a relationship with them. I always come to look for more classes. And they ask me, how are your classes going? And I recommend you take this class…and you do this…” Individuals with a military background are taught to be self-reliant. It can prove difficult for soldiers to request assistance, especially from civilians. During the ENABLE and one-on-one advising session, the advisors reiterate the importance of utilizing the staff’s support and taking advantage of campus resources that are afforded to them. Student C stated, “…anything I was aware of, and anything I was not aware of was literally spelled out…Everyone was like, you can go online to do this, but if it’s too much for you just come back and we will help you.” Student G concurred, “It was fairly easy because I had as much help as I needed, the help was there. So, any and all questions I did have, they were answered…they were answered pretty
thorough. There was no question regarding my next step.” Student H expounded, “they (advising staff) are really good make sure that you know how long it is going to take, how things are going to go and how hard the classes might be. And what classes you should probably take together.” Bolling-Harris (2015), citing Brown and Gross (2011) suggested, universities and colleges should work to offer a registration period that is more convenient for military and veteran students. Many soldiers arrive on campus as a first-generation college student. Student J clarified, “at times I do need my hand held, and they (staff) definitely helped walk me through the experience. It was really easy setting up my classes, and they helped me set up my TA.”

The research participants described the importance of finding a college that is responsive to the needs of individuals with a military background, a campus that is accessible, tuition rates that are affordable, flexible course offerings for adult learners with demanding careers, and degree programs that are transferable. Sound communication is imperative between the institution, the Army Education Counselors, and the enlisted soldier. Student I discussed growing frustrated with having to complete a form on multiple occasions. Hopkinsville Community College is a member of the Servicemembers Opportunity College (SOC) consortium that makes it easier for active duty soldiers and dependents to complete degree requirements. The SOCAD form is a crucial piece to the registration process for soldiers. Student I expressed concern, “I would just say that the Ed Center that works for the Army they kind of seem lacking on their end. Like, I shouldn’t have had to sign a SOCAD agreement 3 or 4 different times. So, it’s that communication…” One participant discussed concerns regarding the lack of communication with the Fort Campbell staff. Student E explained, “I met with a
counselor…as far as reaching them is very difficult over the phone. You really need to be here in person in order to get helped.”

As stated previously, the research participants described their educational experiences at (HFCC) as navigating bureaucracy as enlisted soldier-students in higher education and the military. The DoD supplies active duty enlisted soldiers with a substantial educational benefit toward a bachelor’s degree. Even with civilian colleges and universities as members of the SOC consortium, the current TA policy does not support the soldier to degree completion. Civilian institutions must consider ways in which to align with the military in policy and practice to retain this transit adult student population. Thus, minimizing the barriers faced by the student population and creating degree programs that expedite the undergraduate degree process collectively.

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Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the educational experiences active duty enlisted soldier-students attending (HFCC). The research participants answered the interview questions via a face-to-face or by phone for up to one hour. The narrative suggests that military affiliated populations enter college with unique needs and motives for attending. As educational consumers, this research study generated data that advocates for soldier-students as a diverse adult student population in higher education. The interview questions helped generate the research participants’ sentiments and expanded on the existing narrative from other studies. I analyzed the data using the Collective Affiliation framework that is specific to adult commuter students balancing demanding personal lives and occupations. A soldier’s educational experience is a culmination of their aspirations to attend college, confronting barriers regarding military benefits, learning the process of admission and enrollment, interacting with faculty in the classroom, balancing occupational and personal demand. Based on the data presented in the literature, and the findings, I suggest that enlisted soldiers should be studied, acknowledged and supported equally but considered as a separate student population from other military affiliated groups. As an unexpected finding, I realized that many of the research participants had never thought of themselves as students in a general sense. I believe that they perceive themselves as soldiers who happen to be attending college. The literature review in chapter two substantiated the findings from this research study. Lastly, in chapter five I will discuss the finding of this research, unveil the Dual System for Enlisted Soldier-Student Academic Persistence (DSAP) conceptual model and provide implications and recommendations for future research.
Chapter V: Discussion, Implications & Recommendations for Future Research

Introduction

The purpose of the qualitative study was to examine the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldiers attending (HFCC). This study was guided by the following research questions: 1) What are the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldiers attending Hopkinsville Community College Fort Campbell Campus? 2) What are enlisted soldier-students’ perceptions regarding the military’s expectation regarding their college participation and college graduation? 3) What are some actions the U.S. Army and Hopkinsville Community College has taken that the soldier-students perceive as supporting (or not supporting) of college enrollment and persistence of enlisted soldier-students? The guiding principle of this research study builds from limited but existing research conducted by Wilson et al., 2013. The goal of this research study was to impart new knowledge related to the educational experiences of enlisted soldiers as an adult student population in a community college setting. Therefore, this research challenges ways in which diverse student populations are understood and included in the cultural diversity discourse in higher education.

In Chapter Two of this study, I discussed the personal characteristics and occupational variances of adult students in comparison to active duty enlisted soldier-students in higher education setting in detail. The research protocol in Chapter Three specified that participants must be enlisted soldier-students enrolled at HFCC campus who have earned 9 credit hours or more at HFCC and enrolled in at least one, (3 credit hour) via face-to-face course during Summer (May-August 2016) or (Fall 1 August-October 2016) terms, seeking an Associate of Arts, Associate of Science or Associate of
Applied Science from Hopkinsville Community College and have a military paid grade/rank of E4 to E6. Furthermore, I sought participants who could attest to their interactions with faculty and staff at HFCC, in addition to the policies affecting their education and military progression. The research methods incorporated observation of academic advising sessions, along with face-to-face and telephone interviews to gain insight into the educational experiences.

The qualitative data analysis produced two themes and multiple subthemes that spoke to the enlisted soldier-students’ educational experiences at HFCC. The first theme highlights the soldiers’ aspirations for college and how the college and military experience allowed for an expanded those aspirations. The research participants spoke extensively regarding family support and expectations, preparing for life after the army, reenlistment incentive programs, and civilian education as the impetus for promotional points as aspirations for college attendance. The second theme focused on soldier-students navigating bureaucracy soldiers attending HFCC to include: faculty relationships and support in the classroom; military educational benefits, multiple roles, and enrollment experiences.

The findings of this study validate disaggregating military-affiliated student populations in higher education in policy and practice. The data generated confirmed that enlisted soldiers’ educational experiences are different than other military affiliated and adult student populations attending community college. In support, Wilson (2014) cited Wilson & Smith (2012) “Soldiers attending college view college work through the military values, mission focus lens” (p.56). This notion of the military molding the soldiers’ primary identity informs institutions of higher education that individuals with
military experiences are unlike any adult student population in that setting. Active duty soldiers navigate military and civilian bicultural environments parallel to students of color attending a Predominately White Institution (PWI). Massie (2016) also specified that “While active duty military students may fit the definition of non-traditional students, they do not tend to see themselves as standard non-traditional students…the only factor provided by participants…was the time commitment of serving in the military” p.90.

This research study unveiled the educational experiences of enlisted soldiers enrolled at HFCC. Although I found the Collective Affiliation Model appropriate for this research study, the conceptual framework did not illustrate the educational experience of enlisted soldier-students attending community college specifically. Consequently, I created the Dual System for Enlisted Soldier-Student Academic Persistence (DSAP) conceptual framework. The adaptation of the Collective Affiliation model came to fruition during the data analysis process for this study. My interpretation of the data generated from the advising sessions and semi-structured interviews did not fit a “general” adult commuter student framework. I advocate that more emphasis be placed on the systems soldiers navigate, by defining the functionality of each system and the role it plays supporting enlisted soldier-students attending community college.

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This model, as a bicultural system, provides a way to explore the institutions of affiliation for the enlisted soldiers navigating two vastly different bureaucratic cultures. Like students with one of more cultural identities, Benet-Martinez et al. (2002) suggested that “Although some bicultural perceive their cultural identities as compatible and complementary, others tend to describe them as oppositional and contradictory…we call this individual difference bicultural identity integration (BII)” (p.493). Hence, I found it necessary to operationalize the Collective Affiliation Model because it does not represent the systems that enlisted soldiers-students to navigate specifically. The Dual System for Enlisted Soldier Academic Persistence Model (DSAP) considers that soldiers arrive on college campuses with identities molded by a larger and more dominant system. The military is inclusive of behaviors, values, norms, and expectations that are unlike any other adult student population in the higher education setting. To explain the soldier-students’ holistic educational experience conceptually, I considered the role the systems
played in the educational experiences of this research study in more detail. The two systems involved play specific roles in sustaining and advocating for enlisted soldier-students. The military culture coupled with occupational demands of the Army recognizes the military as the dominant system in this new conceptual model. My conceptual model comprises two spheres that overlap. Each sphere contains policies, practices, and supports that are specific to active duty soldiers and are indigenous to that system. The overlapping area represents the partnership between higher education and military. This model represents the interconnected and interdependent to include military policy integration by the educational institution.

I also incorporated systems theory to demonstrate the collaboration and accountability between the academic and military systems related to the soldier-students’ educational experience. Initially, systems theory (Boulding 1956; Goldstein; 1973; and Forder; 1976) “provided a holistic framework with which to place social work practice” (Walker, 2012, p.3). Forder (1976) founded modern systems theory that exemplifies the institutional systems that support individuals who belong to multiple systems or environments that are influenced by the other. To address military student attrition, this notion of influence fosters collaboration amongst the systems. As a result, the policies and practices created then promote academic persistence to degree completion. Thus, any modifications made within the systems should strengthen the academic persistence and career progression collectively. Wilson et al., (2013) gave an example of how modern systems theory works in the capacity of supporting enlisted soldier-students as a diverse population. The researchers asserted that the less dominant system (academic/higher education) should integrate into policy and practice with the dominant system (military)
to promote academic persistence for soldier-students. The bicultural system of partnerships is successful when the academic system creates culturally responsive practices and policies that align with the dominant system.

I also incorporated the family unit and individual characteristics as the nucleus of the adjoining spheres. I acknowledge the family as a major pillar of support and influence for adult students. Sejuit (2016) reinforced this notion by stating, “After joining the military, the way in which educational attainment is viewed by those around them, can dictate whether or not they will use their military educational benefits and apply to college” (p.11). Dial-Corujo (2015), also confirmed, “As students get older and take on the multiple demands of life, they are often left feeling overwhelmed and somewhat bewildered. It is during those times; that family involvement and support is most important” (p.114). The adult student’s life is complicated and ever-changing. The adapted conceptual framework focuses on the academic and military systems primarily and the institutional variables that are indigenous to each system while acknowledging the important roles the family and unit commander support play in academic persistence. When the soldier’s academic pursuits align with the military’s expectation of attending college, the soldier is more likely to fulfill their educational goals (Davidson & Wilson, 2013).

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DISCUSSION

Civilian and Military Dichotomy: Enlisted Soldier-Students

Navigating the Academic System

The Dual System for Active Duty Soldier-Student Academic Persistence conceptual framework illustrates the educational experiences of enlisted soldiers (E4-E6) who participated in this research study. During the interview process, the research participants discussed the opportunities and challenges while navigating bicultural bureaucracy in the Army (military), and as a community college (academic) in addition to the nuances involved in managing the demands of their personal lives. To date, most military populations are studied as an aggregate population because of their common affiliation regardless of institutional type. This conceptual model implied that the soldiers’ educational experiences are influenced by their perception regarding the Army’s expectation to attend college, the policies and practices established as perceived supports for their college attendance, the policies and supports offered by HFCC, and the education benefits provided by DoD. A major pillar of this framework advocates that the educational system must integrate into policy and practice into the military to support academic persistence and career progression for active duty enlisted soldiers. The following section explores the community college as the college choice for the research participants, summarizes the culturally responsive institutional policies and practices at Hopkinsville Fort Campbell campus that integrates into the military, followed by the implications and recommendations for community college leaders and scholars for supporting enlisted soldier-students in higher education as a catalyst for occupational progression and fulfilling their life goals.
Examples of Culturally Responsive Campus Practices & Policy Integration

Cultural competence at the institutional level plays a prominent role in building a positive college experience and addressing the bureaucracy faced by enlisted soldier-students. Although a few of the participants had prior college experiences, many discussed the lack of guidance that they received regarding the educational process. Several of the participants referenced landing at the educational center and “shopping” for the best fit. At face value, they assessed institutional fit by the front-line staff’s ability to disseminate information promptly, positive and engaging interactions, and their perception of the staff being “supportive” in general. Ultimately, several participants applied for admission at institutions based on the recommendations from other soldier-peers. The positive sentiments articulated by the research participants regarding the Fort Campbell Campus culture included; being in close proximity to work, affordable tuition rates, professional staff who were helpful, fair classroom policies, accessible faculty for academic support and flexible drop/withdrawal policies in case of unexpected deployments, TDYs, and field training. As an anomaly, two of the participants discussed their frustrations with their inability to reach HFCC staff over the phone and via email to discuss financial aid and to file an academic plan (MAP) for registration.

According to Wilson et al. (2013), in order to support academic persistence of active duty soldiers, the academic system must integrate with the military culture in policy and practice. This study acknowledged that creating policies and practices are imperative to the success of this diverse student population. The Fort Campbell Campus offers new soldier briefings/ ENABLE sessions for new soldiers and one-one-one educational experience advising staff offers for existing soldiers who need assistance
walking soldiers through the academic nomenclature, academic programs offered, navigating the Go Army Ed. Portal and PeopleSoft. Typically, soldiers are anxious about making their initial class schedule and completing their academic plan. Wilson and Smith (2012) confirmed the idea of high touch advising and support stating, “Military student may be empowered through a series of interactions with the advisor to take ownership and responsibility for their growth and continued development” (p.68). The advisors assist soldiers with navigating the civilian financial aid process and military educational benefit based on their eligibility. During the admission and enrollment processes, each soldier is encouraged by staff to request a copy of their JST for evaluation for college credit; in addition to college transcripts.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Department of Defense requires military serving institutions to establish priority registration. Soldiers enrolled at HCC have priority registration a week prior to other student populations on the Fort Campbell Campus. Hopkinsville Fort Campbell offers (2) 8-week terms over sixteen weeks. The research participants also reflected on their difficulty with release/flex time to attend classes. KCTCS provides online course offerings from any of the 16 campuses which are accessible to soldiers. In addition, the Fort Campbell Campus offers late afternoon/evening schedule blocks from 4:45-7:15 and 7:30-9:45 pm designed specifically for soldiers and other adults who are unavailable during the daytime. In support, Ady (2009) emphasized, “Most adult students are part-time which presents a problem for degree progression and completion” (p.17). Hopkinsville Fort Campbell Campus offers flexible course offerings 8-week online and face-to-face to assist soldiers with completing courses even during deployments, TDYs, and field training. Researchers
suggested that having tutoring, supplemental instruction and accessible advising is important to adult students. Ford, Northrup, and Wiley (2009) observed, “Because these students may be deployed at any time, it is critical that university personnel make support services accessible when students are available” (p.63). In alignment, Wilson and Smith (2012) and Rumann and Hamrick (2009) agreed that student and academic affairs professions provide comprehensive support services for a student with military experience. The support services should expand beyond the walls of the institution. The authors recommended that higher education officials seek counsel from outside agencies in creating a seamless environment of support.

*Faculty Interaction, Support & Expectations*

There is very little literature discussing the cultural integration of the soldier-students in the classroom setting (Wilson et al., 2013; Ferby, 2013; Ackerman et al., 2009). Faculty plays an instrumental role in the matriculation and retention processes for students. According to Ferby (2013), faculty should consider innovative ways in which to bring viable academic programs and instruction to the unit. The author confirmed this initiative of classroom instruction and program delivery as a successful best practice that may remove barriers to higher education for active duty soldiers.

Also, faculty must receive training on culturally responsive andragogical practices that support adult students with physical, mental and emotional ailments in war. Since 2001, enlisted soldiers have been deployed multiple times supporting the Afghanistan and Iraqi conflicts. Many soldiers returned with PTSD, TBI, and anxiety issues that can affect how they learn in the classroom setting specifically. Therefore, supporting students with documented ailments and disabilities sustained while serving in
the military is imperative to building cultural capacity in the classroom setting that inclusive of ADA compliance and accommodations. According to Brinthaupt & Eady (2014), “There is good evidence to suggest that teachers should adjust or adapt their classroom approaches to accommodate or complement the characteristics of the adult learners” (p.132). A faculty member’s ability to engage student populations with unique needs and occupational backgrounds, not only enriches the classroom experience for the soldier-students but also their civilian counterparts. Wilson and Smith (2012) stated, “For adults, engagement in college through peer and faculty interactions and learning activities increases the value they place on their knowledge identity” (p.67).

Civilian and Military Dichotomy: Enlisted Soldier-Students

Navigating the Military System

One of the goals of the military is to produce a sound group of well-educated leaders (Barber, 1972). According to Hummel (2000), “The Army is one of the major organizations that realize the importance of educating its adults, because of the positive impact a formal education can have for the military and society” (p.1). The Army incorporates civilian education into military progression and promotion process. Although eligible soldiers have received the educational benefits and incentives to enroll in college; accessing civilian education is contingent on the soldier’s duty station and seeking approval at the unit level. The study participants provided a substantial amount of data illustrating the insurmountable challenges experienced at the unit level. Consequently, several research participants confirmed that they were more likely to receive support from a commander who is attending college or has already earned a degree. The amount of encouragement a soldier receives from their superiors to attend
college validates the importance of a civilian education within the military culture. The enlisted soldier is more likely to fulfill their educational goals when the military’s expectations and access are consistent (in policy and practice).

*Military’s Commitment to Civilian Education*

The military has a Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) with two- and four-year colleges and universities located in the education center. The institutions have long-standing relationships with the Army Garrison civilian employees who serve as the liaisons between the civilian institutions and the military. The institutions in the education center have classroom space and designated office space operated by administrators, faculty, and staff who are employees of the college. Although the military serves as the nucleus for education on the installation, all institutions are open to civilians, veterans, and military dependents. Particularly, the institutions located in the education center provide a wide variety of academic programs that align with the needs of the active duty, veteran, and civilian communities in the region.

*Support and Network Opportunities with Soldier-Peers*

The research participants provided examples in which they utilized soldier-to-soldier peer networks with navigating the military bureaucracies of accessing military education benefits, gaining permission from the unit commander to attend classes and discovering the reenlistment incentive programs provided by the Army. A few of the participants indicated that they decided to attend HFCC based on the recommendations of their soldier-peers. This peer network was also instrumental in disseminating information related to navigating educational bureaucracy associated with the admission
and enrollment processes, faculty expectation, academic support and tutoring services, and utilizing federal financial assistance in conjunction with military benefits.

The participants spoke to the commonality of attending college aided in building a sense of kinship and camaraderie among their peers for support and encouragement. Burnett and Segoria (2009) discussed the importance peer-to-peer interaction and support. The researchers reiterate, “Military students feel most comfortable with each other. Peer support is particularly valued because military training and culture have the unit of individuals relying on each other for safety…” (p.54). The report published by NASPA Insidetrack (2013) recommend that “colleges and universities create one-on-one student coaching or mentoring programs designed to support students in defining their educational and career goals and…master life skills…and help them persist through obstacles that arise while they are in school” (p.5).

*The Exploration of Socio-Economic Status, Race and Gender*

Enlistment in the United States Armed Forces affords many individuals a gateway to occupational and educational opportunity. Burke and Espinoza (2012) explained that “life course theorist have examined whether military service has been a turning point in people’s lives, alter the trajectory of their life for better or worse as it is measured by income or educational attainment” (p.403). In support of occupational and educational advancement, the Department of Defense offers education benefits and incentives that reinforce the military’s expectation for soldiers to attend college. According to the research participants, the educational benefits and reenlistment incentive programs play a significant role in enlisted soldier recruitment and retention. Wang, Elder, Spencer (2012), advocated that “Military service enabled a significant
number of young men in disadvantaged circumstances to obtain some college education. They would not have had this opportunity without military service (p.416). Therefore, a college education can change the trajectory of a soldier’s life while working on their education and occupational goals that align with their current and future career goals.

During the interview process, I became aware of the information gaps experienced by enlisted soldiers regarding military education policy. First, lower enlisted soldiers, E2 to E3 are not expected to attend college. New soldiers/Private 2nd Class to Private First Class are becoming indoctrinated into the military culture and receiving training. Only at the time of reenlistment does a soldier begin to learn more about military incentive programs and educational benefits provided by the DoD. Additionally, the research participants referenced unique barriers regarding the misalignment of the Federal Government’s fiscal year and a college’s traditional August start. Since 2014, soldiers have experienced difficulty with the new Tuition Assistance policy modification. Eligible enlisted soldiers are limited to 16 credit-hours /$4,550 and only 36 months to access the education benefit. It is my estimation, that soldier could utilize the benefit more effectively if the policy did not have a credit hour cap. HCC charges under the $250 cap at $162. Thus, affording enlisted soldier-students the opportunity to stretch the benefit further if the credit hour cap did not exist. The cap also implies that soldiers to take classes part-time basis only or seek additional financial assistance to cover the cost. The DoD’s TA policy does not take into consideration the financial assistance needed to earn a bachelor’s degree (Leporte, 2013). This notion of extending or modifying educational benefits remains pertinent for enlisted soldiers who desire to become career military beyond the soldier earning college credit for promotional points. Furthermore,
the participants spoke at length to the challenges of the educational benefits provided by the Department of Defense, Federal Financial Aid, and the income shortfalls of their current rank/paygrade. According to Walpole (2003), “… Beginning with the G.I. Bill… students from low SES background became a focal point of public policy… many scholars believe that threats to financial aid availability may be closing off access for and reducing the retention of low SES students” (p.46). Given the realities of an enlisted soldier’s economic circumstances, policy makers must keep in mind that the G.I. Bill supports educational access. However, the lack of flexibility concerning military education benefits may hinder degree completion. Thus, the speed in which an enlisted soldier earns a degree may delay military promotion, economic mobility and decrease the rate of degree completion among this nontraditional student population.

Enlisted soldiers are indoctrinated into the social and occupational hierarchies of military culture. Racial minorities are exposed to environments that require them to assimilate and code-switch to adapt to the dominate culture. Nagel & Kleykamp, 2007; Lundquist, 2008; Burke & Espinoza, 2012) suggested that racial, gender and SES inequalities still exist within the institutional structures of the military as a subculture of diversity. The research participants discussed navigating academic and military bureaucracy, to include relationships encompassed in the military and educational environments. Young and Nauta (2013) cite Robinson, Kurpius & Lucart, (2000) who suggested that “military affiliated individuals tend to hold more traditional gender role attitudes than do civilians (p.167). This is due to the patriarchal environment represented of the military culture. In contrast, Lundquist (2008), revealed that “emerging research shows that racial disparities and outcomes common among the civilian population do not
apply to those in military service, even after taking the selectivity of military enlistment into account” (p.480). Although the research participants did not reflect on racial disparities, it does not suggest that they did not experience racial prejudice or other injustices related to promotion and consistent educational access.

“Over the past twenty years, women in uniform have increasingly chosen military service as their adult occupation” (Kelty, Kleykamp & Segal, 2010 p.185). As women continue to climb the ladder of the enlisted ranks and advocate for gender inclusivity relative to military combat, they still experience sexism related to the inconsistencies in treatment and benevolent sexes views of their counterparts (Young & Nauta, 2013). The male–female dichotomy, that is present in the military, infers that female soldiers, especially as working mothers may experience role strain and the stress associated with navigating the multiple roles as an enlisted soldier, parent and college student. The notion of balancing roles and multiple identities challenges the social constructs of gender roles and how one gender roles and identity regarding the discourse analysis of women serving in the military with conflicting and compatible identities in occupational environment that does not often celebrate feminine strengths and qualities (Lazar, 2000).

**Conclusion**

The United States Army incorporates civilian education into enlisted soldiers’ promotional structure. There are extrinsic and intrinsic reasons for an enlisted soldier-student to pursue a college degree. As an emerging diverse student population on college campuses, civilian two- and four-year institutions play a pivotal role in supporting the educational needs of active duty soldiers, veterans, and military dependents. However, sustaining these partnerships may require those schools to provide academic and
institutional support that does not mirror other adult or military affiliated populations. Although military personnel receive education benefits and incentives to attend college, their ability to attend may lack consistency throughout their military career.

This qualitative research study provides a foundation for understanding the educational experiences of active duty enlisted soldiers attending Hopkinsville Fort Campbell Campus. By researching the educational experiences of enlisted soldier-students attending community college, practitioners and policymakers can understand the role civilian institutions have in supporting military personnel to degree completion.

The interview participants included ten soldiers-students who participated in semi-structured interviews. The narrative provided from the semi-structured interviews illustrates the soldier-students’ community college experience while navigating two distinct bicultural systems of bureaucracy (college and the military). Thus, gaining valuable insight regarding their needs as a separate adult student population; that ultimately, informs institutional, state and government policies and practices. There were two profound outcomes affecting the academic persistence for soldier-students: the challenges soldiers face at the unit level to attend class and the modifications made to Tuition Assistance in 2014. Although soldiers are afforded educational benefits, attending college is secondary to fulfilling the mission. The Fort Campbell Army Post is a comprehensive training installation. Many enlisted soldiers encountered barriers requesting flex-time or to leave work on time to attend night classes.

The Dual System for Enlisted Soldier-Student Academic Persistence (DSAP) conceptual model was created to highlight and differentiate soldier-students from other adult student populations. Although some academic supports and other services may be
universal, the occupational demands experienced by soldiers do not mirror other adult student populations. It is imperative that institutions of higher education integrate policy and practice with the military. The notion of policy integration blends the lines between the college and the military. Thus, addressing ways in which bicultural discourse is practiced and researched related to enlisted soldier-students specifically. Finally, the findings of this study inform higher education officials, policymakers and various military constituencies regarding enlisted soldiers’ challenges navigating multiple bureaucracies simultaneously—while balancing work and occupational demands. This research Wilson et al.’s (2013) research asserting that military serving institutions (academic system) should integrate both in policy and practice with the (military system). This notion of integration of the academic systems operationalizes policies and practices that validates the culture of the dominant system and incorporating the enlisted soldiers’ identity and military culture into the educational environment. The military conditions soldiers that position the “mission first” and educational endeavors are second to the mission but in support of earning promotional points/military career progression, family’s expectation for college attendance and preparing for life after the military. An enlisted soldier’s college attendance may or may not conclude with degree completion (Wilson et al., 2013).

Implications for Policy and Action

This research posited community colleges and community colleges on military installations as an ideal option for active duty enlisted soldiers who desire an educational environment with well-defined pathways for adult students with military careers. According to Wilson et al. (2013), soldier-students flourish in an educational setting in
which the education institution integrates with the military in policy and practice. The educational institutions must create culturally responsive institutional policies and practices that are uniquely military to foster academic matriculation and occupational progression that prepares the soldier for life after the military as well. Significantly, this study analyzed how the participants perceived the Army and HFCC supporting or not regarding educational endeavors. This research study’s primary focus was to define the educational experiences of enlisted soldiers attending Hopkinsville Fort Campbell Campus. Although the results of this study are not generalizable, the data provides insight into the financial and institutional barriers experienced by enlisted soldier-students. In 2014, the Federal Government modified the Tuition Assistance (TA) Policy to include a $4500 yearly/ $250 per credit hour cap or 16 credit hours per year limit that is available for 36 months. This creates more barriers for enlisted soldiers who desire to earn multiple degrees using their education benefits supplied by the DoD. The consensus among the participants concluded that the educational benefits provided by (DoD) provide access, but it is impossible to sustain the civilian education requirement via promotional points without seeking supplemental funding outside the education benefits provided by the Department of Defense.

It is also essential that institutions like Hopkinsville Fort Campbell Campus look at ways in which they can remove institutional barriers for enlisted soldiers. If institutions brought educational programs, core classes and academic advising to the military units, this might ensure consistent access (Ferby, 2013). Hopkinsville Community College offers degrees, diplomas and certificates that align with many Military Occupational Specialties e.g., (RN Nursing, Combat medic 68W; Criminal
Justice, 31B Military Police; Health Science Technology, Radiology Specialist 68P; and Medical Information Technology and Coding, Patient Administration Specialist, 71G).

In conjunction with evening and online classes, taking courses to the units may create an opportunity for Hopkinsville Fort Campbell Campus to distinguish themselves from the partners and competitors in the education center.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of the present qualitative study was to investigate and define the educational experiences of enlisted active duty soldiers attending Hopkinsville Community College Fort Campbell Campus. I observed four academic advising sessions that brought context to the orientation, advising, and registration processes for new and existing soldiers specifically. Ten soldier-students who met the participant protocol were interviewed and answered twelve questions helped me assess their opinions on the policies and support offered by Hopkinsville Fort Campbell Campus, Department of Defense and the Army. As it relates to future research, I suggest expanding the present study by including more community college participants and testing the Dual System for Enlisted Soldier Academic Persistence Model. Such research might define the population’s experiences, expectations, and barriers for enlisted soldiers attending community colleges on multiple military installations. Additionally, active duty enlisted soldiers are arriving in college classrooms after multiple deployments. As combat veterans, many sustain physical and psychological injuries and develop debilitating health ailments. I would also suggest a mixed-methods study assessing the soldier-student’s opinions regarding the ADA compliance process, support services and classroom accommodations offered to soldiers enrolled in online and face-to-face
classes. A quantitative research study should explore the educational experience of active duty soldiers who graduated from a KCTCS community college and transferred to a 4-year institution. The research would assess their transfer experiences. It would also be advantageous to test the conceptual model on the same population who once attended and graduated with an associate degree and transferred to earn bachelors. I would also recommend studying the perceived and actual barriers soldiers experienced receiving release time to attend classes via qualitative methods. Researchers should consider conducting research that examines the barriers experienced by active-duty soldiers to attending two-and four-year institutions. Including a comparative analysis by institutional type could be helpful in creating transfer policies for this population specifically. I would also encourage researchers to study the educational and occupational pressures of female enlisted soldiers experience navigating the bicultural pressures of their personal lives and the nuances of a hierarchical and male dominated occupation. This inquiry could attest ways female soldiers provide support and engage (or not) within the enlisted ranks. It would also be interesting to learn if sexual orientation, parenting and marital status dynamics mattered as it relates to female soldiers aligning as colleagues within various support networks. According to Bell (1990), “While the bicultural life experience can be a source of empowerment it also can be a source of psychological distress…and acute identity conflict” (p. 464). Ultimately, researching the occupational experiences of female soldiers may unveil the level of acculturation female soldiers endure or embrace working in a male dominated occupation, the military (Weatherill et al., 2011) and whether these formal and informal networks attribute to occupation and educational progression.
Final Reflections

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the education experience of active duty enlisted soldiers attending community college. Over the past eighteen years, I have worked in multiple administrative and adjunct faculty positions that afforded me the opportunity to support and advocate for diverse student populations at two and four-year institutions. It was my time teaching developmental mathematics that exposed me to the realities facing active duty enlisted soldiers in the classroom. Immediately, I realized that the blanket policies contained in my syllabi did not support enlisted soldier and adult students adequately. In addition, I noticed soldier-students requesting accommodation for extended time for test and assignments to fulfill work obligations. Later, I consulted other faculty members regarding the appropriate classroom policies to support soldier and establish consistency. Consequently, I begin to read empirical and general research studies regarding military affiliated populations in higher education. At the same time, I met Dr. Kristin Wilson who is an expert in active duty military student and community college research. It was at that time I began to see the active duty soldier population as a viable dissertation research study topic.

One of the challenges I faced was finding research articles regarding active duty as college students specifically. Most of the research studies I read aggregated military affiliated populations. It was difficult to decipher how researchers applied the data generated in research studies with samples containing a combination of active duty, veterans, and dependents. I then read a research article written by Wilson et al., (2013) who advocated disaggregating military populations because they are attending college for different reasons and are likely to be having different college experiences. This
notion of disaggregating military affiliated populations became the foundation of studying active duty enlisted soldiers as community college students. Finally, my objective for this research study was to provide evidence for supporting active duty soldiers’ holistic college experience. Therefore, providing examples in which community college constituencies can integrate culturally responsive policies and practices that promote academic persistence. To that end, I hope that this study exhibited the esprit de corps brought by the research participants and adds to the body of knowledge regarding enlisted soldier-students attending Hopkinsville Fort Campbell Campus.
Appendix A: Interview Solicitation

Dear Prospective Student:

I am a doctoral student at the University of Kentucky working to complete a research
dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. I
am conducting a research study entitled *A Phenomenological Study of the Academic
Integration Experiences of U.S. Army Active Duty Soldier Enrolled at Hopkinsville
Community College*. The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study is to
examine the academic integration experiences of active duty soldier-students attending
Hopkinsville Community College (HCC).

I invite you to participate in this study. Participation in this study will involve a face-to-
face interview that encompasses a series of semi-structured questions pertaining to your
educational experiences at HCC. In addition to completing a demographic questionnaire.
The face-to-face interview will take approximately 60 minutes and will be audio
recorded. Your participation in this study is voluntary and may decline to answer
questions and/or discontinue at any time. You will have the opportunity to verify your
transcribed audio recording. I will contact you via email and or phone to schedule a time
convenient for you. This process should take no longer than 30 minutes.

There is no foreseeable risk to you. Your name and personal contact information will
remain confidential throughout this process. If you are interested in participating, please
contact me at (931) 472-9909 or email me at tyfolden@yahoo.com by month xx, 2016.

Sincerely,

Tracey Yvonne Folden
University of Kentucky
tyfolden@yahoo.com
931-472-9909
Appendix B
Consent for Participation in Research Study

Principal Investigator: Tracey Yvonne Folden
University of Kentucky Doctoral Student
132 Blackberry Drive
Franklin, KY 42134
931-472-9909 tyfolden@yahoo.com

Advisor: Dr. Jane Jensen
University of Kentucky Education Policy Measurement & Evaluation 859-489-7050

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a study that will take place May to October 2016. This form of consent outlines the purpose of the study and provides a summary of your participation. Your participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time. Only the researcher, Tracey Yvonne Folden-Stewart, will have access to a secured file cabinet where the audiotape recordings, transcribed documents, and notes will be kept.

1. The purpose of the study: The purpose of this study is to identify the academic and cultural integration experiences of active duty soldiers as students attending Hopkinsville Community College. Specifically, this study will address the following questions: (a) What is the experience of active duty soldiers as students transitioning in and out of military and civilian environments? (b) What do active duty soldiers perceive as their needs as community college students; (c) What programs and services are most beneficial as it relates to cultural integration and academic support; and (d) What are the participants’ recommendations for improving the integration experiences and services provided for active duty students?

2. If you agree to participate in the study, you can participate in any of the following: One on one interview: Each participant will receive the same series of questions reflective of the research questions. Duration: The interview process will take approximately 90 minutes. I understand that interviews will be audiotaped and that I will be asked for a second follow-up interview lasting up to 30 minutes. At this time, you will receive a copy of the interview transcript, and you can verify the information transcribed. The investigator seeks participants to observe in an academic advising capacity. The investigator will sit in as a nonintrusive observer during academic advising sessions to learn how active-duty soldiers are processed and guided through the education process.
3. Statement of Benefits: The information gained from this study will provide a greater understanding of the educational experiences of active duty soldiers attending Hopkinsville Community College.

4. Right to ask questions: Please read the information carefully. There are no foreseeable risks for participating in the study. Feel free to ask questions at any time. Contact Tracey Folden at email (tyfolden@yahoo.com) or mobile (931-472-9909). If you decide to participate in this study, you will have to sign this form.

5. Statement of Confidentiality: Your participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time. You do not have answer any questions you do not want to answer. Efforts will be made to keep your study related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information may be released. For example, your information may be released if required by law. In addition, your records may be reviewed by the following groups: Individuals from the University of Kentucky, Individuals from Kentucky Community & Technical College System and Individuals from Hopkinsville Community College. Only the researcher, Tracey Folden, will have access to a secured file cabinet where the audiotape recordings, transcribed documents, and notes will be kept for six years. You will not be paid for your participation in the study.

6. Data from this study may be published and made available to other researchers not part of this project; however, the data will not contain any all identifiable information about the research participant.

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature indicates that you have decided to participate after having read and understood the information presented. You have had the opportunity to ask questions, and they have been answered to your satisfaction. Later, if you have any questions, suggestions, or complaints about the study you can contact the investigator, Tracey Folden at 931-472-9909. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the staff in the Office of Research Integrity at the University of Kentucky between the business hours of 8am and 5pm EST, Monday-Friday at 859-257-9428 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428. You will be given a signed copy of the consent form to take with you.

Signature of the participant agreeing to take part in study ___________________________ Date ___________________________

Print name of the participant agreeing to take part in study ____________________________________________________________

Signature of Investigator Tracey Folden ___________________________ Date ___________________________
Appendix C

Interview Protocol

1. What are the educational experiences of active duty soldiers attending Hopkinsville Community College?
2. What do soldier-student perceive as the military’s expectation regarding college participation and college graduation?
3. What are some actions the U.S. Army and Hopkinsville Community College has taken that they perceive as supporting (or not supporting) of college enrollment and persistence of soldiers?
4. How are (or are not) these actions resulting in policy integration for active duty military personnel?

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<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the educational experiences of active duty soldiers attending Hopkinsville Community College?</td>
<td>Why did you attend college? Why did you choose to attend HCC? Describe your admissions and Enrollment experiences at HCC. What is it like transitioning in and out of civilian and military environments?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do soldier-student perceive as the military’s expectation regarding college participation and college graduation?</td>
<td>Did Tuition Assistance influence your decision to attend college? Describe your experiences balancing the demands of the military and your academic endeavors. Does your NCO or Commander support you taking classes? Give Examples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are some actions the U.S. Army and Hopkinsville Community College has taken that they perceive as supporting (or not supporting) of college enrollment and persistence of soldiers?</td>
<td>Did Tuition Assistance influence your decision to attend college? What do you believe are your needs academically as a soldier-student attending community college? How would you improve the support services provided for soldiers at HCC? Do you believe faculty members are responsive to your needs in the classroom?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are (or are not) these actions resulting in policy integration for active duty military personnel?</td>
<td>This research question will serve as the foundation for chapter 5.</td>
</tr>
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Appendix D
Demographic Questionnaire

Purpose: The purpose of the questionnaire is to obtain demographic data of the research participants.

Disclosure: The information you provide is voluntary. No individual identifiers are asked of you during this process.

Demographics: Circle and write in all that apply

Gender: (a) Male (b) Female (c) Transgender

Age: _________

What is your racial background?

[] Black/African American [] White [] Asian [] Native American
[] Biracial/multiracial [] Hispanic American/Latino [] Pacific Islander
[] Specify [] Decline to Respond

Current Enlisted Rank: _____________________
Number of Years in the Army: _______________

Current Military Occupational Specialty (M.O.S)
________________________________________

Number of Semesters/Terms Enrolled at HCC ________________________________

Program of Study ______________________  Number of college hours earned ________
How did you learn about educational benefits?

Do you get release time during the day to take classes? Yes_______
No___________

Additional Comments: (please print)

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### Appendix E
#### Coding Worksheet

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<td>Strong parental involvement intervention</td>
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<td>Soldiers building relationships with Advisors and faculty</td>
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<td>Tuition Assistance</td>
<td>Supplemented funding needed</td>
<td>Soldiers supporting Soldiers</td>
<td>Education embedded</td>
<td>Ed. Incentive Pgm/Stabilization</td>
<td>Elderly</td>
<td>Supplemented funding needed</td>
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<td>Supplemented funding needed</td>
<td>Soldiers received inconsistent academic advising</td>
<td>Soldiers TDY and faculty support</td>
<td>Mission First/lack of flex time for classes</td>
<td>Soldiers building relationships with Advisors and faculty</td>
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Appendix F
Support Letters

November 6, 2015

University of Kentucky
Education Policy Studies & Evaluation
131 Taylor Education Building
Lexington, KY 40506-0001

Re: Letter of Support – Tracey Yvonne Folden-Stewart

Dear Institutional Review Board and Members:

On behalf of the Glenn H. English, Jr. Fort Campbell Army Education Center, I am writing to indicate our support of the research proposed by Tracey Folden-Stewart, a doctoral candidate at the University of Kentucky in the Department of Education Policy Studies and Evaluation. We are aware that her proposed research study is entitled, Permission to Engage: Examining the Academic Integration Experiences of Active Duty Soldiers Attending Hopkinsville Community College.

Tracey has informed our office that she intends to examine the academic integration experience of soldiers through preliminary fieldwork with direct service providers, individual interviews with soldiers enrolled at Hopkinsville Community College (HCC), and observation of academic advising sessions provided by HCC professional staff.

As Education Services Specialist on the Fort Campbell Installation, I am responsible for performing liaison for the civilian community, and maintain contact with State, local and professional education associations.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact my office at 270-798-0222.

Sincerely,

Cathy

Education Services Specialist
Army Education Center
Fort Campbell, KY
October 9, 2015

Dr. Jane Jensen, Associate Professor
University of Kentucky
Education Policy Studies & Evaluation
131 Taylor Education Building
Lexington, KY 40506-0001

Dear Dr. Jensen:

I am writing to pledge my support of Tracey Folden-Stewart and her efforts in the research phase of her dissertation. Tracey is a valuable member of the leadership team at Hopkinsville Community College and we have had a chance to discuss her dissertation goals and methodology. I believe Tracey will be diligent in her efforts to research her proposed topic and add to the body of research in this field.

Her work with the proposed research she has titled Permission to Engage: Examining the Academic Integration Experiences of Active Duty Soldiers Attending Hopkinsville Community College fits well into the College’s dedication to serving military related students. I hope that her phenomenological qualitative study will provide insight to the educational community and ultimately lead us to better serve active duty soldiers.

I support Tracey’s efforts with this study and hope that she will be allowed to move forward with the proposed study of our students. If you should need more information from the College, please contact my office. Thank you for your time and support of Tracey in her dissertation research efforts.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Jay Allen, Ph.D.
President/CEO
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Go Army ED Portal. Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges.


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doi:10.1037/h0094958
Vita

Tracey Yvonne Folden

Educational Institutions Attended and Degrees Awarded

Western Kentucky University
MAE in Counseling & Student Affairs

Western Kentucky University
BA in Sociology Minors Psychology & Criminology

Professional Experience

University of Evansville
Assistant Vice President Academic Affairs & Title IX Director 2016-present

Hopkinsville Community College
Director of Cultural Diversity & Leadership 2006-2016

Western Kentucky University
Assistant Director of Minority Student Academic Support 2006-1999
Director of Middle School Outreach Initiatives

Teaching/Adjunct Experience

Hopkinsville Community College Ft. Campbell, KY Campus
Instructor: Developmental Mathematics & Algebra 2009-2015

Western Kentucky University/ Bowling Green Community College
Instructor: Developmental Mathematics 2000-2006

Western Kentucky University/Bowling Green Community College
Instructor: University Experience 2000-2006

Professional Presentations


- Folden, T., Hendricks, C. (2010, May). This is How WE Did It! A Community’s VISION from Grassroots to Leadership. New Horizons KCTCS Conference, Covington, KY.

- Panel Discussion (2008, May). The Role of a Diversity Officer at a community college. New Horizons KCTCS Conference, Covington, KY.


### Community Boards

- Christian County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors 2007-2012
- Coordinated/Facilitated Study Circle Initiative on Race & Human Relations Fall 2007-2009
- Coordinating/Facilitating Study Circle Initiative on Closing the Educational Gap Fall 2008
- International Festival Planning Committee-2008-2011
- Diversity Conference Planning Committee- 2010-Present
- United Way site selection member panelist 2007
- Boys & Girls Club Executive Board Member 2009-2011